

Special Double Issue: The Foreign Policy Attitudes of Russian Elites,
2019-2020
Guest Editors: Sharon Wessing Rivers and William Zimmetman

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Ideology among Russian elites: attitudes toward the United States as a belief system

Danielle N. Lussier


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ARTICLE



Ideology among Russian elites: attitudes toward the United States as a belief system

Danielle N. Lussier

Department of Political Science, Grinnell College, Grinnell, IA, USA

ABSTRACT

This article examines ideological constraint among Russian foreign policy elites, using all seven waves of the Survey of Russian Elites 1993–2016 to explore four questions: (1) Do attitudes expressed by members of the Russian foreign policy elite form a constrained belief system? (2) What is the content of Russian elite belief systems? (3) Do different groups within the foreign policy community differ with regard to their ideological attachments? (4) How have these belief systems changed over time? My statistical analysis reveals two structured belief systems within Russia's elite: one focused on attitudes toward the US and another regarding economic and political institutions. Attitudes toward the US have vacillated over time, compressing in a more hostile direction in 2016. In analyzing these elites' attitudes, variation over time proves more significant than variation between elite groups.

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Ideological constraint in elite belief systems

Russians have enjoyed greater domestic stability during Vladimir Putin's 18 years in office than during the decade that preceded his tenure, which has provided the foundation for a more assertive Russian foreign policy. While foreign policy in the Yel'tsin years actively sought greater cooperation with Western institutions, Putin has forged a foreign policy identity based largely on statist developmentalism (Clunan 2009). Scholars have offered a variety of explanations for Russian foreign policy assertiveness, ranging from discussions of Putin's personality traits to broader realist accounts that emphasize security concerns (Götz 2017). Within this body of scholarship, scholars working in the constructivist tradition have increasingly focused on ideational accounts to explain foreign policy assertiveness (Neumann 1999; Clunan 2009; Tsygankov 2018). Empirical analysis in this tradition has relied primarily on discourse analysis to discern the ideas that underpin the construction of national identity and threat perceptions, as well as their congruence with theoretical expectations (Kratochvil 2008; Stewart and Zhukov 2009; Tsygankov 2014). The Survey of Russian Elites (Zimmerman, Rivera, and Kalinin 2019) presents a valuable source that can enhance discussions about the role of ideas in Russian foreign policy, in part by bringing insights from the fields of political behavior and international relations into closer dialogue with each other.

While existing scholarship has enriched our understanding of Russian policy discourse, we know very little about the ideological convictions of the Russian elite. The ideological spectrum within Russia, which defies the liberal-conservative continuum generally present in advanced democracies, is unclear. As several studies have demonstrated (Miller, Hesli, and Reisinger 1995, 1997; Kullberg and Zimmerman 1999), individuals who support free market capitalism in post-communist

countries do not necessarily back civil liberties, and those who favor individual political rights might want the state to play a significant role in the economy. We do not know much about whether ideology constrains Russian elites' views of politics and economics, and we know even less about ideological constraints on their attitudes toward foreign policy.

Our lack of empirical knowledge about Russian elites' ideological constraints limits scholars' ability to adjudicate between competing explanations for foreign policy positions and shifts, particularly in parsing out the credibility of realist arguments that emphasize rational structures in the international system against liberal and constructivist accounts that place greater weight on the agency of individuals. In formulating a theoretical framework to consider the relationship between structure and agency in the development of foreign policy, Götz suggests that "the dominant set of ideas within Russia" shapes foreign policy by influencing threat assessments (2017, 244). While a number of factors likely play a role in shaping dominant ideas, attachment to a set of ideological beliefs is one possible source factor. Drawing on insights from the study of attitudes and their interdependence developed from the study of political behavior, this article aims to shed light on the ideological position of Russian foreign policy elites using all seven waves of the Survey of Russian Elites 1993–2016 to explore four questions. First, do the attitudes expressed by members of the Russian foreign policy elite form a constrained belief system? If so, what is the content of elite belief systems in Russia? Do different groups within the foreign policy community differ with regard to their ideological attachments? And how have these belief systems changed over time? The aim of this study is descriptive. Answers to these questions, however, may help clarify the motivations behind Russian foreign policy decisions and enhance existing debates within Russian foreign policy about the causes and consequences of shifting policy orientations.

