

## Chapter 1

# *Why Blame Attribution Matters for Protest*

Why do some individuals and groups address their grievances through collective action, while others endure their situation passively? One explanation rests on the complexity of the grievance. If a grievance is complicated, having numerous causes and numerous potential problem solvers, it is difficult to single out any one cause or remedy and to channel demands accordingly. Simplifying becomes key. Those among the aggrieved who specify a source of blame for the problem are more likely to take action than those who attribute blame vaguely or broadly.

Wage arrears in Russia is a case in point. The potential causes of unpaid wages are numerous, making it difficult to identify a specific source of blame. A minority of Russians nevertheless have done so, and this minority has been more likely to participate in strikes and protests to demand back payment of wages than the vast majority of Russians who are unspecific in their attributions of blame. For the majority, collective action has been thwarted by uncertainty about whom to address.

In this chapter, I elaborate on these points and present the major hypotheses to be tested in the rest of the book. I begin with a brief description of existing hypotheses for protest and passivity in Russia and of why an explanation focusing on blame attribution complements or performs better than these alternatives. I discuss how the costs of collective action can be affected by variation in both the complexity of a grievance and the attribution of blame, and I discuss how consideration of blame attribution can enhance the existing body of theoretical literature on collective action. I end with brief discussions of measurement, especially the slippery variables of protest and wage arrears, and methods for testing the hypotheses.

### Explanations for Protest and Passivity in Russia

This study's major empirical finding is that Russians who most clearly and specifically attribute blame for their grievances have been more active in strikes, demonstrations, or other acts of protest than Russians who do not attribute blame specifically. The vast majority of Russians fall in this latter category and therefore have not taken collective action.

This explanation is not the one most commonly offered to explain Russian responses to the wage arrears crisis, and it is also not the one most commonly emphasized in broader theories about political mobilization. Most explanations instead focus on the economic, psychological, cultural, and organizational obstacles that have prevented Russian workers from acting collectively. These will be described and tested more fully in chapter 5 but deserve brief mention here.

Perhaps the most common explanation offered is that many workers have lacked alternative job opportunities and have been too dependent on their current places of employment for nonwage benefits such as housing, child care, and medical treatment to risk losing their jobs as a result of protest activity (Crowley 1997). Worker passivity is motivated by Russians' extreme poverty. Still other explanations propose the precise opposite and practically deny that wage delays have constituted a real crisis. Thanks to a shadow economy that is said to account for anywhere between a quarter and a half of Russia's gross domestic product, workers have been living much better than official data suggest and have had little need for their wages. These explanations obviously contradict one another: on the one hand, Russians are assumed too desperate to protest; on the other, they are assumed too well-off to protest. The data presented to support either assumption have so far been unsystematic and weak.

Each explanation also embodies its own paradox. If workers' dependence on their enterprises causes passivity, then worker *independence* should cause protest, but it seems more plausible that workers who are independent—that is, workers who have not been getting nonwage benefits from their enterprise and could land another job relatively easily—would just take that other job instead of protesting. Conversely, if workers' ability to survive on alternative sources of income and food causes passivity, then why would these workers remain employed in their first jobs? By this logic, the only workers who should remain on enterprise payrolls are those who fare unsuccessfully in the informal economy and desperately need their wages, so the level of worker protest in Russia

should be much higher than it has been. Furthermore, there is no necessary reason why alternative sources of income should make Russians accept the loss of prior earnings to which they are legitimately entitled. It seems equally if not more plausible that most Russians would still want money they are owed, regardless of other earnings, and would perhaps make demands to this effect.

Some social-psychological explanations of worker passivity—such as the contention that most workers disbelieve in the efficacy of protest because most of their jobs are strategically unimportant—hold more promise but ultimately also come up short. First, the sense of efficacy has been almost universally low in Russia—so low, in fact, that even if all efficacious individuals protested, they would still comprise only a minority of the relatively small number of participants in strikes and protests. Second, workers in some notoriously active professions, such as mining, nuclear power, and air traffic, have clearly benefited from their strategic leverage, but workers in other active professions, such as teaching, have persisted even as they repeatedly reveal their lack of strategic leverage. Russian schools have closed with regularity, disrupting children's learning and preparation for the future but hardly bringing cities to their knees as power shortages do. As a result, teachers have won few concessions. Nevertheless, teacher strikes have continued.

Still other explanations for responses to the wage arrears crisis focus on organizational dilemmas of Russian workers (Ashwin 1999). Workers might be ready to take to the streets, but they have just not been mobilized effectively because of incompetent or politically compromised trade unions. This hypothesis finds a good deal of empirical support. Official Russian trade unions have depended on the good graces of the federal government to retain assets and privileges, and this dependence has interfered with the unions' ability to champion workers' rights and court workers' support. However, the failures of Russian trade unions are probably not the only explanation for worker behavior because it remains necessary to understand variation in protest and passivity that is independent of trade union initiation or participation and why independent trade unions or other groups have not stepped in to fill the organizational void.

In addition to trade unions, other supposed opposition groups are also charged with failing to organize worker protest. Most notably, the once logical candidate, the Communist Party, has seemed devoid of a mission or alternative program that speaks to workers' interests and rallies workers to action. This hypothesis too finds a good deal of empirical sup-

port. Agitation from party activists, when attempted, has often encouraged Russians to protest, but the attempts have been relatively rare.

Organizational arguments are valuable because they remind us that certain tasks are difficult for individuals to perform alone. In this sense, organizational arguments are compatible with the explanation about blame attribution described in greater detail later in this chapter. Blame attribution can be a very difficult task, and it becomes much more difficult without an effective organization to lend assistance. Organizations have played a negative role in the Russian public response to wage arrears because they have not taken on the task of helping Russians attribute blame for the problem, identifying the most important of a daunting array of causes and thereby framing the problem in a way that people can comprehend. Organization leaders have pointed fingers and made excuses and justifications, but they have not explained the essentials of how wages came to be delayed and how they can now be paid. Without clarity on these matters, Russians have been unlikely to take to the streets.

Many other factors have featured prominently in discussions of the Russian wage arrears crisis and the related public response. These factors include the sense of civic duty to protest, moral duties like the Hippocratic oath to stay on the job, the size of the Russian workplace, and interest or disinterest in politics. Many of these arguments are useful for limited cases, but many are not supported by the empirical evidence. Those that are more useful are generally compatible with my explanation about specificity in blame attribution. I test these and other alternative arguments more fully in chapter 5.

### **Issue Difficulty and Blame Attribution**

A better explanation for why some Russians engage in collective action and others do not focuses on the ability of the aggrieved to specify blame for their problem. Those who attribute blame specifically are more likely to take action, but these individuals are few in number. Most Russians do not attribute blame specifically and therefore endure their grievances passively. Part of the reason for Russians' lack of specificity in attributing blame is the complex nature of the grievance at hand. This section will explore in greater detail the connections among issue difficulty, blame attribution, and protest.

As chapter 2 will demonstrate, wage arrears in Russia is a complicated issue that could quite reasonably be attributed to a variety of sources, including the federal government, local governments, managers of enterprises and organizations, foreign governments and international organizations, the aggrieved Russians themselves, and many other people, institutions, and circumstances. Sometimes these sources, like the government and enterprises, contribute directly to the crisis because they owe wages directly to workers. Sometimes they play a more indirect role. For example, the government's failure to pay for goods and services prohibits some enterprises from paying workers, while enterprises' failure to pay taxes results in a budget deficit and prohibits the government from paying workers. The complexity is magnified because, in addition to these broad categories like the federal government, there are many individuals and institutions within the broad categories to whom blame could reasonably be attributed, like the executive who historically calls the shots in Russia; his advisers and cabinet members, who are charged with resolving the crisis; the legislature that sets policy, and so on.

Objectively, there may be a "true" story that would implicate one of these sources over the others or that would weave together the contributions of several culprits for a more nuanced multidimensional explanation. For the purposes of protest, however, objective reality is less important than perception. A very complicated issue is unlikely to inspire much collective action if the public perceives the issue as complicated, but a very complicated issue that the public perceives as straightforward and attributable to a single cause can indeed inspire action. If Russians perceive that a single person or institution is the source of their misery and/or the potential source of a solution, they are far more likely to protest than if they perceive that blame is widely dispersed and difficult to pinpoint. In the case of a complicated issue like wage arrears, however, the objective and the subjective are mutually reinforcing. Wage arrears is in fact a complicated economic problem, and it is perceived that way by most Russians. This perception leads to an inability to identify an appropriate target for protest and a generally passive response to hardship.

This study's major theoretical finding, therefore, is that issue difficulty, or the complexity of a grievance, and specificity in blame attribution play roles in collective action decisions. The more complicated the grievance, the less likely it will lead to mobilization. For any particular grievance, complicated or simple, the more specifically the aggrieved attribute blame, the more likely they are to mobilize. In this study, I will

test only the latter proposition, but it is useful to consider them both here to understand the causal mechanisms that connect blame to protest.

