

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Middle class, civic activism, and local politics: Evidence from Russia

Denis Ivanov¹ , Alexander Libman²  and Alexei Zakharov^{3,4}

¹Shenzhen MSU-BIT University, Shenzhen, Guangdong, China, ²Eastern European Studies, Freie Universität, Berlin, Germany, ³University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA and ⁴Yale University, Jackson School of Global Affairs, New Haven, CT, USA

Corresponding author: Alexander Libman; Email: alexander.libman@fu-berlin.de

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Abstract

This paper examines the mobilizing capacity of the middle class in fostering civic activism under authoritarian rule. In particular, we examine whether the middle class has the potential to recruit other strata in civic activism. We use a boutique $N = 2017$ survey conducted in Moscow, Russia, in December 2021, with an embedded conjoint experiment that identifies the reaction of respondents to an invitation from a hypothetical neighbor to take part in a civic action. We find that self-reported willingness to engage in civic activism is positively associated with the share of the middle class in the respondent's district of residence. Furthermore, middle-class individuals are perceived as more knowledgeable and thus have higher mobilizing capacity; however, we find no evidence that individuals are more likely to be mobilized by someone from a similar social stratum. In districts with a low middle-class share, middle-class individuals exhibit higher willingness to engage in civic activism, but this difference disappears in high-middle-class districts. Finally, for civic activism, unlike the anti-regime protests, we find no evidence that dependence on the state reduces the self-reported willingness to engage in civic activism. A survey-based measure of past civic engagement augments findings from the conjoint experiment. Our findings contribute to research on authoritarian politics by refining our understanding of state–society relations, the middle class, civic activism, and local politics in autocracies, as well as to the general studies of impact of social context on civic activism, with implications beyond the Russian case.

Keywords: Middle class; authoritarianism; civic activism; Russian politics; local politics

JEL classification: C93; D63; D71; D72; Z13

Introduction

Authoritarian regimes are complex political systems. A key aspect of this complexity lies in state–society relations, including how regimes engage with civil society and civic activism. While early scholarship often portrayed authoritarian rule as relying primarily on coercion and propaganda, recent literature offers a more nuanced view of autocracies. This shift underscores the need for more detailed analysis of various political and non-political actors in authoritarian regimes and the way they operate and interact (Przeworski 2023).

This paper investigates civic activism in authoritarian regimes, with particular attention to the role of the middle class. Historically, both civil society and the middle classes have played a crucial

role in democratization studies. The middle class was seen as a fundamental precondition for democratization (Lipset 1959).¹ In the same way, observers considered civic activism as the first step toward political activism and societal mobilization leading to democracy. Contemporary scholarship, however, suggests that both civil society (Pietrzyk-Reeves 2022) and middle class (Chen 2013; Wietzke and Sumner 2018; Rosenfeld 2020) could play an ambiguous role in the process of democratization. At the same time, the discussion of their role in autocracies should not be limited merely to analyzing their potential contribution to democratic transition. Civic activism could have a variety of functions in an authoritarian system, some threatening the regime and some (directly or indirectly) supporting it. Understanding the mechanisms triggering this activism is, therefore, an important task.

A large literature links higher levels of civil activism to the middle class and examines the reasons why its members engage in civic activism. The focus of this paper is on another, less frequently studied topic: the mobilizing capacity of the middle class. Do other groups (i.e., non-middle-class members) follow the middle class in their civic engagement? What are the mechanisms for this contagion effect? If the middle class possesses a strong mobilizing capacity, the resulting changes in behavior of the non-middle classes could turn out to be even more significant – politically and socially – than the actions of the middle-class members themselves.

We examine the mobilizing capacity of the middle class in civic activism using a unique survey conducted in Moscow, Russia, in December 2021. Our analysis has two components. First, we conduct a pre-registered conjoint experiment in which respondents are asked how they would react to an invitation from a hypothetical neighbor to participate in various forms of civic activism.² This design allows us to randomly assign characteristics of the neighbor to each respondent, enabling a causal estimate of the effect of these characteristics.³ We then test whether middle-class members can, in fact, mobilize non-middle-class individuals to engage in civic activism. Second, we leverage the fact that our respondents reside in different neighborhoods (*rayony*) within the city of Moscow, which vary in their share of middle-class residents. One can plausibly conjecture that the larger this share, the more likely it is for non-middle-class residents to interact with middle-class individuals. If middle-class individuals are indeed capable of mobilizing non-middle-class individuals to participate in civic activism, the latter should be more likely to adopt behaviors similar to those of the middle class. We collect data on both hypothetical participation in civic activism and actual experience with civic activism, and we test whether areas of the city with a larger share of middle-class residents are characterized by different levels of inclination to engage in such activities.

Our paper contributes to several strands of research. First, in the broadest sense, we engage with the literature on the role of societal context in shaping political behavior (Przeworski 1974; Huckfeldt Plutzer and Sprague 1993; Zuckerman 2005), offering a specific example of how societal context influences civic activism. Second, our study speaks to the literature on authoritarian politics and, more importantly, the societies of authoritarian states and their interaction with the regime (Simpser Slater and Wittenberg 2018; Greene and Robertson 2019; Lankina 2023; Sharafutdinova 2023; Forrat 2024). We contribute to the growing literature on civic activism in autocracies by examining a highly relevant case – Russia – and investigating the mobilizing potential of the middle class. Third, we also add to the democratization literature, albeit indirectly. As noted above, civic activism should not automatically be viewed as an early step in democratization processes; however, there are instances when such a link exists. Our study speaks to the

¹For years, Barrington Moore's famous prediction 'No bourgeoisie, no democracy' (Moore 1966, p. 418) summarized the consensus point of view on this topic.

²The correspondence between the pre-registered hypotheses and the hypotheses of the paper is reported in the Online Supplementary Material.

³We refer to a neighbor (and not coworker or acquaintance) because many civic activism issues are of a local nature, i.e., involve people living in the same residential building.

literature on the role of individual social groups in protests in autocracies (Boix 2003; Ansell and Samuels 2014; Dahlum Knutsen and Wig 2019). Fourth, the paper contributes to research on local politics in autocracies, including within-city spatial divisions. Large cities are highly complex entities that authoritarian regimes often find difficult to govern (Norton 2024). They are also extremely heterogeneous, with different neighborhoods or spatial units being characterized by different political and social dynamics; Moscow is a prominent example of this heterogeneity (Gorokhovskaia 2018). Nevertheless, research on within-city heterogeneity in autocracies – and its political and social consequences – remains limited.

The remaining part of the paper is organized as follows. The next section summarizes the main theoretical arguments of the study. The subsequent section introduces the Russian context, including the discussion of case selection and local politics. The following sections describe our methodology and summarize the results. The final section concludes.

Civic activism and the middle class in autocracies

Civic activism in authoritarian regimes

While historically civil society has been studied in conjunction with the process of democratization, recent scholarship criticizes this approach as overly simplistic (Pietrzyk-Reeves 2022). A vast literature on authoritarian civil societies demonstrates complex and contradictory patterns of their interaction with the regime (Spires 2011; Lewis 2013; Teets 2014; Sombatpoonsiri 2020). Civil society can become a nucleus of resistance to an authoritarian regime, but it can also play an important functional role contributing to the legitimacy and the functioning of the regime. Civil society institutions can engage in the provision of crucial public goods (thus relieving the regime from this burden), participate in a dialogue with the regime (improving its governance), or even support mobilization in favor of the regime (Lorch and Bunk 2017). In the latter case, the regime does not need to resort to coercive – and potentially unpopular – measures, as it can rely on the spontaneous self-organization of its subjects. Authoritarian regimes invest substantial effort into constructing a regime-friendly civil society or capturing the existing one (Teets 2013; Kropp, Aasland, Berg-Nordlie et al. 2017; Owen 2020).

Similarly, recent research offers a more nuanced understanding of the role of civic activism in autocracies (Cavatorta 2012). On the one hand, civic activism can serve as a preparatory stage for political activism and thus positively influence the prospects for democratization. Civic activists – whether beginning with environmental protests or complaints related to urban planning – acquire organizational skills and experiences that are valuable for political mobilization (Yanitsky 2012). Disappointment with the government's response can also prompt a shift from civic to explicitly political issues. On the other hand, civic activism can be captured by the authoritarian regime, which can use it to obtain information about the societal ills (Marquis and Bird 2018) and thus adjust its policy. Regime can also channel the dissatisfaction with the autocracy into less dangerous forms for the regime: rather than criticizing the system as such, activists could be encouraged to focus on specific policy problems. Activists themselves may have a strong preference for avoiding the politicization of their initiatives – either out of fear that it would reduce their ability to achieve their goals (due to lower state cooperation) or because they genuinely reject political objectives aimed at regime change.

