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Naive monarchism and rural resistance in contemporary
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Naive monarchism and rural resistance in contemporary Russia

Natalia Mamonova

Abstract

This paper analyses the relation between “naive monarchism” and rural resistance in contemporary Russia. It argues that popular resistance in the name of the president is a form of contention of powerless groups in an authoritarian state. The naive monarchist grievances of the rural population reinforce the presidential autonomy and hegemonic structure, and, therefore, are not subject to state repressions. At the same time, they provide the rural poor with a tool to tackle deprivation and inequality in the countryside. This raises the question of how “naive” the naive monarchism actually is. This research analyses three types of rural monarchist practices: written petitions, peasant delegations to the president, and geographical renaming in honour of Putin. Certainly, not all these acts are determined by strategic choices. Rural beliefs in a compassionate and impartial ruler have developed throughout peasant history, are culturally accepted, and popularised by the Putin government. The naive monarchist practices have been criticised for their backwardness and blank subjection to the power, but they are, perhaps, the most effective form of rural resistance in contemporary Russia. These dissents are unable to challenge the existing order at large, but provide rural dwellers with a means to remedy occasional local injustices.

1 Introduction

In the summer of 2008, peasant delegates from 17 Russian regions left their villages and travelled to Moscow to participate in the “*Krestyanskiy Khod* [Peasant Walk] *for the salvation of the Russian village*”. The aim of the khod was to inform the President about the woes of the Russian countryside. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian villages have been going through hard times. The land reform did not benefit the rural population: the land of former collective and state enterprises was grabbed by oligarchs and agrohholdings, the collective agriculture failed and the social infrastructure – formally maintained by the collectives – crumbled (Visser et al. 2012). Being unable to adjust to the new capitalist system, the majority of the rural population fell into deep poverty and experienced social exclusion and high unemployment. Despite various state programmes on socio-economic development in rural areas, villagers have not experienced significant improvements. Large-scale agriculture has flourished, whereas the Russian village has been decaying. The khod participants intended to bring these and many other issues before the president, whom they named the “keeper of the villagers’ hopes for a better life”. People believed that the president could resolve their problems if only he knew about them: “President, you are misinformed”, wrote rural dwellers on their posters. However, the dialogue between peasants and the country leader never took place, as the president (then Medvedev) did not come to his Kremlin office on the day of the Krestyanskiy Khod¹.

The peasants’ ultimate belief in the benevolence of the sovereign, whom they saw as their benefactor and intercessor, whereas all the failures were ascribed to officials, who deliberately misrepresented and misinformed the country’s leader, is known in history as “naïve monarchism”². This belief was widely spread in the medieval and early modern ages in Europe and Russia (see Luebke 1997 on naïve monarchism in early modern Germany; Sandall 2012 on sixteenth-century England; Field 1976 on tsarist Russia). However, while naïve monarchism has significantly declined with the emancipation of the peasantry and the democratisation of society in Europe, it remains a dominant belief in rural Russia today.

The primary focus of this article is to investigate the relation between naïve monarchism and rural resistance in contemporary Russia. Whilst peasants in different countries mobilise in social movements to resist the dominant corporative food regime and to exert public pressure on their governments to control agricultural corporations and meet their human rights obligations, Russian rural dwellers seem to show remarkable tolerance and peaceful acceptance of widespread deprivation and inequality. The lack of rural protests is often explained by 70 years of socialism, during which the expression of disagreement with governmental actions was prosecuted, and by the contemporary authoritarian regime of Putin, which is able to repress, divide, and demobilise undesired civil protests (Henderson 2011; Mamonova and Visser 2014). The peasant grievances typically take the form of peaceful appeals to the president (or the heads of regional authorities) by means of individual or group petitions, or, as described above, khody.

This research argues that popular resistance in the name of the president is a type of contention of powerless groups in restricted and state-controlled civil arenas. The naïve monarchist grievances of the

¹ This episode is reconstructed from an interview with a participant of the Krestyanskiy Khod (conducted by the author on the 28th of September 2012 in Moscow) and internet publications: Izvestia (2008), Novayagazeta.ru (2008). The term ‘naïve monarchism’ is the most commonly used in the academic literature (see e.g. Field 1976, Sandall 2012). However, there are other terms to describe this phenomenon. Soviet historians often referred to it as ‘monarchist illusions’ (Field 1976); Luebke (1997) uses ‘peasant monarchism’ as synonym for ‘naïve monarchism’; some populists (especially radical populists in tsarist Russia) called it ‘popular monarchism’ (Field 1976).

² The term ‘naïve monarchism’ is the most commonly used in the academic literature (see e.g. Field 1976, Sandall 2012). However, there are other terms to describe this phenomenon. Soviet historians often referred to it as ‘monarchist illusions’ (Field 1976); Luebke (1997) uses ‘peasant monarchism’ as synonym for ‘naïve monarchism’; some populists (especially radical populists in tsarist Russia) called it ‘popular monarchism’ (Field 1976).

rural population reinforce the presidential autonomy, and therefore are not subject to the state repressions. At the same time, they provide an opportunity for the rural poor to address their problems. Despite being criticised as backward and a blank subjection to the power (e.g. Izvestia 2008), naive monarchist resistance constitutes, perhaps, the most effective type of peasant resistance in contemporary Russia. This research demonstrates that such rural practices are unable to challenge the existing order. However, they provide rural dwellers with a means to resolve occasional local injustices.

The topic of “naive monarchism” in rural Russia arose in 2014 through the author’s ethnographic research, which focused on the response strategies of the rural population to deprivation and inequality in the Stavropol Krai (Southern Russia). Aside from a number of in-depth interviews with Stavropol rural residents, the research for this article included qualitative data from the author’s longitudinal study of the rural social movement *Krestyanskiy Front* [Peasant Front] from 2010 to 2013. Furthermore, a critical discourse analysis was conducted on a sample of 35 petitions written by rural dwellers to the Russian president (and some other top governmental authorities). These petitions were derived from the online petition platform www.change.org³ and the author’s ethnographic research in the Moscow region in 2013. Besides that, the author analysed an extensive set of secondary data, obtained from internet publications, academic literature, and Russian statistical services.