*Blame and the Costs of Collective Action*

Why does the difficulty or complexity of a grievance matter for protest? Complexity in a grievance raises the cost of collective action because of the additional time, energy, and even money needed to engage in an information search, sort through the many potential causes of the grievance and the many potential problem solvers, and narrow the field to a concrete target. Complexity also raises the risks of collective action because of the greater uncertainty that the specified target is indeed the guilty party and/or capable of delivering the sought-after rewards. To the usual concerns about retaliation and ineffectiveness, complexity adds concerns about time wasted barking up the wrong tree and the possible need to bark up multiple trees. Complexity in a grievance can even preempt the cost-benefit calculations in collective action decisions if the aggrieved are unable to specify a source of blame and target of action. The cost-benefit calculation makes sense only in relation to a target. One target, like the federal government, might be powerful and spiteful and likely to retaliate, whereas another target, like a local government or an employer, might be weak or sympathetic and unlikely to retaliate. One target might have tremendous resources at its disposal, whereas another target might not. The more complicated the issue or grievance, the more likely the cost-benefit calculation will be unmanageable or simply unattempted.

On the other hand, all grievances, regardless of their objective complexity, can be interpreted simply, and some individuals do achieve a level of specificity in their attribution of blame, even for a complicated problem. These individuals are most easily mobilized for collective action. Specificity in blame attribution lowers the cost of collective action for the aggrieved in two ways. First, individuals who make specific attributions of blame for their grievances have fewer information costs because they assess the risks and rewards of protest mostly in relation to the single target they specify. Lacking specificity in blame attribution, other individuals must assess the risks and rewards of protesting against multiple targets and/or the risks and rewards of a vaguely defined protest with an unnamed target. This information gathering is more time-consuming, potentially futile, and therefore costly. Second, individuals who make specific attributions of blame are likely to have fewer organizational and opportunity

costs associated with the proposed form of collective action since the action would be focused and finite. Unspecific attributors are likely to experience higher costs because their proposed protests would be directed at multiple targets, requiring more complex organization and a greater commitment of time. Of course, unspecific attributors could just join a protest that focused on one target over another, but relative to their more specific peers, they are unlikely to do so because the perceived effects of the protest are less clear. Unspecific attributors would first have to be convinced not only that collective action will yield benefits but also that collective action against the specific chosen target will yield benefits. Individuals who make specific attributions of blame for their problems are already persuaded that they have come to the right place and are thus more receptive to mobilizing efforts against their specified culprit or problem solver.

The incentives to free ride, or avoid the costs of protest while sharing in the benefits, are still high for both Russians who are specific in their attributions of blame and Russians who are not. Protest is a low probability event, and all Russians, like aggrieved individuals everywhere, are relatively unlikely to take to the streets to redress their grievances. However, given the lower costs faced by Russians who are specific in their attributions of blame, they are more easily convinced by mobilizers to take action.

#### *Variation in Grievances and Variation among People*

In developing this argument, I am taking an in-depth look at the content of the grievance or potential protest issue. This is a departure from much of the collective action literature, which assumes a relative equivalence of grievances as potential mobilizers and focuses on the mechanism by which mobilization occurs. Few would argue that all grievances are alike or that collective action is not issue driven. Rather, the role of grievances in collective action decisions is downplayed or ignored in favor of discussions about the costs and benefits of collective action, organizational difficulties, opportunities provided by the political system, and the like. I attempt to fill this gap by specifying how grievances differ in facilitating or inhibiting protest. I also attempt to specify how individuals and groups differ in their responses to different types of grievances.

The idea that both grievances and people are heterogenous and that this heterogeneity is meaningful for political behavior is a familiar point in other fields. Specifically, Carmines and Stimson (1980, 1989) show that

issues matter for voting decisions and that they matter both for their objective and subjective differences. Objectively, some issues may provoke reaction more easily than others because they appeal at the gut level and require little if any contextual knowledge and reasoning ability to understand, while other issues require both contextual knowledge and reasoning ability as well as a certain degree of political sophistication. By this criterion, Carmines and Stimson show that racial desegregation is a relatively easy or uncomplicated issue and therefore drives voting decisions more frequently than relatively intricate issues like the Vietnam War. Carmines and Stimson also argue, however, that there is a subjective dimension to issue heterogeneity and that circumstance sometimes influences whether an issue is perceived as complicated or simple. “Racial desegregation could be complex and Vietnam simple if the issues had evolved that way in the political system and if voters saw them that way. All issues have intrinsically simple and complex facets” (1980, 81).

We can draw on this conceptual distinction between more and less complicated issues in discussing other forms of political behavior. Issue difficulty also plays a role in collective action decisions. Complicated problems are much less likely than relatively straightforward problems to motivate the vast majority of the population to strike, protest, or otherwise act collectively. Complicated problems for protest are defined as those that appear to have no one clear and distinct cause, either because the problem results from objectively complex actions and circumstances in the political and economic arenas or because the simpler facets of the problem are not readily apparent or grasped, or both. By this definition, wage arrears in Russia is a complicated problem, and as such, it does not drive the vast majority of the population to protest.

Studies of voting behavior show that differences among people matter as much as differences among issues. Some voters use even very complicated issues when casting ballots. These are the most politically attentive and sophisticated of the population, the minority who are willing to commit time and mental energy to fact gathering and processing (Carmines and Stimson 1980, 1989). The rest of the population makes decisions without taking complicated issues much into account. Similarly, outside the electoral arena, we may expect a minority of the population to take other forms of political action even regarding very complicated issues. One distinguishing feature of this minority is in its ability to attribute blame.

Individuals and groups are more likely to protest when they can attribute blame for a problem to a clearly identifiable source. They are less

likely to protest when they are unable to attribute blame confidently because they hold multiple sources accountable or because they are altogether uncertain about the causal mechanism for problems. Blame attribution thus serves as a catalyst for mobilization on behalf of a grievance. In the case of the wage arrears crisis, those who are owed larger amounts of back wages and for longer periods of time should be more likely to protest than those experiencing only small, short-term arrears or none at all, but this relationship is contingent on the ability to specify blame. Even the hardest hit workers will be unlikely protesters if they do not know whom or what to protest against.

I therefore argue that protest behavior is predictable from knowledge about grievances and their perceived causes. The argument applies to both groups and individuals. To the extent that protest is a collective or group phenomenon, it depends on consensus within the affected group about the source of blame. The greater the consensus, the more likely the group is to protest. To the extent that protest is an individual phenomenon—that is, involving individuals who decide whether to become active—it depends on the affected individual’s conviction that he or she understands the origins of the problem and understands these origins to be relatively finite. The greater the conviction, the more likely the individual is to protest.

Potential protesters need not draw accurate conclusions about the source of their grievances. The requirement is that they draw limited, clear, and consistent conclusions. Aggrieved individuals can be wrong about who is to blame for a problem, but they will more likely protest if they believe fervently and consistently that the individual or institution they accuse is indeed the guilty party.<sup>1</sup> Nonprotesters are distinguished not by their failure to assign blame correctly but by their frequent failure to assign blame at all. They are stymied by complex situations. They often do not know whom to yell at, or they want to yell at everyone. For the most part, they end up yelling at no one.

Besides their varying abilities to attribute blame to a clearly identifiable source, individuals and groups are also differentiated by their varying abilities to tackle another attribution task, the identification of problem solvers (Fincham and Jaspars 1980; Brickman et al. 1982; Shaver 1985; Iyengar 1989, 1991). The literature on attribution distinguishes between two concepts, causal responsibility and treatment responsibility.

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1. “It is a common assumption of most of the researchers in perception and in social psychology that man reacts to the world as he perceives it—not necessarily as it really is” (Worchel and Andreoli 1976, 252).

Whereas causal responsibility involves accountability for the creation of problems, treatment responsibility involves accountability for the solution of problems. The aggrieved may seek not only villains in their targets of political action but remedies, and those who succeed in this latter task and who can attribute responsibility for problem solving to a clearly identifiable actor or institution are more likely to protest than those who cannot.

It is important to distinguish treatment attribution from causal attribution because the two tasks are neither theoretically nor empirically identical. However, as I will show in chapter 4, the tasks are highly correlated in the minds of the aggrieved, and the distinction may not offer considerable leverage in understanding the implications for protest behavior. Those who can identify a specific culprit for wage arrears are also more likely to identify a specific problem solver. Variation in either attribution task helps explain variation in protest.

Because of the high correlation between causal attribution and treatment attribution, I often use the terms *blame* or *blame attribution* to refer generally to both tasks, attribution for causing a problem and attribution for failing to solve a problem. To blame or to attribute blame is to assign culpability or responsibility. In those instances when I refer distinctly to one task but not the other, I use the more precise terminology of causal attribution or treatment attribution.

### **Blame Attribution and Collective Action Theory**

The notion that protest behavior depends on specific blame attribution provides a missing link in the collective action and social movement literatures. Over the years, the literatures have examined various aspects of protest, leading to a wide body of knowledge on why aggrieved individuals sometimes mobilize and sometimes do not. We know, for example, that the effects of perceived hardship and injustice are not as great as originally supposed. We know that resources and organization are needed to mobilize the aggrieved, as is a frame that makes the grievance comprehensible. We know that protest is usually impeded by the certainty of high, concentrated costs combined with the uncertainty of low and dispersed benefits, and we know that protest is shaped by the incentives and constraints found in a political system. The above propositions about blame attribution contribute to this body of knowledge by directing attention to a

significant but overlooked variable in the collective action equation and by adding new perspectives to the role of these other variables. This section illustrates some potential contributions.

For example, variation in blame attribution helps explain why comparable levels of perceived deprivation may be associated with different levels of collective action. If the issue in question is complicated, only some deprived actors will be able to attribute blame specifically and therefore engage in collective action.

A focus on blame attribution also helps explain one of the chief functions of resources mobilized on behalf of grievances. Organizations and their leaders use their time, money, and other resources not only to inform their members about impending collective action and to encourage their participation but also to inform members about or clarify for them the prior question of whom to blame. Since some issues are naturally clearer or easier to clarify than others, the amount of resources needed for mobilization and the probability of successful mobilization vary. Complicated issues compel the use of more resources than do easy issues with a lower anticipated return on the investment.

