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Naive Monarchism and Rural Resistance in Contemporary Russia

This paper applies the concept of “naive monarchism” (i.e., the traditional peasant expressions of reverence for the tsar as their benefactor) to study contemporary rural politics in authoritarian Russia. While Russia is not a monarchy, and its rural dwellers are not traditional illiterate peasants, the veneration of its leader manifests itself in many rural grievances. I analyze three types of rural politics that have traits of naive monarchism: written petitions to the president, rural pickets and delegations to the Kremlin, and geographical renaming in honor of Vladimir Putin. Grievances, voiced in this way, are rarely subjects of repression from above, as they reinforce presidential authority and the existing order. This raises the question of whether rural dwellers faithfully believe in a benevolent president or intentionally exploit their subordinate position and Putin’s image as the present-day tsar. Whether sincere or strategic, these rural politics aim to enforce the existing state commitments. Although they are unable to challenge the status quo, they provide rural dwellers with a means to remedy occasional local injustices.