The article is structured as follows. The next section analyses the relations between naive monarchism and rural resistance. After that, the development and expression of peasant monarchist beliefs in tsarist, Soviet and, later, post-Soviet Russia are discussed. The section “naive monarchism as a resistance strategy” includes the analysis of three types of rural dissent: written petitions, peasant pickets and khody, and geographical renaming. The paper’s final section contains a discussion about the “naivety” of naive monarchist practices and the possibilities for rural revolt in contemporary Russia.

2 Relations between naive monarchism and rural resistance

Naive monarchism derives from the “ancient rights”, which implied that domination was based on reciprocal obligations between the monarch and his people, who in return for obedience and support, had to provide protection and guardianship (Luebke 1997). The strong belief in the benevolence of the ruler towards the common people characterised peasant politics in the medieval and early modern ages in Europe and Russia (Field 1976). The monarch’s actions were recognized unconditionally, whereas the failures were ascribed to officials, who, according to peasant beliefs, deliberately misrepresented the monarch’s will. Peasants saw the nobility as an obstacle between them and their beloved monarch, and were certain that the monarch would take the people’s side if only he knew of their problem. Therefore, the main objective of peasant politics was to inform their sovereign about local injustices and ask for his intervention.

Naive monarchism was the force that united peasants for collective action. The veneration of monarch created solidarities among peasants, which led to the emergence of rebel demands, according to Sandall’s (2012) analysis of sixteen-century British civil conflicts. However, most studies on naive monarchism suggest that the hegemonic belief in the imaginary ideal relations between peasants and their monarch effectively prevented peasants from embracing truly revolutionary goals (Luebke 1997). First, naive monarchism protected the monarch from becoming the object of negativity, and accordingly, secured the existing political order. Second, it provided peasants with a hope for an upcoming positive change, which would be effected by the monarch once he knew about the existing

³ Change.org is a global non-profit petition platform established in 2007 in the USA, which became popular in many countries, including Russia. It provides a freemium tool for people to leave their personal and group petitions, and organise non-profit campaigns. Currently there are more than 65 million users; popular topics are human rights, economic and criminal justice, the environment, health, and sustainable food.

wrongdoings (MacKay 2002). Third, the peasant petitions and diplomatic missions to the monarch diffused peasant rebellious energy, even though they rarely brought any discernible gains to the petitioners (Luebke 1997).

There are debates about how to interpret the peasant monarchist practices. Leubke (1997:75) was convinced that they were nothing more than a “blanket defence against domination”. In his analysis of German peasants, he argued that peasant assumptions of mutual obligations were “lopsided”, as there was “no condition of real life [to] satisfy their requirements” (ibid:75). Therefore, petitions to the monarch often failed and resulted in repressions, as peasant appeals were beyond the ability and desire of any monarch to fulfil.

However, Burke (1984) argued to the contrary in his study of medieval Mediterranean Europe. According to him, petitions starting with “long live the king” and following up with requests to resolve local injustices provided peasants with a safe political tool. The loyalty of the petitioners motivated the king to grant their appeals in order to enhance his own prestige; at the same time, since the peasants did not challenge the kings’ authority, they were rarely subjected to repression. Although peasants’ direct appeals to the monarch were formally outlawed in many countries, they were often encouraged by monarchs in order to attain information about rural conditions, regulate rural unrest, and control the nobility (Palat 2001). Field (1976) was the first who interpreted Russian peasants’ veneration of the monarch in their grievances as a conscious strategy of defiance. By demonstrating their “naivety” and “misguided” loyalty to the monarchy, peasants obtained significant immunity from prosecution and managed to defy noblemen, reduce tributes and taxes, and engender conflicts between the interests of the landlords and the authorities (Field 1976).

Scott (1990) used the idea of “not-so-naive monarchism” to explain power relations in current nondemocratic societies. He argued that subordinate groups use existing hegemonic ideology to their advantage: they make their appeals within the official discourse of deference, which lessens the possible risks of their insubordination. Scott argued that subordinates purposely reinforce the hegemonic appearances in their grievances. This leads to the emergence of public and hidden transcripts in their political conduct. In dialogues with the power, subordinate groups use grandiloquent language, which stresses their loyalty and humility (i.e. public transcripts); while the critique of the power is spoken behind the back of the dominant by means of hidden transcripts (rumours, gossip, poaching, pilfering, etc., which Scott (1990) referred to as the “weapons of the weak”).

Any hegemonic structure, according to Scott (1990), provides powerless groups with a weapon to interrogate the power stratum for violation of the rules by which it justifies its own authority. Similarly, O’Brien (1996) revealed that peasants often use the state’s own laws, policies, and values to defy “disloyal” political and economic elites – something he conceptualised as “rightful resistance”. However, rightful resisters do not appeal to imaginary patronages, but use institutionalized channels of dissent resolution (O’Brien 1996). Rightful resistance as well as naive-monarchist appeals are peaceful practices and operate in the reform not the revolution paradigm. Nevertheless, moments of rural uprising could occur once public anger reaches a boiling point and hidden transcripts are spoken publically (Scott 1990).

3 Naive monarchism in tsarist and soviet Russia

Tsarist period

Naive monarchism is the dominant ideological force in Russian history. Its popularity was rooted not only in traditional peasant belief in compassionate *tsar-batushka* [tsar-dear father]. This ideology was reinforced by the Russian Orthodox Church and propagated by the tsar himself.

Obedience to power was one of the obligations of an Orthodox person, while rebels were associated with foreign and evil forces (Dunning 2010). Similar to popular beliefs in many other monarchies, the tsar was seen as the representative of the God on earth and people pinned their hopes for justice and security in this world on him. Field (1976:12) observed that the “veneration of monarch and veneration of God derive from the same impulse”, therefore, religion was a powerful tool of the tsarist autocracy.

The image of the tsar as the common people’s benefactor and intercessor was maintained and imposed by the tsar himself. Such symbolic acts as “standing godfather to the child of a poor peasant” or public instances of “humiliating or executing arrogant nobles and officials” were practiced by many Russian tsars, including Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great (Field 1976: 5). These actions were aimed not only at promoting the personality of the current tsar, but all tsars in general. Thus, in the later tsarist period, Nicolas II issued a book “*Tsar Liberator, Tsar Martyr*”⁴ about his predecessor Alexander II, to invigorate the myth about the benevolent tsar among the growing number of literate peasants (Tumarkin 1997).