Similarly, geographic concentration increases the likelihood of collective action not only because it facilitates communication about how, when, and where to mobilize but also because it facilitates communication about blame attribution. The more complicated the issue, the greater the difficulty in capitalizing on this advantage. Actors could instead communicate misinformation or conflicting information, much like in the game of "telephone," when the message gets distorted by each successive player. As a result, potential protesters are left confused or overwhelmed rather than stirred to action.

The very plausible thesis that strikes are most likely among "isolated communities" such as miners, sailors, and longshoremen is now largely discredited, probably for this very reason (Kerr and Siegel 1964; Lockwood 1966; Lipset 1981): By living in isolation and mingling only with each other, workers in these communities can more easily generate consensus about whom to blame than workers in more sprawling and diverse industrial towns, but their ultimate success in doing so, and in then taking action, can still be foiled by a very complicated issue. Conversely, workers in larger environments with a greater diversity of views may overcome this obstacle when faced with a clear-cut issue with a relatively indisputable source of blame.

Larger cities may also have an advantage over isolated communities

when the need to attribute blame is taken into account. Given an equally complicated issue, workers in the larger cities will have greater access to information that clarifies whom or what to blame. Indeed, many students of collective action tout the role of information in a generic sense but provide few details about how much and what kind of information matters. A focus on blame attribution helps. In addition to information about the number of others affected by the grievance, planned actions to redress the grievance, previous actions to redress the grievance, the outcome of these previous actions, and so on, what matters most is information about why the grievance came about, whether a concrete individual or institution is accountable, and whether that accountable individual or institution is now in a position to remedy the situation.

Spelling out answers to these questions can be viewed as a requisite task in what is known in the social movement literature as the construction of collective action frames (Snow et al. 1986; Snow and Benford 1988, 1992; Eyerman and Jamison 1991; Gamson 1992; Tarrow 1998). Before individuals take action, their grievance must be comprehensible. Traditionally, this has meant that they see their situation as unjust and shared by many others, but the more complicated aspect of constructing a collective action frame involves understanding the situation's origins and identifying guilty culprits. The ability to make specific attributions of blame determines whether the collective action frame will be constructed successfully.

The ability to make specific attributions of blame also determines how readily collective action will spread. The first of the aggrieved to take action are often credited with demonstrating to other aggrieved actors the plausibility of collective action (Lichbach 1995, 115–18; Tarrow 1998, 44–47, 145). In addition, such actions serve to provide others with a frame for the grievance, including the attribution of blame. Latecomers can join the bandwagon relatively easily if they have been shown whom to blame and if the attribution makes sense.

Specificity in blame attribution also affects calculations of the risks and rewards of collective action (Olson 1965). As mentioned earlier, an aggrieved individual or group cannot even attempt these calculations without some idea of the cause of the grievance and therefore the appropriate target of action. The potential risk of protesting against a local government, for example, probably differs from the risk of protesting against a national government. Risk can also vary depending on whether the protesters target the government structure, the current government in office, or just one or two bad policies. Likewise, potential rewards depend on the

target of protest. Different targets wield different amounts of power and control different amounts of resources. Whether potential protesters correctly assess the target's power and resources and, therefore, the true risks and rewards of protest is less important than the prior need to identify a target before making any assessment at all. Even incorrect calculations of risks and rewards should differ for different sources of blame and targets of action.

While blame attribution in this sense precedes calculations of risk and reward, it is also part of the calculation. The cognitive process of blame attribution is a costly endeavor (Langer 1978, 40). Individuals risk wasting considerable time trying to make sense of a situation. Worse yet, after wasting all this time, they could still come to erroneous conclusions and waste even more time protesting against a target that ultimately turns out to be blameless for the grievance. The expected rewards from collective action are already uncertain, even if actors correctly identify the source of blame and target their activities accordingly. The possibility of assigning blame incorrectly only adds to this uncertainty. Complicated issues are thus more costly than easy issues and less potentially beneficial on two counts: First, complicated issues demand more time, energy, and possibly money in the quest to attribute blame. Second, complicated issues have a higher probability of being attributed to the wrong source and so a lower probability of reward. They are consequently less likely to motivate collective action.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, the need for potential protesters to attribute blame specifically helps explain the role of the political system in fostering or hindering collective action. As numerous works have emphasized, the political system provides incentives and constraints for collective action and thus determines the "structure of political opportunities" available to would-be protesters (Eisinger 1973; Tilly 1978; McAdam 1982; McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1988). These opportunities usually involve the relative openness of the institutions of governance, the relative stability of elite alignments, the presence or absence of elite allies, and the state's capacity and propensity for repression (McAdam 1996). I propose that the transparency of the system also influences the opportunities for collective action. While other aspects of the political opportunity structure involve how open or closed

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2. While not referring to the specific information-gathering exercise of blame attribution, Olson (1982, 25–29) notes that information about a collective good is itself a collective good and that information is more costly for some collective goods than others.

the system is to political participation, transparency involves how open or closed the system is to surveillance. Protest is encouraged not only by a vulnerable or receptive political system but also by a system in which lines of authority are visible and distinct. The more visible and distinct, the easier it is to attribute blame and thus the easier it is to mobilize on behalf of an issue.<sup>3</sup> Intentional confusion of blame, like repression, is a proactive tool available to the regime and other state and nonstate actors to diffuse potential protest. Confusion of blame may also result not from a conscious mechanism to diffuse protest but from blame-avoiding strategies, such as agenda limitation, scapegoating, and passing the buck, that elites adopt to survive politically (Weaver 1986). Where the literature on political opportunity structures usually portrays a divided elite as a factor conducive to collective action because it signifies weak and vulnerable leadership, a focus on blame attribution suggests that the reverse may also be true. A divided elite pointing fingers at one another can make the identification of the source of blame more difficult and thus discourage protest.

Similarly, the literature on state strength usually portrays centralized states as stronger and more resistant to social movements than decentralized states that have been weakened by the devolution of power and are vulnerable at many points of contact (Lichbach 1995, 68–74), but a focus on blame attribution suggests something different. By devolving power and decision making, decentralization increases the number of possible sources of blame for public grievances and makes it difficult to isolate the most important source. Decentralization thus can discourage collective action. With a centralized state, the public at least knows who is calling the shots and can hold the party accountable (Tarrow 1998, 81–82, 209).

The goal of this study is to analyze the role of blame attribution in collective action decisions by examining the Russian public's response to the most vexing of their many economic problems, the wage arrears crisis. In emphasizing the importance of blame attribution, I am not discounting the existence of other relevant variables for collective action. Protest is a highly complicated form of political behavior, influenced by some of the factors mentioned earlier; by traditional factors such as gender, age, and education; and even by weather, season, and personality type.<sup>4</sup> For some,

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3. This hypothesis is supported by studies of voting behavior. Electoral results are more affected by economic variables such as GDP growth and unemployment in nations where responsibility for the economy is clear than where it is less clear (Powell and Whitten 1993).

4. For example, protests usually decrease in Russia during July, when many people go on vacation.

laziness or an aversion to group activities prevails. For others, protest is a self-actualizing political experience or has entertainment value (Lichbach 1995, 121). A monocausal explanation of the decision to engage in collective action would therefore be a fruitless pursuit, as would an attempt to bundle several explanations into a general predictive theory. As Lichbach (1995, 281) argues, “A general theory of why people rebel will fail for one simple reason: aggregate levels and particular outbreaks of collective dissent are largely unpredictable.”

Instead, the goal of this study is to identify a previously downplayed factor in the collective action literature that has a significant independent impact on individual protest decisions and clarifies the role of other variables. As I demonstrate in the remaining chapters, the ability to attribute blame specifically can make an aggrieved individual at least three times as likely to protest, and in the aggregate, the ability to attribute blame specifically can produce at least three times as many protesters from the pool of the aggrieved. In absolute terms, this effect can be crucial. Variations in the ability to attribute blame can make a meaningful difference in the public response to a problem.

Before turning to the relationship between blame attribution and collective action decisions, however, it is useful to consider in more general terms the significance of blame attribution for human behavior. In the next section I discuss some relevant findings from the fields of social psychology and economic voting. In chapter 2, I discuss the task of blame attribution in the specific case of Russia’s wage arrears problem and the complex web of people, institutions, and situations that may be responsible for causing the problem. I propose that this complexity limits the number of groups and individuals who mobilize to protest the situation. In the remaining chapters, I test these propositions using survey data from a nationwide sample of the Russian population. I examine how individual and group variation in the ability to specify blame for wage arrears is related to the propensity to strike, protest, or engage in other forms of collective action.

### **The Importance of Blame Attribution for Human Behavior**

The theoretical background for my argument comes from the literature on social psychology and the political science literature on economic voting. These literatures discuss the importance of blame for motivating human

activities, and I draw on them to make three points here. First, how people understand causal relationships influences their behavior. Second, whether people can understand a causal relationship depends in part on the complexity of an issue and individual characteristics. Third, understanding causal relationships is an especially difficult task for collective action.