The Russian case provides a number of prominent examples of how different forms of civic activism and civil society emerge in an authoritarian context and what consequences they have. On the one hand, there is an example of environmental protests (Evans Jr 2012; Flikke 2021) that often crossed the boundary from civic to political activism, creating a highly persistent behavioral pattern that has continued even after 2022 (Holmgren 2025). Several other high-profile forms of civic activism have also emerged (e.g., addressing urban planning issues, garbage disposal, reckless driving, or the use of recreational lands and forests), which in some cases evolved into political

protests but in others remained purely non-political. On the other hand, a large segment of civil society in modern Russia provides bottom-up assistance to Russian troops in Ukraine and thus serves as an important pillar for the regime. Russia is also a notable example of regime engagement in the construction of civil society, for instance, through pro-Kremlin youth movements (Hemment 2015; Schwenck 2023), which, however, should not be viewed merely as products of governmental engineering but rather as outcomes of more complex state–society interactions. A wide variety of civic activism in Russia has historically manifested itself in diverse forms and expressions (Morris, Semenov and Smyth 2023; Morris 2025).

In this paper, we focus on middle-class civic activism in an authoritarian context. Definitions of the middle class are numerous (Stearns 1979), yet most relate to two key characteristics of this group: education and relative wealth (distinguishing it both from the poor and from the elites). In our study, we treat education as the primary marker of middle-class status, although we also employ alternative approaches in the empirical analysis and draw on arguments emphasizing wealth in the theoretical discussion. Specifically, as a robustness check, we use a definition of the middle class combining educational traits and professional occupation.

While the middle class is certainly not the only source of civic activism, existing research suggests that it is particularly prone to such engagement (Egerton 2002; Chen and Suen 2017). This is because middle-class members tend to have better access to information about opportunities for civic participation, greater knowledge of political and administrative processes, stronger verbal skills, and a generally more positive attitude toward the possibility of improving life through collective action compared to other social strata. From the perspective of relative wealth, the middle class also possesses greater resources for civic activism. Whether Russian civic activism is primarily driven by the middle class remains disputed (Bahry and Way 1994; Sundstrom, Henry and Sperling 2022); nevertheless, as Zeveleva (2024) suggests, the middle class plays a pivotal role in at least some forms of societal self-organization. This connects to the ambiguous position of the middle class in Russian society more broadly: since the early 1990s, its development and role have been the subject of intensive debate (Ross 2016; Gontmakher and Ross 2017), both from a sociological perspective – aiming to assess the size and characteristics of the Russian middle class – and from a political perspective concerning its role in the political sphere. Our study seeks to contribute to these ongoing discussions.

Middle class, democracy, and civic activism

Similarly to civil society, the middle class was historically seen as a crucial driver of democratization (the historical changes associated with the rise of the middle class and democratization, see, e.g., Glassman, William and Peter 1993). The belief in the pro-democratic effects of the middle class was based on several proposed mechanisms: middle classes were expected to have greater desire for protection of human rights and private property (Doepke and Zilibotti 2008; Tang 2011; Cheeseman 2015; Glaeser and Steinberg, 2017; Wu, Chang and Pan 2017),⁴ to be more optimistic about politics and their ability to influence it in general (Hillygus 2005; Glaeser, Ponzetto and Shleifer 2007; Sanborn and Thyne 2014; Chen and Suen 2017), and to hold negative beliefs about the ability of an authoritarian regime to support the country's development (Leventoglu 2014). Yet, as with civil society, modern research shows that the assumption of the middle class's inherent democratizing role is overly simplistic.

Numerous studies across the world document the existence of authoritarian middle classes – segments of the middle class that actively support authoritarian rule. First, the middle class itself can be a product of an authoritarian regime – shaped by its education policies or industrialization – and subject to its indoctrination. Second, the willingness of the middle class to embrace democracy depends on the extent to which its members rely on the government to maintain their

⁴The latter aspect is relevant for the wealth-related definitions of the middle class.

standard of living and social status. Third, middle-class members may fear the chaos and instability associated with regime change, worrying that it could lead to the loss of their status and property (Jones 1998; Chen and Lu 2011; Chen 2013; Garrido 2021). Fourth, in contrast to the arguments presented above, the middle class may prefer disengagement from politics over political or civic activism. Even when they favor democracy over authoritarianism, middle-class members may perceive political change as unattainable and therefore withdraw from any form of political involvement (Croke, Grossman, Larreguy et al. 2016; Miao 2016).⁵

From this point of view, modern scholarship acknowledges that the middle class – similarly to the civil society – is highly heterogeneous (Tang, Woods and Zhao 2009; Zechmeister, Sellers and Seligson 2012; Resnick 2015). The ‘newness’ and the dependence on the state are among frequently mentioned characteristics of the middle class explaining its loyalty to an authoritarian regime or lack thereof (Gontmakher and Ross 2015; Nathan 2016; Rosenfeld 2017, 2020, 2021; Nahmadova 2021). If the main source of income for middle-class members comes from public sector salaries or government transfers, their likelihood of engaging in activities that jeopardize the regime is low.⁶ In resource-dependent states, government control over the allocation of rents also helps ensure the loyalty of the middle class (Bourguignon and Verdier 2000; Jensen and Wantchekon 2004). By contrast, individuals from families that have belonged to the middle class for generations are more likely to have internalized values associated with a stronger demand for democracy (Lankina 2021; Lankina and Libman 2021). Conversely, experiences of political instability tend to reduce middle-class support for democratization (Mazaheri and Monroe 2018).

Thus, not every segment of the middle class is willing to participate in political protests demanding democratization. At the same time, loyalty to an authoritarian regime does not necessarily preclude middle-class groups from engaging in non-political civic activism. The middle class may view such activism as a means of addressing its problems – and improving its social status – within the framework of an authoritarian system, without creating risks of political instability. Libman and Kozlov (2017) refer to this type of engagement as *compliant activism*: citizens attempt to address the problems they face through channels explicitly approved by the regime, in some cases even strengthening the regime’s stability. The resources and informational capacity of the middle class may make it more inclined toward compliant activism than other social strata.

Still, the factors presented above could also deter the middle class from engaging in non-political civic activism. First, the boundary between political and non-political is often unclear; non-political protests can gain their own dynamics or be hijacked by political groups. Second, not all regimes look favorably at the non-political activism. For regimes insisting on complete depoliticization of their subjects (Gerschewski 2023), the costs of non-political activism could outweigh the benefits: the fact that subjects learn the mechanics of bureaucracy and politics, as well as develop some self-organization capacity, could be perceived as more dangerous than legitimacy and information gains. Middle classes loyal to the regime, anticipating this reaction, would refrain from civic activism altogether.

The mobilizing potential and the size of the middle class

The discussion so far has focused on the middle class’s own preference for civic activism. An equally important, yet much less researched, question is whether the middle class has the ability to influence the willingness of other social strata to engage in political or civic activism. There are arguments both for and against this possibility.

⁵An intermediate outcome is also possible: middle-class members engage in some forms of civic and political activism but refrain from riskier activities (Tang 2011).

⁶Moore’s original argument specifically refers to the ‘bourgeoisie’ and not to public sector employees (Bernhard 2016).

On the one hand, middle-class members have relatively high social status and therefore enjoy greater respect in society. Many occupy positions particularly conducive to promoting their worldviews – for example, as teachers. A large body of literature shows that people are more likely to follow the arguments of those with higher status, who are perceived as more knowledgeable and competent. Opinion leadership is ubiquitous in such diverse domains as online networks (Weeks, Ardèvol-Abreu, and Gil de Zúñiga 2017), investment (Bursztyn, Ederer, Ferman et al. 2014), or physician prescription (Nair, Manchanda, and Bhatia 2010). For example, in advertising higher social status of the spokesperson increases the persuasiveness of the message (Block and Atkin 1983; Bergkvist and Zhou 2016). Members of the high-status groups are typically judged as more confident by those interacting with them (Phalet and Poppe 1997; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick et al. 2002; Brambilla, Sacchi, Castellini et al. 2010). Psychological literature claims that there is a link between perceived social status and perceived competence (Fiske, Xu, Cuddy et al. 1999; Brambilla, Sacchi, Castellini et al. 2010). The perceived advantage of competence and higher position in the social hierarchy could make the non-middle-class members particularly likely to emulate the middle class (Paulhus and Morgan 1997; Van Ewijk and Sleegers 2010).

