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Russians' Growing Appetite for Change

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In the past two years, the Russian public's appetite for change has increased considerably. A small but growing group of Russians blame President Vladimir Putin for the country's problems, and his capacity to deliver change is now being questioned. Yet the demands for change are taking very different forms, not only in open protests but also through latent discontent, and the public has not identified a specific alternative leader as a potential agent of change.

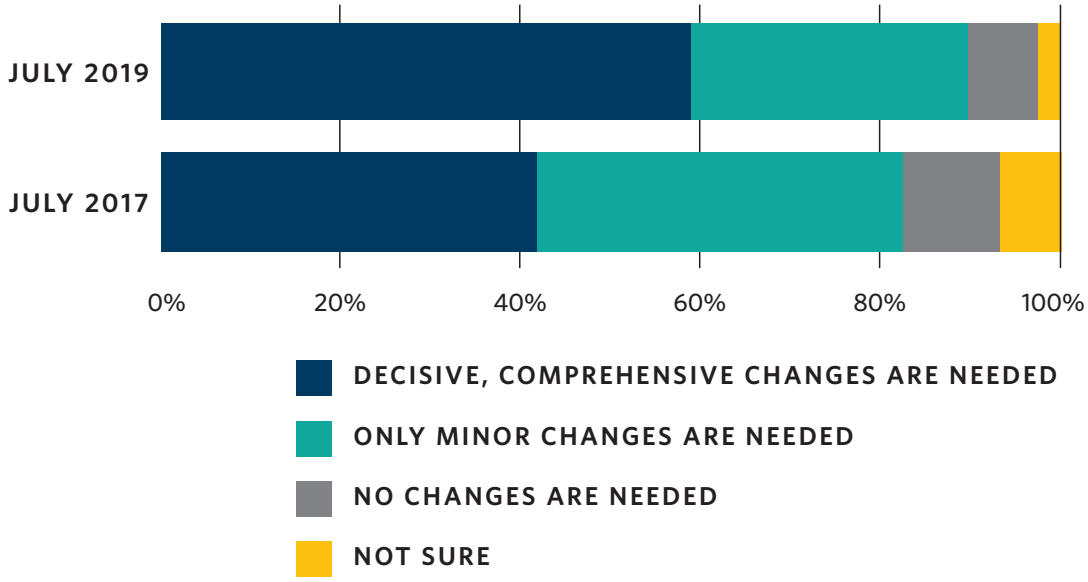
In July 2019, the Carnegie Moscow Center and the Levada Center, Russia's main independent polling agency, conducted a third poll in two years asking 1,600 Russians about their readiness for change. The results show some striking new trends. A total of 59 percent of respondents—17 percent more than two years before—said that the country needed "decisive comprehensive change" (see Figure 1). The Russian publication of this research in November 2019 attracted a lot of attention from the media and political class. An answer came in January 2020 in a form of constitutional changes and the resignation of the government. In his annual address on January 15, Vladimir Putin said: "Our society is clearly calling for change. People want development. . . . The pace of change must be expedited every year and produce tangible results in attaining worthy living standards that would be clearly perceived by the people. And, I repeat, they must be actively involved in this process."[1]

In the first poll in August 2017, much of the Russian public expressed a desire for comprehensive change (42 percent), but nearly an equal number (41 percent) said that only "minor" changes were needed.[2]

The 2017 poll revealed that Russians wanted their government to shift its focus from foreign to domestic policy. As Russia had already become "great again" thanks to Putin's perceived foreign policy successes, respondents indicated that it was time to concentrate on the domestic economy and social issues. The euphoric effect of the 2014 takeover of Crimea from Ukraine had slowly worn off.

FIGURE 1

Russian Views on the Need for Change



SOURCE: Carnegie Moscow Center and Levada Center poll of 1,600 Russians, conducted in July 2019.

NOTE: The question was, "Do you think our country needs changes?"