### *The Effects of Blame Attribution on Behavior*

According to the literature on social psychology, behavioral responses to adverse circumstances are motivated by attributions of blame for the circumstances. Studies show that individuals try to identify the source of a problem, and they apply this causal reasoning in determining subsequent action. Their approach is analogous to a professional scientist's: Using lay versions of experimental methods, individuals form theories, test hypotheses, and weigh experimental evidence. They use covariation principles and other inferential rules and thus act as "naive scientists" in trying to interpret and explain events (Heider 1958; Kelley 1967, 1971, 1972a, 1972b, 1973; Jones and McGillis 1976; Snyder and Gangestad 1981, 172–74). The practice of connecting effects to their perceived causes has been found in children as early as preschool age (Ruble and Rholes 1981, 7–8).

Only after these causal attributions are made can individuals take the next step and respond appropriately. Causal attributions for success and failure influence whether a person expects future success or failure and whether a person persists following failure. Causal attributions also influence behaviors such as help giving, parole decisions, and quitting smoking (Ickes and Kidd 1976; Weiner 1985; Russell, McAuley, and Tarico 1987, 1248). If a commuter blames drunkenness for an individual's falling in a subway car, he is less likely to lend assistance than if he thinks the fallen individual is ill. If a parole officer blames a stable cause like psychopathy for a criminal's conduct, she is less likely to recommend parole than if she thinks a temporary situation like unemployment was the cause. If a smoker blames nicotine use on physiological addiction, he is less likely to attempt to quit than if he blames the habit on more controllable factors.

In the political realm, whom or what one blames for problems influences support for government and voting decisions (Sniderman and Brody 1977; Fiorina 1981; Lau and Sears 1981; Feldman 1982; Iyengar 1991; Powell and Whitten 1993). This relationship helps make sense of the numerous and somewhat counterintuitive findings that personal economic

grievances have little systematic influence on voting behavior (Kinder and Kiewiet 1979; Lewis-Beck 1988). Voters rarely punish incumbents due to a change in personal finances, but this is because they rarely hold incumbents accountable for such changes. Instead people may accord far greater weight for their economic misfortunes to personal failings or the immediate environment (Brody and Sniderman 1977; Kinder and Kiewiet 1979, 522–23; Schlozman and Verba 1979; Lau and Sears 1981). On those occasions when voters blame an incumbent, personal economic grievances, or “pocketbook” concerns, play a greater role in determining political behavior (Lau and Sears 1981; Abramowitz, Lanoue, and Ramesh 1988). For example, in Great Britain, where the link between government and private lives is greater than it is in the United States, so too is the link between pocketbook concerns and voting (Kinder and Kiewiet 1979, 522–23). Cross-nationally, people hold incumbents more accountable for changes in the overall economic situation than for changes in personal finances, so the former changes have a more powerful and consistent influence on voting decisions.

### *The Difficulty of Blame Attribution*

Most discussions of causal attribution are principally concerned with the degree to which individuals blame themselves or the external environment for problems, accidents, or other forms of adversity (e.g., Weiner 1980).<sup>5</sup> Do individuals accept responsibility for their fates, or do they feel victimized by government, society, or “the system”? Behavior is shown to vary accordingly. Support for government, for example, is higher among those who attribute blame to themselves and lower among those who attribute blame to government or society (Sniderman and Brody 1977; Lau and Sears 1981; Feldman 1982; Iyengar 1991).

This distinction between person-blame and system-blame causal attributions is, however, only one part of the relevant attribution process. “The system” is a large, multifaceted entity. Individuals who hold it accountable for problems still often need to specify further whom or what within the system should be blamed. This is no easy task. As Fischhoff (1976, 432) explains,

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5. Psychologists since the 1950s have called this the “internal-external distinction” (Heider 1958; Weiner 1985).

Making proper attributions requires some fairly sophisticated and complicated use of the knowledge accumulated in covariation matrices and causal schemata. There is a good deal of evidence showing that people are poorly equipped for this sort of conditional, multivariate thinking. Hammond and Summers (1972) have shown that cognitive control, or ability to apply knowledge, may lag well behind the acquisition of that knowledge. They also argue that everyday learning experiences are typically not structured to develop cognitive control. A related problem is people's poor insight into the information integration policies that they are following.

Judgments about within-system blame are therefore not always easy, and errors in attribution are common (Kahneman and Tversky 1972, 1973; Tversky and Kahneman 1971, 1973, 1974, 1980; Nisbett and Ross 1980).

Whether individuals succeed in attributing blame depends in part on the objective complexity or simplicity of a situation. In electoral politics, the clarity of policy-making can be critical. If power is concentrated in the hands of a single person or party, then individuals can confidently assume that blame should also be concentrated. If, however, power is diffuse due to legislative rules, lack of party cohesion, bicameralism and other institutional power-sharing arrangements, coalition governments, or other features of government that allow a ruling party to share blame with opponents or claim an inability to make binding decisions, then individuals face greater difficulty in attributing blame with confidence, and this in turn affects their voting behavior (Powell and Whitten 1993; see also Strom 1990; Paldam 1991).

No matter how objectively difficult or easy the situation, success in attributing blame also depends on how the individual muddles through the process. Unlike a cause, which exists independently of perception, blame attribution is inherently a subjective phenomenon (Shaver 1985, 136). Not just accountability but perceived accountability matters for public political behavior, and the clarity of policy-making matters only insofar as it facilitates the perception of accountability. Some individuals can have difficulty assigning blame for a grievance even in those political systems with few power-sharing arrangements and therefore clear lines of accountability. Other individuals can have very strong convictions about where culpability lies, even when culpability is purposefully shared. Individuals in the same political system have different cognitive abilities, different personal circumstances, and different political perceptions that may play a

role in their attributions of blame. For example, voters hold a political party with which they sympathize more accountable for performance on its most salient dimension (such as unemployment for left-wing parties and inflation for right-wing parties) than they hold the opposition (Hibbs 1982; Powell and Whitten 1993, 405).

Success in blame attribution—in the sense of arriving at a target, any target—is far from guaranteed. Especially when reality or perceived reality is complex, an individual “often is motivated to move away from the direction of attributional specificity. Rather than narrowing the range of causes to arrive at a single dominant explanation, we should at times expect efforts to break open the range of causality—to locate multiple causes and to render the end result of the ‘search’ for causality ambiguous” (Snyder and Wicklund 1981, 198). When voters cannot make a causal connection between an issue and the contested office or an issue and the candidate, the issue is anticipated to play little role in the voters’ decisions and thus plays little role in the campaign (Popkin 1991, 100–101). Without concrete blame attribution, reactive behavior is limited. The behavioral implication can be the same regardless of whether the difficulty in attributing blame arises from personal failure in comprehension or the genuine complexity of the political issue.

The main lesson to be learned from the economic voting literature, then, is that individuals do try to figure out—by looking at how their government operates or the performance of their country relative to other countries or other factors—whether there are causal links between political leaders or institutions and economic outcomes. The task can range in level of difficulty, and individuals can perform the task with varying levels of success. Behavior follows accordingly.

### *The Greater Difficulty of Blame Attribution for Protest*

This task of blame attribution is probably far more difficult for political protest and other forms of collective action than for voting. First, during an election campaign, voters benefit from cues sent by the media and the heightened political environment that help them attribute responsibility for economic outcomes (Abramowitz, Lanoue, and Ramesh 1988, 860; Popkin 1991, 41). On the prescribed day, they use this information for a single finite act. Potential protesters, however, have no guarantee of a campaign or equivalent public discussion to offer them cues and to define and limit the time before they must make a decision. Politicians can lie low

and avoid providing damaging or even exculpatory information, and they can potentially do so indefinitely, since there is no set date on which individuals must attribute blame and act or not act.

Second, in the case of voting, no matter which of the many persons or institutions in the external environment is seen as most blameworthy, the potential for redress is limited to the finite decisions presented at the ballot box at that particular time. It may or may not be a presidential election year. It may or may not be a legislative election year. The accountability question gets narrowed to a “yes-no,” a thumb up or a thumb down for one specific incumbent executive or legislator. For collective action, individuals face a much less finite and mutually exclusive spectrum of choices. Targets for blame are not presented at a ballot box but are conceived by individuals in their minds and through conversations with others about the particular issue in question. At any time, possibilities include managers, local executives, local legislatures, national executives, national legislatures, and a variety of others. Given the diversity of perspectives in the public, the result could be a great variety of targets, or, given the lack of parameters and direction in framing the issue, the result could be no target at all.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps more than for voting decisions, then, issue difficulty and characteristics of the individual are central to the “blame game” played prior to collective action decisions. The complexity of an issue, or how multifaceted it is, is central to a protest decision because it determines the amount of time and energy required to sort through the relevant information and identify the primary source of blame. It determines the “cost” of blame attribution. Characteristics of the individual are also central to the protest decision because they determine the effort that goes into playing the blame game and how successful the person is at identifying who is to blame. If the cause of a problem is clear and distinct—or if the affected individual perceives the cause to be clear and distinct—it is then easier to assign blame and thus to protest. When instead the cause of a problem could be found among many of the elements of the system or within both

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6. In the language of public opinion polling, the difference between the vote choice and the collective action decision is equivalent to the difference between a closed-end and an open-end question: “Do you blame A, B, or C for your problem?” versus “Whom do you blame for your problem?” As anyone who has ever coded survey responses knows, the range of answers for the latter question will almost always far exceed the set response categories for the former, and the number of “don’t know” responses will be higher for the latter than for the former.

the system and the individual, the process of blame attribution becomes cumbersome and may be an impediment to protest.