On the other hand, it is also possible that the mobilizing potential of the middle class is constrained by the social distance between its members and other strata. The middle class can be perceived as distant from the problems of ordinary people or as primarily concerned with its own issues. The homophily argument suggests that people who are more similar to each other are likely to experience mutual sympathy and to perceive one another as more trustworthy (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001), and are thus more likely to emulate each other's behavior. People are more strongly influenced by those whom they perceive to be similar to themselves or to share a common identity (Brock 1965; Simons, Berkowitz, and Moyer 1970; Wilder 1990). From this perspective, members of the middle class, perceived as distant and disconnected, would have little impact on the behavior of members of other strata.

The authoritarian context can affect both of the logics discussed above. On the one hand, many autocracies deliberately use propaganda to sow dissent between individual social groups. In Russia, since the protests of 2012, the regime has actively stigmatized the *kreakly* (creative class) as a source of disloyalty, portraying them as indifferent to the real interests of the country.⁷ This would reduce the mobilizing potential of the middle class. On the other hand, the hierarchical organization of authoritarian societies could strengthen the association between higher social status and mobilization capacity. Whether this latter consideration applies to Russia – which experienced a period of high instability in the 1990s, leading to a massive loss of status for many formerly privileged members of society – is questionable (Gerber 2000).

The size of the middle class by itself does not necessarily make its members more (or less) convincing to others. For example, a high school teacher in nineteenth-century Russia, where the majority of the population was illiterate, might have been perceived as a greater figure of intellectual authority than a modern Russian teacher, yet at the same time would have been much more distant from most Russians – and possibly even unable to articulate his ideas in language they could understand. However, if members of the middle class are indeed seen as more knowledgeable, and if their mobilizing potential is large, the behavior of non-middle-class members is likely to change to a greater extent when the share of the middle class in society is substantial. This is straightforward: the higher the share of the middle class, the more frequently non-middle-class members interact with them. As a result, the number of social situations in which the diffusion of values (Bisin and Verdier 2022) and mobilization can occur increases.

At the same time, the size of the middle class is likely to influence the behavior of its members. First, larger middle classes can more easily create the organizational foundations for civic activism (Ju 2004) – for example, by establishing forums, organizations, and networks – and can more effectively disseminate information about opportunities for engagement. In many

⁷<https://republic.ru/posts/35999>.

autocracies, people are unaware of the opportunities available to them or of others engaged in similar activities (Oberschall 1994). A more numerous middle class could help overcome this information constraint. Second, if the middle class is large, it is more likely to be taken seriously by the government when engaging in civic activism; otherwise, its position may be seen as fringe and ignored by the authoritarian state. This, in turn, would encourage middle-class members to become more active.

This brings us to the key theoretical expectations from our study. First, the middle class is more likely to engage in civic activism than other social groups (this could hold for the middle class connected to the state as well, since not all forms of civic activism in an autocracy are seen by the regime as problematic). Second, middle-class members are likely to be seen as more knowledgeable by other social strata, which would make them capable of mobilizing other social strata for civic activism. Third, in case the share of the middle class is large, it will lead to more numerous encounters between middle-class and non-middle-class members. Combined with the mobilizing capacity of the middle class, it could lead to a situation where, if the share of the middle class is large, the difference between the middle class and other strata will disappear – the latter will behave as the middle-class members. At the same time, if homophily is the decisive factor explaining civic mobilization, then we should expect members of the middle class to be more readily mobilized by other middle-class individuals. If the middle class is large, individual members of it will be even more active in terms of civic activism.

The case of Russia and the city of Moscow

Local politics and civic activism in an authoritarian city

Authoritarian cities often receive particular attention from regimes and are beneficiaries of redistribution aiming to increase the regime's legitimacy and support (Wallace 2013; Glaeser and Steinberg 2017). In the last decades, the result of this attention was the phenomenon of global authoritarian cities (Koch 2022), serving as showcases of the regime; historically, it supported migration from the periphery to the cities, which in itself became a challenge for many regimes. Capital cities are particularly important in this context, and autocracies employ a plethora of strategies for controlling these cities and co-opting their population (Goodfellow and Jackman 2020). Some regimes prefer to move the center of power into new capital cities (Shelekpayev 2018); others invest significant effort into managing the old capitals.

The attractiveness and expansion of authoritarian cities (and capitals in particular) lead to substantial heterogeneity within these cities (Bogaert 2018). Different communities benefit from authoritarian redistribution, adapt to the regime-driven change of the urban landscape, or initiate these changes themselves to a different extent. This within-city variation is important for two reasons. Conceptually, it can lead to the variation of local politics within an authoritarian city.⁸ City neighborhoods offer natural spaces for emergence of local activism, with people connecting to each other to solve their common problems (Elwageeh, Kleinhans, and van Ham 2023; O'Connor 2025). Furthermore, at least in some cities, some forms of officially sanctioned neighborhood governance exist. In some cases, authoritarian regimes allow some level of pluralism in these governance institutions to facilitate the resolution of urban problems (Xia and Guan 2020).⁹ These governance institutions, as well as the boundaries between city districts, affect the ability of an authoritarian regime to exercise political control in the city. They also influence whether the regime can benefit from spontaneous self-organization of the society. The social composition of a neighborhood is likely to have an important impact on the self-organization of

⁸The term 'politics' is used in a broad sense and includes various forms of self-organization and civic engagement.

⁹Heberer (2009) highlights the crucial role of the interaction between the bottom-up and the top-down processes in the development of local governance and civil society in an autocracy.

its residents, but also on the attention it receives from the government and the benefits (or costs) from redistribution.

Yet another reason why within-city variation is important from the researcher's point of view is a methodological one. One can leverage this variation to test the general implications of the theories of authoritarian politics reducing unobserved heterogeneity. Pepinsky (2019) points out that there is a trend toward increasing attention to single-country case studies in political science, driven by the better comparability of sub-national units. Within-city comparison is likely to be even more attractive in this context if the data are available (Vasilyeva and Libman 2024).¹⁰

Russia and Moscow as empirical cases

Both the Russian Federation and the city of Moscow provide interesting case studies for our analysis. There are two reasons why studying the mobilizing capacity of the middle class in Russia is important. First, Russia is a highly prominent case of a resilient authoritarian regime, which in the last twenty-five years demonstrated a significant level of adaptation and transformation (Gel'man 2015; Frye 2021). Civic activism, as mentioned above, has been both a problem for the Russian regime in some cases and an important resource the regime could have used in others. Second, Russia is among the rare examples of modern authoritarian states with large educated strata and an urbanized population (Paneyakh 2018; Rogov 2018). Understanding the role of civic activism and the middle class in such a context is particularly important.

The city of Moscow is interesting to us for several reasons. It is a good example of both authoritarian cities attracting substantial resources, money, and power, and becoming showcases of the regime. Before 2022 (and to some extent even after it), Moscow was particularly characterized by a high standard of living and prevalence of modern international lifestyle (Kolossoff and O'Loughlin 2004). It is also a city with a very high level of education in the population and the key center of education and science in Russia. At the same time, it is a very large city (about 12 million people of official population and 2.6 thousand sq. km of territory) – as of now, the largest city in Europe after Istanbul. This provides an enormous heterogeneity of the city population, which could be leveraged for our analysis. Different parts of Moscow differ a lot in terms of the middle class presence: this is driven by the traditional settlement patterns (some parts of the city in the Soviet or even pre-Soviet era were home to major industrial facilities and had higher working-class populations; others specialized in education, science, or service sectors),¹¹ by differences in the environmental conditions and quality of housing. At the same time, all parts of the city share the same urban lifestyle; their population encounters problems more similar to each other than those of people living in different regions of Russia.

