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ARTICLE



A surprising connection between civilizational identity and succession expectations among Russian elites

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ABSTRACT

We know from prior research that non-democratic regimes can become vulnerable when elites anticipate succession at the top, but we know little about what shapes these elites' expectations. This study examines connections between such expectations and Russia's relationships to the outside world. Analysis of elite opinion data from the 2016 Survey of Russian Elites reveals strong associations between identifying Russia with European civilization and expecting Russian politics to display behaviors more like those believed to characterize European polities, including more frequent dominant party turnover. Elites appear not to expect their top political leadership to pay a political price for what they perceive as foreign policy blunders in a consistent way, though opposition elites critical of Russia's actions in Ukraine are found to expect an earlier United Russia Party exit. Variations in threat perceptions are not found to influence predictions of leadership tenure.

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How, if at all, does Russia's relationship with the outside world influence whether elites expect their top political leadership to fall from power? Prior research finds that non-democratic regimes are particularly vulnerable to instability when regime stakeholders begin to anticipate some form of succession. When elites start to expect succession at the top, their incentive to respond positively to regime promises or threats weakens at the same time as they gain new incentive to jockey for position or to "abandon ship" entirely, dynamics fraught with the danger of regime collapse (Tullock 1987; Olson 1990; Hale 2015). We know precious little, however, about how succession expectations emerge, especially among elites. Hardly any pre-existing studies directly address this question with respect to non-democratic systems.¹ What little prior research does exist has tended simply to document the presence of such expectations through interviews; to model them using game theory; or to assume that they are present when, for example, a term limit approaches, a president credibly announces a date of retirement, or a leader's economy is performing poorly (e.g. Reuter and Gandhi 2011; Hale 2015; de Mesquita and Smith 2017).

The present study exploits the rare opportunity for a systematic examination of elite succession expectations under authoritarianism supplied by the 2016 wave of the Survey of Russian Elites (SRE), which includes key questions on when a representative sample of Russian Federation elites expects Vladimir Putin and his ruling United Russia Party to leave office (Zimmerman, Rivera, and Kalinin 2019). As this dataset was designed primarily to examine foreign policy views, the present study focuses specifically on whether expectations of leadership exit are influenced by different

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aspects of Russia's relationship to the outside world, looking at the mechanisms of identity, accountability, and threat perception.

The most robust finding supports a role for identity: whether elites view Russia as part of European civilization is a strong predictor of whether they believe the dominant United Russia Party (but not Putin) is likely to lose power in the next 10 years. Other features of the data are consistent with the interpretation that, in identifying Russia with European civilization, elites envision a political future for Russia more similar to that of a democratic Europe than to that of other civilizations that citizens might associate with Russia. Civilizational identity is found to trump both accountability and threat perception in shaping succession expectations. This effect is revealed to be specific to elites (as opposed to the masses), perhaps because of socialization processes unique to the foreign policy elite that constitute the bulk of the SRE sample. In addition, when they perceive poor foreign policy performance, including in Ukraine and Syria, elites are found not to expect their leaders to pay a price in terms of political longevity. Nor is there evidence that perceptions of threat foster beliefs in leadership permanence. That said, there is some evidence that more complex accountability mechanisms may be at work, operating differently among regime supporters than among non-supporters. These findings, while modest and subject to certain methodological limitations, at a minimum constitute a *prima facie* case for scholars to devote further research both to the sources of elite expectations in non-democratic regimes and to the role of civilizational identity in politics.

The social science of expectations

In some fields, it is taken virtually for granted that expectations have an important influence on outcomes, generating robust behavioral research into what shapes these expectations. This is most obvious in the field of economics, where positive expectations are seen as engines of economic growth through mechanisms such as firm-level decisions to expand their operations and investor decisions to buy or sell on the stock market (Muth 1961; Carroll 2003; Coibion, Gorodnichenko, and Kumar 2018). Expectations are afforded a similarly central role in some parts of political science, especially research into how different kinds of expectations shape strategic voting (Cox 1997) and economic voting (Duch and Stevenson 2011).

When it comes to non-democratic regime dynamics, however, attention to expectations is much spottier. One can certainly find a vast array of works arguing that expectations have the potential to impact authoritarian regime survival, with the emergence of expectations of regime change facilitating that very outcome in a kind of self-fulfilling prophesy, as in Solnick's (1998, 7) clever notion of a "bank run" on the state. Senses of impending regime doom have thus been found to be central to the demise of the USSR (Solnick 1998; Beissinger 2002), the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe (Olson 1990; Kramer 2003; Kotkin 2009), revolutions in the post-Soviet space (Hale 2015), and anti-regime public opinion dynamics in Russia (Hale and Colton 2017). Conversely, senses of inevitability have been linked to regime support, or at least what Rose, Mishler, and Munro (2006) call "resigned acceptance." Accordingly, in manipulating public perceptions, regimes are found to be concerned not only with cultivating support but also with fostering mass beliefs in their own dominance and hence permanence (Havel 1992; Wedeen 1999; Petrov, Lipman, and Hale 2014; Simpson 2014).

At the same time, however, there is precious little work on where expectations of leadership succession or permanence actually come from. The primary exception is a paper by Rivera (2017) that, using a combination of her own elite survey data and the SRE data from 1996 to 2016, finds a decline in elite uncertainty in predicting political outcomes (including succession-related outcomes) as authoritarianism in Russia has consolidated. Beyond this, those few studies that do advance arguments about the sources of succession expectations rarely make them the primary dependent variable of interest, instead treating them mainly as a mediating factor. These accounts thus document expectations primarily through interview or memoir evidence and connect them to

posited causes and effects through some kind of process-tracing (e.g. Beissinger 2002; Rose, Mishler, and Munro 2006; Hale 2015).