As mentioned in the previous section, the state benefitted from naive monarchism by dissipating rebellious peasant energy, disciplining the nobility, and attaining information about rural conditions (Palat 2001). The peasants’ written petitions were encouraged and even granted by the tsar; and their diplomatic missions (called *khody* [walks]) became popular peasant practices. Although Russian history had a number of successful peasant *khody*, some of them were complete failures – such as the bloody Sunday of 1905, when the tsar’s soldiers shot down more than a hundred peasants who were peacefully petitioning to the tsar (Field 1976). The outcome of peasant appeals depended on the tsar’s capacity and will to engage with peasants’ causes, the content of the appeals, and the political context in the country.

Despite the belief of many theorists in traditional peasant peacefulness, naive monarchism had a revolutionary potential in Russia. It became the driving force of civil war during the Times of Troubles at the end of the seventeenth century, when peasants supported the mystically survived *tsetsarevitch* [crown prince] Dmitry, who claimed the throne from tsar Boris Godunov. Peasants believed that Dmitry was the “true tsar” and followed him to restore the traditional order (Dunning 2001). Field (1976) discussed similar reasons for peasant uprising in his analysis of the Pugachev rebellion 1773-1775. Pugachev’s success in mobilising peasants for revolt was largely defined by his claims that he was the legitimate tsar Petr III.

On the eve of the Russian Revolution, the peasants’ naive monarchism was discussed as an obstacle to antimonarchist rebellion both by radical populists⁵ and by Marxists. The late nineteenth century populist propaganda aimed to destroy the rural “illusions” in a compassionate tsar-batushka. However, loyalty to the tsar was an ineradicable peasant feature, which led to the failure and diffusion of the populist movement and the spread of Marxism, whose leaders saw industrial workers as less “benighted and superstitious than the peasantry and therefore more promising revolutionary material” (Field 1976:3).

⁴ This illustrated book was published in 106,000 copies; in simple language, it portrayed the tsar as ‘devoted to his people and as a martyr for that love’ (Tumarkin 1997:10). The tsar Alexander II was known as Alexander the Liberator for the emancipation of serfs in 1861. He was killed by terrorists in 1881.

⁵ Radical populism was a movement in Russia that developed from the 1860s until the 1880s. Its leaders (radical writers, idealists, and anarchists) believed that peasants (not the proletariat, as Marxists argued) would lead to a socialist revolution. Radicals ‘went to the people’ in rural areas with revolutionary socialist propaganda, but failed to achieve their movements’ goals (O’Mahony 2004).

Soviet period

After the fall of imperial Russia in 1917, the new Soviet government aimed to create a class of politically conscious rural workers by eradicating peasant features such as land property and family labour. The peasants' collectivisation into *kolkhozy* and *sovkhozy* [collective and state farms] in the 1930s was not only aimed at generating the resources needed for the country's industrialisation, but also at eliminating the peasantry as a class. Nevertheless, naive monarchism remained part of the rural culture and continued to play an important role in state-society relations, targeting soviet leaders instead of the monarch. In the early Soviet period, peasants wrote letters and organised *khody* to Lenin to ask for advice. These practices were encouraged and used by the government to demonstrate the benevolence of Soviet power "by personally intervening on behalf of troubled citizens" and were a "form of controlling bureaucratic inefficiency and corruption" (Bittner 2003:282). The belief in a good tsar was ably transformed into the cult of the immortal "clever Lenin" (Tumarkin 1981) and the cult of Stalin as the "father of all peoples" (Bittner 2003).

If the peasants' naive monarchist actions during the tsarist period were considered by some scholars to be a rural strategy of resistance (Field 1976; Scott 1990), the peasant petitions and *khody* to the Soviet leaders were not clearly classified. There are many studies on overt and covert rural resistance to collectivisation. Most of them analyse open dissents such as "*babii bunty*" i.e. peasant women's riots against collectivisation (Viola 1986), passive resistance expressed in peasant livestock slaughtering instead of giving it to collective farms (Wegren 2005), or stealing, foot-dragging, and gossiping as everyday forms of peasant resistance. Alexopoulos (2003), however, discovered hidden resistance in the peasant petitions to Stalin. He observed sarcasm and irony in peasant letters, and referred to these appeals as instances of "modest rebellion". By expressing their loyalty to the Soviet power, petitioners criticized the implementation of the orders and, indirectly, the regime itself.

The later generations of soviet rural dwellers, who did not remember the painful collectivisation and the period preceding it, accepted collective farming and became the "winners" of the socialist revolution. They benefitted from guaranteed employment at *kolkhozy* and *sovkhozy* and the collective support made available to their households (Tepicht 1975). Petitioning remained a rural practice, but became less subservient with the weakening of the repressive authoritarian regime. Workers' letters to Khrushchev, Brezhnev, and Kosygin were more direct and critical than the previous naive monarchist appeals, but contained the same elements: beliefs in an impartial ruler and complaints about unlawful local officials (Workers Force 2012). Gorbachev's memoir (2014) contains a number of such letters, which feature complains, but also advice, empathy, and support. The democratisation of society provided subordinate groups with new tools to defend their interests and personal petitions to the ruler resembled a rather informal state-society dialogue.

4 Present day rural Russia and monarchist beliefs

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the new Russian government initiated a land reform, which was aimed at distributing the *kolkhozy*'s and *sovkhozy*'s land to rural dwellers by means of land share certificates for private farming development. However, due to the absence of financial resources and informational support, fragmented and often non-functioning markets, and rural dwellers' unwillingness to leave the collectives, the majority of land recipients did not become farmers (Visser and Spoor 2011). The restructured *kolkhozy* and *sovkhozy* experienced severe financial difficulties in free market conditions. This led to high rural unemployment. Those villagers who remained employed received very low salaries. Bogdanovskii (2005) reports that, in 1990 (before the transition began), agricultural wages were 95 percent of the average monthly wage; by 2002 they had fallen to 40 percent of that average. The peak of rural poverty was in 1999, when 73.1 percent of villagers had incomes lower than the subsistence level (Independent Institute for Social Policy 2002). Many rural residents, especially the young people, "voted with their feet" and moved to cities. Those who remained in the villages became highly dependent on subsistence farming on their household plots, experienced social exclusion, and succumbed to depression, alcoholism, and poor health.