The limited research on blame attribution in the collective action literature supports these assumptions. For centuries, poor people confronted with seemingly inexplicable bouts of famine came together not by pondering their predicament as a result of natural causes or randomness but by developing a clear and limited idea about whom to blame. Concrete targets such as merchants and Jews stirred the poor to action (Thompson 1971; Tarrow 1998, 33–34). In contrast, before the civil rights era, blame attribution was a principal dilemma for northern black Americans that frustrated their ability to act collectively. The salient issue of housing, for example, failed to arouse much protest because

There is disagreement among influential Negroes as to the source of the problem, what ought to be done about it, and what can be done under the circumstances. . . . the targets of protest action have become unclear or ambiguous. . . . what is the target for protest aimed at “equal opportunity in housing”? One cannot picket or boycott or send deputations to all the real estate brokers, all the mortgage bankers, all the neighborhood improvement associations, or all the community newspapers. . . . Discriminatory practices in housing, in brief, are not the product of public or private decisions by some identifiable decisionmaker. They are the result of an infinite number of social choices made by tens of thousands of home owners, landlords, realtors, bankers, loan officers, community groups, and individuals. (Wilson 1961, 295–96)

The effectiveness of strikes is credited to their uniqueness in having an employer as the usually logical and clear target of action (Tarrow 1998, 162). If instead dissidents want to target the state, they first “must believe that the state should provide the PG [public good] and that therefore it is responsible in some causal, legal, or moral sense for their grievances. . . . Attributing some blame to government for, say poor economic conditions, seems essential to collective dissent” (Lichbach 1995, 251–52).

Discussion about the relationship of blame attribution to public protest so far has been limited to side commentary within broader collective action frameworks. In this study of both protest and passivity, I bring the discussion about blame to the forefront. I argue that Russians have faced a highly cumbersome process of blame attribution in trying to

account for the country's wage arrears problem. Wage arrears in Russia has been a very difficult or complicated issue. The nation's unpaid wage bill has climbed as high as ten billion dollars, and a valid case could be made for blaming almost anyone and everyone: the central authorities and their many component individuals and institutions, the local authorities and their many component individuals and institutions, the managers of various enterprises and organizations, international organizations and foreign governments, and the people themselves and a variety of other institutions.<sup>7</sup> With so little clarity of responsibility for the problem, few Russians have been able to make the causal connections that inspire collective action. This explains in part why the aggregate level of participation in protest in Russia has been low.

### **What Is a "Normal" Amount of Protest?**

It is important to pause for a moment to reflect on Russia's protesters and nonprotesters in a comparative context and ask: what does it mean to say the level of participation in protest in a country is "low"? What would it take for the level to be "high"? Do the numbers of strikers and protesters in Russia perhaps represent a "normal" response to the wage arrears crisis?

Answers to these questions are typically colored by preconceptions about the relative importance of grievances versus collective action problems in the decision to protest. Those who approach the Russian situation through the lens of grievance theories are struck by the scope and seriousness of the wage crisis. Given such staggering grievances, they ask, why haven't most if not all Russians risen in protest? The relevant point of comparison is the number of affected individuals and the much smaller number of activists, so participation in protest in Russia seems low. During the 1989 Soviet coal miners' strike, for example, "The much larger question was not why there was so much labor unrest in the Soviet Union, but rather addressed a more perplexing issue: Why was there so little?" (Crowley 1997, 2). And from 1989 to 1992, when government-sponsored shock therapy wiped out much of the gains miners had achieved through strikes, the question was why "the level of strike activity remained extremely low in view of the high costs reform was imposing on labor" (Cook 1997, 46).

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7. The role of these groups in creating and sustaining the crisis is discussed in chapter 2.

In contrast, those who approach the Russian situation through the lens of collective action theories are struck by the existence of any activism in the country at all. Given the propensity for free riding (the possibility to share in benefits without bearing any of the costs), why would any Russian protest? The relevant point of comparison is the high risk of political activity for an uncertain reward and the high number of risk takers. Participation in protest in Russia—and anywhere else—seems high.

Crudely stated, then, grievance theorists focus on why protest in Russia is low, while collective action theorists focus on why protest is high.<sup>8</sup> Both perspectives have value and should inform our expectations about the Russian public, but in terms of a working guideline, it would be useful to pin down a concrete number or percentage of the aggrieved that is regarded as “normal” and then use this number as the yardstick by which to measure the Russian response to wage arrears. In this regard, the so-called “5 percent rule” seems most reasonable and appropriate (Lichbach 1995, 17). Many students of social movements expect that for any given movement, only about 5 percent of affected individuals usually protest. This has been the case for most major rebellions, revolutions, and other forms of mass political action, including the American, Russian, Algerian, and Cuban revolutions (Lichbach 1995, 18). Five percent, then, could be the yardstick by which to judge protest in Russia, and by this yardstick, Russians have been struggling.

This is not immediately apparent from aggregate strike statistics. At a quick glance, it would seem that the level of unrest in Russia has grown in accordance with the severity of the problem. The total number of participants in strikes in Russia rose from just under five hundred thousand in 1995 to almost nine hundred thousand in 1997, and the number of enterprises affected by these strikes rose from almost nine thousand in 1995 to almost twenty thousand in 1997 (table 1.1). In addition to strikes, Russians have engaged in other acts of protest not recorded in the official statistics, such as demonstrations, rallies, hunger strikes, sit-downs on railroad tracks, and other forms of collective action. The overall increase in these activities, combined with the well-publicized volatility of Russian regions like Vladivostok and Kemerovo and of particularly active professionals like teachers, doctors, and miners, has often led observers to pre-

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8. Still other students of social movements focus more on mobilization cycles and the rise and fall of protest over time. They evaluate high and low protest by the number of protest events rather than by levels of participation. Beissinger (1996, 1998b), for example, uses this approach to study nationalist movements in the former Soviet Union.

dict the coming of a “hot autumn” or “hot spring” in Russia (vanden Heuvel and Cohen 1997). Some have also predicted that any impending “social explosion” in Russia could be even worse than those seen in Albania or Indonesia in the 1990s.<sup>9</sup>

On closer examination, however, social explosion has not seemed imminent in Russia. Even if protest activities increased annually during the late 1990s, the quarterly data reveal peaks and valleys in activism that do not fully correspond to the relatively steady climb in aggregate wage arrears (fig. 1.1). The data therefore cast doubt on predictions that continuation or deepening of the crisis would tip Russians over the edge. Sudden changes in arrears can explain away some extreme periods of public outcry, like the protests following the sharp increase in wage arrears at the end of 1996, and some extreme periods of public retreat, like the calm at the end of 1997 when President Boris Yeltsin tried to fulfill his campaign pledge to pay off arrears before the new year. However, there are still noticeably long intervals when very high levels of arrears are not accompanied by high levels of protest (for example, most of 1998), and there are no consistent lag times between initial increases in arrears and the public calls for solutions. Wage arrears has become a constant thorn in Russians’ sides; protest, only a sporadic response.

Moreover, even when protest events receive their greatest publicity and hype, the turnout usually has failed to meet expectations and has been unimpressive relative to the size of the Russian workforce and the size of

**TABLE 1.1. Strikes in Russia**

	Participants	Enterprises Affected
1995	489,000	8,856
1996	663,800	10,046
1997	887,500	19,751

*Source:* Goskomstat

9. Gennady Zyuganov has predicted that “great changes will come in March. The protests will increase daily,” and Alexander Lebed “has likened the growing volume of Russian labor protests to strikes, street protests and violence in Serbia, Bulgaria and Albania that are toppling entrenched governments” (Helmer 1997). Reflecting on a poorly attended protest, journalist Fred Weir (1997) writes, “I do not take the rally’s sloppy showing as a sign that everything’s OK, or that the danger of social explosion is receding in Russia. On the contrary, the rage and frustration of people is quite palpable. . . . No one actually represents the workers in any of this, and they know it. This cannot go on forever.”

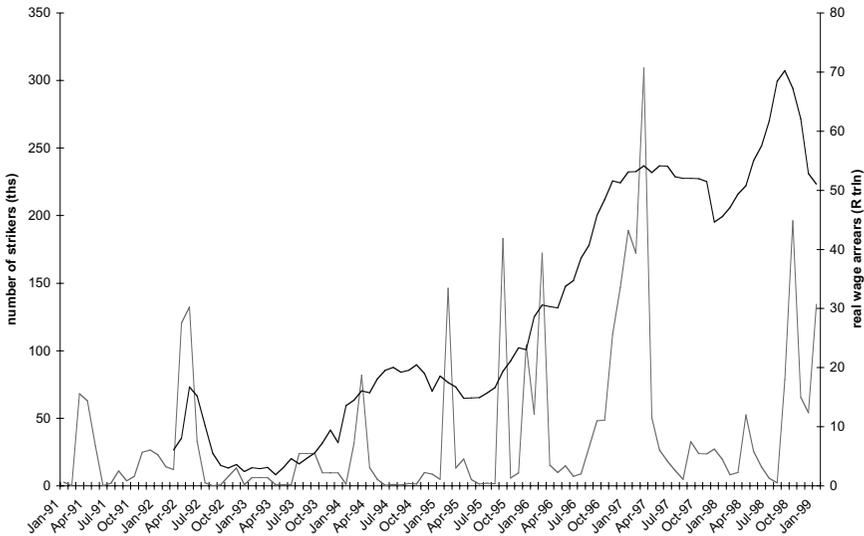


Fig. 1.1. Wage arrears and strikes. (Data from Goskomstat.)

the aggrieved population. The most generous estimates of strikers and protesters in the country have still represented only 1 or 2 percent of all Russian workers as well as an extraordinarily small percentage of workers owed wages. Those strikes that have generated relatively high attendance have often not been very noteworthy in their intensity or duration. Indeed, it is reasonable to question what a strike in contemporary Russia has even meant, given the current state of Russian industry, when many factories have not been producing anything in the first place. Public protest activities have quickly become an object of ridicule in the country, commonly mocked with a twist in the old Soviet adage, “We pretend to work; they pretend to pay us.” Now the adage goes, “We pretend to strike; they pretend to listen.”