When the present author was invited to explore research opportunities presented by the SRE, therefore, the chance to systematically study the sources of elite expectations of succession in non-democratic regimes stood out as one of the most unique and important. And since the SRE is focused primarily on foreign policy questions, it made sense to focus specifically on how a country's relationship to the outside world may impact elites' expectations about their leadership's prospects for staying in power. To the best of this author's knowledge, there is no pre-existing work that explicitly develops theory on how a country's relationship to the outside world shapes such expectations, in Russia or any other non-democratic country.

Why foreign relations might influence domestic political expectations

Why would a non-democratic country's relationship to the outside world have any role in shaping expectations regarding domestic political outcomes? To begin with, a large literature finds that foreign policy considerations can have important effects on individuals' views of their leadership in such regimes. International conflict can benefit the incumbent leaders of conflicting states by catalyzing "rallying around the flag" effects (Mueller 1973; Brody and Shapiro 1991; Baker and Oneal 2001; Hale 2018). Theories of "diversionary war" even posit that state leaders sometimes initiate such conflicts with the intent of boosting their popularity by distracting people from poor economic performance or other sources of dissatisfaction (Levy and Vakili 1992; Levy 1998; Tir 2010; Jung 2014). Others find more generally that foreign policy performance can generate support for presidents (Mishler and Willerton 2003), and many posit that state or national identity – perceptions as to how states or nations fit into the rest of the world – shape how people interpret and evaluate their leaders' actions (Anderson 1991; Darden and Grzymala-Busse 2006). But while all of these accounts do establish connections between a country's relationship to the outside world and views of its leadership, they generally focus on sources of regime or leadership *support* as the main outcome of interest. This leaves open the interesting question of whether "foreign affairs," broadly speaking, might also influence *expectations* regarding a leadership's future.

The present study was thus designed to utilize the SRE to test whether three distinct logics might be at work connecting foreign relations and expectations of leadership succession, logics summarized here as accountability, threat perception, and identity. The first is the mechanism of accountability. If elites believe their political system involves some kind of accountability for poor performance and if this applies in the foreign policy realm, then it should be that elites who perceive poor foreign policy performance will tend to expect Putin and United Russia to have to leave power sooner rather than later. There are grounds to believe that elites would perceive even the imperfect elections in Russia as providing at least a weak form of accountability. Research at the regional level in Russia through 2005, when governors were elected in "managed" contests not unlike those for the presidency in Russia today, has found that poor performance significantly increased the odds of an incumbent losing even elections stacked heavily in his or her favor (Konitzer 2005; Reisinger and Moraski 2017).² It is therefore not implausible that elites might perceive the same to be true for presidential elections when it comes to presidential performance on major, consequential foreign policy decisions. We thus might expect elites who believe Russia's annexation of Crimea, its role in the war with Ukraine, and its intervention in Syria are misguided to be more likely to expect an earlier political exit for Putin and the dominant United Russia Party.

An alternative version of the accountability logic ("reverse accountability") might connect foreign policy performance and expectations of succession in something like the opposite way. In line with the general idea that bad policy can sometimes make for good politics (de Mesquita and Smith 2012), it is conceivable that in non-democratic regimes, leaders who perform poorly might be expected to cling to power more tightly so as to escape punishment. In addition, poor performance may taint people closely associated with the regime and thus constrain the exit

options for elites considering defecting. This might lead us to conclude that elites who perceive bad leadership performance on the same major issues would systematically expect Putin and United Russia to exit their positions later, not sooner.³

The second general mechanism tested in this study centers around threat perceptions. Research into human psychology has found that when people sense an external threat facing a group to which they belong, they tend to become more ingroup-oriented and leader-oriented (Brown 1988; Feldman and Stenner 1997; Merolla and Zechmeister 2009). This might lead us to expect elites who perceive exogenous national threats to see their leadership as more permanent and its authority as less in question. The SRE enables testing for the impact of two types of threats in the case of Russia: threats from an identified “Other” (an outgroup commonly defined in opposition to the ingroup) and exogenous shocks (here treated as threats that tend to be seen as arbitrary and not specifically targeted at Russia). For a threat from a particular rival Other, the study considers the view that the United States threatens Russia. As for possible exogenous shocks, it considers elites’ concerns that a future drop in oil prices might threaten national stability. In each case, the threat-perception logic would lead us to expect heightened threat perception to be associated with longer expected leadership continuity.

The third mechanism tested focuses on identity. Identity can be understood as a cognitive uncertainty-reduction device that people use to understand their relationship to a highly complex social environment (Hale 2004). With such a “relational approach” to identity in mind, research has found that differences in identity can influence how people form expectations about the future behaviour of others (Brubaker 2004; Hale 2008). For example, in some contexts, co-ethnics are commonly expected to be more likely to supply patronage to their ethnic kin than to ethnic others (Chandra 2004), and in other contexts ethnic outsiders are widely expected to be more likely to behave aggressively than are ethnic insiders (Snyder 2000; Kaufman 2001; Whitt 2010).

In the international context, the present study focuses on the notion of civilizational identity, or individuals’ associations of Russia with alternative world civilizations. In referring to “civilizations,” this study explicitly sheds the concept’s primordialist Huntington (1993) baggage, instead understanding it simply as a macro-level identity category with which individuals can identify their countries and hence themselves (Hale 2014). Prior research has found that civilizational identity is an important influence on thinking among Russian elites (Rivera 2016; Tsygankov 2016; Katzenstein and Weygandt 2017).⁴ The SRE allows us to focus on one particularly important distinction: whether elites identify Russia primarily with “European civilization” or instead think of Russia as belonging to a civilization other than Europe.