The year 2018 appears to have been a pivotal time. According to a separate Levada poll, government approval ratings tumbled sharply then and have stayed comparably low since.[3] An unpopular pension reform announced in the summer of 2018, and other unpopular economic policies, caused discontent. A strong protest vote during the municipal and regional elections in September 2018, when several gubernatorial elections broke with recent tradition and went to second rounds of voting, strengthened the perception that a demand for change—however populist, abstract, and unclear—does exist. Russia's civil society awakened from its slumber and became more active again.[4]

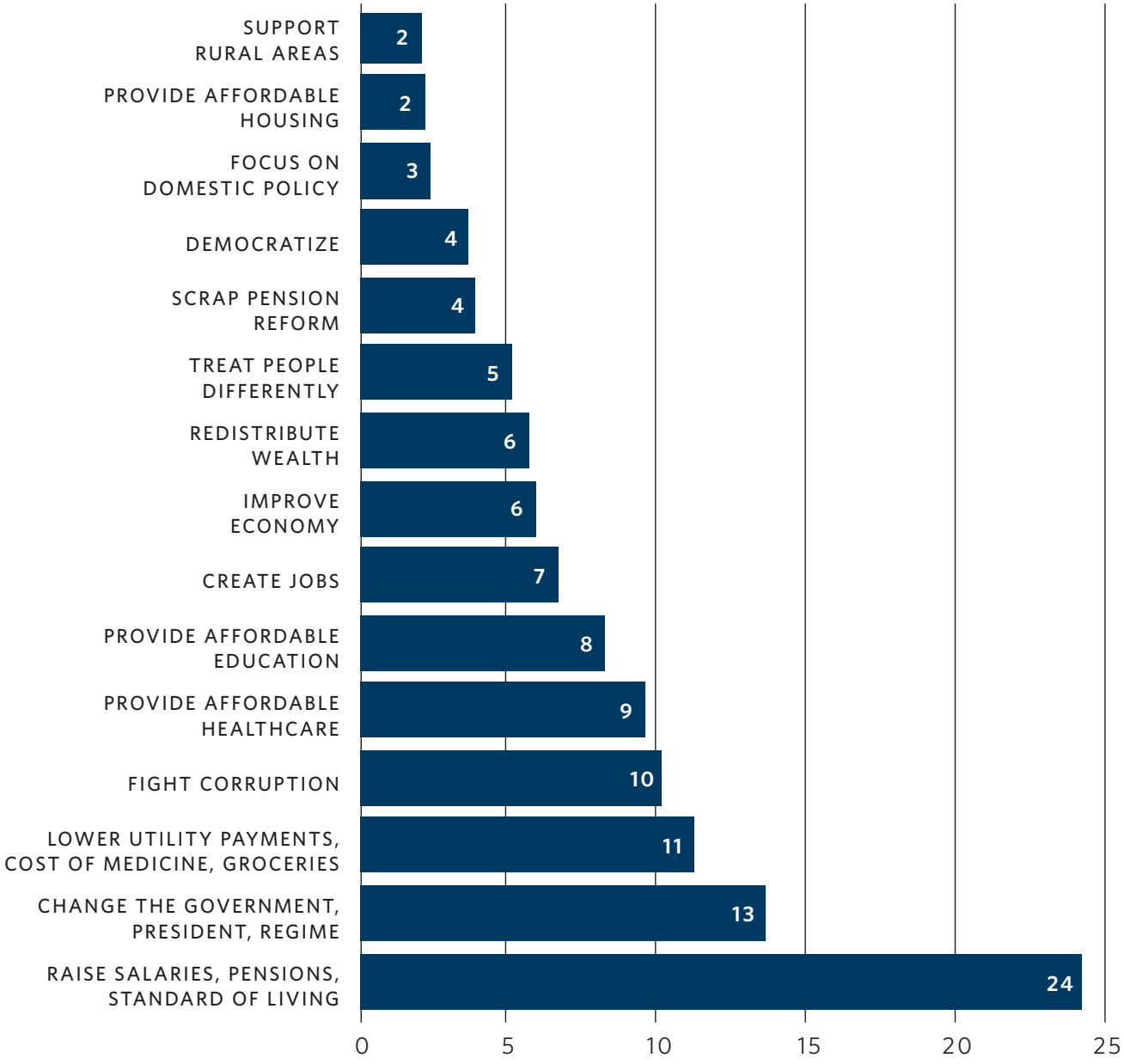
Another Levada poll conducted in September 2019 revealed how Russians' fears about the country's situation and their mistrust in its leaders had risen since 2017. The number of people who said they were afraid of the regime becoming harsher rose sharply from 17 to 35 percent. Fear of mass repression and the abuse of power increased from 21 to 39 percent and 29 to 50 percent, respectively. Concern about the state of the world in general had also risen. A total of 53 percent of Russians said they were afraid of a world war erupting—an increase from 40 percent in 2017.[5]

WHO WANTS CHANGE?