It is noteworthy that naive monarchism faded during Yeltsin's presidency. This can be explained by the remarkable unpopularity of the first Russian president – his approval rating was only 2 percent in 1999 (Transcripts 2002). Yeltsin was viewed as someone who caused chaos rather than imposed order, and people therefore did not pin their hopes on him. With Putin's rise to power in 2000, the situation changed.

Putin's policy in rural areas was (and is) aimed at developing large-scale agribusiness. Land sales were legalised in 2002, which attracted new players to the Russian land market. Domestic oligarchs and foreign land investors started acquiring large tracks of farmland, spurred by the global financial and food crises. They practiced land acquisitions or long-term renting agreements with the rural population, or purchased the entire collective farms. Currently, 83.2 percent of farmland is controlled by large-farm enterprises (LFEs). Although many rural dwellers remain the official landowners, the existing power discrepancies prevent them from deriving benefits from their land. The long-term land renting agreements imply a very small (in-kind) payment to the landowners, and offer almost no termination or renegotiation options. The small-holders' land right violations and various fraudulent schemes, under which land investors accumulate their lands, allowed Visser and Spoor (2011) to characterize this process as an instance of land grabbing. Furthermore, LFEs practice control grabs – politics of controlling the agricultural value-chain and accumulating the majority of state subsidies, thereby preventing the development of small-scale entrepreneurship in rural areas.

Visser, Spoor and Mamonova (2014) argue that the land reform was not genuinely redistributive: rural dwellers continued to cultivate their small-scale household plots, while kolkhozy and sovkhozy were gradually transformed into LFEs. The main changes were the significant reduction of social support to rural households and rural areas (which had previously been provided by the collectives) and the decrease of employment opportunities in the countryside. LFEs invested a great deal in the development of large-scale industrial farming, while needing significantly less labour than former kolkhozy and sovkhozy. Kalugina and Fadeeva (2010) estimated the real rural unemployment at 55 percent in 2009.

Although Putin's reign is characterised by a general reduction of poverty, it has not significantly influenced the declining rural living conditions. The social infrastructure has crumbled: during the last 16 years, 34 percent of rural schools have been closed down, the existing schools are overpopulated, and 40 percent of them need major overhauls; the majority of medical facilities require renovation and refurbishment, and have a shortage of 35 percent of medical personnel; the existing road system is in a very bad state, leading to the isolation of many settlements from the outside world; 26 percent of rural houses are dilapidated, and only 9 percent have central heating (Kiseleva et al. 2013).

The author's ethnographic research in the Stavropol Krai revealed that rural dwellers blame "the government" for the woes of their household and for the problems in rural areas. In their discourses about wrongdoings in the countryside (such as the bankruptcy of kolkhozy/sovkhozy, the destruction of village infrastructure, price politics that discriminate small-scale producers, land grabbing, etc.), peasants use the word "they" to allude to the state-elite coalitions. At the same time, president Putin is seen in a positive light by the majority of rural residents. The following statement of Natalia, an old woman living in the village Rasshevatskaya is illustrative:

I support Putin. He is a good man. He increased our pensions... He makes it better for people, but you cannot be a warrior when you are alone in the field. He cannot cover everything. The local authorities are those who do things wrongly⁶.

Not only the older generation of post-soviet villagers shares the naive monarchist belief. Younger people, who grew up in capitalism and are more critical to the existing order, also believe that

...the president does not see or does not want to see what is going on. He arrived here [in Stavropol Krai] to visit the best farms in the region. He should just get into a car and drive to rural areas to see how people live (interview with Alexey, a young farmer in the Krestyanskoye village).⁷

How did the old peasant belief in a good tsar-batushka re-emerge in contemporary Russia? The first explanation is related to the contemporary process of re-peasantisation. Mamonova (forthcoming) argued that the post-soviet transition from socialism to capitalism reversed the agrarian transformation in Russia. Instead of creating commercial private farmers, it caused the partial re-emergence of the peasantry, which shares many features with the classic Chayanovian peasants – such as subsistence-oriented farming and family labour. Although the contemporary Russian peasants are not backward and uneducated, the belief in an unlimited just power, which protects the poor from their oppressors, is still present in their cultural practices. The folk adage '*pridet tsar-batyushka i vseh rassudit*' [the tsar-dear father will come and judge us all] continued to be used in daily discourses, although often ironically.

A second explanation derives from the fact that naive monarchism is a means of a deprived population to deal with severe living conditions, when no escape is possible. The rural-urban migration often ends with the return of migrants to their native villages, as they are unable to compete with urbanites for better-paid jobs and are confronted with expensive city-life conditions (Mamonova 2015). The post-soviet frame of mind and the existing politico-economic situation in the countryside also narrows the available universe of possibilities: neither entrepreneurship nor open resistance are considered by villagers as feasible solutions to their problems. Just as many centuries ago, naive monarchism gives rural dwellers a hope for future positive changes in their villages – changes, which the ruler will implement as soon he gets to know about the local problems.

Whereas the above-mentioned reasons have a bottom-up origin, the top-down reinforcement of naive monarchism is, perhaps, the main driver for the re-emergence of the tsar-batushka persona. Recent studies describe the cult of Putin's personality (Montefiore 2007; Canciani 2012). The president has appealed to the traditional methods of Russian tsars to create loyalty among his people. Putin often acts as an intercessor for the ordinary people, demonstrating his will to intervene and solve local injustices. Fortescue (2009) describes how the president visited the Pikalevo settlement after receiving a petition from its inhabitants about the greedy and anti-social behaviour of local businessmen. Putin arrived, reprimanded the businessmen, and re-established order. However, Fortescue suggests that Putin's intervention was nothing more than a PR stunt and brought only short-term relief to the Pikalevo residents. Another tsar-like behaviour of Putin's is demonstrating his closeness to the people – for example, when allowing "himself to be photographed shirtless on a fishing trip, he could have been channeling Peter the Great, who projected a virile style by posing as an ordinary sailor" (Montefiore 2007). Furthermore, the annual question-and-answer session "Hot Line with President of Russia Vladimir Putin" demonstrates Putin's will to interact personally with the Russian people and to solve their personal grievances.

⁶ Conducted 20-07-2014, Stavropol Krai.