In particular, the present study posits that elites who identify Russia with European civilization are more likely to expect Russia’s political future to resemble that associated with Europe. And because Europe is widely associated with higher levels of political contestation, greater openness, and a higher likelihood of leadership turnover than are commonly linked to other conceptions of civilization prevalent in Russia, it is expected that elites who see Russia as part of European civilization will be more likely than others to expect earlier political exits for Putin and United Russia. Indeed, the primary alternative to European civilizational identity in Russia is widely agreed to be a notion of “Eurasian” (or uniquely Russian) civilization that is popularly linked to traditions of autocracy and long-serving rulers, which are argued to be natural to countries that share this civilizational tradition (Tsygankov 2014).

Importantly, civilizational identity is posited to impact expectations at a rather abstract level, shaping general expectations about the likelihood of leadership turnover in the distant future rather than specific expectations regarding particular pathways through which this turnover may be realized.⁵ Such general expectations should be captured in survey questions that essentially ask people to guess a future political outcome without identifying any particular mechanism, as is done in the SRE.

Method

To test these theoretical propositions, the present study draws on the 2016 wave of the SRE, the only wave in which the questions of interest on leadership turnover expectations and civilizational identity were asked. The 2016 SRE interviewed a sample of 243 elites designed to be representative of Russia's elite more generally (Zimmerman, Rivera, and Kalinin 2019). The sample was constructed by identifying a set of formal entities (institutions, organizations) whose population of senior representatives was deemed to be representative of Russia's elite in the spheres of media, science and education, private business, state-owned enterprises, the executive branch, the legislative branch (specifically those working in the realm of foreign policy), and force agencies (*siloviki*). Among individual elites selected through the sampling process, an impressive response rate of 75% was achieved. All interviews, carried out by a reputable Russian firm, took place between February 8 and March 20 in Moscow, where most of the leading Russian elite is regarded to have at least some form of residence due to the country's high degree of centralization.

Two binary dependent variables capture expectations related to succession in this study. The first is coded 1 for individuals who consider it either "very likely" or "likely" that "someone other than Vladimir Putin will become president" (0 otherwise); a second is coded 1 for those thinking it is "very likely" or "likely" that "a party or movement other than United Russia will come to power" (0 otherwise).⁶ While the United Russia variable captures dominant party turnover rather directly, the question on Putin asks not about whether he will leave "power" but instead about whether he will leave the presidency. These are distinct concepts in the Russian context, where formal power does not always overlap with informal power; indeed, Putin is widely regarded to have been the dominant politician in Russia during the 2008–2012 "tandem" period, when he served as prime minister while his junior protégé Dmitry Medvedev filled the presidency (Taylor 2018, 74). Nevertheless, this variable is likely to capture expectations regarding Putin's possible exit from power, since people who harbor such expectations would answer either "very likely" or "likely" to a question about his leaving the presidency, though it is "diluted" in that it is also likely capturing expectations that Putin will leave the presidency yet hold onto power through other means. The percentage of elites giving each answer to these questions, as well as the distributions on other variables that figure prominently in this analysis and are defined later in this article, can be found in online Appendix B.

The accountability logic linking Russia's international relations to leadership turnover expectations is operationalized through three independent variables, each of which captures perceptions of poor performance on consequential foreign policy moves. Regarding the annexation of Crimea, a binary variable is coded 1 for the 26 respondents who indicated that this was "definitely" or "probably" done in violation of international law (0 otherwise).⁷ A binary variable was also created and coded 1 for the eight respondents who chose the only response option in the SRE indicating that Russia was responsible for the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, which has involved Russian regular and irregular forces fighting and dying there.⁸ Third, concerning Russia's military intervention in Syria, a binary variable was coded as 1 for individual elites who expressed dissatisfaction when asked the reasons for this engagement by either averring that the authorities were "attempting to distract the Russian population from the economic crisis and the authorities' inability to deal with the declining quality of life, corruption, and governmental incompetence" or stating that "I do not understand why Russia is participating in this war" (0 otherwise).⁹

Turning to the logics of threat perception and civilizational identity, three more binary variables are created. The first, capturing threats from a defined Other, is coded 1 for individuals who see the US as "a threat to Russian national security" (0 otherwise).¹⁰ A second, indicating possible threatening exogenous shocks, is coded 1 for people who see low oil prices as being above the midpoint on a five-point scale of "no danger" to "utmost danger" of leading to "destabilization of the country."¹¹ Finally, for civilizational identity, a binary variable is coded 1 for people who "agree" or "mostly agree" that "Russia is part of European civilization."¹² Control variables are added for

gender and age (reported by year and rescaled from 0 to 1, where 0 represents the youngest respondent and 1 the oldest).

As is appropriate for binary dependent variables, logit models are estimated for expectations regarding both Putin's and United Russia's potential exit from power. Since logit coefficients are not straightforward to interpret, findings are reported as average marginal effects. In other words, in this case, a factor's average marginal effect is the average difference it makes in the probability that an elite will think it very likely or likely that Putin/United Russia will exit in 10 years when we raise the value of that factor from 0 to 1, holding observations at their actual values on all other variables in the dataset. Standard errors are adjusted for clustering because the sample is composed of multiple clusters of observations defined by elite category (media, parliament, etc.) (Colin and Miller 2015).¹³ A factor is deemed a significant influence on succession expectations if we can rule out a zero average marginal effect with at least 95% confidence.

