Linking Public Opinion and Foreign Policy in Russia

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Introduction

- Empirical studies in democracies showed a strong causal relationship between public opinion and policy (Page and Shapiro 1983; Risse-Kappen 1991; Burstein 2003). The relationship may as well be reciprocal, with policy driving public opinion. The latter is often supposed to be the case for non-democratic states.
- While democratic leaders commonly only run the risk of non-re-election to office, authoritarian leaders potentially risk public revolt and are sensitive to manifestations of dissent on policy at an aggregate level. Collecting data on public preferences in various political regimes may have dissimilar political functions, but remains important both in democracies and non-democratic states.

Hypothesis: Public policy attitudes are congruent with official foreign policy doctrines.

Data and Method


1. The public opinion time-series selected from national surveys in which respondents are asked about their general attitude to a specific country (cross-sectional data sets of the Levada Analytical Centre). The Levada Centre holds monthly omnibus surveys—a country-wide poll of urban and rural population over 18 years of age based on a representative sample of 1,600 people from 130 settlements of 45 regions of the Russian Federation. The survey is organized as a face-to-face interview at the home of the respondents. A typical questionnaire consists of 80–100 questions. http://www.levada.ru/en/method/omnibus.

Public Attitudes towards the United States, the EU and China

Russia’s foreign policy preferences have gone through considerable changes in the years following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Although the changes of the foreign policy course since the emergence of an independent Russian Federation in late 1991 were remarkable, they were not less ‘evolutionary’ than they were in the 2000s (Stent 2008, Tyagnyev 2015, Sakwa 2008).

The data in Figure 1 demonstrates the dynamics of public attitudes towards foreign nations from 1997 (for the U.S. and China) and 2003 (for EU) until 2018. First, public attitudes towards the foreign nations have changed, although these shifts may be explained as a reaction to major foreign policy events. Attitudes fluctuate within several years or even several months by a few tenths of a percentage point. Since we have very few measurements for the period from 1990 to 1996 (mainly for the US), these data points are not included in the graphs.

Correlations between public attitudes toward single states

The correlation table below shows how these time series of public opinion are related to the entire measurement period. Table 1 describes the dynamics for each pair of countries based on the averaged values (1 year is 1 point).

- The correlations between China and the U.S., between China and the EU and between China and Ukraine are significantly negative: the worse the attitudes people have towards the U.S., the EU and Ukraine, the better they are towards China, and vice versa.
- The attitudes towards Georgia and Belarus do not correlate with the attitudes to other countries: all the correlation coefficients are insignificant.

Conclusions

- Russians demonstrate a significant shift in their perceptions of the nation’s international image and the amity/emnity feelings towards others.
- Most of the shifts in public opinion can be explained as responses to key international events, which endorses the thesis of the rational and reactive public.
- On the whole, public opinion and the official policy line in Russia move in the same direction.

References