⁷ Conducted 15-07-2014, Stavropol Krai.

The emergence of neo-tsarism in the Putin era is discussed by many western scholars. This is not only related to the paternalistic Slavic-Asian autocracy, as Canciani (2012) stated, but also to the revitalization of the old tsarist symbols, such as the double-headed eagle with a crown, displayed on official buildings and in the Russian parliament (Corum 2010). The idealization of the tsarist regime is observed in such religious undertakings as the canonization of the last tsarist family in 2000, and the recent governmental decision to build a cathedral in the centre of Moscow devoted to the family's martyrdom. The Orthodox Church has gained an important role in the last decades, and while religion never completely disappeared in the countryside even despite the Soviet state's atheist policy, it now appears to flourish. New churches have been opened, and loyalty and subordination to power are brought back to the value system of common people.

Finally, the popular belief in the benevolence of the president and the evilness of local authorities is reinforced by the state-controlled mass media. Hopstad (2011) describes how Russian news agencies are "guided" to promote presidential autonomy, while being free to criticize local and regional authorities.

Thus, naive monarchism fits into the current Russian society: it is politically promoted from above, and socially and culturally accepted from below.

5 Naive monarchism as a resistance strategy

This section analyses the role of naive monarchism in the following rural practices: (1) written petitions to the president (or top country authorities), (2) group pickets and peasant khody, and (3) geographical renaming in honour of Putin.

Written petitions

The analysis of petitions is based on 35 rural written petitions to the Russian president (or top state authorities), which were obtained from two sources: the online petition platform www.change.org (28 petitions) and the author's ethnographic research in the Moscow region in 2013 (7 petitions). The platform change.org provides a database of several thousand petitions, initiated by urban and rural Russians. For this research, 124 written petitions were selected using the words "villagers" and "rural" as search criteria. After a content analysis, the author chose 28 petitions, which had been written by groups of rural dwellers (26 cases) or individually on behalf of rural communities (2 cases). These petitions represent cases from different Russian regions, were written during 2008-2014, and were addressed to Putin (22 cases) and heads of republican and regional governments (6 cases). The petitions obtained from the ethnographic research were group petitions, written to Putin (5 cases) and the Moscow regional governor (2 cases).

Compared to the urban petitions (which were left out during the content analysis), rural petitions contain more adages, allegories, and emotional expressions. The appeals to the president as "the one who is capable to solve the problem" while the local authorities "feed [the people] with breakfasts" only (a folk saying, which means unfulfilled promises for future actions) demonstrate the presence of naive monarchism. The petition letters describe various local problems, such as: the absence of a rural school, a hospital closure, water shortages, the cancellation of train/bus connections between two villages, the unlawful acquisition of a kolkhoz, etc. Some of them ask for money to renovate a rural church or sports/cultural facilities. At first glance, these claims are very loyal to the power, as even the arbitrariness of local authorities is not central in these petitions. However, things are often not what they first appear to be.

Table 1. The objectives and framing of the analysed petitions

Problem statement	Number of petitions	Alignment with the state national projects	Reference to constitutional rights and state laws	Inaction of local authorities	Reference to elections	Warning of resistance, bad times, loss of statehood	Irony, sarcasm
Need for renovation/construction of hospitals, schools, sports and cultural centres, churches	12	7	5	6	3	5	4
Bankruptcy of kolkhoz, misuse of kolkhoz's land	8	5	7	5	2	3	2
Transportation problems	7	3	2	4	2	2	3
Deforestation, ecological problems	4	2	2	2		3	
Slaughtering pigs due to swine flu	2	1	1			1	1
Arbitrariness of local authorities	1				1		1
Water supply problems	1	1		1			1

Table 1 shows that many of the sample petitions, although related to local socio-economic problems, link to national state programmes and policies, have elements of rightful resistance, and warn the president about the growing discontent on the ground. The petition reproduced below is written by villagers from the Novgorod region about the cancellation of the train connection between several rural settlements, and contains the aforementioned elements. A brief narrative analysis of this petition and an abstraction of common features with other petitions from the sample are presented afterwards.

Respectable Vladimir Vladimirovich.

We, residents of villages: Khvoynaya, Pestovo, Lubutino appeal to you. The reason is that since January 2014 all local trains between stations Khvoynaya–Budogosch and Khvoynaya–Pestovo are cancelled. The RZhD [Russian Railways] is boasting about new Sapsan and Allegro trains, while we, provincial residents, are cut off from the outside world. And this is happening against the background of the programmes... your programmes, which are aimed at rural and agricultural development, improvement of rural living conditions, attraction of the youth to the countryside.

Our local and regional authorities did not inform us about their plans until the very last moment. Obviously, they were afraid of our appeals to higher authorities against these changes. The governor of the Novgorod region S. G. Minin is not concerned about trains on the edge of the region. Of course, he has a private car with a driver, and all roads are blocked every time he rushes to his office to perform his duties. But no one wants to think about us. [...]

To tell you that we are worried about what is going on at the railways, and what could happen with us due to this reformation, is to tell nothing. The wave of public anger and indignation grows every day.

They [local/regional authorities] say that we will not use these trains after ticket price increases, and they do not intend to cover the losses because of us. The officials elected by us do not have money for us, taxpayers, the electorate. They remember about us only during elections. [...]

Respectable Vladimir Vladimirovich, we ask you to help our governor S. G. Minin with money as he is unable to make ends meet (or to tell him where to get this money) in order to

pay for the train connection between our villages. And to help the RZhD director V. I. Yakunin to understand that there are some important things in this life which are not-for-profit.

Sincerely grateful, villagers of Khvoynaya, Pestovo, Lubutino (submitted 28 December 2013, signed by 541)⁸

As many other petitions, this letter starts and ends with public transcripts: petitioners refer to the president by name, which expresses the rural belief in personal connections between the president and his people, while those, who stay in-between, are named formally by surnames. The adjectives “respectable”, “sincerely grateful” express the petitioners’ gratitude and loyalty, who “naively” ask the president to help regional power-holders to remedy the situation.