Findings

Figure 1 reports the main results (see also Table C1 in the online Appendix C). Most immediately evident, from Figure 1(a), is that none of the tested factors have any significant relationship to the expectation that Putin will leave the presidency within 10 years. It is possible that this results from the fact that our binary variable on expecting Putin's exit is not a clean measure of succession expectations, since, as noted earlier, it codes as 1 people who think that Putin will remain in power but leave the presidency alongside people who actually think he will lose power, and our theory makes predictions only about the latter. Keeping that in mind, the sign of the coefficient on the variable for civilizational identification is in the expected direction, though this is not the case for the other tested variables (except for blaming Russia for the Ukraine crisis, where the confidence interval is extremely wide and stretches well into both positive and negative territory). Breaking the Putin exit variable down into its five original categories (very likely, likely, unlikely, very unlikely, no response) and performing a multinomial logit analysis likewise yields no coherent results (see Table D1 in online Appendix D).¹⁴

Our measure of succession expectations is more precise in the case of United Russia, and Figure 1(b) shows that interesting and significant findings do result from this analysis. Most importantly, elites who see Russia as part of European civilization are 14 percentage points more

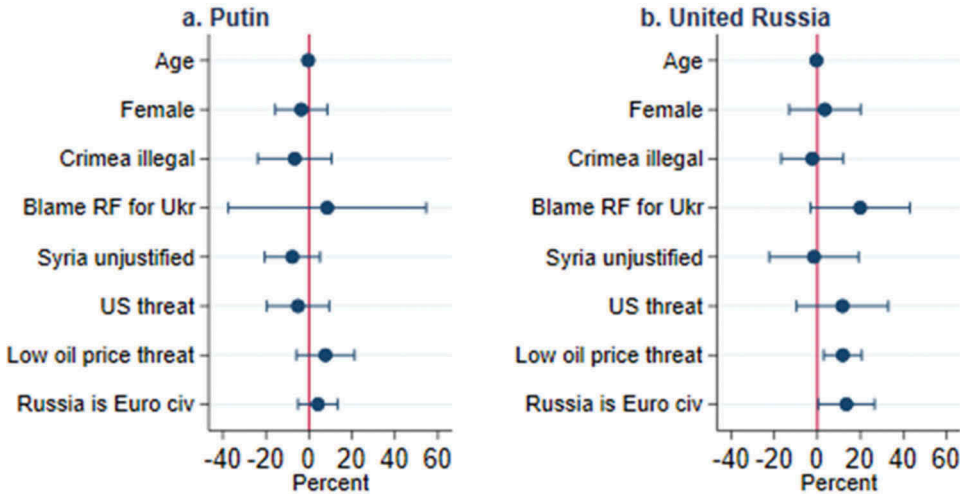


Figure 1. Average marginal effect of factors on the probability of expecting Putin and United Russia to leave office in 10 years (logit, 95% CI).

likely to expect dominant party turnover in Russia within the coming decade. This finding is also robust to alternate model specifications, as described in Appendix D. We find no clear indication, however, that a logic of accountability is driving succession expectations in Russia. Not only are these variables insignificant, but they do not even point in a consistent direction: coefficients are (slightly) negative for dissatisfaction with Crimea and Syria, but positive for blaming Russia for the Ukraine war.¹⁵

There is also no support for the threat perception logic. Perceiving the US as threatening is unrelated to expectations of United Russia turnover, and the relationship between dominant party turnover expectations and thinking an oil price collapse threatens Russia is actually the opposite of what was originally predicted going into this analysis based on a logic of threat perception. Elites who think low oil prices threaten Russia are 12 percentage points more (not less) likely to expect United Russia's ouster in the coming 10 years. This indicates that fear of exogenous shocks leads elites to expect the nation not to rally around the leader, but instead to blame that leader for the consequences.

The finding of a link between civilizational identity and elite expectations of dominant party turnover in one's own country is (to the best of this author's knowledge) completely novel. This warrants further exploration, which is the focus of this article's remaining pages.

Civilizational identity, Russia's opposition, and unexpected findings on accountability

Could the civilizational variable effectively be proxying for "political opposition to the Kremlin," thereby explaining the result? This seems unlikely at the outset, since we would expect three other variables in the analysis to be correlated with opposition (criticism of key Putin moves in foreign policy), meaning that they are likely to serve as controls for this possibility. We can gain more confidence, however, by extending the analysis in several ways.

The first way is to add a control variable capturing support for United Russia. A binary variable is thus coded 1 for elites who either report being members of United Russia or name United Russia when asked "Which party or movement reflects your views?"¹⁶ When added to the equation that generated Figure 1(b), we obtain the results reported in Figure 2. Here we see that controlling for United Russia partisanship actually strengthens findings regarding the importance of civilizational

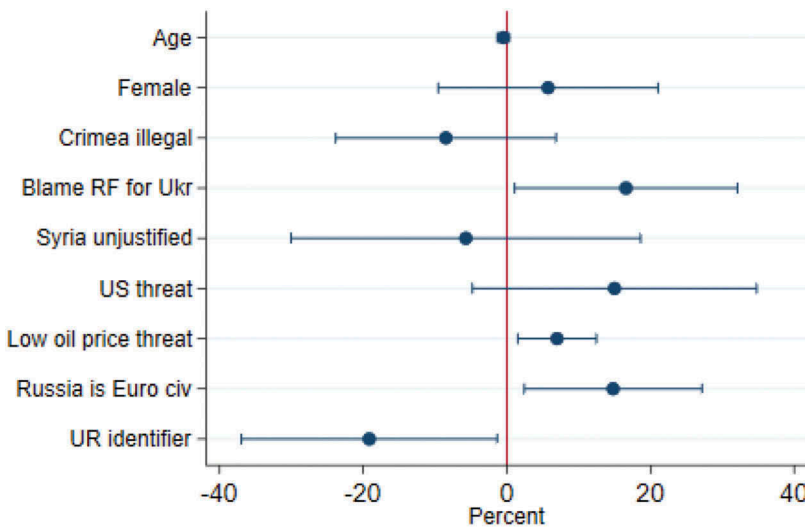


Figure 2. Average marginal effects of factors on the probability of expecting United Russia to lose power with UR control (logit, 95% CI).