The article ultimately concludes that: (1) Russian foreign policy elites exhibit constrained belief systems; (2) their positions reflect considerable volatility over time; and (3) their foreign policy beliefs are largely structured around whether they view the United States as a threat and adversary. As such, these conclusions suggest that while elites' positions may shift over time in response to real-world events, how they react is largely informed by a broader attachment to beliefs about the US.

Belief systems: dimensions and domains

In the study of political attitudes within modern democracies, the most robust finding has been the near-universal existence of a left-right continuum for ideological organization. This organizing principle is present in all advanced democracies, irrespective of differences in regime subtype (parliamentary vs. presidential) or the number of political parties in a system. Although political space in advanced democracies can be multidimensional, the left-right continuum provides an adequate summary of most advanced democratic systems (Dalton, Flanagan, and Beck 2017).

The same cannot be said of contemporary Russia. In the period immediately following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a new Russian Federation, ideology was less likely to be associated with a political philosophy and more likely to overlap in substantive ways with the institutions and practices through which politics was experienced (Converse 1964). As we consider the relationships between different attitudinal positions among Russian political elites, it is helpful to employ Philip Converse's concept of the belief system, which he defined as "a configuration of ideas and attitudes in which the elements are bound together by some form of constraint or functional interdependence" (Converse 1964, 207). In his path-breaking study of ideological attachments among American political elites and citizens, Converse concluded that political elites have stronger ideological attachments – more constrained belief systems – than the mass public. Since Converse's early work, political scientists have regularly employed the concept of belief systems to investigate ideological constraint or attitudinal interdependence among political elites, with studies consistently concluding that elites' belief systems are more structured

than non-elites' (Barton and Wayne Parsons 1977; Converse and Pierce 1986; Jennings 1992; Miller, Hesli, and Reisinger 1995).

Approaching political attitudes from the framework of "belief systems" allows us to consider the possibility that individuals may have mutually supporting ideas without consciously connecting these beliefs to a greater philosophical abstraction, be it Marxism, liberalism, or realism. This helps illuminate a case like contemporary Russia, where the question of ideological attachments is complex. Although an entire adult generation has come of age in the post-communist era, the overwhelming majority of adults in Russia have nevertheless experienced life under the Soviet system, the chaos of the 1990s, and the stable, state-dominated market authoritarianism of the Putin regime. These systems were alternately branded with labels tenuously tied to ideological convictions (communism, political liberalism, capitalism), but their actual philosophical underpinnings were shallow. While elite debate in the late 1980s and early 1990s exhibited meaningful political pluralism, the most relevant divisions between elites were rooted less in ideology and more in one's orientation toward the changes the regime was experiencing.

Most of the analyses of ideological constraint in Russia were published in the first post-Soviet decade using data from the 1990s. Miller, Hesli, and Reisinger (1995) authored one of the few studies to examine ideological constraint among Russian elites and the mass public. Looking at survey data collected in 1992, the authors found that attitudinal constraint among elites in Russia and Ukraine shortly after the collapse of the USSR was unexpectedly low compared to that of their counterparts in other countries. Analyzing the results of 30 survey questions, they identified four dimensions of constrained beliefs: attitudes toward reform, tendencies toward nationalism, preferences for a market economy, and democratic principles. None of the questions the authors investigated addressed foreign policy preferences, however, leaving us with little sense of how these attitudes might also reflect an underlying ideology.

Zimmerman (2002) examined ideological constraint among Russian foreign policy elites and the mass public during the 1990s, concluding that elites are more constrained in their foreign policy views "both in the sense that the range of ideologically connected beliefs is broader and in the sense that a central notion such as the extent to which the United States is a threat is more systematically related to other policy orientations" (88). Yet the method of analysis employed in Zimmerman's study tells us little about the formation of a specific belief system through the way that responses to particular survey questions cluster together.