If we think of 5 percent as a reasonable yardstick for a normal amount of protest, only in 1997 did the number of strikers in Russia finally reach a high of 887,500, still less than 4.5 percent of the roughly twenty million Russians who were owed wages. Moreover, the ratio of strikers to aggrieved individuals might be even lower if, as discussed next in this chapter, it turns out that Goskomstat, the Russian State Statistical Committee, has double- or triple-counted individuals who participated in more than

one strike. The level of protest is lower still if we consider that the number of Russians affected by wage arrears has exceeded the twenty million directly owed wages. The 887,500 strikers are a much smaller fraction of a pool of Russians that includes the spouses, children, parents, and other dependent relatives of unpaid individuals in addition to the unpaid themselves. It seems reasonable, therefore, to refer to participation in protest over wage arrears in Russia as low and to use this as a working assumption throughout this study.

Use of the 5 percent yardstick and acknowledgment of the low level of participation in protest in Russia does not belittle the importance of those protests that do occur or underestimate the potential impact of a small but committed group of aggrieved individuals. Even if protest were limited to only 1 percent of the working population, it could still have critical implications for Russia's future. Strikes and demonstrations are often concentrated in specific regions and specific industries, with quite devastating effects on the surrounding political and economic life. Furthermore, history shows that small groups of malcontents, such as the Bolsheviks, can create disturbances and achievements far disproportionate to their numbers. The only claim here is that to the extent that contemporary Russia experiences threats to regime policy and regime stability, the threats come from a relatively small percentage of the population. Assessments of the impact of strikers and other protesters in Russia will be offered occasionally throughout this book, but a full analysis is beyond the scope of this study.

### **How Much Protest Is There in Russia?**

It is also worth pausing to consider how we can know exactly how much strike and protest activity has taken place in Russia. Are the numbers like 887,500 on which we base our assessments of public activism accurate? Do they cover the full range of behavior that could be considered acts of protest?

Information on public activism that is used most frequently by scholars, government officials, and journalists comes from Goskomstat, which gathers data on strikes but unfortunately does not gather data on demonstrations, rallies, hunger strikes, sit-downs on railroad tracks, and other forms of protest. While the strike statistics are certainly indicative of some aspects of public discontent, they fail to capture its full scope. After all,

much of Russia's industry has been unproductive, so workers often view striking as futile and instead choose other forms of protest. In recent years, the repertoire of contention has grown to include such untallied acts as sitting down on railroad tracks to halt the shipment of important natural resources or other goods intended for domestic energy needs or lucrative export.

Even if we were to reframe the question of this study and ask not why some Russians express public indignation over wage arrears in a variety of forums but why some Russians take the specific action of striking, Goskomstat's aggregate strike data alone would still be problematic. Goskomstat records strike data in three ways: number of employees involved, number of enterprises affected, and number of workdays lost. The first statistic is presumably the most relevant, but it is also probably overestimated, since a single worker who participates in more than one strike could be counted more than once. The extent or consistency of the overestimation is unclear. Where Goskomstat shows an increase in strikers almost every year through 1998, individual-level data from the U.S. Information Agency survey (discussed below) show attrition or stability in strike behavior for some of these same years.

In other ways, Goskomstat's strike data might underestimate total strike activity. Official statistics record only those strikes that are "officially registered," but it is unclear if all or most strikes in Russia indeed meet this criterion and, if not, whether strikes in certain industries or regions have been systematically unregistered and therefore unrecorded or whether the omissions have been random. Clarke (1998, 76, 93n) claims that "the vast majority of strikes over the non-payment of wages have . . . been illegal" and that "strike statistics bear no relation to reality, since most strikes are not reported as such, officially being defined as unauthorised absence from work."

Newspaper accounts are another valuable source of information on strikes and other acts of protest in Russia because they help document the rise and fall of protest over time, and students of Russian politics have used these accounts to generate rich insights into trends in collective action (Beissinger 1996, 1998b). Given their focus on mobilization cycles and the number of protest events that have occurred in allotted time intervals, the events data pulled from newspaper accounts are reasonably well suited to their research agenda. However, for studies like this one that focus on levels of participation and the individual decision to protest, newspaper accounts, like aggregate data, have limitations (Danzger 1975; Snyder and

Kelly 1977; McCarthy, McPhail, and Smith 1996; Wolfsfeld 1997; Rucht, Koopmans, and Neidhardt 1998).

Among other difficulties, events involving several thousand participants are likely to be covered, but events with fewer participants get more sporadic coverage with little systematic rationale for inclusion or exclusion. A dramatic and colorful act of protest, like stealing a military helicopter or holding a firm manager hostage, attracts a lot of media attention regardless of the number of individuals involved, whereas ongoing traditional protests like teacher strikes attract less attention.<sup>10</sup> For example, we know from newspaper accounts that several engineers from a nuclear submarine plant in the northern town of Severodvinsk threatened to tamper with a nuclear reactor if they were not paid their wages; that two coal miners in the Siberian town of Kiselevsk packed a car with explosives and blew themselves up after six months of working without pay; that fifty officers' wives and children at a military airfield in the far eastern city of Mongokhto sat on the runway, refusing to leave until the officers were paid their back wages; and that between three and four hundred employees of the Zvezda nuclear submarine repair plant in Bolshoi Kamen, near Vladivostok in the far east, blocked the Trans-Siberian Railroad for two hours, demanding their wages. However, we know far less about the more mundane work stoppages and peaceful demonstrations. Indeed, after two years without pay, workers at the Roschino timber plant in Sakhalin had no money even for bread, but their sporadic protests went largely unnoticed until a desperate worker chained himself to a gate and drove a nail through his hand (*Associated Press*, May 16, 1997; *Jamestown Foundation Monitor*, May 19, 1997; *Pravda 5*, December 1, 1997).

Newspaper accounts are also biased toward unique events over usual ones and events in accessible locations over remote ones. Acts of protest with extreme demands like the ouster of President Yeltsin grab more attention than the same acts with routine calls for the timely payment of wages, and protests over "new" issues grab more attention than protests over more fundamental issues that have become repetitive and boring. As

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10. This is typical of protest coverage in all countries. Citing Kielbowicz and Scherer (1986), Tarrow (1998, 116) writes, "The single student in a peaceful antiwar protest who throws a rock at a police line or the transvestite marching in garish drag in a gay rights march makes better copy than no matter how many marchers parading peacefully down a city street." Similarly, Wolfsfeld (1997, 20–22, 86–87) writes that to get media coverage, protesters "gotta have a gimmick. . . . If you cannot get in by being important, you have to compensate by being interesting."

one prominent Moscow correspondent explains, “500 people throwing bottles and paint at the US embassy is probably more interesting than 7,000 people protesting late wages, because by now we have seen the late wages protests many times, but bottles clanking off the embassy over Yugoslavia is something new.”<sup>11</sup> Acts of protest in a capital or other city where journalists are regularly stationed receive better coverage than those off the beat. Also, media coverage of protest often has as much to do with other news events as with the protest itself: more exciting headlines can push acts of protest to the back pages or entirely out of view. These same acts could be featured heavily on slow news days.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, given an unquestionably large demonstration worthy of newspaper coverage, there will inevitably be conflicts over how to measure turnout and inconsistencies and ambiguities in how these conflicts get resolved in the public record. It is well known that organizers of protest activities tend to overestimate their success, including the attendance, while political authorities, police, or others being challenged have incentives to downplay such events and thus underestimate attendance. For example, in April 1995, the Russian Federation of Independent Trade Unions sponsored a nationwide day of protest that it claimed attracted 1.5 million participants, while the minister of the interior put the number at 450,000 (Cook 1997, 109). In the nationwide protests of March 27, 1997, unions claimed twenty million participants, whereas the police and interior ministry estimated between one and two million.<sup>13</sup>

Newspaper reporters, editors, and publishers may be sympathetic to either side in a conflict and estimate accordingly, or, even with no stake in the conflict, they may simply have difficulty measuring turnout. After all, there is no registration procedure or formal head count for most protests. If protests occur in a confined location, reporters try to estimate crowd size

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11. Private correspondence with author on condition of anonymity. Serge Schmemmann, another prominent correspondent and former Moscow bureau chief for the *New York Times*, sees the selective coverage of protest in Russia as a positive indication of the nation’s development: “In the case of protest, it is a measure of Russia’s advance toward ‘normalcy’ that routine demonstrations or protests are no longer news, any more than are the millions of strikes and protests in New York and elsewhere that we don’t report” (private correspondence with author).

12. As one example, when Yuri Luzhkov’s big celebration for the 850th anniversary of Moscow fell on the same day as the funeral for Princess Diana, Weir went out and joined the crowds on the streets of Moscow but never filed a word about it. “No point,” he explains (private correspondence with author).