identity, showing that United Russia partisanship is a finding-sharpener rather than a confounder. Both the statistical and substantive significance of civilizational identity increases, with an average marginal effect approaching 20 percentage points. In addition, this exercise confirms that United Russia partisans are significantly less likely to expect their party to exit power within 10 years, with an average marginal effect of near 20 percentage points. The positive relationship between seeing low oil prices as a threat and expectations of leadership turnover also remains significant. Interestingly, when the United Russia partisanship variable is included, negative evaluations of Russia's role in the Ukraine war also become a significant predictor of expected dominant party turnover. This suggests that the present study may be dismissing the accountability logic too quickly by looking only at the analysis reported in Figure 1(b).¹⁷

A second way to assess whether the civilizational identity variable may be having its effects primarily by reflecting opposition sentiment is to see if the relationship holds when we consider only United Russia partisans. If so, we know that it is not opposition to United Russia that is driving the patterns. Figure 3(a) reports the results when we drop from the analysis all people who do not identify with United Russia (that is, observations are dropped if they are coded 0 on the control variable for United Russia partisanship reported in Figure 2). As can be seen, identifying Russia with European civilization remains a statistically significant predictor, with those United Russia loyalists who also think Russia belongs to European civilization being close to 30 percentage points more likely than their fellow United Russia partisans to expect their own party to leave power in a decade. Figure 3(a) also shows that some variables drop out of the analysis because essentially no one among those who identify with United Russia has the relevant dispositions, including thinking that the annexation of Crimea was illegal, blaming Russia for the Ukraine crisis, and not seeing the US as a threat. Interestingly, as Figure 3(a) shows, this exercise also reveals that negative evaluations of the Syrian war are statistically significant predictors of expected early party exit among United Russia identifiers, again suggesting that we may not want to rule out the operation of an accountability logic based solely on Figure 1.

Can we now confirm that the relationship also holds among opponents of United Russia? Figure 3(b) reports the results when we exclude United Russia partisans from the analysis, including only people who are neither United Russia members nor sympathizers. The coefficient

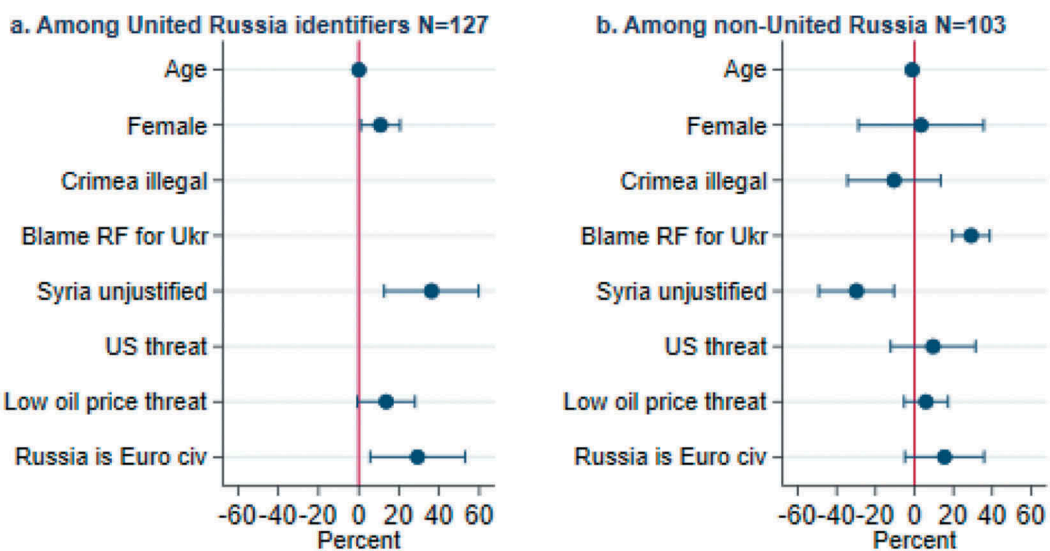


Figure 3. Average marginal effects on the probability of expecting United Russia to lose power in 10 years among Kremlin elite supporters and opposition elites (logit, 95% CI).

is in the expected direction, indicating a positive correlation between dominant party exit expectations and identification of Russia with European civilization. This finding misses the threshold for statistical significance, though it is not far off ($p = .11$).

Fortunately, the SRE supplies a path to firming up the conclusion that the relationship between civilizational identity and expectations of dominant party turnover does in fact hold among Russia's elite opposition, not just among elite United Russia partisans. Specifically, the 2016 SRE also asks respondents whether they think it likely that "political movements with which you sympathize will win an election" in the next 10 years. One can thus take the opposition¹⁸ elites in the sample, dropping United Russia supporters, and construct a binary dependent variable for this group that is coded 1 for individuals who think it likely or very likely that a party sharing their views will win an election within the next 10 years (0 otherwise).¹⁹ Figure 4 reports the findings: associating Russia with European civilization makes an opposition elite about 30 percentage points more likely to expect an earlier exit for the dominant party, and this relationship is statistically significant. This analysis, however, contrasts with that reported in Figure 3 in that Figure 4 reports no statistically significant evidence for an accountability logic (though the finding on negative accountability regarding Syria only barely misses the significance threshold and is otherwise in line with the analogous finding in Figure 3).

Taking the results from Figures 2–4 all together, we can conclude it is unlikely that elite identification with European civilization is simply a proxy for opposition sentiment and that this is driving results on the role of civilizational identity in shaping elites' succession expectations. Instead, the relationship holds among United Russia identifiers and non-identifiers alike.