The Carnegie-Levada 2019 poll results suggest that five social groups, with very different profiles, are most in favor of comprehensive change:

- People between ages forty and fifty-four (63 percent said they wanted decisive change). These are people who will soon enter pre-retirement. They are unhappy with pension reform and the labor market.

FIGURE 2
Russians' Top Asks



SOURCE: Carnegie Moscow Center and Levada Center poll of 1,600 Russians, conducted in July 2019.

NOTE: The open-ended question was, "What needs to be changed first?"

- People with higher education (62 percent).
- People with low incomes, such as those who can barely afford to buy groceries (66 percent).
- Residents of midsize cities (60 percent). Sentiment among Moscow residents was less pro-reform at 54 percent.
- Critics of the current ruling regime (80 percent). This group disapproves of Putin's job performance and does not want him to stay in office after 2024.

Two contrasting social groups potentially stand to benefit from change. The first group forms the basis of the economy and Russia's consumerist society—in other words, it constitutes people commonly considered part of the middle class and the private sector. The second group comprises people whose personal and socioeconomic conditions are far from stellar but are not hopeless: public sector employees, retirees, and the poor.

Among those who do not support change are people who did not finish their secondary education; people over age fifty-five, who are more likely to harbor concerns that any changes might make things worse; and Muscovites (Moscow residents), of which 18 percent do not want change of any kind. These residents enjoy a better quality of life than those in other parts of the country and are therefore less inclined to change anything. This state of affairs once again confirms the old adage that Moscow and Russia are not one and the same.

WHAT KIND OF CHANGE IS NEEDED?

When asked the open-ended question of what exactly needs to change in Russia, most respondents mentioned socioeconomic issues. This continues the trend Carnegie identified in 2017—that Russians believe the goal of restoring the country's prestige and greatness had been accomplished and that it is now time for the government to focus on domestic problems.

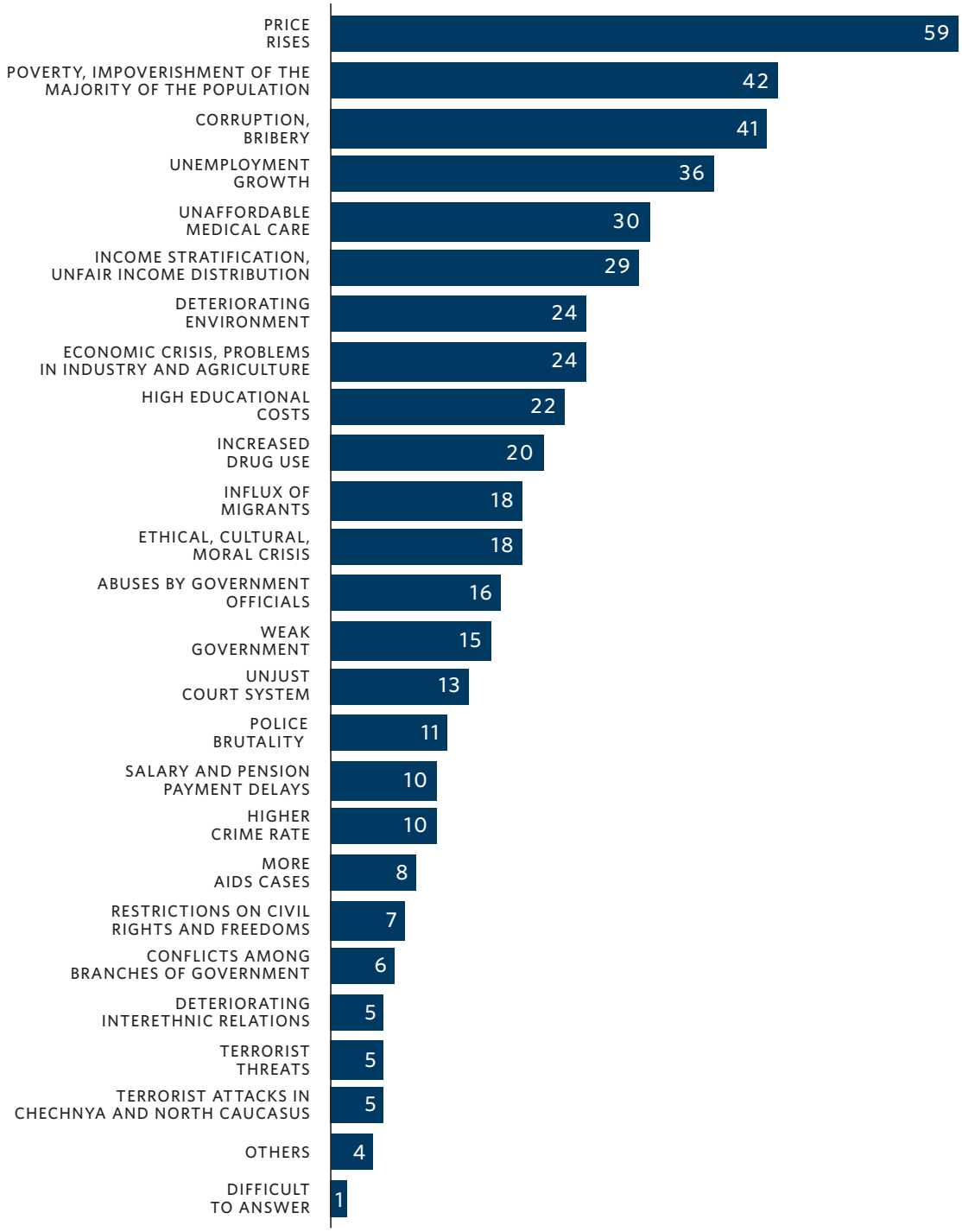
Respondents said that the overall standard of living needed to improve, and around one-quarter of them referred to low salaries and pensions. There were also appeals by 11 percent to reduce high utility payments and the cost of medicine, groceries, and other essentials. Ten percent believed that fighting corruption should be the first priority. Nine percent called for easier access to healthcare. Because it is getting harder to see doctors, one has to either spend a lot of time waiting for a free doctor's appointment or pay for an appointment (see Figure 2).