13. These numbers were cited in various sources, including *RIA, Itar-Tass*, and *Interfax*. For a brief summary, see *Jamestown Foundation Monitor*, March 31, 1997.

in light of such factors as the generally accepted amount of people that can possibly fit into a space (for example, Red Square holds forty thousand), whether participants are joining or quitting, and at what rate. For less confined locations, the estimate is trickier. Reporters may estimate the flow of a march by noting how many people pass a certain point per hour, or they may find a position where they can get an overhead view of the crowd, pick a small unit of area among the sea of bodies, count the number of participants, and then multiply this number by an estimate of the number of similarly sized units in the entire area covered by the event. While these procedures are reasonable, they are far from precise. Demonstrations, especially large ones, may cover several blocks, with participants clumped closely in some areas and scattered more loosely in others. Demonstrations may wind through streets, making it difficult to detect their beginnings and ends. And they may last several hours or days, with participants coming and going, leaving it open to debate whether the “true” size of the event is determined by the maximum number of participants at any one point during the demonstration, the average number of participants throughout the course of the demonstration, or the total number of individuals who participated at any time during the demonstration (which is nearly impossible to estimate).

Despite the difficulties, the estimated size of a protest—that is, the number of participants—is at least usually offered by both official statistics and newspaper accounts. The more elusive measures of the level of protest—duration, intensity, and dispersion—are often not even recorded. A strike or demonstration’s beginning may go unrecorded because an initially small group of participants does not seem very noteworthy. Its end may go unrecorded because it peters out gradually and is never officially declared “over” or because, after days or weeks, the story is no longer new and ceases to be covered. A strike or demonstration’s intensity is often a subjective determination or omitted from the story altogether. It may involve three hundred lethargic workers standing around with picket signs, or it may involve three hundred irate workers in a testy mob. The dispersion of a strike or protest is perhaps the toughest call of all and thus a good candidate for omission. The three hundred protesters could represent a small percentage of a single firm or its entire workforce. They could be from the same firm or industry or from many firms in a region. Indeed, it is usually quite difficult to know what percentage of the country or industry or aggrieved group is involved in protest activities. Instead of protesting, a significant percentage of aggrieved individuals may choose to

leave their firms, industries, regions, or countries (Hirshman's "exit" over "voice"), leaving the journalist or reader to determine whether the protest level should be calculated based on the initial number of aggrieved individuals or the remaining number. With rising inflation in the spring of 1992, for example, teachers and health care workers watched the value of their wages plummet, and many left their jobs and their professions rather than organize and fight for better pay (Cook 1997, 47).

All these inaccuracies and insufficiencies in the data on protest pose a real dilemma for social science research. How can we study protest and passivity if we do not know precisely how much protest and passivity exist? How can we determine the causes of protest and passivity if we do not know precisely where and when protest and passivity exist? One option is to gather individual-level data on both protest activities and their supposed determinants through the use of a nationwide survey, which is the approach I take here.

### **What We Can Learn from Individual-Level Data**

This study is based on findings from a nationwide survey of 2,026 adult (age eighteen and over) Russians commissioned by the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) and conducted between September 27 and October 12, 1998.<sup>14</sup> More information on the sampling scheme and other aspects of the survey is provided in Appendix A.

The use of individual-level data is informed by theoretical and practical concerns. Theoretically, since the decision to protest is made ultimately by individuals or groups of individuals, a study of protest at too high a level of aggregation involves problems of ecological inference (King 1997). A region or industry may have been the site of both a high level of protest and a low level of a hypothesized explanatory variable such as nonwage benefits (housing, child care, medical treatment, and other workplace provisions that supposedly discourage protest because they alleviate the burden of unpaid wages and increase workplace dependency and the risk of job loss). However, there is no necessary connection between the two. Individuals who received no nonwage benefits may have been passive, and individuals who received many benefits may have protested. In the aggregate, this information could get lost. A survey of individuals avoids this

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14. After weighting, the sample size is 2,021.

difficulty by linking each individual's receipt of nonwage benefits or any other potential explanatory variable directly to the individual's behavior.

As a practical matter, data gathered through survey research—though not without its flaws—is more transparent and can thus be used with a higher degree of confidence than the aggregate data. The survey was supervised closely by me and other analysts at USIA in close collaboration with a Russian firm. Appendix A provides details on how the survey was conducted, along with the margin of sampling error and a discussion of factors that might have influenced survey responses or other possible questions about the validity of the data. The data can thus be scrutinized and analyzed by others to test competing hypotheses, and most importantly, the survey can be replicated to test the reliability of measures.

Aggregate-level data on protest and wage arrears from official Russian sources provide few of these possibilities. They may be useful for some illustrative purposes, but they are generally unclear, incomplete, and/or misleading. The procedures for reporting and recording data are usually not included with the official statistics, and few scholars or journalists could muster the money, time, or access necessary to replicate such a vast enterprise of data collection. While the data may be accurate, there are certainly reasons to be skeptical. In June 1998, Yuri Yurkov, the head of Goskomstat, was arrested along with Boris Saakyan, head of the agency's data processing center; Vyacheslav Baranovskii, head of its publishing center; and about twenty other senior employees on charges of "systematic distortion of statistical data."<sup>15</sup> The specific distortions involved major Russian companies with the goal of allowing them to evade taxes. The scandal may imply absolutely nothing about the integrity of official data on protest and wage arrears, but then again, it adds a malicious twist to the phrase "lies, damn lies, and statistics" and should make conscientious students of Russian politics somewhat cautious about uncritically using any data from the agency.

The reasons for caution are not driven solely by scandal. "The State Statistics Committee's figures are not always accurate, to put it mildly" because—unlike the tax police—the agency has little muscle to compel the provision of accurate data from Russian regions and enterprises (Latynina 1998). It may be extreme to claim, as Latynina (1998) does, that "Information in the State Statistics Committee is gathered by timid 40 and 50-year-old women in threadbare dresses and unfashionable shoes whom any

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15. See reports in *RFE/RL Newslines*, June 9–12, 29, 1998.

factory director would not let beyond the threshold of his office,” but there is certainly truth to the sentiment. Furthermore, the Russian economy is sometimes so anarchic and the methods and procedures of official data collection are sometimes so arbitrary that the data would be of limited use even if collected by honest agency leaders and more persuasive field staff.

In this regard, I have already discussed Goskomstat’s unreliability as a source of statistics on public unrest. There are also great difficulties in using Goskomstat as a source of statistics on wage arrears.<sup>16</sup> The main problem is that the agency selectively includes certain sectors of the economy and excludes others and is inconsistent in its choices over time. When Goskomstat began collecting data on wage arrears in March 1992, it did so for only three sectors: industry, construction, and agriculture. By 1995, it had added the transport sector and by 1996 education, health, culture and art, and science and scientific services. Arrears to workers in housing and communal services were added only in late 1997, and arrears to state and municipal administrative workers and local militia were added only in the fall of 1998. Arrears to workers in the military and the still large Russian defense industry are generally calculated separately or omitted altogether from official statistics for reasons of state security, political embarrassment, or just general confusion. Considering the difficulty of estimating much simpler statistics like the number of employees in the defense industry (Gaddy 1996, 14–22) and the fact that various ministries such as defense and finance have competing interests in reporting the status of the military’s wage crisis, accurate estimates of wage arrears to the defense industry may not even exist. In mid-1997, for example, military wage arrears were estimated at 5 trillion rubles (\$865 million) by then First Deputy Prime Minister Anatoly Chubais but at 8.1 trillion rubles (\$1.4 billion) by the Defense Ministry’s Military Budget and Finance Department head, Georgy Oleinik, with the admission by Oleinik that “Everyone has his own calculation methods” (*Reuters*, July 1, 1997; *Interfax*, July 10, 1997). Quite significant arrears to workers in several other economic sectors also have not been recorded, and arrears to pensioners are reported inconsistently and incompletely.

It is therefore difficult to know the trend in total wage arrears over time for Russia as a whole or for any sectors of the economy that were not included in the initial three. Arrears could have grown in the reported sec-

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16. I thank Rory McFarquhar and Andrei Illarionov for assistance in interpreting Goskomstat’s statistics on wage arrears.

tors while declining in the unreported sectors, or vice versa. With the consistent omission of arrears to workers in the defense industry and other sectors, total wage arrears has always been underestimated, and to complicate matters, the underestimation has not necessarily been consistent, since arrears to defense workers have not always risen and fallen with arrears in other sectors.

Underestimation of total wage arrears has also resulted from the unauthorized distribution of money allotted for wages. Although there is a government scale that determines the allocation of wages, and wage increases are supposed to be officially sanctioned, some managers have used their discretion to grant wage increases as incentives to selected workers to stay on the job. As a result, the managers may have insufficient resources left over to pay the total wage bill, leaving less competitive workers unpaid altogether. The official Goskomstat statistics might not reflect the nonpayment, because money was in fact allotted for these workers. The statistics might instead reflect only the lower amount of total wages owed if wages had been allocated as intended.