Figures 2–4 also indicate that accountability logics may be at work differently among opposition and pro-regime elites. The contrast between the two parts of Figure 3 is consistent with the following simple story: seeing folly in Russia's Syria intervention leads opposition members to perceive United Russia as more permanent but leads the ruling party's own loyalists to view it as more vulnerable. If true, a straightforward logic of accountability would seem to be functioning among ruling party elites while a reverse logic of accountability operates among opposition elites. The intervention in Syria, therefore, may be weakening opposition resolve at the same time that it is weakening resolve among United Russia's own elite supporters. When it comes to Ukraine, however, we find that a straightforward accountability logic is at work and that it is driven primarily

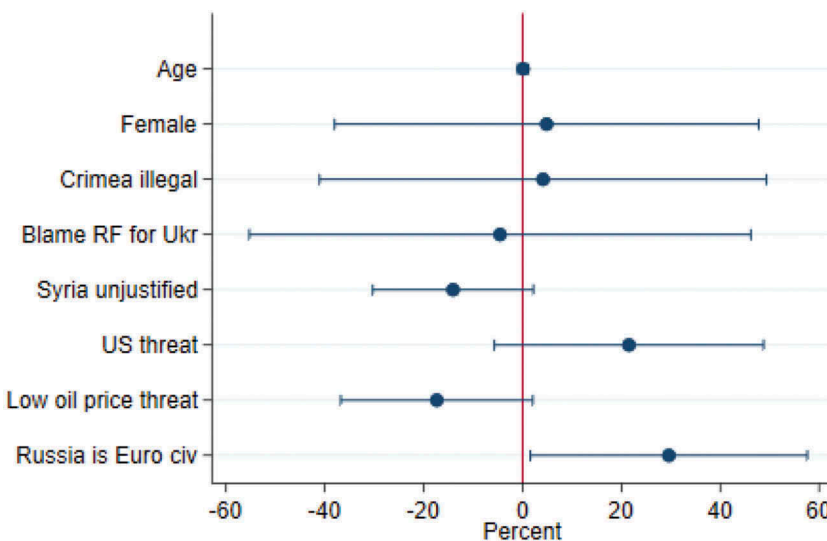


Figure 4. Average marginal effects on the probability of expecting a movement that shares one's views to come to power in 10 years among non-UR-partisans, ($N = 103$, logit, 95% CI).

by opposition elites. Figure 3(a) illustrates that there is not enough variation in such views among United Russia partisans for any relationship to be documented at all.

Elite civilizational identity correlates with other dispositions as expected

Augmenting our confidence in the conclusion that elite civilizational identity matters is that our measure of it is significantly associated with other dispositions (not just succession expectations) that the logic outlined above indicates it should be. The posited mechanism is that in identifying Russia with European civilization, Russian elites are more likely to envision an abstract future for their country that is closer to perceived European norms – especially those of democracy, political equality, and uncertainty of electoral outcomes – than to norms associated with the most prominent perceived civilizational alternatives, which in Russia's case are usually linked more with authoritarian rule (Tsygankov 2014). A vision of the future inspired by European civilizational identity, therefore, is expected to be associated with a greater chance of leadership turnover. If this interpretation is correct, and if this study's measure of European civilizational identification is valid, we would expect the latter to be strongly associated with views that Western models of democracy and democratic rights are compatible with and good for Russia.

The SRE offers a number of opportunities for evaluating whether this is the case. Accordingly, binary variables were created and coded 1 for: identifying “Western-style democracy” as the “most appropriate” system for Russia;²⁰ opposing forms of intolerance such as anti-immigrant sentiment;²¹ favoring rights over order;²² believing that political competition makes Russia's system stronger;²³ thinking that Russia should follow the development path of “Western civilization”;²⁴ advocating for Russia's tight integration with – and even membership in – the European Union;²⁵ considering “Western media” to be at least mostly objective;²⁶ and expressing pride in Russian democracy.²⁷

Figure 5 reports the results when these variables are regressed on the binary variable for European civilizational identity and controls for age and gender. Perhaps most importantly, Figure 5(a) reveals that identification with European civilization is a strong and statistically significant predictor of believing that Western-style democracy is the political system that best fits Russia, with an average marginal effect of about 20 percentage points. The wording of this question is noteworthy, since it reads not as “best for” Russia but “most appropriate” for Russia, conveying a notion of fit that is consonant with how the present study posits civilizational identity is having its effects. This helps us understand Figure 5(b), which shows that civilizational identity is a strong predictor of pride in Russian democracy. This finding makes little sense if one

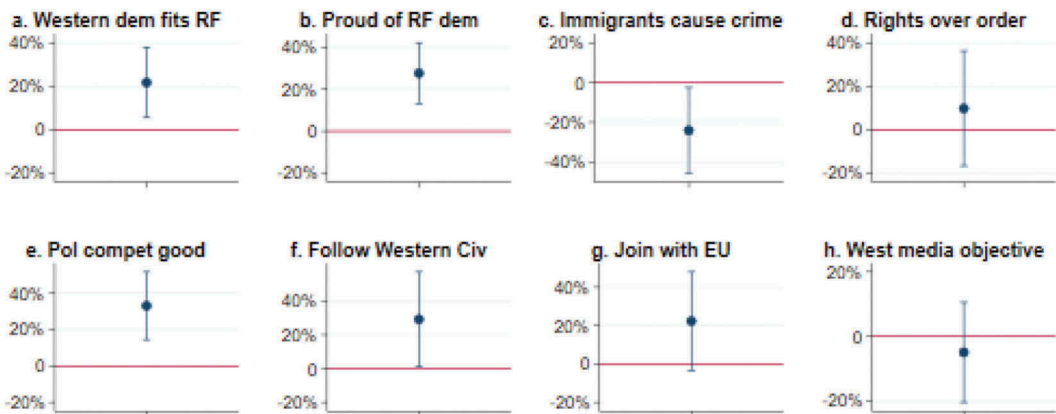


Figure 5. Average marginal effects of European civilizational identity on the probability of agreeing....

equates European civilizational identity with opposition to the regime (ruled out above), but is understandable if one posits that Russian elites believe that they are in fact getting a satisfying democratic outcome in Putin and United Russia despite their system's flaws, leading them to de-emphasize the ways in which their system falls short of European norms. Polls of Russia's masses have long shown that Putin, and to a lesser but still significant extent United Russia, wield significant support, lending credibility to the idea that Russian elites would think that their elections have yielded outcomes consistent with plurality or majority views, and that Russia's authoritarian features are not as significant as Westerners tend to believe (Treisman 2011; Reuter 2017; Hale 2018).