Respondents were also given a list of measures the government could take and asked to prioritize them. As with the open-ended question, there was much less interest in democratizing the political system than in fixing socioeconomic policies. No more than 10 percent of respondents named, among their top priorities, holding free and fair elections, maintaining an independent judiciary, and expanding democratic rights and freedom. These issues were generally mentioned by the youngest and most educated Russian respondents, as well as by residents of large cities—but not dramatically more than by the rest of the respondents.

Answers to both questions naturally reflect people's perceptions of the most serious social problems facing Russia. In the last twenty years of regular polling by Levada, people have consistently mentioned two concerns: price increases and general poverty. In August 2019, 59 percent cited the first concern and 42 percent cited the second. However, both problems have gradually become less of a priority in recent years. Concerns about corruption, on the other hand, are now at an all-time high—41 percent (see Figure 3). As economic problems have increased and respect for the regime has declined, the public has begun to express its discontent with the establishment in stronger terms. People are increasingly outraged by reports of the extravagant lifestyles of government officials, executives of state-owned corporations, and members of the president's inner circle.

FIGURE 3

Popular Perceptions of the Most Serious Problems



SOURCE: Source: "Trevozhashhie problemy" [Troubling problems], press release, Levada Center, September 25, 2019, https://www.levada.ru/2019/09/25/trevozhashhie-problemy-2/.