In other ways, however, Goskomstat may have overestimated wage arrears. Salaries reported as unpaid often have in fact been paid off the books or are not really owed at all, since the initial wage bill was falsely inflated at the outset. Prior to a December 1997 Constitutional Court ruling, Article 855 of the Russian civil code stipulated that enterprises must pay their employees' salaries before paying taxes and nonbudgetary expenses such as pension fund contributions. As a mechanism to evade taxes, therefore, many managers may have paid workers on the condition that they sign a document indicating that their salaries are higher than the amounts paid. If a worker is owed one thousand rubles and gets paid one thousand rubles, but the official record reflects a salary of two thousand rubles, then the manager could claim that, by law, he is not required to pay taxes because he has not yet been able to pay his workers.<sup>17</sup>

The inconsistencies and inaccuracies of the aggregate protest data and aggregate wage arrears data are troublesome enough independently, but they would become even more problematic if we try to draw a relationship between them. For example, although the wage arrears data have been gathered for different economic sectors over time, it is unclear whether the strike data have been gathered from the same sectors each year and with similarly increasing inclusiveness. If not, then even if all wage arrears data

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17. Of course, it is quite possible, as the Constitutional Court claimed, that managers avoided taxes by not paying wages at all. That is, the wage arrears might be accurate, just artificially maintained (*Itar-Tass*, December 23, 1997).

and all strike data from Goskomstat were completely accurate, they would be inappropriate for comparison and analysis.<sup>18</sup>

The use of individual-level survey data avoids most of these concerns and obstacles. Individuals tell us whether they have been owed wages and for how long, and they tell us whether they have taken action to protest the situation. Still, the individual level of analysis is criticized by those who favor a midlevel or group approach to studying social movements in Russia. For example, Crowley (1997, 18) writes that “the individual level of analysis is insufficient” because “workers share a common predicament that provides incentives for organizing. Further, the decision to act collectively is rarely made in isolation, but in an interactive process with others, with whom the individual will have continued contact as more-or-less permanent work partners.” While I agree that protest is a collective as well as an individual phenomenon, I would challenge the assumption that groups can be studied independently of the individuals who comprise them and make decisions.

First, problems of ecological inference are just as relevant for groups as for aggregate data. Analysis at the group level assumes that when an enterprise or an entire industry is on strike, all of its members are on strike. For example, Crowley (1997, 33) frames his question, “Why did the strike spread to disparate regions and republics of the Soviet Union along industrial lines, rather than within the community or region in which it began?” Why did the miners strike but not the steelworkers? The problem with this question is that not all the miners went on strike. For most forms of collective action, some of the collective opts out. These are the classic free riders. The question is really why did *most* miners strike and *not most* steelworkers, and with this ever-so-slight rephrasing comes the need to ask individual miners and individual steelworkers about their decisions to protest or remain passive.

Crowley acknowledges that some mines did not go on strike and some steel factories did, and he tries to explain this counterevidence as consistent with his theory that nonwage benefits create a mutual dependence between labor and management and thus discourage protest. (The non-striking mines had greater mutual dependence between labor and management; the striking steel factories had less.) The explanation is plausible, but it ignores a definitional problem: Which mines and which steel factories are classified as on strike, and which ones are not? If half the workers

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18. Figure 1.1 is thus used only as an illustrative tool to show the difficulty of connecting wage arrears to strike activity. I do not analyze the data further.

at an enterprise participate in a strike or demonstration, is the entire enterprise—and therefore all its workers—considered on strike? By using a group approach, we ignore the percentage of each group that ultimately engages in protest, we make inferences from the predominant group behavior, and ultimately we attribute actions to individuals that they did not in fact take.<sup>19</sup>

By using a group approach, we also attribute characteristics to individuals that are not always accurate and then claim that these false characteristics have explanatory power. For example, the mutual dependence thesis, discussed in greater detail in chapter 5, claims that passivity is explained by dependence on nonwage benefits like housing and vacations and that the passivity of steelworkers in particular is explained by their greater dependence as a group (Crowley 1997). But not all steelworkers are equally dependent. Some receive more benefits than others, even at the same firm.<sup>20</sup> The variation in dependence should mean that workers in the same firm will have different incentives to act with the collective. By labeling an entire workforce “dependent” or “not dependent,” we mask these intra-industry or intrainfirm differences and run a high risk of mislabeling individuals. This casts doubt on any finding that dependent workers are passive, because a large percentage of them may not in fact be dependent.

Indeed, a large percentage of them might not even be owed wages. Workers at a single firm or in a single industry have varying experiences with wage arrears. Some get paid on time, and others late (Desai and Idson 1998b; Earle and Sabirianova 2002, 23; Gimpelson 2001). The most relevant subject of an analysis of responses to wage arrears is that percentage of the group—or those individuals—who have the problem.<sup>21</sup>

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19. Of course, the decision to strike is usually made collectively by a vote, and an opponent of striking may join the strike out of respect for majority rule and commitment to the group. However, that all strike opponents do this is an assumption and should be supported with evidence. As I discussed earlier, reports of strikes and protests rarely include detail on the percentage of the aggrieved involved. When two hundred miners lay down their tools and refuse to work, we usually do not know whether the entire staff is on strike or whether the strike involves only two hundred of the three hundred or five hundred or one thousand employees.

20. Crowley acknowledges this (1997, 16).

21. It is possible that workers who are personally unaffected by wage arrears might protest to show solidarity or sympathy with aggrieved coworkers, but these workers should still have far fewer direct incentives to protest than those who are personally affected. At the very least, we should control for direct experience with wage arrears in analysis to test for similarities and differences between affected and unaffected individuals, not lump these individuals together without distinction.

Although the mutual dependence explanation is masked as a group-level argument, it is really an individual-level one. It is individuals, after all, who receive wages and benefits like housing and vacations and individuals who make the ultimate decision to protest. As I will show in chapter 5, once we move from the group level and examine individual variation in the receipt of benefits and individual variation in protest and passivity, the mutual dependence argument finds little support.

A second difficulty with studying protest and passivity at the level of groups is that the analysis can be distorted by the choice of groups studied. For example, to test the mutual dependence theory, two groups are chosen, the miners, because they have protested, and the steelworkers, because they have not. This is a classic case of “selecting on the dependent variable” or choosing cases based on the phenomenon one is trying to explain, and it often leads to erroneous substantive conclusions (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994). A more reliable approach could involve canvassing all or a subset of Russian industries and estimating the level of mutual dependence and the level of strike activity in each. (Even then, however, the analyst is still left with the ecological inference problem described above, so at some point individual-level data must be used.) Individual-level analysis avoids the problem of selecting on the dependent variable because a “case” is an individual, not a protester.

Individual-level analysis is not without its own weaknesses. Because it relies heavily on survey data, individual-level analysis may suffer from all the inadequacies traditionally associated with surveys, including problems of recall and other response error. Since panel data are costly, time-consuming, and therefore rare, survey-based individual-level analysis usually presents a snapshot in time, allowing for cross-sectional inferences but not for inferences over an extended period. Here, the individual-level analysis is based heavily on a single survey because, with the exception of the Russian Longitudinal Monitoring Survey already analyzed in detail by Desai and Idson (2000) and others, few if any surveys address either the wage arrears crisis or protest behavior with any real depth. If there are limitations in this single survey, then there are limitations in the propositions we can test. Furthermore, individual-level analysis misses much of what is collective about collective action, especially the group interaction and evolving dynamic from sharing a grievance to mobilization.

Some of these problems are important to acknowledge but not terribly worrisome for analysis: recall bias in survey questions, for example, is likely to be randomly distributed and should not systematically influence

the relationship between variables of interest. Other problems mainly serve to limit the claims one can make from the data. Cross-sectional individual-level analysis is inadequate for the study of mobilization cycles over time and for the study of group dynamics, where events-based data or group analysis might shed more light. Instead, individual-level analysis is best used to support inferences about individual decisions to protest or remain passive in response to a grievance, as is its principal function in this study. The absence of alternative data on such crucial issues as protest and wage arrears, despite the vast amount of survey research coming out of Russia in the 1990s, is unfortunate and indeed provided the impetus for me, while working for USIA (now the State Department), to propose a survey on the issues. The contribution of this survey data would certainly be enhanced by replications and additional studies.

There are, of course, group or collective aspects to public protest, and these should not be ignored. Studies show that groups are often essential in facilitating an individual's decision to take action (Gamson, Fireman, and Rytina 1982; Dawes, Van de Kragt, and Orbell 1988, 96). The only quibble here is about the proper starting point for analysis. I argue that the most fruitful approach is to start with the grievance or the public good in question, not the group, and then ask people how they respond. There is a crisis in Russia in which individuals fail to get paid regularly. What explains their reactions to the crisis? This should be how we begin our inquiry. Through the course of our study, we may gain leverage on the problem by asking whether the grievance varies between groups, and we may discover greater activism among individuals who belong to certain groups than to others, but we are not limited to these questions or discoveries. By starting with the wage arrears crisis itself, we open our minds to any sort of public reaction, individual or group, active or passive.

### **Conclusion**

The frequent nonpayment of wages in Russia has only occasionally provoked social unrest. This silence in response to desperate hardship is perplexing but not uncommon. Indeed, it is the classic puzzle of collective action research. I find that the silent response in Russia results partly from the complexity of the wage arrears crisis and the consequent inability of Russians to make specific attributions of blame for the crisis. Russians who have specified a culprit or remedy for the crisis have been the most

likely to engage in collective action, but these Russians comprise only a small percentage of the population, so collective action has been rare.

In general, the ability to make specific attributions of blame for any grievance should increase the likelihood that the aggrieved will engage in collective action. Specificity in blame attribution lowers the costs of collective action by focusing the aggrieved's attention on a narrowly defined target. The narrow focus reduces the time and energy spent searching for information about the risks and rewards of protest and reduces the time and energy spent organizing and participating in protest activities because these are directed against a single target rather than many targets or some vaguely defined and possibly disputed target.

Most Russians have not enjoyed these lowered costs. Instead they have faced the higher costs associated with unspecific attributions of blame for a very complicated economic problem. The next chapter puts their attribution dilemma in context by describing the many different players in the wage arrears crisis and why attributing blame to each is quite reasonable.