Identifying Russia as part of European civilization is also significantly correlated with opposing anti-immigrant sentiment (Figure 5(c)), declaring that political competition among parties strengthens Russia (Figure 5(e)), and supporting a "Western" development path for Russia (Figure 5(f)). Civilizational identity is not a statistically significant predictor of favoring rights over order (Figure 5(d)) and integrating with the EU (Figure 5(g)), though the coefficients point in the right direction and the latter variable is quite close to significance. The only one of the eight variables featured in Figure 5 that is found not to be at all associated with civilizational identity as expected is considering Western media to be objective (Figure 5(h)). Overall, this analysis provides substantial support for the validity of the SRE's indicator of European civilizational identification; on balance, it is strongly associated with the kinds of dispositions we would expect a good measure to be in the Russian context.

Civilizational identity's role appears to be elite-specific

Is the apparent influence of civilizational identity on succession expectations somehow linked to being socialized or selected into Russia's foreign-policy oriented elite (which the SRE samples), or is this relationship part of a more general connection between civilizational identity and political expectations? Unfortunately, typical mass opinion survey samples are far too small to hope to include enough elites (if any at all) to study systematically whether and how elites stand out from the rest of society. But we can meaningfully compare mass and elite attitudes by looking at separate surveys with separate samples that nevertheless include similar questions (Zimmerman 2002).

Here, it is possible to take advantage of a survey of a nationally representative sample of 1,646 adult residents of Russia organized by the present author and carried out by a leading survey agency during 1 June–21 August 2015, not too far off from the period covered by the 2016 SRE.²⁸ This survey included a question on civilizational identity that was identical to the one posed to elites in the SRE, allowing us to construct a binary measure of people who identify Russia with European civilization just like the one used for the elite analysis here. The mass survey also asked respondents, "Tell me please what you think, does any party or movement other than United Russia have a chance to come to power in the next 10 years?" Respondents could answer either yes or no. A binary variable can thus be coded 1 for individuals answering yes (0 for all others), yielding a measure of succession expectations that is reasonably similar to the one created from the SRE dataset. Unfortunately, measures analogous to the other variables presented in Figure 1 are mostly not available in the mass survey dataset, so controls are included only for age and gender. This should not make much difference: if all controls but age and gender are dropped from the analysis that yielded Figure 1, the effect of civilizational identity on succession expectations remains significant ($p = .02$) with an average marginal effect of 12 percentage points. Using the mass data from 2015, however, regressing the succession expectations variable on the civilizational identity measure using a logit model (controlling for age and gender) indicates that the relationship detected among elites is not present at the mass level. As can be seen in Figure 6, the coefficient is (just barely) in the predicted direction, but is quite close to zero and the relationship is nowhere near statistically significant.²⁹

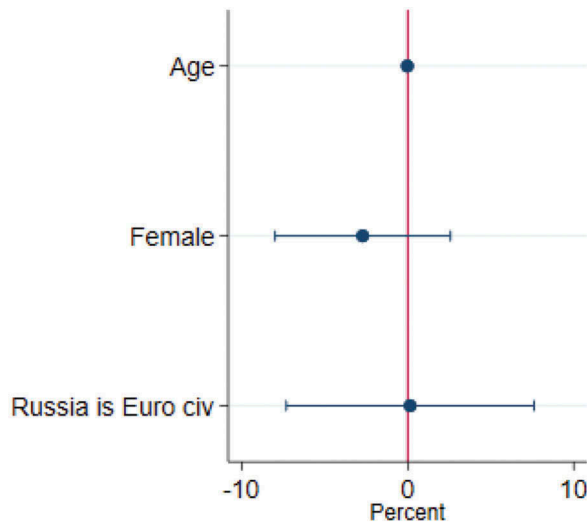


Figure 6. Average marginal effects of factors on the probability of expecting UR exit in 10 years in a nationally representative mass survey of the Russian population.

All told, then, civilizational identification appears to work differently among elites than among the masses, where we find no relationship between identifying Russia with European civilization and expectations of an early exit for United Russia from power. While satisfactorily explaining the apparent special importance of civilizational identity among elites will require further research, it is plausible that socialization into Russia's foreign policy-oriented elites (the type of elites on which the SRE sample concentrates) raises the salience of civilizational identity as a "mental map" for interpreting the world (or that people predisposed to such thinking tend disproportionately to select into Russia's elite). Indeed, foreign policy elites can be presumed frequently to think of Russia in relationship to what is happening outside of Russia, and it is well established that Russian elites frequently express and attach meaning to civilizational frames (Tsygankov 2003, 2016; Zevelev 2009; Laruelle 2016; Rivera 2016; Katzenstein and Weygandt 2017). Since we would expect civilizational identity to hold less meaning for how ordinary citizens go about their lives, they may be less likely implicitly to link their civilizational identification of Russia with their beliefs about domestic politics. This hypothesis, however, requires future investigation.

Conclusion

Using unique data from the 2016 Survey of Russian Elites and a separate 2015 study of mass opinion in Russia, this article has made an initial effort to understand the foreign relations-related sources of elite expectations of leadership turnover in non-democratic regimes, which have repeatedly been shown to be vulnerable when such expectations become widespread. In particular, evidence is presented that civilizational identification shapes how elites understand their own domestic political system: elites who identify Russia with European civilization appear to be inclined to see their country's political future more in line with what they perceive to be more democratic European norms than with the authoritarian norms commonly linked to notions of Eurasian (or uniquely Russian) civilization. This effect is found among elite regime supporters and elite opponents alike, though not among the masses. These findings are significant not only for the study of expectations in non-democratic regimes, but also for the study of civilizational identity, a topic that is extremely under-researched. The finding that civilizational identification matters for something as important as expectations of non-democratic dominant-party ouster should

encourage more scholars to join the effort to understand the role of this form of identity in contemporary politics.

