



Complaint-making as political participation in contemporary Russia

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ABSTRACT

Prior to December 2011, instances of widespread collective mobilization were relatively rare in contemporary Russia. Russian citizens are more likely to engage in a different means of airing grievances: making an official complaint to the authorities. This article considers how complaint-making, as a variety of political participation, may contribute either to authoritarian resilience or to political liberalization. The political significance of complaints made to the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Russian Federation is examined. Since it is the broader political context that shapes the significance of complaints, in the absence of meaningful elections individualized appeals to the state are unlikely to promote democratic change, although they may allow for redress of individual rights violations.

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In recent years, a vocal minority of Russian citizens has engaged in spontaneous public protests on issues ranging from new social security policies and corruption in traffic policing and property rights violations by developers, and electoral fraud (Evans, 2012; Robertson, 2009). Strategy 31, a coalition of opposition groups has highlighted the state's infringement of the freedom of assembly by attempting to organize a series of demonstrations in Moscow's Triumfalnaya Square (Lipman, 2010; RIA Novosti, 2010). The Defenders of the Khimki Forest protested the construction of a highway through a forest near Moscow (Evans, 2012). Indeed, some observers predicted that protests are likely to grow as a result of popular dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the economy (Lipman, 2011; Whitmore, 2010).

Despite these high-profile examples, public acts of collective mobilization were rare in contemporary Russia prior to December 2011. Citizens of post-Soviet Russia remained remarkably quiescent despite well-documented violations of political rights and problems with public services. Given that grievances are common but protests were not – and that protests appear to be a measure of last resort – how have Russian citizens expressed their dissatisfaction with state policies and rights violations? This article examines a more widespread and less politicized means of airing grievances: making an official complaint to the authorities. There is ample evidence that complaint-making is a more common means of expressing dissatisfaction with the government and bureaucracy than protest, but the political significance of complaint-making as a variety of political participation is less clear. Do citizen complaints have an effect on Russia's political system and, if so, what is it?

Complaining about the government – even officially – appears to be universal in all regimes, democratic and authoritarian, yet the political impact of complaint-making is under-theorized. Two broad, and somewhat contradictory, sets of assumptions about citizen complaints emerge from two different scholarly literatures. First, scholars who study the extensive system for receiving and processing complaints in the Soviet Union and in contemporary authoritarian regimes, such as China, point out the importance of complaints as a means of ensuring political stability by addressing public dissatisfaction and monitoring implementation of policies at lower levels of government. Second, comparative political scientists focused primarily on democratic governments look at systems for addressing complaints, including the widespread use of ombudsmen to investigate citizens' grievances, and argue that these processes serve as a check on government authority and an avenue for

increased accountability. Moreover, scholars note that increasing the responsiveness and accountability of state officials may offer a means of democratizing politics. The juxtaposition of these two sets of analyses raises the question: when do complaints facilitate the state's dominance of society and when do they increase citizens' control over a state?

Viewing contemporary Russian politics through the lens of these two literatures highlights the ambiguous role of complaint-making by Russian citizens. Is it a source of regime legitimation and perpetuation, used by a nondemocratic political elite to identify bureaucratic inefficiencies and to simulate political responsiveness? Or is it a means of political liberalization, drawing attention to the government's violation of constitutionally-endowed rights and freedoms and a means of rectifying abuse of power? If the impact of largely similar complaint-making processes depends on political context, having different effects in different political environments, how can we evaluate its role in Russia?

This article examines these questions by looking carefully at the institution with the most significant authority to investigate citizen complaints: the Commissioner for Human Rights (*Upolnomochennyi po pravam cheloveka*) of the Russian Federation. The data for this study are drawn from detailed annual reports by the Human Rights Commissioner's office, scholarly literature on complaints in a variety of regimes, and media reports. The first section examines the two relevant literatures on complaint-making. Next it considers complaint-making by Russian citizens to the Commissioner for Human Rights, including a brief review of the institution's history and an overview of statistics on complaints. The third section offers a preliminary assessment about the political impact of complaints to the commissioner. I conclude by considering whether complaint-making through the office of the Commissioner for Human Rights contributes to regime stability or liberalization in Russia. Although the commissioner's office frequently voices sharp criticism of the Russian government and offers a useful avenue for addressing individual and procedural complaints, its work is constrained by the broader political context in which other varieties of participation are circumscribed and the ultimate mechanism of accountability – elections – do not serve to create a competition and responsiveness among the elite.

1. The political effects of complaints

Do official systems for collecting and investigating citizens' complaints contribute to political stability and regime survival or political change and regime liberalization? Scholars have answered this question differently depending on the type of a regime in question.

1.1. Complaint-making in the Soviet Union: reinforcing the regime

Authoritarian regimes, by definition, discourage autonomous activism by citizens. Instead, these regimes prefer top-down systems of public mobilization in order to achieve objectives chosen by the political elite, not the public. Underdeveloped systems of public feedback can create an obstacle to authoritarian governance, however. For example, the regime's technocratic goals of economic development and modernization could be derailed by self-interested bureaucratic actors who manipulate their office for personal gain. A political system perceived as inefficient or unfair could lead to public dissatisfaction with the potential to disrupt the status quo.

Public complaints serve a useful purpose for the political elite in an authoritarian system in the following ways:

- highlighting areas of inefficiency in the administrative apparatus;
- revealing corrupt practices or arbitrary conduct by lower level officials;
- creating the appearance of regime responsiveness and accountability to the public; and
- addressing public dissatisfaction in a way that pre-empts collective action.

Even when they rely on elaborate mechanisms of repression, leaders of authoritarian regimes need some way to assess public attitudes. After the Bolshevik revolution, Lenin encouraged complaint-making, stating that the party should “teach the people the immense value of practical complaints, bringing about as they do desirable and serious results” (*Leninskii Sbornik* XXI, p. 227, as cited in Boim, 1974, p. 516). Fitzpatrick summarizes the Soviet dilemma in regard to public feedback, stating, “The Soviet regime was wary of allowing citizens to express uncensored opinions about matters of public import in public. At the same time, it was extremely anxious to know what people were thinking” (Fitzpatrick, 1999, p. 164). The Soviet state gathered information on public sentiment using secret police reports, often compiled by eavesdropping on citizens' complaints in markets and other public venues, and citizens' letters to officials and newspapers (Fitzpatrick, 1999, p. 165; Bittner, 2003).

Citizens are not the only subjects of surveillance. Ultimately, the regime cannot achieve its goals unless discipline is maintained throughout the state hierarchy. Friedgut captures this dynamic, stating, “Every Soviet student of public administration learns in the first pages of his textbook Lenin's dictum that ‘practice in the localities is the test of the center's leadership’” (Friedgut, 1978, p. 461). The complaints process thus offers the opportunity for “two-way surveillance” – citizen's surveillance of the bureaucracy and the regime's surveillance of citizens (Fitzpatrick, 1999, p. 177). Bader and Brompton suggest that in the Soviet system “the complaining citizen serves as an important source for obtaining information on departures from legality, on arbitrary acts, and on abuse of power by agencies of public administration (Bader and Brompton, 1968, p. 80).

Historians have examined the Soviet regime's use of complaints during some of the most critical political developments in the USSR. Fitzpatrick chronicles the active use of complaints by Soviet citizens who saw themselves as unfair victims of

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