While the belief system concept and the investigation of beliefs through survey data originated in the study of American politics, most hypotheses about ideology's role in shaping foreign policy beliefs have come from the study of international relations, where the unit of analysis is rarely individual elites, but rather the state as a whole or clusters of actors within the state. Theories about ideological constraint and foreign policy have been heavily influenced by the work of Wittkopf (1981, 1990), who found that most of the variation in American mass and elite foreign policy views could be explained by two dimensions: one focused on militant interventionism and one oriented toward cooperative relations. Building on this logic, one hypothesis regarding Russian elites' shift toward more anti-American posturing is that these elites have come to favor militant interventionism over cooperative internationalism, particularly in response to changes in the global balance of power.

Within the specific study of Russian foreign policy, a number of scholars have argued that a focus on elite-held ideas, particularly with regard to the construction of national identity and its concomitant association with threat perception, helps explain Russia's foreign policy more fully than realist accounts. Applying valuable insights from social identity theory, Clunan (2009) demonstrates how political elites construct national self-images and identity management strategies that then determine national interests and behavioral orientations. In discussing Russian foreign policy orientations, Clunan (2009) notes that the statist developmentalist identity that has epitomized Putin's orientation pushes Russia to pursue strategies that make Russia part of the Western "in group" of advanced economies and power holders, but simultaneously sees the West as an "out

group” with regard to interests in post-Soviet space. Tsygankov (2018) applies these same insights to explain Russia’s fixation on NATO as a threat, prioritizing countering it over more pressing security challenges. Similarly, Kratochvíl’s (2008) discourse analysis revealed different conceptual understandings between EU and Russian elites of several key norms that underpin European integration, helping to explain failures to achieve rational policy development that a realist perspective would view as beneficial to Russia.

In a similar tradition, Ponarin and Sokolov (2014) reject explanations of Russian anti-Americanism that rely on instrumental and situational theories. Their analysis of the Survey of Russian Elites suggests that Greenfeld’s concept of “ressentiment” – in which elites create an ideal to emulate and then turn away from it after a period of disillusionment – points toward the growth of Russian anti-Americanism as an elite-led phenomenon. A similar conclusion is reached by Malinova (2014), who sees resentment, which she describes as a long-term emotional attitude, as a significant factor shaping the discourse of Russian identity vis-à-vis for the West. Murray and Cowden’s (1999) study also supports the view that long-held beliefs about foreign policy are slow to change even in the face of altering threat perceptions. In their analysis of the belief systems of American elites at the end of the Cold War, they find that respondents’ previous positions on military and cooperative schemes strongly predicted post-Cold War views. Murray and Cowden conclude that even though profound changes have taken place in the global system, ideological attachments reflect core values that structure elites’ foreign policy beliefs. A similar argument is made by Blum (1993) regarding Soviet foreign policy beliefs. He claims that core beliefs are central in shaping the kinds of options policymakers see as available and that those positions that proved “compatible with the requirements of the belief system had a powerful advantage over those which did not” (373). These analyses suggest that ideological constraint with regard to foreign policy can play an important causal role in political elites’ decisions and actions.

Method: factor analysis

Converse’s original study of belief systems divided attitudes into two groups, foreign and domestic policy, which were meant to represent two possible dimensions of attitudinal interdependence. Converse then examined inter-item correlations between attitudes that aligned with each of these dimensions. This methodological approach relies on the logic that higher correlation between items represents functional interdependence (or constrained beliefs) between the attitudes reflected. One limitation of this approach is that it only considers dimensions constructed by the investigator, leaving out the possibility that individuals might have constrained beliefs that are organized according to a different logic.