Two purposes of such appeals can be distinguished. The first is a plea for help from the president; the second is a threat to local power-holders. Although Putin’s interventions do not occur often, their probability keeps local authorities accountable. For this reason, villagers send the original letters to the presidential office and copies to other stakeholders. Thus, the analysed letter was forwarded to the president, the governor of the Novgorod region, and the RZhD director. Petitioners anticipate actions from local authorities, therefore, they barely accuse them of misconduct and law violation; instead, they complain about their ignorance and inactivity. However, the critiques of the hegemony are hidden in many petitions from the sample:

this position is in fact a triumph of indifference of the local authorities towards the problems of Krasnoye village residents (land related petition);

...these officials are silent, and, probably, wait until another bus will fall into the abyss and ordinary people will suffer. No one blows at his *moustache*⁹! No shame, no conscience of these “servants” of the people (transport problem).

The analysed petition similarly satirizes the duties of the governor (“he rushes to his office to perform his duties”) and indirectly assaults local authorities for their non-compliance with their responsibilities (“they remember about us only during elections”). The election theme passes through many petitions in the sample. Thus, petitioners from the Filino village (the Ivanovo region) use Putin’s elections as an argument in their request to build a rural school: “we voted for you because we believed in you!” In this way, rural dwellers remind the power about its dependency on the electorate in the state building process.

Contrary to common assumptions about peasants’ juridical illiteracy, these modern rural petitioners are familiar with their rights, and refer to state laws and regulations to support their complaints:

...this territory falls within the scope of the federal law “On specially protected areas”... (environmental problem),

...the regional government’s attempts to save money on public health contradict Governmental Decree N1689 (hospital closure).

In this sense, these petitions resemble rightful resistance, which, contrary to naive monarchism, is not linked to imaginary patronages. People appeal to the existing legal system to litigate their grievances; however, they do this by addressing the president, not via institutionalised channels of disputes

⁸ The full text of this petition is available in Russian here: www.change.org/p/владимир-владимирович-путин-предотвратите-отмену-поездов-хвойная-пестово-хвойная-будогощь-хвойная-подборовье

⁹ This folk expression means: no one does anything.

resolution. The Russian court system is biased and corrupt, and does not often work in favour of the rural poor (Mamonova and Visser 2014).

In order to emphasise the importance of their cause, petitioners link it with national state programmes and policies. The analysed petition alludes to the National Priority Project “Agriculture” (“your programmes, aimed at rural and agricultural development...”). Other petitions link to the Food Security Doctrine (petition against the closure of kolkhoz), ecological food production (land related petition), and the most recent refer to the geopolitical situation and sanctions against Russia (acquisition of kolkhoz petition).

Along with legalistic definitions of their grievances, rural petitioners often refer to “people say...” arguments. On the one hand, it is a part of folk vocabulary; on the other, they demonstrate the growing discontent among the people. The analysed petition, for instance, notes that “the wave of public anger and indignation grows every day”. Other petitions warn about the destruction of the Russian national identity and statehood (land related petition), the return of serfdom (kolkhoz acquisition), and even foresees Times of Troubles (ecological petition). It is unclear if the last petition refers intentionally to the Times of Troubles as a historical event at the end of the seventeenth century, characterised by anarchism and the peasant civil war. If so, it is a disguised threat to the existing order.

Presidential intervention in local conflicts is unlikely except for such extraordinary cases as the Pikalevo dispute, as described by Fortescue (2009). Petitions are usually forwarded from the presidential office to lower level authorities for their resolution. Vasily from the Galkinskoye village reported that he managed to hand over a petition letter to Putin during the president’s official visit to the Sverdlovsk region; the next day the head of the presidential administration invited Vasily for a meeting. Although, no concrete actions from the top-government have followed, this incident spurred the local authorities to launch an investigation of the kolkhoz’s bankruptcy. The authors of the analysed petition managed to preserve two trains between Khvoynaya–Budogosch, although trains between Khvoynaya–Pestovo were cancelled.

However, not every petition ends in success. The procurement price of milk in the Grachevskiy rayon of the Stavropol Krai is lower than the production costs peasants incur. The villagers reported that the local “milk mafia” controls the milk collection and punishes those who dare to complain. Olga from the Krasnoye village shared the following story with the author:

There was one woman with cows. The price is too small, you cannot survive. Her sister decided to help her. She wrote a letter to the governor about that... Well, the governor considered it, and sent it to the SMF [Stavropol Milk Factory] with an order to solve the problem. SMF ordered: no more milk to be collected from this woman. That was it... She tried to sell milk by herself, make cottage cheese, but nothing worked out. Finally, she had to slaughter her cows. No one wants to complain anymore¹⁰.

The outcome depends on the scale of the problem, how much the power-holders are ready to give up, and the will from above. According to Sergey Kuznets, who has been fighting for many years against illegal constructions in the Sergiev-Posad district, roughly 20 percent of written petitions are successful. Although it does not seem a high percentage, it is in fact a significant share for Russia, where institutions are biased and function weakly.

Peasant pickets and khody

The analysis of peasant pickets and khody is derived from the author’s longitudinal study of the rural social movement *Krestyanskiy Front* during 2010-2013. In-depth interviews (6 with the leadership and 21 with members), participant observations of four pickets, three group discussions, and extensive

¹⁰ Conducted 15-07-2014, Stavropol Krai.

document analysis constitute the empirical part of this section. Furthermore, participant observation of three non-Front group pickets in the Moscow region during 2013 and nine in-depth interviews with their activists are also analysed.

Similar to written petitions, the group pickets and peasant khody inform the president (or a head of the regional government) about local injustices. Rural organised protests occurred around large cities during the first decade of 2000. Many of them were related to illegal acquisitions of former collective farmland. Peasants protested against the violation of their land rights, the artificial bankruptcy of collective farms, and the construction of country houses for urban middle and upper classes on former agricultural fields. Land use transfers from farming to construction purposes became a very profitable, often unlawful, business after the land sales legalisation in 2002 (Visser et al. 2012). Krestyanskiy Front was organised in 2005 by a group of former collective farm workers, who lost their land shares due to the illegal acquisition of their farm. By 2010, Krestyanskiy Front had more than 25,000 members from 80 farm enterprises located in different regions of Russia. The movement defended its members' interests by applying to courts and organising pickets, demonstrations, and peasant khody to the president.