The study also uncovers intriguing clues as to other logics that may be connecting a country's international relations to elite expectations of regime durability. Perhaps most interestingly, logics of accountability appear to interact with regime support. Among opposition elites, those most critical of Russia's intervention in Syria seem to follow a logic of reverse accountability, thinking that their leader is less likely to leave power soon – perhaps due to anticipated rally-around-the-flag or “diversionary war” effects. But among United Russia supporters, a critical attitude toward Russia's role in Syria correlates with expectations that their own party will leave power sooner, not later. In contrast, there appears to be no accountability mechanism at work among pro-Kremlin elites regarding the Ukraine crisis, while those people in the Kremlin's elite opposition who are most critical of Russia's role in the Ukraine war tend to expect earlier dominant-party exit (though this finding only holds up at all for one of two specifications of expected dominant-party exit). The study finds no evidence that a logic driven by fear of external threats (including the United States) is significantly shaping elite expectations of leadership durability. In fact, elites who most fear external shocks such as low oil prices are more likely to think that – rather than induce rallying around the leadership – the shock will be blamed on United Russia, increasing its chances of leaving power earlier.

As an initial study of a single country at a single point in time, of course, these findings cannot be considered definitive. For one thing, due to data limitations, we cannot rule out the possibility of “reverse causality” – that believing Russia's leaders will exit early may make elites more likely to see Russia as part of European civilization. That said, it is hard to believe that expectations regarding a specific succession would be the primary shaper of how elites identify Russia in civilizational terms, a form of identification that is typically argued to be rather deeply embedded in larger personal worldviews among elites (Laruelle 2016; Tsygankov 2016; Katzenstein and Weygandt 2017). Regardless, this study has at least provided convincing evidence that European civilizational identity is associated with elite expectations of leadership turnover, and patterns in the 2016 SRE are robustly consistent with the original hypothesis that civilizational identity shapes such expectations in the way posited here. These findings are significant, novel, and justify further research.

Ideally, future studies will have larger samples at their disposal, variation over time, and measures more directly tailored to the specific questions addressed here. The systematic study of elite opinion in Russia is also practiced only rarely, raising questions of sampling strategy that future work might address. More effort could be made to explore why (or whether) elites differ from the masses in the role civilizational identity plays in their thinking, including coordinating mass and elite surveys in terms of timing and instrument content. In this light, however, the SRE is pioneering in providing data that allow social scientists for the first time directly to address the questions central to this article. The findings thus represent essentially the only ones to date on this subject; hence, these results should be taken seriously and provide a conceptual and empirical foundation for future research on Russia and other countries, contributing to theory on a rarely studied form of expectations that have been found by many to lie at the heart of important regime dynamics.

Notes

1. One indication of this is that the topic of expectations is essentially absent from issues of the *Annual Review of Political Science*, including from those articles on topics most closely related to that of the present study, such as authoritarian elections (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009).
2. This significantly changed when direct elections for governor were eliminated (Reuter and Robertson 2012; Reisinger and Moraski 2017).
3. The author thanks participants in the Hamilton College workshop for suggesting this theoretical proposition, which was not part of the original research design.

4. The same has been said of elites in many other countries, including state leaders in Turkey (Hale 2014) and populists in Europe (Brubaker 2017).
5. It is thus not appropriate here to try to specify whether people concretely think that, for example, United Russia will leave power eventually because it will voluntarily give it up or because the Russian people will drive it out; the very general notion of civilizational identity is unlikely to shape expectations at such a level of specificity.
6. Derived from the SRE variables likelyputin and likelyur. Specific wording for these and other SRE questions used in the main analysis is provided in online Appendix A.
7. From SRE variable crimeaviolat.
8. From SRE variables ukrcisis1-7.
9. From SRE variables syria1-7.
10. From SRE variable fpusfear.
11. From SRE variable danoil.
12. From SRE variable eurciv.
13. The option "cluster()" is used in Stata.
14. The 2016 SRE also includes the variable likelywhen, which reports answers given to the question of when a respondent thinks it "likeliest" that Putin will step down from the presidency, giving them only the choices of before 2018, 2018, and 2024. This question gives us little leverage on succession expectations, since it is asked even of people who had just said in the previous question that they thought Putin was unlikely or very unlikely to leave the presidency by 2024 (79% of the sample). Nevertheless, if a variable on the timing of Putin's exit from the presidency is created that uses likelyputin for those who think it likely he will stay on until at least 2024 and likelywhen for those who in likelyputin say they expect him to leave before 2024, we still obtain no clear, significant results.
15. Including only one of the accountability variables at a time does not result in any of them crossing the significance threshold.
16. From the SRE variables partymem and partyid.
17. Results in tabular format for the analyses reported in Figures 2–4 can be found in online Appendix E.
18. For convenience, the term "opposition" is used loosely in this study to refer to people who do not identify with United Russia in the SRE variables partymem and partyid. Some may, of course, consider themselves neutral and not actually in "opposition."
19. From the SRE variable likelyelect.
20. From the SRE variable russyst.
21. From the SRE variable immigcrime. This variable is coded 1 for people who hold the most discriminatory views, so should be negatively correlated with European civilizational identity to the extent that the latter captures identification of Russia with more democratic norms.
22. From the SRE variable fphmrht.
23. From the SRE variable compopol.
24. From the SRE variable europhil.
25. From the SRE variable RUS_N_EU.
26. From the SRE variable objwest.
27. From the SRE variable pridedem.
28. It was funded by National Science Foundation grant SES-1541738.
29. Results in tabular format can be found in online Appendix F.

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