Factor analysis, meanwhile, is a common data reduction technique used in psychometric analyses that seek to understand whether measured responses to specific questions align such that we can view these responses as indicators of a latent construct. For the past three decades, scholars have generally followed the recommendation of Granberg and Holmberg (1988) to employ factor analysis on questions that have been informed by theoretical considerations and then select the items that will be used for comparison based on the interdependencies revealed by the factor analysis model. By assuming that observed variables comprise linear combinations of some underlying latent factors, factor analysis seeks to represent a set of measured variables through a smaller number of factors. It relies on examining the correlation matrix for a set of specified variables to identify interdependencies across their measures. It is a valuable tool for identifying the presence and content of ideological constraint in survey populations. In contrast to top-down models constructed by a scholar to reflect specific theoretical constructs, factor analysis allows us to scrutinize ideological constraint from the bottom up by looking at specific correlations within the data. When factor analysis reveals interdependence across survey questions, we can look at which questions correlate with the underlying factor and seek to understand the relationship.

Using factor analysis to analyze ideological constraint as expressed through responses to survey questions is an inherently interpretive science. There is no decisive test to determine whether a specific model is most appropriate for the data. The investigator makes choices about the number of factors to include in a factor analysis model and how to interpret the factors. In developing the models presented here, I adhered to the following procedure. First, I conducted an exploratory factor analysis on the questions listed below using maximum likelihood estimation in which I did not specify the number of factors to be estimated. I analyzed the number of factors with eigenvalues > 1 , the degree of variance explained by each factor in the model, and the visualization of factors in the scree plot to determine when the addition of another factor ceased to explain further variance. Based on these metrics, I conducted a second factor analysis on the same set of questions in which I specified the number of factors that would be retained. In ambiguous cases, I was guided by parsimony, selecting the models that yielded the clearest substantive interpretations with the fewest factors.

While factor analysis offers a valuable approach to examining the presence of ideological constraint among survey responses, there are several methodological considerations that warrant discussion. First, as a technique for identifying interdependencies across observed variables, factor analysis is sensitive to the specific sample under investigation. Since it examines covariance structure, the results can vary dramatically with the inclusion or exclusion of specific questions in a given sample. For this reason, I limited my analyses to 19 attitudinal questions that are repeated across all seven survey waves so as to minimize variability in findings that could be driven by differences in the types of questions included in each wave. (These are listed later in the article.) While a larger number of questions are repeated across all survey waves, I sought to include approximately equal numbers of questions on domestic and foreign policy, aiming for questions that best reflect key differences in the ideological perspectives articulated by political elites. Second, the more questions are included in the factor analytic model, the larger the correlation matrix and the harder it is for a simple factor structure to obtain. This sensitivity can be compounded by smaller sample sizes, as there are simply fewer observations available to establish correlations and identify latent source factors. Given these sensitivities, the use of factor analysis to identify ideological constraints in a survey sample represents a “hard test.” In contrast, finding that the covariance in individuals’ level of education, occupation, income, and housing values can all be explained by a single underlying factor – what social scientists usually call “socioeconomic status” – is a relatively easy test. If we can find evidence of ideological constraint using factor analysis on these attitudinal data, we should have confidence that the belief systems represented by the unobserved factors are present.

A few caveats about the specific survey sample under investigation here are in order. As Zimmerman (2002) has noted, the Survey of Russian Elites explores the views of members of the foreign policy elite, whose daily engagement with questions of foreign policy and national security may make their responses to questions on these topics unrepresentative of the way that others think about foreign policy. Yet there is also a statistical basis for believing that the rather large sample size allows us to make inferences about the Russian national elite regarding topics not explicitly considered in the sample construction, such as attitudes toward the economy and democracy.

With these methodological considerations in mind, I calculated the factor analysis models in three different ways. First, I conducted separate factor analyses for each individual survey year. Second, I conducted a pooled analysis of all survey years. Third, I conducted two separate pooled analyses, one of the Yel’tsin survey years (1993, 1995, and 1999) and one of the Putin-Medvedev years (2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016). Due to space constraints, I am reporting only the results of the pooled analysis, which provides the clearest evidence of the underlying attitudinal structure.