Naive monarchism is manifest in Krestyanskiy Front' appeals to the president for help. However, the reason for these appeals is the peasants' inability to get fair disputes resolutions from appellate institutions. Maria Zharova, the head of the Moscow regional branch of Krestyanskiy Front stated the following in one of the interviews:

We have applied to local and regional courts, appealed to the prosecution office. The answer is always negative, although all our documents confirm that we are right. The corruption comes to the fore! Only the president has the power to rein the court.¹¹

The judiciary is among the most corrupt public institutions in Russia (Global Corruption Barometer 2013). The court's partiality manifests itself not only in highly politicised land-related issues, but also in cases of water pollution, deforestation, and other local problems.

Many activists combine petitions with pickets. According to Tamara Semenova, one of the Krestyanskiy Front's leaders, the diversification of resistance strategies determined the success of the movement. The hidden transcripts become more public in such protests, and the president is no longer seen as benevolent:

Everything happened during Putin's rule. Thus, it was his will. Courts are not fools, it was his order, I think. It is impossible that the master does not know what is going on in his country! (Taisia, an activist from the 'Serp i Molot' sovkhoz)¹²

The goal of peasant delegates is not to inform their "monarch" about their problems, but to make their appeals as public as possible. For this reason, Maria registered her group petition for the 'Hot Line with President of Russia Vladimir Putin':

I will raise our question and will see. The question will be addressed to him directly. Live stream. I think he will not avoid answering (Maria, an activist from the 'Serp i Molot' sovkhoz)¹³.

Rural activists intentionally exploit the publicity of political leaders, especially during elections. Ekaterina, who fights the deforestation of the Pereyaslav forest near the town of Sergiev-Posad in the Moscow region, said that it does not matter which politician is going to use their problem in his

¹¹ Conducted 30-05-2013, Purschevo village, Moscow region.

¹² Conducted 30-05-2013, Purschevo village, Moscow region.

¹³ Conducted 30-05-2013, Purschevo village, Moscow region.

election campaign, as long as the problem will be solved. The practice of selective intercessions for the poor is commonly used by candidates in their political campaigns. Being aware of this, peasants plan their activities accordingly. Lilya, an activist from the 'Leninskiy Luch' sovkhov, identified the following main factors, which influence their decision to hold a picket:

We consider the weather and the political situation in the country. Now, for example, the election of the Moscow regional governor is coming. Therefore, we are going to organise pickets more often. The weather is getting better too¹⁴.

Protesters use the state's laws and regulations to confront their oppressors, and, at the same time, express their loyalty to the supreme power, thereby avoiding being accused of opposition to the regime. This strategy allowed Krestyanskiy Front to win a number of disputes and be active during nine years, which is a long period for a Russian civil society organisation. Putin's reign is characterised by the state persecution of opposition, repressions against undesired civil groups, and the creation of a 'guided' civil society (Mamonova and Visser 2014, Henderson 2011).

While naive monarchism shields rural activists from the ruler's anger, it does not protect them from pressures and persecutions at a local level. One of the Krestyanskiy Front's leaders, Tamara Semenova, led a protest group of 600 rural dwellers – former workers of the 'Gorki-2' sovkhov – in their fight against land grabbing:

For 5.5 years, we had been fighting for the restitution of our land rights. It was a difficult fight. During that time I was threatened, chased; they tried to give me a bribe. My underage daughter was taken to the police; they wanted to shake out something from her. [...] Not many can handle such pressure...¹⁵

Nevertheless, naive monarchist appearances and the legitimate character of the Krestyanskiy Front's activities saved the movement from severe repressions from above. Even such provocative actions as *Krestyanskiye* [peasant] *Khody* were carried out without significant punishments to their participants. Under the shelter of traditional peacefulness and loyalty of peasant khody, rural activists demanded a reformation of the judicial system and empowerment of civil self-governance in 2008. The Krestyanskiy Khod of 2011 appealed for the elimination of all taxes in rural areas, while participants of the 2012 Khod protested against Russia's accession to the WTO. None of the khody reached the president, and no request was met. The peasants' demands contradicted the official state policy, and the societal impact of a possible presidential intervention was much lower than the anticipated costs of meeting the peasants' demands. However, the khody were not complete failures. The public attention surrounding such movements and the presidential tolerance towards rural protesters motivated some politicians to engage with the peasants' causes. Thus, after the 2008 Khod, Sergey Mironov, the Chairman of the Federation Council, invited the Khod participants to his office to develop a collective project aimed at revitalising Russian villages. Although no countrywide policy change followed, this project was implemented in several villages (predominantly the residences of the khod participants) and positively influenced the social infrastructure, rural employment, and living conditions in the selected settlements.

Named after Putin

The recent rural practices demonstrate that it is not always necessary to appeal to Putin personally in order to solve local problems. One strategy is to invoke his name in public activism. A number of internet publications reveal the ongoing geographical renaming in Putin's honour, which became especially widespread in the countryside (Podrez and Prikhodina 2014, Baimukhametov 2007).

¹⁴ Conducted 20-04-2013, Krasnogorsk town, Moscow region.

¹⁵ Conducted 28-09-2010, Moscow.

Thus, in 2007, local dwellers of the Kholodny Rodnik settlement near Stavropol organised a movement to protect their local forest from urbanisation-driven deforestation. They initiated the renaming of the forest into 'Putin grove' and attached Putin's portraits to every tree. Inna Bakulina, an activist in this movement, explained their actions in an interview to NEWSru.com (2007) as follows:

...we thought that our local authorities and constructors will not dare to touch Vladimir Vladimirovich [...] we do not have a copier, we multiplied his portraits in the city [...] They [construction workers] only cut the trees which are without Vladimir Vladimirovich. If his portrait is there – they are afraid [...] The truth and Putin are on our side!

The construction workers indeed refrained from cutting down the trees with Putin's portraits attached, and a few days later the court declared the deforestation and construction to be illegal (Kommersant 2007).

Podrez and Prikhodina (2014) describe a number of cases when a rural street or even a whole settlement were renamed in honour of the president. Thus, the residents of a small village Kasatkino (the Udmurt Republic) initiated the renaming of their main street to the 'Putin street' in 2008. They hoped it would stimulate local authorities to asphalt the road and more broadly improve the living conditions in the village. Although the asphaltting has not occurred yet, villagers indicated that the municipal snowblowers clean the snow away from the village road every winter since the name change took place. Residents of an underpopulated village Tyuli (the Smolensk region) named their street after Putin in 2002 in order to attract new residents. One more 'Putin street' emerged in the Kardailovo village (the Orenburg region) in 2006. The renaming in Kardailovo was a form of rural protest against the unlawful actions of the local authorities, who did not want to delegate their responsibilities to a local village council in accordance with the Putin programme of the self-governance empowerment (Podrez and Prikhodina 2014). As soon a geographical feature receives the president's name, it attracts attention of mass media and society, which motivates local power-holders to fulfil their duties and solve local problems.