The administrative division of Moscow can be traced back to 1991, when the city was divided into 10 administrative districts, which in turn consisted of more than 100 municipal districts (later renamed raiony). Initially, this division applied only to the city executive (the legislative bodies at the within-city level existed, but were organized within boundaries of the old Soviet districts); in 1997, local councils were created, which are elected by the residents of the raion.¹² The introduction of the new territorial division in 1991 signified a breach with the old Soviet division, with

¹⁰As a caveat, caution is required in terms of adapting nation – or region-level theories to the within-city context.

¹¹In the Soviet era, employers played a major role in providing access to housing for their employees, which frequently led to employees of certain enterprises or institutions living near each other. Since the 1950s, migration to Moscow was constrained; an exception was made for the new employees (mostly manual workers) of industrial enterprises, who received the right to reside in the enterprises' dormitory and in many cases, stayed there for decades, having a major impact on the social composition of the population of their raions.

¹²Legally, since 2002, Moscow is divided into administrative units subordinated to the city government and municipal units governed by their councils; their borders, however, coincide.

the city consisting of about 30 districts.¹³ The boundaries of the municipal districts changed occasionally in the last 35 years, but these changes were marginal. The overall evolution of the local governance in Moscow was heavily influenced not only by the general logic of autocratization in Russia but also by the political dynamics in the city itself (where already in the 1990s the city mayor created a powerful political machine) (Bater, Degtyarev, and Amelin 1995; Furman 1999). The political role of local councils changed over time as well: from more or less powerless entities populated by local bureaucrats to a brief period of politicization in the late 2010s, when the opposition managed to win the majority of votes in elections in some of the raiony (Gorokhovskaia 2018).

For us, a more important feature of the city is that due to its size and complexity, many problems its residents face are localized. These localities do not necessarily coincide with the raion boundaries¹⁴. Still, raiony can be used as imperfect proxies for quantitative analysis. In the last decades, Moscow witnessed multiple instances of local civic activism, in particular related to the environmental problems, housing construction, and infrastructure (Shomina, Kolossov, and Shukhat 2002; Evans 2018; Borisova, Smyth, and Zakharov 2023). While the main attention in the literature is devoted to the most visible forms of this activism (protests), Muscovites engage in various other forms of civic activism as well. The determinants of the within-city variation in civic activism remain largely unexplored (although there exists a literature on the variation of civic activism across regions of Russia, see Semenov, Snarski, and Tkacheva 2024). This is closely related to the lack of empirical data on this topic. Our study ought to close this gap.

External validity

While focusing on within-city variation reduces the unobserved heterogeneity, it requires a discussion of the external validity of our findings. There are, in particular, four issues that should be addressed here:

- First, the education level in the City of Moscow is higher than in many other authoritarian capitals of the Global South. The mobilization capacity of the less numerous middle classes may be different, as discussed above.
- Second, Moscow has an institutionalized system of limited local self-governance. While Moscow is certainly not unique from this point of view (and can be compared, for example, to Chinese metropolitan cities), its experience cannot be automatically generalized to other cities where such a system is absent (and, for example, informal communities are much more important).
- Third, the study was conducted in December 2021, when the planet was still in the COVID-19 pandemic. The risk of infection could have also affected the general willingness of Moscow residents to engage in various forms of civic activism.¹⁵
- Finally, fourth, the dominance of large residential buildings in Moscow is also not universal and could affect the patterns of civic activism.

While these concerns could identify some of the scope conditions under which the insights from Moscow could be relevant for different authoritarian cities, fundamentally, they do not negate the importance of Moscow as a highly interesting case and the fundamental deficit of research on the topics of this paper. And, in fact, from several perspectives, Russia appears to be a

¹³During the Soviet era, these districts had their own local councils (sov'et); in 1991–1993, old sov'ets (within boundaries of old districts) coexisted with new territorial divisions of the city administration.

¹⁴Many Muscovites identify their neighborhood by the most proximate subway station.

¹⁵While the Russian government was much more lax in implementing COVID-related restrictions than, say, the Chinese one, it did not hesitate to use these restrictions against possible attempts of public actions.

case representative for a rather broad class of authoritarian regimes. Russia in 2021 was a personalistic autocracy relying on controlled elections, targeted repression, and information control – this class of authoritarian regimes is widespread in the modern world (Levitsky and Way 2010; Reuter 2017; Guriev and Treisman 2020); the levels of social capital and generalized trust were also similar to other electoral autocracies such as Cameroon, Kazakhstan, or Malaysia (Afrobarometer 2022; EVS/WVS 2022). From this point of view, despite the caveats mentioned, our results could be interesting beyond studying the specific Russian case.

Hypotheses

Our analysis is informed by several hypotheses. The first three concentrate on how individuals belonging to the middle class and the size of the middle class in a district affect individuals' propensity toward civic activism. The first hypothesis is about an individual's middle-class background: information advantage and larger resources ought to make such an individual more likely to engage in civic activism. The second and third hypotheses test the implications of the size of the middle class for the behavior of the middle-class members and non-middle-class members. The second hypothesis proceeds from the assumption that the share of the middle class in a district affects the behavior of its residents and makes them more likely to engage in civic activism. In particular, both middle-class and non-middle-class members will engage in civic activism to a larger extent if the share of the middle class in the district is large. The third hypothesis suggests that the effect of the size of the middle class on the middle-class members can be larger or smaller than on non-middle-class members. Therefore, in a district with a large share of the middle class we will observe either (a) a larger increase of civic activism from the middle-class members than from the non-middle-class members or (b) a larger increase of civic activism from the non-middle-class members than from the middle-class members (in this case, the extreme scenario could occur when differences between middle-class and non-middle-class members would disappear). We refer to these as positive and negative compound effects, respectively.

H1. Respondents belonging to the middle class are characterized by higher civic activity.

H2. An individual (regardless of her social status) is more likely to be characterized by higher civic activity if he/she reside in a district with a larger proportion of the middle class.

H3. Neighborhood middle class and belonging to the middle class have a positive compound effect on civic activism.

H3'. Neighborhood middle class and belonging to the middle class have a negative compound effect on civic activism.

Additional hypotheses allow us to focus on the specific mechanisms relating individual middle-class status, group-level middle class, and civic mobilization. In the previous section, we discussed possible drivers of differences between raions, some of which could be linked to the middle class, but others would not. Correspondingly, the conjoint experiment contains explicit hypotheses testing the mobilization capacity of the middle class. Specifically, we compare the extent to which middle-class members are seen as convincing by the non-middle-class members (while deciding whether to engage in civic activism). As mentioned above, members of the middle class are potentially seen as more competent and therefore have a stronger mobilizing capacity. However, members of the middle class could be distrusted for potentially having very different interests than members of other social groups. In this case, the smaller the social distance, the more likely people are to believe that their counterparts share the same interests and are willing to achieve the same societal goals.

This leads us to two pairs of hypotheses. The first pair identifies the relative mobilizing capacity of the middle-class members as opposed to members of other strata.

H4a. An individual is more likely to be mobilized to engage in civic activism by someone from a similar social stratum.

H4b. An individual is more likely to be mobilized to engage in civic activism by someone with a high social status.

The second pair explains specific reasons for the difference in mobilizing capacity; Hypotheses H4a and H5a, on the one hand, and H4b and H5b, on the other, are linked to each other.

H5a. Someone from a similar social stratum is more likely to be perceived as having similar interests.

H5b. Someone with a high social status is more likely to be perceived as more competent.

In addition to these main hypotheses, we also advance an additional Hypothesis H6, which focuses on the civic activism of the middle class employed in the public sector. As already discussed, in the democracy-and-middle-class literature, economic dependence on the state (associated with employment in the state sector) is often seen as the primary reason for the lack of support for democracy. For civic activism, this argument does not necessarily hold: civic activism is not necessarily punished by the regime, and the public sector employees may have an even bigger information advantage in terms of the functioning of the regime than other groups of the middle class, which would make them particularly prone to compliant activism. Nevertheless, it is also possible that the state-dependent middle class, being wary of possible incorrect interpretation of its actions, will still try to avoid any form of activism, civic or political. To our knowledge, for the Russian case, this link has never been explored, and therefore, we test the following hypothesis.

H6. Respondents belonging to the middle class and employed in the state sector are characterized by lower civic activity.