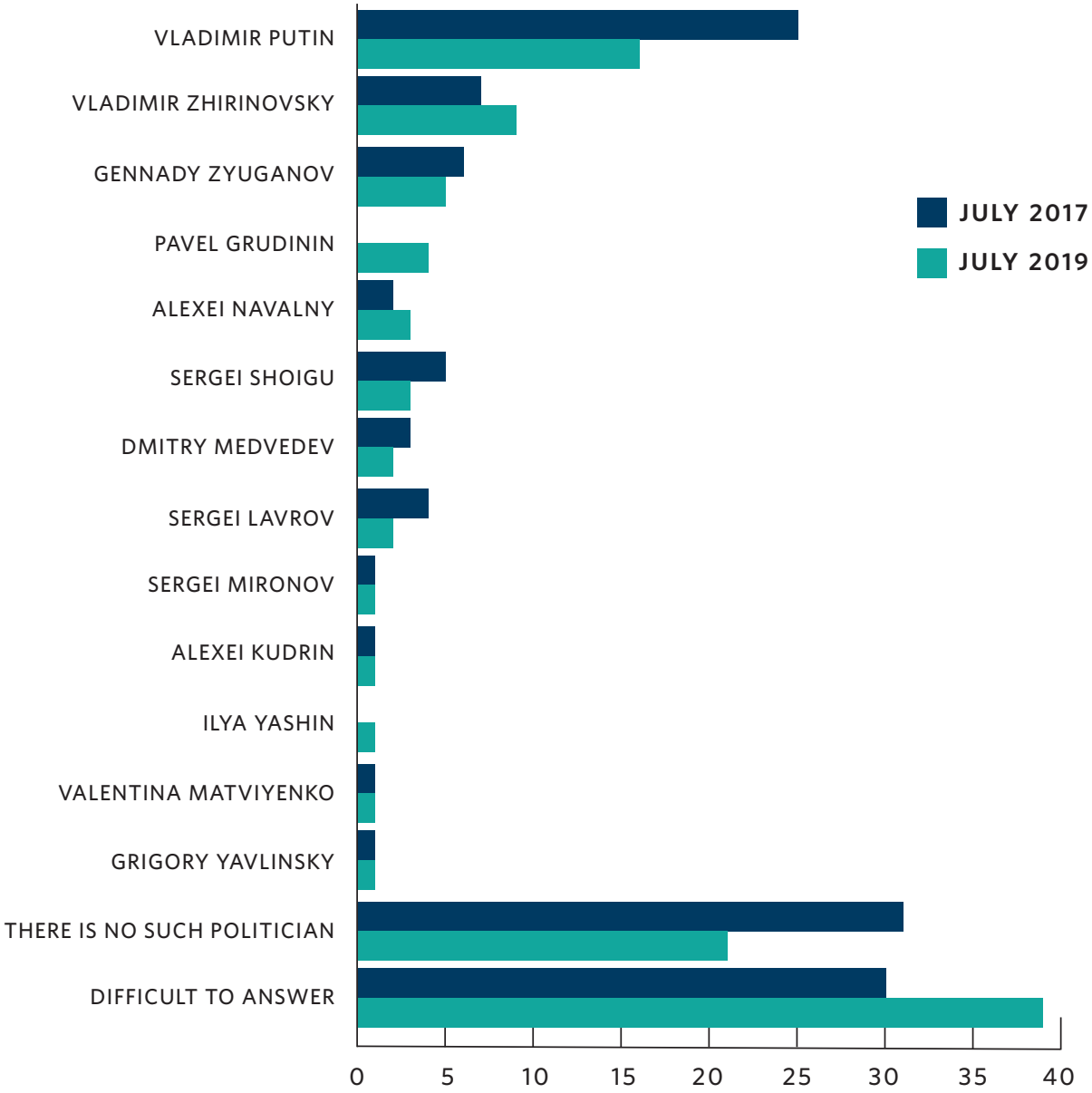
NOTE: The question was, "Which of the following problems in our society worry you the most; which problems do you consider most serious?"

WHO CAN OFFER A ROAD MAP FOR CHANGE?

Increasingly, demands for change have political connotations, and it is becoming more common to hear criticism of Putin. Even though blame is still shifted to other actors—such as government bureaucrats, the prime minister, individual ministers, and oligarchs—Putin increasingly receives his share of criticism and is treated on the same level as other government officials.

This is a very important development. After Russia's seizure of Crimea, Putin became the country's symbol and standard-bearer, an untouchable political deity. But his divine essence began to dwindle after 2018 and a human being reemerged, whom many people appear to