Identifying elite belief systems

In order to analyze attitudinal interdependencies as a measure of ideological constraint, I selected a series of questions from the seven waves of the Survey of Russian Elites that examined potential aspects of belief systems relevant to post-communist Russian politics. I sought out questions that

involved both foreign policy attitudes and attitudes about domestic concerns. As Kullberg and Zimmerman (1999) and Zimmerman (2002) have noted, many of these questions were designed precisely to measure opinions regarding the debates that were central to the post-communist reforms of the 1990s. In order to develop a clear empirical basis for evaluating change in belief structures over time, I only analyzed questions that were repeated across all survey iterations. While this stringent criterion for selecting questions leads to the exclusion of a number of interesting indicators, it is the only way to ensure that change observed over time is substantive and not a product of a differing question composition in the factor analysis for any given year in the analysis. Most of the questions analyzed are worded so that response categories comprise ordinal scales of agreement or categorical responses aligned along an ordered dimension, although a few have dichotomous response categories. Questions related to domestic political concerns were recoded 0–1 so that 0 represented the most pro-reform position and 1 represented the position most consistent with Soviet-era domestic political practices. Questions related to foreign policy were recoded 0–1 so that 0 represented the most pro-Western or anti-militarist position and 1 represented the most anti-Western or pro-militarist position. A brief summary of the questions and my recoding scheme follows.

Domestic politics

- (1) In any society it will always be necessary to prohibit the public expression of dangerous ideas. (Completely agree = 1)
- (2) The rights of the individual should be protected even if guilty people sometimes go free. (Completely agree = 0)
- (3) The interests of society should be protected even if innocent people sometimes end up in prison. (Completely agree = 1)
- (4) Of all of the philosophies in the world, only one is undoubtedly correct. (Completely agree = 1)
- (5) Stalin is blamed for things he didn't do. (Completely agree = 1)
- (6) Competition among various political parties will make our system stronger. (Completely agree = 0)
- (7) Competition among enterprises, organizations, and firms benefits our society. (Completely agree = 0)
- (8) It is normal when the owner of a prosperous enterprise, using the labor of his workers, becomes richer than many other people. (Completely agree = 0)
- (9) There is no sense in starting a new business since it might fail. (Completely agree = 1)
- (10) All heavy industry should belong to the state and should not be privately owned. (Completely agree = 1)

Foreign policy

- (11) Do US policies represent a threat to Russian national security? (Yes = 1)
- (12) How friendly is this country toward Russia: US (Very hostile = 1)
- (13) How friendly is this country toward Russia: Germany (Very hostile = 1)
- (14) Should Russia send its troops to assist countries that were formerly part of the USSR if they request assistance? (Yes = 1)
- (15) Should Russia send its troops to assist other foreign countries if they request assistance? (Yes = 1)
- (16) Military force decides everything in international relations. (Yes = 1)
- (17) Which of these are especially dangerous: rise in economic inequality in the Russian population. (Utmost danger = 1)

- (18) Which of the following represent the greatest threat to the security of Russia: growth of US military power compared to Russia. (Utmost danger = 1)
- (19) Which of the following represent the greatest threat to the security of Russia: border conflicts between Russia and countries of the CIS. (Utmost danger = 1)

The factor analysis conducted on the full pool of survey responses for the seven survey waves supported a two-factor solution. Two underlying factors that align with aspects of foreign policy and domestic policy explained 85% of the variance between responses. The pattern matrix for this solution is displayed in Appendix A, Table A1 of the online appendix.¹ The factor pattern coefficients can be roughly interpreted as correlations between the survey question and some underlying, latent factor. By analyzing these correlations, we can interpret patterns among respondents' answers to understand the source of interdependency. Following general practice in psychometric methods, I accept a threshold of .40 among the factor pattern coefficients as evidence of a meaningful correlation with the underlying factor, and the substantive interpretation of underlying factors is based on analysis of which variables load onto a specific factor with a coefficient of at least .40.