Data

Our empirical analysis is based on a conjoint experiment embedded in an online survey of $N = 2107$ inhabitants of Moscow conducted in December 2021.¹⁶ In what follows, we present the key elements of the survey.

Dependent variables

We use two types of dependent variables: those measuring the hypothetical willingness to engage in civic activism (these variables are extracted from a conjoint experiment described in greater detail below) and the actual self-reported experience of engagement in civic activism. In the main part of the study, we report the results for the hypothetical decisions, leaving the results for the actual experience in the Online Appendix. This is because hypothetical willingness to engage in civic activism can be used in both branches of our analysis: a conjoint experiment (linking the willingness to engage in civic activism to the characteristics of a hypothetical neighbor suggesting it) and a correlational study linking civic activism to the share of the middle class in the specific raion.

¹⁶Additional sample details and control variables are reported in the Appendix and Table 1 after the Conclusion. English translation of the text of the survey, including the experimental part, is reported in the Online Appendix E.

Fundamentally, both variables have flaws. With the actual experience of civic activism, we may face a larger problem of social conformity bias. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that, unlike political activism, where we would have expected the authoritarian context to downward bias the responses, for civic activism, the bias can go in both directions – the regime does not clearly discourage it, and there may be some pressure to identify oneself as having an active position and being responsible for the society. For the hypothetical activism, of course, the problem is that intent to engage in civic activism does not necessarily translate into action. At the same time, it threatens our results only in cases if the deviation between hypothetical and actual civic activism is correlated with the characteristics of the hypothetical neighbor (conjoint experiment) or the share of the middle class (correlational study). There are no *ex ante* reasons for it to be the case.

Hypotheses H1, H2, H3, H3', H4a, H4b, and H6 deal with the willingness to engage in civic activism. In the conjoint experiment, we ask the respondents whether they would support each of the four different propositions by the neighbor: *Signing a petition against a new highway in your district*; *Taking part in a protest action against a new highway in your district*; *Leaving a signature in support for someone else's candidacy for your building's homeowner's council*; and *Leaving a signature in support for someone else's candidacy for the position of a municipal deputy*. The choice of options corresponds to the typical forms of civic activism observed in Moscow. One can notice that the first three forms of civic activism clearly have no political implications and focus on managing infrastructure or residential buildings; these are among the key problems residents of Moscow have to solve using civic action. The final option may have a political dimension, but, as mentioned above, it depends on the specific mode of operations of the municipal council. We refrain from offering additional options to our respondents to keep the survey feasible (respondents may find it difficult to think about a plethora of different options for civic activism if they have never engaged in them).¹⁷

Hypotheses H5a and H5b concern the attitudes toward civic activists. Correspondingly, following each conjoint experiment scenario, we ask four questions about the neighbor described in the scenario. The first two of these questions deal with trust: *Do you trust this neighbor?* *Do you think other neighbors will trust the neighbor?* Two more questions deal with the specific reasons why the neighbor may or may not be trusted. The first of these two questions deals with the neighbor's perceived competence: *Do you think this neighbor is competent in questions related to your building of residence or district?* The second question is about the congruence of the neighbor's interests with those of the respondent: *Do you think this neighbor's interests are the same as yours?* This way, we are interested in how the neighbor is evaluated along valence and position dimensions (Groseclose 2001; Zakharov 2009). All eight dependent variables in the conjoint experiment are standardized to make the standard deviation equal to 1.

Middle class, individual-level and raion-level

To test hypotheses H1, H2, H3, H3', and H6, we correlate the responses of the survey participants with their middle-class status and the share of the middle class in the raion of their residence. In the main part of the analysis, we use education as the main criterion for identifying the middle class, treating as middle-class members those respondents who indicated that they have a university degree (i.e., higher education or PhD; students or individuals with incomplete higher education are not included). Furthermore, we implement a robustness check: acknowledging that education could be a simplistic measure for the middle class, similar to Rosenfeld (2020), we use

¹⁷We also ask whether respondents would agree with the proposal of a hypothetical neighbor to changing the managing company of the residential block. Managing companies are selected by owners of individual apartments to deal with joint tasks concerning the entire building (e.g., maintenance, public spaces etc.). This question is not related to civic activism and we include it primarily as a neutral and 'technical' option, which would reduce the concerns of the respondents, who would perceive the survey as overly political.

the information on the individual's *higher education* and employment to proxy for her middle-class status. The survey includes several open-ended questions to obtain the ISCO-08 classification of the respondent's occupation. We code the respondent's occupation as *professional* if her ISCO major group was 1, 2, or 3 ('Managers', 'Professionals', or 'Technicians and Associate Professionals'). In this case, we consider respondents as middle-class members if they both have higher education and professional occupations. In the main part of the paper, results based on the educational definition of the middle class are reported; we indicate the robustness of the findings to adjusting the definition, including occupation.¹⁸

Our raion-level dataset includes data from 125 raions of Moscow. We use demographic data from the 2010 Russian census, which does not cover 21 settlements of the so-called 'New Moscow' – previously mostly rural territories incorporated into Moscow in 2012.¹⁹ We proxy the raion-level share of the middle class by the share of the population above 15 having a university degree; by adding it to our regressions, we capture the group-level middle class effects. Online Appendix F provides some qualitative examples of raions with a particularly high and a particularly low share of the middle class to offer an intuition for the factors driving the distribution of the middle class in Moscow and its potential political effects.

Neighbor attributes from the conjoint experiment

To test Hypotheses H4a, H4b, H5a, and H5b, we look at how civic participation is affected by the attribute levels in the conjoint experiment scenario involving interaction with a hypothetical neighbor. We vary several neighbors' attributes that are relevant to their middle-class status. *Higher education* is either present or absent, one's *position at work* is either managerial or subordinate, and we also vary one's *salary* – either 20,000, 40,000, 60,000, 100,000, or 150,000 roubles per month. These values were selected to match the cutoff values for the individual income question in the survey. Individuals with manager positions had incomes of 60,000, 100,000, or 150,000 roubles only. In December 2021, the nominal exchange rate was around 73–74 Russian roubles per 1 USD. In addition, one could be employed either in *state or private sector* and be a *neighborhood resident* either for 1 year or 4 years. We also vary *gender* (male/female) and *age* (30, 45, and 60 years).

Empirical strategy

In the conjoint experiment, each respondent is presented with five scenarios, a total of 10535 scenarios that serve as our units of analysis.

Hypotheses H1, H2, H3, H3', and H6 are tested using the following model:

$$y_{il} = \alpha + b_1 m_i + b_2 M_i + \delta X_i + \tilde{\beta} \tilde{X}_{il} + \mu_l + \varepsilon_{il}, \quad (1)$$

where y_{il} is the likelihood that individual i will react positively to a proposal from the hypothetical neighbor in vignette l , m_i is individual i 's higher education, M_i is the percentage of residents with higher education in i 's district of residence, X_i is the vector of control variables at the individual and district levels, and $\tilde{X}_{il}$ is the vector of dummy variables for the different levels of attributes (gender, age group, higher education, income group, works for state company, works in a senior

¹⁸Our definition of the middle class is the same for all raions regardless of the socioeconomic composition of their population. Hypothetically, the same markers of social status (e.g., education) indicate belonging to the middle class in one setting and to other strata in another. We believe that using the same definition of the middle class throughout Moscow is justified. As mentioned, the raions of the city are not self-contained; their inhabitants regularly interact with each other and most likely have similar ideas of what it means to be part of the middle class. Second, we are interested in identifying the part of the population that due to its characteristics (knowledge of political process, financial and organizational resources) is more likely to engage in civic activism: the group we identify as the middle class is likely to have these characteristics in all raions of Moscow.

¹⁹More than 96 percent of our sample have indicated living in one of the 125 raions.

position, and has lived 4 years, rather than 1 year, in the building) for conjoint experiment scenario l and individual i .

Hypothesis H1 implies that $b_1 > 0$, and H2 implies that $b_2 > 0$. To test Hypotheses H3 and H3', we interact individual and raion-level higher education:

$$y_{il} = \alpha + b_1 m_i + b_2 M_i + b_3 m_i M_i + \delta X_i + \tilde{\beta} \tilde{X}_{il} + \mu_l + \varepsilon_{il}. \quad (2)$$

Hypothesis H3 implies that $b_3 > 0$, while H3' implies that $b_3 < 0$.