Some reorganised collective farm enterprises have also received the name of Putin. Thus, the former 'kolkhoz of V. I. Lenin' in the Parfenovo village (the Irkutsk region) is the 'Joint Stock Company of V. V. Putin' since 2006. A local entrepreneur in the Gornovka village (the Altai Krai) similarly named his farm: 'JSC named after Putin' (Baimukhametov 2007). Galina Ivanova, a historian at the Russian Academy of Science (quoted in Podrez and Prikhodina, 2014), explains this renaming as follows:

As part of the Bolshevik tradition, the name of the leader was not only used as a talisman and amulet, but also as a way to convey local problems to the authorities [...] I would not attribute this to the people's love. You know, kolkhozy were named after Khrushchev during his lifetime. This was done to attract the Party's attention to the kolkhozy's problems and to receive some help.

These peaceful and, at first sight, naive activities of rural dwellers are the veiled mechanism of keeping the power-holders accountable.

6 Conclusion

This research demonstrates that naive monarchism is a vibrant ideology in present-day rural Russia. It complies with the traditionally developed rural perceptions about domination and subordination, and is popularised by the current government for purposes of state social regulation. Putin's authoritarian regime, which represses and demobilises undesired civil protests, is tolerant to naive monarchist practices because they reinforce the president's authority and the existing hegemony. Furthermore, rural petitions and delegations to the country leader (or some other top governmental authorities)

provide alternative information about rural conditions, and allow the power to control rural unrest and restrain “disloyal” oligarchs and lower-level authorities. For rural dwellers, however, naive monarchism is the means to express their discontent without being prosecuted or accused of revolt. Certainly, naive monarchist practises are not solely a conscious strategy of rural defiance. Putin’s popularity is incredibly high and has reached a record-level with the annexation of Crimea in 2014. A 2015 public opinion poll revealed that more than 80 percent of the Russian population supported Putin, making him one of the world’s most popular leaders domestically (Gallup 2015). In this context, rural pleas to the president for justice and security look quite natural.

This research, however, demonstrates that the president’s veneration in peasant grievances is an effective (and perhaps the only) method to openly address rural discontent and remedy local injustices. This leads to a discussion on civil society in Russia. Until recently, Russian civil society was considered underdeveloped and state-controlled. However, new studies have revealed that the state-embeddedness of many social movements and organisations should be interpreted not as a weakness, but as a strategy to perform and achieve discernible results in a highly constrained political environment (Henry 2006, Mamonova and Visser 2014). Civil groups are the most effective in Russia when they cooperate with the state while preserving their autonomy. Although naive monarchist activists do not attempt to be embedded in the state, their loyalty to the supreme power and use of the state’s laws, rhetoric, and values in framing their protests similarly protect them from repressions and provide an opportunity to defend their rights and interests. This raises the question of how “naive” the naive monarchist practices actually are.

The fact that activists rarely anticipate direct interventions from their country’s leader is a strong argument on behalf of the not-so-naivety of rural dissents. The ethnographic analysis of three types of naive monarchist practices (i.e. written petitions; peasant pickets and khody; and geographical renaming in honour of the president) revealed that the initial addressees of these actions are local power-holders. Rural dwellers threaten their offenders with a possible presidential intervention by forwarding them copies of petitions to the president. Similarly, rural activists use Putin’s name in their pickets and geographical renaming to attract media and societal attention to their problems, thereby, holding local governments accountable. Hence, the president is engaged in the analysed rural grievances as more of a threat than an actual benefactor and intercessor of common people.

The rationality of the rural activists comes to the fore in their conscious choice to intensify their protest activities during pre-election periods. Elections, as well the state’s priority policies and programmes, are often used by activists to align their cause with the national interests, thereby attaching greater importance to their dissents. The elements of ‘rightful resistance’ – such as references to state’s laws and regulations – demonstrate that rural activists do not have illusions about imaginary patronages, but are aware of their legal rights and demand their safeguarding. However, because of the corrupt courts, they have to seek a fair dispute resolution outside the juridical system.

Naive monarchism is a unique combination of overt and covert resistance. On the one hand, it is open, public, and noisy. The rural activists seek, rather than avoid, the attention of the power-holders in their politics. On the other hand, it contains hidden transcripts, through which rural dwellers criticise local authorities, the state policies’ implementation, and the existing order. Indirect assaults to the power are hidden under hegemonic appearances, which protect rural activists from accusations of revolt and severe punishment. The disguised and subordinate character of naive monarchist practices corresponds with the hidden resistance of powerless groups or ‘weapons of the weak’ as discussed by Scott (1985, 1990).

Thus, naive monarchism is a form of contention on the continuum between ‘rightful resistance’ and ‘weapons of the weak’. It operates within the boundaries of legality set by the regime, but contains hidden critique of the regime in its discourses. The hidden transcripts in the analysed rural practices demonstrate the growing discontent among rural Russians. This raises the question of whether naive monarchist practices could lead to open resistance against the existing system of power domination.

Scott (1990) predicted that hidden resistance might transform into mass riots once public anger reaches a boiling point and hidden transcripts are spoken publically. This scenario is unlikely in the analysed case. Contrary to the undisclosed everyday peasant resistance – when the hidden transcripts remain between the subordinates and only public transcripts are spoken directly to the face of power – naive monarchist practices allow hidden transcripts to reach the power-holders. This diffuses rural rebellious energy and influences the conflict resolution. Although not all naive monarchist appeals are successful, and their initiators may experience the rage of local power-holders, these practices are, perhaps, the safest and most effective form of resistance of powerless groups in authoritarian Russia. This research demonstrates that naive monarchist practices are unable to challenge the existing order at large; however, they do provide rural dwellers with a means to remedy occasional local injustices.

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New Extractivism, Peasantries and Social Dynamics: Critical Perspectives and Debates

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