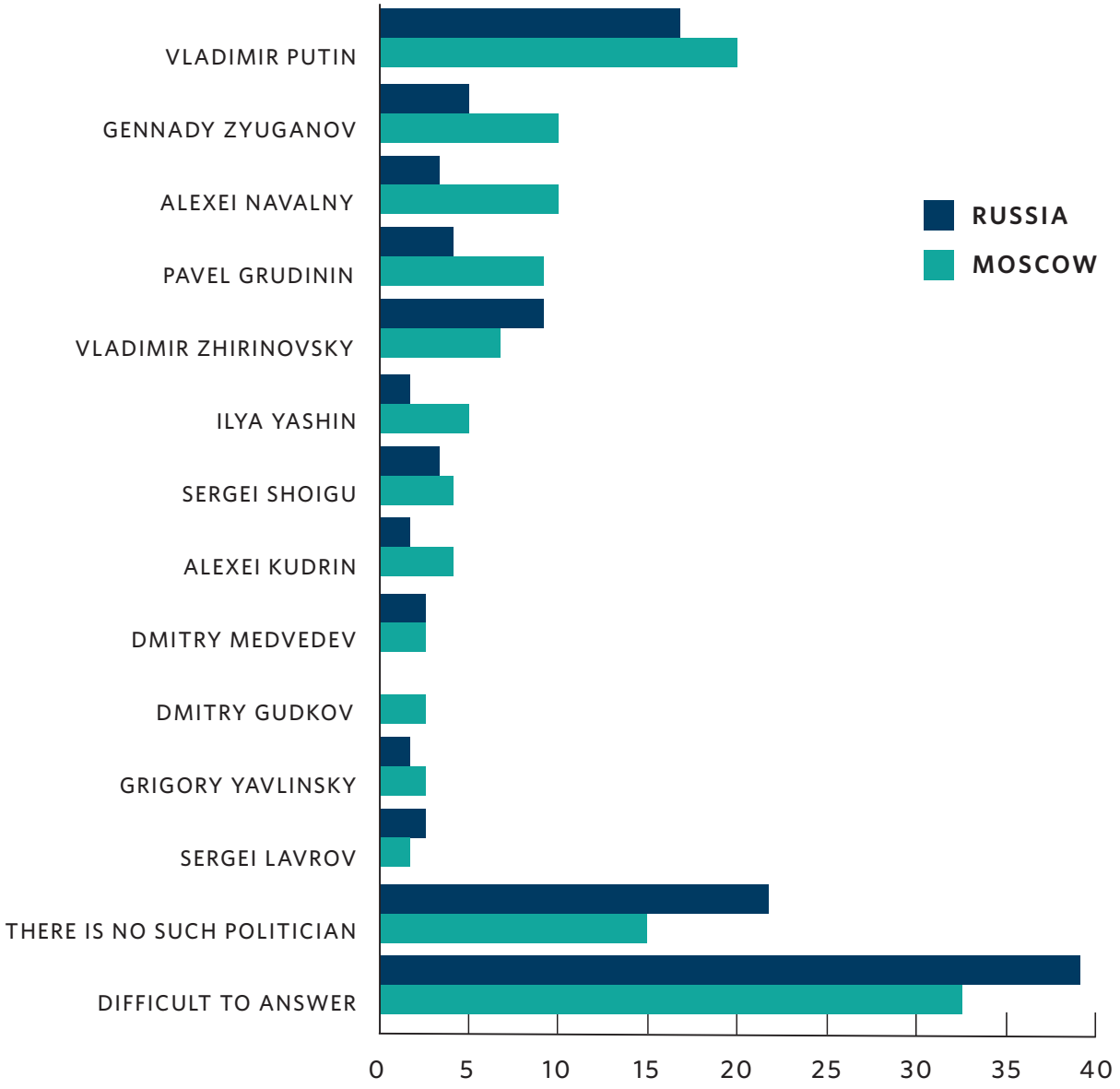
FIGURE 4a
Top Modernizers, in 2017 and 2019



like a whole lot less. And the stronger this perception becomes, the lower Putin's electoral, confidence, and job approval ratings will be. At the same time, this decline in confidence in Putin does not translate into a boost for his rivals. No other politician has wholly captured the trust of the public. Instead, when asked which Russian politician "can offer a road map for change," the number of people who have no answer at all (39 percent) is the highest. Moreover, this figure has risen sharply since 2017 and reflects the continued lack of alternatives to Putin.

Putin remains at the top of the list of potential modernizers. However, this status seems to be a legacy

FIGURE 4b
Top Modernizers, in Russia and Moscow



SOURCE: Carnegie Moscow Center and Levada Center poll of 1,600 Russians, conducted in July 2019.

NOTE: The open-ended question was, "Identify those Russian politicians who can offer program of changes that you might support."

of his former stellar rating. Putin's rating as a person capable of changing the country's situation for the better has dropped significantly. Behind him in the list stand two veteran leaders of the parliamentary "systemic" (loyal) opposition, Vladimir Zhirinovsky of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia and Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov—both of whom trail Putin by a large margin. Not far behind them is Pavel Grudinin, who established his popularity among Russians when he became the Communist Party presidential candidate in 2017–2018. Grudinin currently occupies the populist niche that under different circumstances might belong to non-systemic (which means he is not allowed to participate in any kind of elections) opposition leader Alexei Navalny. Navalny is listed among the top five potential modernizers, receiving the same level of support as Putin's most popular cabinet member, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu (see Figure 4a).

When separating out Muscovites, the list becomes markedly different (see Figure 4b). Their choices vary more widely, which seems to run counter to their general satisfaction with life in the capital. But they are expressing an opinion not just about the quality of life in their city but discontent with the general state of affairs in Russia. Moscow residents are bolder and more proactive in their search for alternative political figures, which makes the situation in the capital much more polarized.

INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO CHANGES

The most recent Carnegie-Levada poll makes it clear that a change in attitudes is under way in Russia. But it is far from clear that respondents are prepared to alter their own behavior in order to meet the challenges of societal change (see Figure 5).

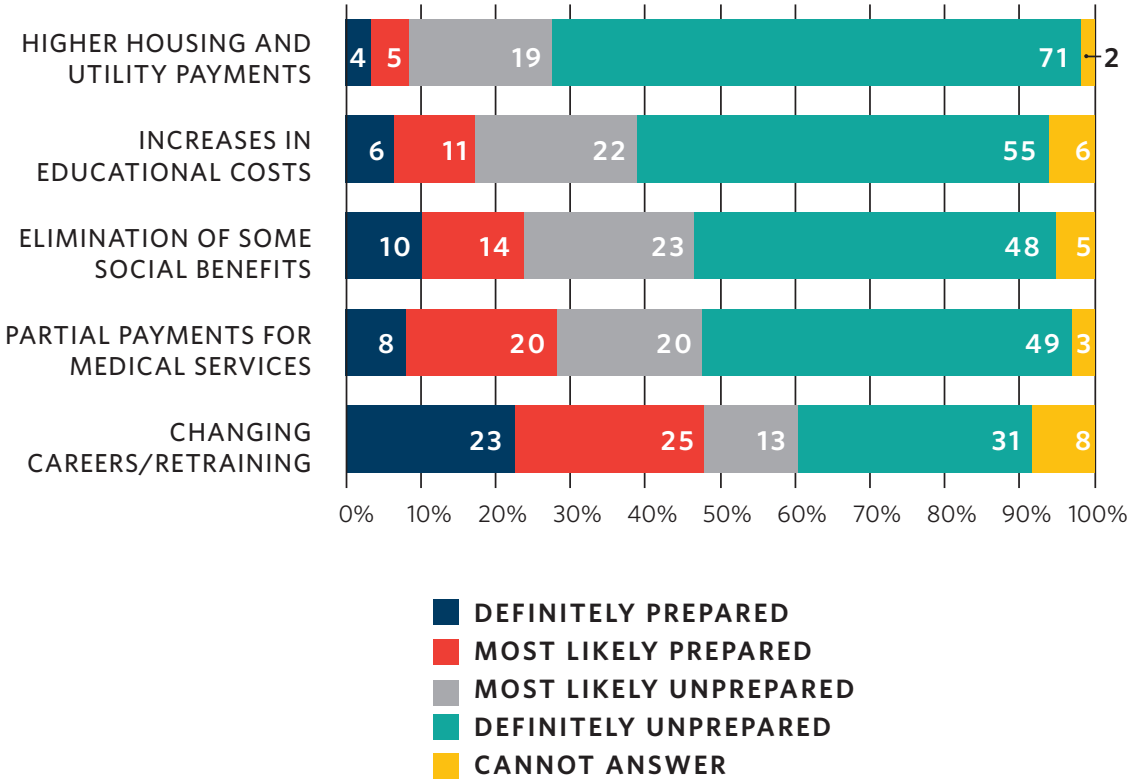
About half of the respondents are prepared for some form of career change and professional retraining (the number is significantly higher—almost 70 percent—for those below age forty). But people are much less likely to embrace a change that results in higher living costs and the potential loss of their familiar position in society. Only one-quarter of respondents are prepared to pay in part for medical services or to lose some of their social benefits (the portion jumps to about one-third among those below age forty). Just 17 percent of respondents are ready to accept paying more for education; even among the most affluent group, only one-quarter of the people would accept that. Practically no one would support an increase in housing and utility costs in exchange for improved quality of services (9 percent of total responses, with no significant disparities among different demographic groups). Most likely, the public does not believe that rising costs will help to improve the quality of services.

It comes as no surprise that Russians over age fifty-five, especially those over sixty-five, as well as the impoverished and poorly educated, are among those least prepared to sacrifice anything to improve their future standard of living. In Moscow and other cities, residents are unwilling to pay for such improvements out of their own pockets. The Carnegie-Levada 2017 poll yielded similar results. The fact that wealth and relative poverty can often be found side by side in Moscow only partially explains this phenomenon. Separate focus groups that Levada has hosted indicate that even many young and active Muscovites would like to receive public benefits. Even residents of the country's largest economic powerhouse—a place that provides plenty of well-paid employment opportunities—are not ashamed to accept handouts from the state. This just confirms earlier conclusions about how a great many Russians, especially Muscovites, frequently rely on pragmatic paternalism when thinking about their economic circumstances.