For the analysis of Hypothesis H6, we interact an individual's higher education with a public sector employment dummy:

$$y_i = a + b_1 m_i + b_2 M_i + b_3 S_i + b_4 m_i S_i + \delta' X'_i + \tilde{\beta} \tilde{X}_{il} + \mu_l + \varepsilon_{il}, \quad (3)$$

where S_i stands for the individual i working in the state sector and X'_i are the remaining individual and raion-level controls. Hypothesis H6 implies that $b_4 < 0$.

For Hypotheses H4a, H4b, H5a, and H5b, we estimate the following model:

$$y_{il} = \alpha + \tilde{\beta} \tilde{X}_i + \tilde{\beta} \tilde{X}_{il} + \gamma D_{il} + \mu_l + \varepsilon_{il}. \quad (4)$$

Here, the vector $\tilde{X}_i$ denotes those individual-level controls that have a counterpart among the attributes of the neighbor: gender, age group, higher education, income group, and employment in a state company. The vector D_{il} denotes the similarities between the genders, ages, incomes, and education of individual i and the neighbor in scenario l . The similarity between genders is 1 (same genders) or zero; the similarity between educations is 1 (both have higher education or both don't have it) or zero; the similarity between ages is equal to the negative absolute difference between the age categories of individual i and neighbor j , taking values 0, -1 , or -2 , as there are three age categories; the income similarity is the negative absolute difference between income categories, taking values between -5 and 0 .

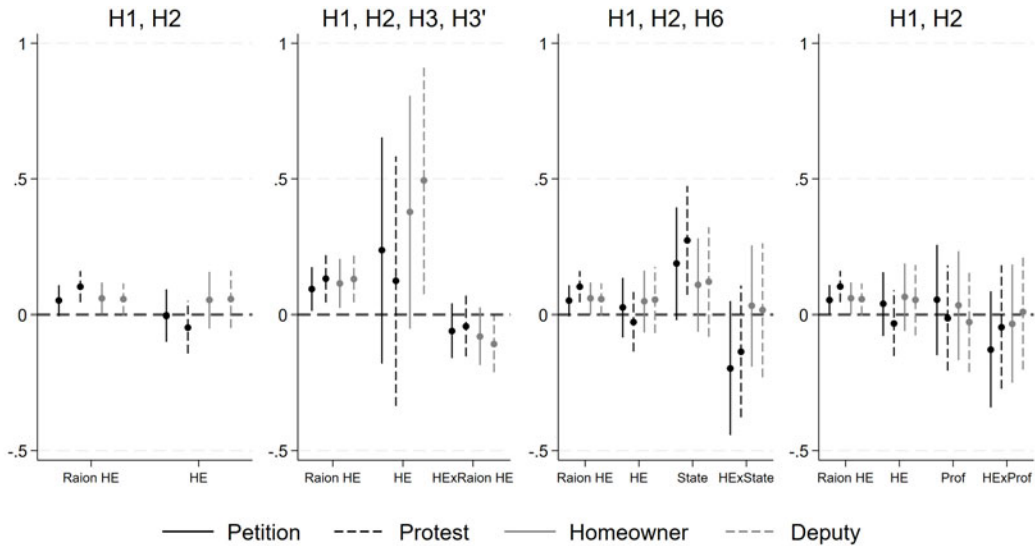
Hypotheses H4a and H5a imply positive coefficients in γ , indicating that the individuals exhibit homophily: one is more likely to be mobilized by someone similar along various characteristics (age, gender, income, and education). Hypotheses 4b and 5b imply positive coefficients for the components of $\tilde{\beta}$ corresponding to higher social status: higher education, higher income groups, and a senior position at work.

For Hypotheses H1, H2, H3, H3', H4a, H4b, and H6, y_{il} are the likelihoods that individual i will react positively to a proposal from the hypothetical neighbor in vignette l . For Hypotheses H5a and H5b, y_{il} are the trust toward the neighbor, assessment of their competence, and perceived similarity of interests with the neighbor. The dependent variables are coded from 0 (*Definitely no*) to 1 (*Definitely yes*); *Difficult to say* responses to the dependent variable question were treated as missing. All regressions are estimated using ordinary least squares. Standard errors are clustered at the raion level in models 1, 2, and 3, and at the individual level in model 4.

Results

We first report the results for Hypotheses H1–H3 and H6. In the first panel of Figure 1, we report the main coefficients of interest for model (1), regressing individual and vignette-specific indicators of the willingness to engage in civic activism on the individual's higher education and higher education in the raion. In the second panel, we report model (2), adding an interaction term between the two independent variables. The third panel reports model (3), where the association between higher education and activism can be different if the individual works in the state sector. Finally, in the fourth panel, we consider a variation of model (1) where we replace the proxy for the middle class based on education by one based on professional status.²⁰

²⁰In Online Appendix Table OA2, we provide the full set of coefficients for the model in the left panel of Figure 1, with robustness checks being available at request.



OLS regressions, 95%CI, SE clustered by raion. DV is the likelihood of signing a petition against a new road, joining a protest action, leaving a signature in support of a candidate to building's homeowner's council, leaving a signature in support of a candidate for the position of a municipal deputy. Raion HE: Fraction of higher educated in the raionX10 (0-10). HE: Individual has higher education (0 or 1). State: Individual works in state sector (0 or 1). Prof: Individual is in professional occupation (0 or 1).

Figure 1. The effect of raion-level and individual middle class on civic activism, hypothetical participation choices.

Hypothesis H2 is strongly supported. In the first, third, and fourth models, the share of the population with higher education in a raion (denoted raion HE in the figures) is positively associated with all four dependent variables. A 10% increase in the share of college-educated residents is associated with a 0.05–0.1 standard deviation increase in the dependent variables, with $p < 0.077$ for all twelve specifications.

For Hypotheses H1, H3, and H6, we generally find no confirmation. An individual's status as part of the middle class (denoted HE in the figures) is not associated with civic activism, as is evident from the first and last panels. In the second panel, we either find no effect for different levels of raion higher education, or a negative interaction term for one of the activism variables, lending some support to H3'; the interaction term is mostly insignificant though. At the same time, for two of our dependent variables, the marginal effects of individual higher education as estimated by model (2) are positive if the raion-level higher education is sufficiently low. For the intention to leave a signature in support of a municipal deputy candidate, the marginal effect of higher education is positive and significant at a 95% level if the share of higher educated in the raion is 36.2% or smaller; for the 90% significance level, the corresponding figure is 37.8%. These two figures correspond to the 29th and 40th percentiles of the share of highly educated (see Online Appendix Figure OA5 for marginal effects estimation). For the intention to leave a signature in support of a homeowner council candidate, the effect is significant at a 90% level if the share of higher educated in the raion is 36.2% or smaller. It means that individuals with higher education differ from those without higher education in terms of their willingness to engage in civic activism only in raions with a low share of the middle class. In raions with a high share of the middle class, the difference between individuals belonging to the middle class and not belonging to it is absent.

In the third panel, individual higher education is not associated with any of the civic activism variables for either state sector employees or others. Interaction of individual higher education with the raion-level share of the middle class is either not significant or, for the willingness to leave a signature for someone else's candidacy for the position of municipal deputy, is negative with $p = 0.003$.

Being employed in the public sector similarly does not moderate the hypothetical willingness to engage in civic activism; public sector employees are more likely to show intention to engage in some forms of civic activism than other groups. This underscores the importance of distinguishing between civic activism and political activism in an authoritarian context – civic activism could be very much in line with the will of the autocrat.

In Online Appendix A.1, we report the results where the dependent variables measure the respondent's actual experience of civic activism over the past three years. We find some evidence of positive correlation between individual- and raion-level middle class and engagement in civic activism, though the results are not robust to specifications and inclusion of controls. Furthermore, the evidence on the co-movement of the share of the middle class in a district and the hypothetical willingness to engage in protests is, unlike the previously reported findings, correlational, and endogeneity could threaten our results. We address this problem using an instrumental variable strategy, which is discussed in the Online Appendix A.2. The results corroborate our main findings.