Most respondents do not believe that they can influence the introduction or direction of future changes; the data reveal that 60 percent of the people think in these terms. This is the case for most senior citizens and the poor, who are forced to rely on the state for assistance. As many as 70 percent of these people feel that they are unable to

FIGURE 5

Russians' Readiness for Changes in Different Areas



SOURCE: Carnegie Moscow Center and Levada Center poll of 1,600 Russians, conducted in July 2019.

NOTE: The question was, "How prepared are you for changes in exchange for higher quality of life?"

affect any changes. They quite understandably see the state as the main political and economic actor, since it controls resources and has the necessary mechanisms to manage and distribute national wealth.

This line of reasoning helps to explain why three-quarters of the Russian public supports state intervention in the economy. Most people are simply unaware of any other possibilities to address economic problems and do not understand the principles of the market economy. This reliance on the state stems partly from feelings of despair and powerlessness and partly from a lack of knowledge about possible alternatives. The Carnegie-Levada polls and other similar research demonstrate that many Russian citizens do not believe that their active participation—for example, in elections, charity and volunteer work, and protests—might help bring about better changes.

At the same time, almost 40 percent of the respondents said that they can influence the changes, at least somewhat. These are mostly people under age forty, affluent people, and Muscovites. Up to half of the members of these groups can be described as moderate

optimists. One could attribute these views to their age and youthful naivete, but the young, most educated, and affluent generally have more civic-minded people in their midst.

Apart from participating in elections, which is increasingly a ritual form of expressing confidence or no confidence in the current regime, civic activism consists of uniting with others to solve problems jointly. That takes various forms, including signing open letters and petitions and filing complaints and inquiries in various institutions. At the same time, people do not really see this form of activism as a way to achieve serious changes; rather, it serves as a method of fighting for one's rights, a technique that can lead to minor improvements in one's daily life. So far, Russians lack extensive experience in civic activism. Only one-third of the population appears to take part in such activity, but the number appears to be growing.[6]

CONCLUSION

The fact that so many Russians are ready for change indicates that, while not gearing up for a revolution, society wants at least to nudge the government toward changes that are primarily socioeconomic but also administrative and political in nature. But the public does not want change at its own expense. Russians still believe that the state is the main tool for the redistribution of national wealth and that it must do its job more efficiently. There are numerous contradictions in people's views—for instance, while they want comprehensive changes, they are reticent to bear the higher costs for social benefits and other services. Nevertheless, their collective perceptions do make some sense: if the state takes a lot of resources, it has to give a lot of resources back, too.

If the thirst for political change continues to gain momentum in Russia, a full-scale demand for political freedoms and alternatives may emerge quite soon. At least, more civic resistance to some government initiatives is inevitable (at different levels), and there is an evident readiness for new faces in the political process. If a civic movement coalesces, government authorities will be forced to change not only their methods of management, potentially making the state more modern and technocratic, but also allow, conceivably, for greater political freedoms. So far, the state appears totally unprepared to do this. In fact, it has been drifting toward greater authoritarianism. Here is where the key contradiction of the next few years lies: society will be developing faster than the state, potentially leaving the latter behind.

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NOTES

1 "Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly," President of Russia, January 15, 2020, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62582.
2 See a previous article by these two authors, "The Perils of Change: Russians' Mixed Attitudes Toward Reform," Carnegie Moscow Center, February 6, 2018, https://carnegie.ru/2018/02/06/perils-of-change-russians-mixed-attitudes-toward-reform-pub-75436.
3 See the "Approval of the Government" section on "Indicators," Levada Center, accessed January 14, 2020, https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings.
4 Andrei Kolesnikov, "No Left Turn in Russia," Carnegie Moscow Center, November 9, 2018, https://carnegie.ru/commentary/77683.
5 "Fears," press release, Levada Center, November 11, 2019, https://www.levada.ru/en/2019/11/11/fears-3.
6 "Rossiyskoye ekho moskovskikh protestov" [Russian echo of Moscow protests], press release, Levada Center, September 11, 2019, https://www.levada.ru/2019/09/11/rossijskoe-eho-moskovskih-protestov.

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