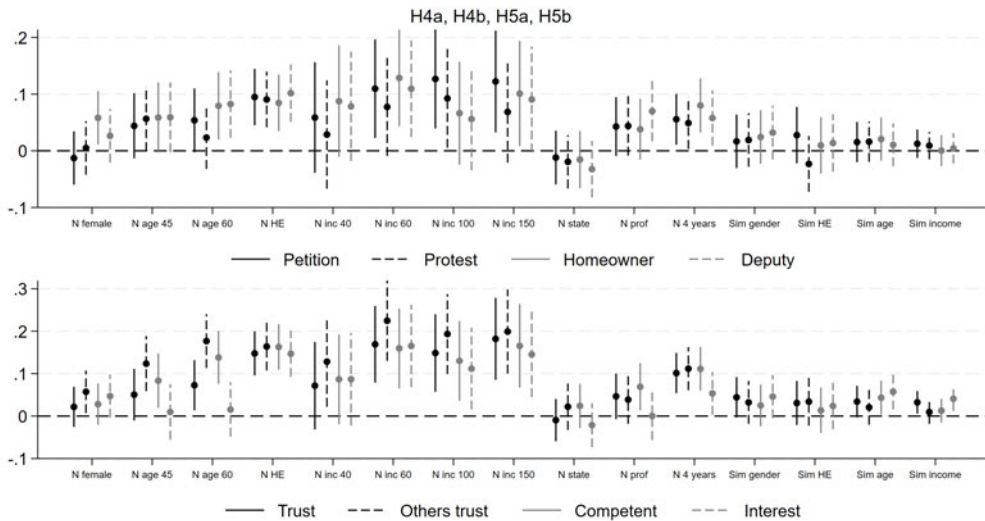
Our findings suggest that, first, an individual from a raion with a higher share of the middle class is more likely to claim the willingness to engage in civic activism than an individual from a raion with a lower share of the middle class; and second, that in raions with a lower share of the middle class, an individual belonging to the middle class is more likely to claim willingness to engage in civic activism than an individual, who does not belong to the middle class (the last results holds only for some of the dependent variables). While Hypothesis H1 is not supported in our main regressions, in the auxiliary analysis, we find evidence that there are settings where middle-class members show a higher declared willingness to engage in civic activism than other individuals.

The result is in line with our theoretical reasoning. Assuming that middle-class members have strong mobilizing capacity, in the high-middle-class raions this would lead to the non-middle-class members behaving as if they were middle-class members. The overall social environment in these raions could also be more conducive to civic activism (infrastructure, organizational foundations, etc.). At the same time, if the share of the middle class is low and the encounters between the middle-class members and other individuals are less frequent, the non-middle-class individuals show more distinctive behavior from that of the middle class than they do in the high-middle-class raions. Under these conditions, we find a significant difference between the middle-class members and the non-middle-class members.

The analysis so far, however, merely speculated on the existence of the mobilizing capacity of the middle class, but did not provide any empirical evidence for it (i.e., we do not know yet whether middle-class members are seen as more convincing by people not belonging to the middle class). This issue is addressed in the conjoint experiment. The main results of the experiment are presented in Figure 2, which plots the estimated coefficients and 95% confidence intervals for model (4).²¹ It is apparent that neighbors with traits that are characteristic of higher social status and are related to middle-class status are more likely to elicit civic engagement and are perceived as more trustworthy. For all eight dependent variables, a neighbor's higher education is positive and highly significant. The attitude towards a neighbor's proposition is 0.09–0.11 standard deviations higher if the neighbor had higher education, and the trust toward the neighbor, trustworthiness, and perceived competence and alignment of interests are 0.15–0.16 standard deviations higher, with $p < 0.001$ for all dependent variables.

Likewise, a neighbor of a higher income is more likely to elicit civic engagement. The effect of the neighbor's income is particularly strong on trust, trustworthiness, and perceived competence/shared interests: Increasing income to 60,000, 100,000, or 150,000 roubles per month from 20,000 roubles per month increases these variables by 0.11–0.23 standard deviations, with all effects significant at $p < 0.023$. Younger individuals (age 18–34) are less likely to elicit civic engagement

²¹The full set of model coefficients is reported in Online Appendix Table OA3.



OLS regressions, 95% CI, SE clustered by individual. Respondent controls not shown. For top panel, DV is the likelihood of signing a petition against a new road, joining a protest action, leaving a signature in support of a candidate to building's homeowner's council, leaving a signature in support of a candidate for the position of a municipal deputy. For the bottom panel, DV is the trust toward the neighbor, belief that others trust the neighbor, belief that the neighbor is competent, and the belief that the neighbor has shared interests with the respondent. N female, N age 45, N age 60, N HE, N inc 40, N inc 60, N inc 100, N inc 150, N state, N prof, N 4 years: Indicator variables (0 or 1) for neighbor being female; being 45 or 60 years old (baseline category for age is 30); having higher education; having monthly income of 40, 60, 100, or 150 thousand Roubles (baseline > e education. Sim age is age similarity (-2 to 0). Sim income is income similarity (-5 to 0).

Figure 2. Average effects of hypothetical neighbor attributes on civic action and attitudes toward the neighbor, 95% CIs.

and are perceived as less competent and trustworthy than those belonging to older age groups. An individual in a senior position elicits a more positive response to one of the civic initiatives, is more trustworthy, and has higher perceived competence (these variables increase by 0.047–0.07 standard deviations, $p < 0.09$).

This way, Hypotheses H4b and H5b are both supported in our data, with most results being robust accounting for multiple hypothesis testing (see Online Appendix A.3). Similar results are obtained if the model (4) is estimated without the similarity variables D_{it} (see Table OA4 in Online Appendix).

Our findings generally do not support Hypothesis 4a. There is no evidence that being contacted by someone of similar age, income, education, or gender makes one more or less likely to engage in civic activism. Hypothesis 5a is supported: shared gender, and, especially, similar age and income, make one more likely to believe that the neighbor has shared interests. Similar income and age, and shared gender, are also important for whether the respondent trusts the neighbor, and a neighbor of similar age is perceived as more competent.

For none of our dependent variables, it mattered whether the neighbor worked in a state company or not (i.e., we refute the Hypothesis H6). Thus, the power of persuasion is unrelated to employment in the state sector, and the members of the potentially government-loyal middle class have the same ability to mobilize respondents as do members of the middle class employed in the private sector. Interestingly, respondents were more willing to follow those hypothetical neighbors who lived for a longer period of time in the current place of residence. This again may indicate the importance of competence and knowledge advantage for respondents in terms of deciding whether to join civic activism or not – in this case, it is the tacit knowledge acquired while living in a certain place.

Conclusion

The paper investigated the origins of civic activism in an authoritarian context, and, in particular, the role of the middle class in it. In the case of Moscow in December 2021, civic activism (or, at

least, self-reported readiness to engage in civic activism) is strongly correlated with the share of the middle class in individual districts of the city. We also find that individuals see middle-class members as more ‘convincing’ when it comes to civic activism (and more convincing than the members of their own social group). This leads us to the following hypothetical mechanism: if the middle class is numerous, difference between middle-class and non-middle-class members disappears, as the latter are likely to engage in civic activism to the same extent as the middle-class members themselves. If the share of the middle class is small, there is some evidence that middle-class members are more likely to claim willingness to engage in civic activism than non-middle-class members.

There are several caveats with respect to the results of the paper we have to highlight. First, to validate the mechanism derived from the quantitative analysis, qualitative research tracing individual mechanisms based on extensive fieldwork would be beneficial. Unfortunately, in the Russian context, since February 2022, conducting such a qualitative study would be very difficult.²² Second, we acknowledge the limits of the study in terms of external validity, which we discussed in the paper. From this point of view, our study is but a first step, hopefully encouraging further research on the role of the middle class and its mobilizing potential in the civic activism in autocracies.

Furthermore, the fact that our survey was conducted before February 2022 constitutes another constraint on the generalization of our results. Russian politics and society currently undergo dramatic changes. In particular, these changes affect the way how the government interacts with the civic activists and the spaces of possible and punishable. Large out-migration affects the social composition of urban centers. Unfortunately, empirical data on any of these processes are limited (even for such phenomena like the emigration of educated urban population, we have only tentative observations). While some of the patterns we observe in this article could have survived the change of the last four years, others possibly did not.

As a final remark, we have to point out the possibility of an alternative, and very interesting, theoretical framing of the results we reported in this paper. The pre-registered experiment and the observational study focused on the behavior of the middle class and its mobilizing capacity for other social strata. The observational component of our research project (differences between districts of Moscow) could be interpreted differently: districts, which are characterized by a high share of the middle class, could have stronger local communities, based on more intensive social connections and in possession of larger resources, both symbolic and material. The fact that longer residence in a district also correlates with involvement in civic activism fits this interpretation – it would mean that more established members of the local community are also more inclined to civic activism.

If that is the case, our paper should be seen as one demonstrating the differences in behavior of more integrated and robust local communities as opposed to less integrated (and possibly more heterogeneous) ones. This offers an avenue for further fascinating research.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1475676525100613>

Data availability statement. The data is published at the journal website as online supplementary material.

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²²For a rare example of qualitative research in modern Russia see Morris (2025).

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Appendix: Sample details and control variables

Sample characteristics: The sample was stratified according to gender and age group (18–29, 39–49, 49–59, and 60+) to match demographic distribution, and was limited to respondents who lived in Moscow since 2016 or earlier. This is done for two reasons. First, we exclude people who have spent a relatively short time in the city to minimize the influence of socialization effects. Second, and more importantly, before the local elections of 2017, almost all district councils in Moscow were controlled by the United Russia – the “party of power” loyal to Vladimir Putin. In 2017, the opposition managed to establish control over some of the district councils. As a result, some respondents moving to the city could have chosen specific districts to match their political preferences.

Individual control variables: Our analysis includes a broad range of individual-level controls. **Demographic controls** include the respondent’s *gender*, *age category*, whether the respondent is *married* or living with a partner, as well as whether the respondent has *dependent children*. As an income measure, we use the logarithm of *household income* divided by the square root of household size. We include variables indicating the *employment status*: Whether one works full-time, part-time, is on paid leave, unpaid leave, or is unemployed, looking, or not looking for a job. Other variables indicate whether one is a *student*, *retired*, works for a *state-owned company* or a *foreign company*, and is paying a *mortgage*. These variables could affect civic and political participation via the bargaining power of the state vis-à-vis the individual; they can be used to test whether state dependence changes the civic activism of the middle-class members. In particular, we expect that employees of state-owned enterprises and institutions could be more likely to face workplace intimidation in retaliation for undesirable civic activism. We also control for the *number of floors* in the individual’s building of residence, which can serve as a proxy for the size of a building and the strength of within-building social ties.²³ Multi-apartment buildings in Moscow vary a lot: while in the 1960s 5-storey buildings were typical, in the 1990s and the 2000s 20- to 30-storey buildings accommodating about 1,000 residents became more frequent. Smaller buildings are likely to be characterized by a greater level of social exchange. In addition, residents of 5-floor buildings are likely to have participated in deliberations related to the ongoing redevelopment program, leading to greater civic interactions (in 2017, the city government of Moscow decided to demolish older buildings from the 1960s and to resettle their inhabitants into new buildings; this decision triggered a wave of protests in the city). We also include variables indicating *how the individual acquired the apartment* – whether it was privatized by the respondents or their relatives (meaning that it was initially received from the state in the Soviet period and transferred to private property after the collapse of the USSR), was purchased, or is rented.

Several variables are used to control for the **parental human and/or social capital**. First, this is the number (0 to 2) of parents with *higher education*, and the number of parents who were *members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (a variable arguably with strong influence on political attitudes and behavior, see Libman and Obydenkova, 2021). Second, similarly to Evans et al. (2010), we ask about the number of books the respondent had at their home at age 16, and include binary variables indicating whether the individual had *200 or fewer books* and *over 200 books*. The composition of the family library could be an indicator of more intensive value transmission across middle-class generations. For descendants of the historical middle class, books served as a symbol of status (Lankina and Libman, 2021). Third, there is a dummy variable indicating whether one of the relatives was *subject to Stalinist repressions*. Fourth, there are indicator variables for the social strata (based on occupation) of one’s parents when the respondent was 16.²⁴

Raion-level control variables: We also consider several raion-level variables potentially confounding the effect of raion-level higher education. Larger communities might have stronger coordination problems and greater distance between elected officials and their electorates (Oliver, 2001). Therefore, we control for the log of the raion population. Given the increasing trend for within-city ethnic segregation in Moscow (Vendina, 2002; Shatilo, 2015; Kashnitsky and Gunko, 2016), we control for the share of the ethnic Russians, since ethnic minorities might be different in their civic and political behaviors. We control additionally for the share of the employed among the population 15 to 72 years old, since neighborhoods with a high proportion of employed residents might differ in terms of the amount of time and effort their residents can devote to civic activities as well as to their demand for local public goods.

²³Most inhabitants of Moscow reside in multi-apartment houses, with a population of up to 300 families.

²⁴For all these four groups, we also include indicator variables for missing data.

Table A1. Summary statistics, individual controls

Variable	N	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
Gender: Male	2107	0.46	0.50	0	1
Gender: Female	2107	0.54	0.50	0	1
Age 18–34	2107	0.21	0.41	0	1
Age 35–54	2107	0.49	0.50	0	1
Age 55 and above	2107	0.30	0.46	0	1
Education: Higher	2107	0.64	0.48	0	1
Education: NA	2107	0.00	0.07	0	1
Log adjusted household income	1866	10.63	0.92	5	13
Log adjusted household income: NA	2107	0.11	0.32	0	1
Married: Yes	2107	0.63	0.48	0	1
Married: No	2107	0.34	0.47	0	1
Married: Refuse to answer	2107	0.03	0.17	0	1
Dependent children: Yes	2107	0.41	0.49	0	1
Dependent children: No	2107	0.57	0.50	0	1
Dependent children: Refuse to answer	2107	0.02	0.15	0	1
Professional occupation	2107	0.44	0.50	0	1
Professional: NA	2107	0.41	0.49	0	1
Work: Full-time	2107	0.59	0.49	0	1
Work: Part-time	2107	0.06	0.24	0	1
Work: Paid leave	2107	0.03	0.16	0	1
Work: Unpaid leave	2107	0.01	0.08	0	1
Work: Unemployed, not looking for job	2107	0.18	0.38	0	1
Work: Unemployed, looking for job	2107	0.12	0.33	0	1
Work: Hard to say	2107	0.02	0.14	0	1
Checked: Student	2107	0.03	0.18	0	1
Checked: Retiree	2107	0.19	0.39	0	1
Checked: Foreign company	2107	0.06	0.23	0	1
State sector job	2107	0.18	0.38	0	1
Checked: Paying a home loan	2107	0.08	0.27	0	1
Checked: Hard to say	2107	0.03	0.17	0	1
Floors: Private house	2107	0.04	0.19	0	1
Floors: 2–5	2107	0.16	0.37	0	1
Floors: 6–9	2107	0.25	0.43	0	1
Floors: 10–22	2107	0.49	0.50	0	1
Floors: 23 or more	2107	0.03	0.18	0	1
Floors: Hard to say	2107	0.03	0.18	0	1
Apartment: Bought	2107	0.39	0.49	0	1
Apartment: Privatized	2107	0.33	0.47	0	1
Apartment: Rented	2107	0.10	0.29	0	1
Apartment: Social	2107	0.09	0.28	0	1
Apartment: Other	2107	0.03	0.17	0	1
Apartment: Hard to say	2107	0.07	0.26	0	1
Parents members of KPSU	2107	0.40	0.64	0	2
Parents with higher ed	2107	0.82	0.86	0	2
Parents: NA	2107	0.07	0.26	0	1
Repressed relatives	2107	0.25	0.43	0	1
Repressed relatives: NA	2107	0.13	0.34	0	1
Books: 200 or fewer	2107	0.55	0.50	0	1
Books: Over 200	2107	0.38	0.49	0	1
Books: NA	2107	0.07	0.26	0	1
Parents: Agriculture	2000	0.18	0.38	0	1
Parents: Non-manual, no higher ed	2000	0.18	0.39	0	1
Parents: Non-manual, higher ed	2000	0.24	0.43	0	1
Parents: Intelligentsia	2000	0.10	0.30	0	1

(Continued)

Table A1. (Continued)

Variable	N	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
Parents: Military/law enforcement	2000	0.06	0.24	0	1
Parents: Managerial	2000	0.09	0.29	0	1
Parents: Students	2000	0.01	0.08	0	1
Parents: Retirees	2000	0.01	0.12	0	1
Parents: Other	2000	0.05	0.22	0	1