As Table A1 shows, nine of the 19 questions have factor pattern coefficients of 0.40 or higher on the factors extracted in the factor analysis (in bold). By examining the questions that cluster together on each factor, we can see that Factor 1 appears to reflect interdependent beliefs about a subset of foreign policy attitudes, in particular attitudes toward the United States as a military rival. All three of the questions relating to US policies or actions correlate with this factor, together with the question about Stalin's legacy² and the question about the role of military force in determining a state's power in international relations. Individuals who hold views more hostile toward or suspicious of the United States are also more likely to view Stalin as unfairly blamed and to view military force as the ultimate deciding factor in international relations. Notably, other foreign policy questions – regarding Russia's relations with former Soviet states, Russia's relations with Germany, and Russian troop commitments – do not correlate with this underlying factor. Factor 2 reveals interdependencies between four questions that relate to the organization of political and economic institutions. Individuals who support competition among political parties also tend to support competition among enterprises, favor private ownership of heavy industry, and accept income inequality. Attitudes regarding other domestic political concerns, such as freedom of speech and thought, do not appear to correlate with this underlying factor.

When viewing the full range of questions and the underlying factor structure of the model, it appears that Russian foreign policy elites have exhibited constrained beliefs about some subsets of foreign and domestic policy – namely, about the US as a military rival and about the nature of competition in domestic political and economic institutions. Attitudes toward other aspects of foreign or domestic policy do not appear to correlate with these underlying factors or with each other. From this analysis, we can draw three general conclusions. First, while Russian foreign policy elites might be described as relatively hostile in their attitudes toward the US, this position does not necessarily align with holding particular attitudes toward former Soviet states or other Western states, such as Germany. Second, as extensive research in the attitudes and beliefs of Russian citizens has demonstrated (Gibson and Duch 1993; Carnaghan 2007a, 2007b), a position that favors competition in the economic and political realms does not necessarily predict specific attitudes about free speech, law and order, or other domestic political concerns. Third, while the two underlying belief systems identified are positively correlated, the correlation is not very strong – individuals who are more anti-US in their foreign policy orientations do not necessarily disavow economic and political competition domestically.

Examining the structure of Russian elite belief systems

The presence of two belief systems among Russian foreign policy elites prompts a set of questions. For example, how anti-US are Russian foreign policy elites? How much do they support or oppose

competitive domestic institutions? How much ideological constraint is present among Russian elites compared to elites in other polities? Is there variation in the strength and consistency of ideological constraint across elite groups? Is there variation over time? This section will shed light on these questions by examining several statistics regularly used in the comparative study of belief systems.

As a starting point for evaluating the complex nature of belief system structure, I constructed two indices comprised of the nine questions with factor loadings of greater than 0.40 in Table A1. The first is a Foreign Policy Index of five questions, weighted according to each question's unique contribution to explaining variation in the latent factor.³ The Foreign Policy Index ranges from 0 to 1, in which a score of 1 reflects holding the most anti-US position on all questions, as well as being in complete agreement that Stalin was blamed for things he did not do and that military force is the most important determinant of international relations. The second is a Domestic Policy Index comprised of four questions, also weighted according to each question's unique contribution to explaining variation in the latent factor. The Domestic Policy Index likewise ranges from 0 to 1, in which a score of 1 reflects a position of "completely disagree" on questions favoring economic and political competition and "completely agree" on questions favoring state intervention in the economy, indicating a strong anti-reform position. The two indices are positively, though weakly, correlated at $r = 0.29$, suggesting that individuals who are more hostile toward the US in their foreign policy beliefs are also hostile to competitive political and economic institutions. The mean score on the Foreign Policy Index is 0.54, with a standard deviation of 0.28, and the mean score on the Domestic Policy Index is 0.31, with a standard deviation of 0.20. [Figure 1](#) displays box plots of the distribution of scores on these indices over the different survey years. The ends of each box show the upper and lower quartiles of the variable's distribution, and the line in the middle of the

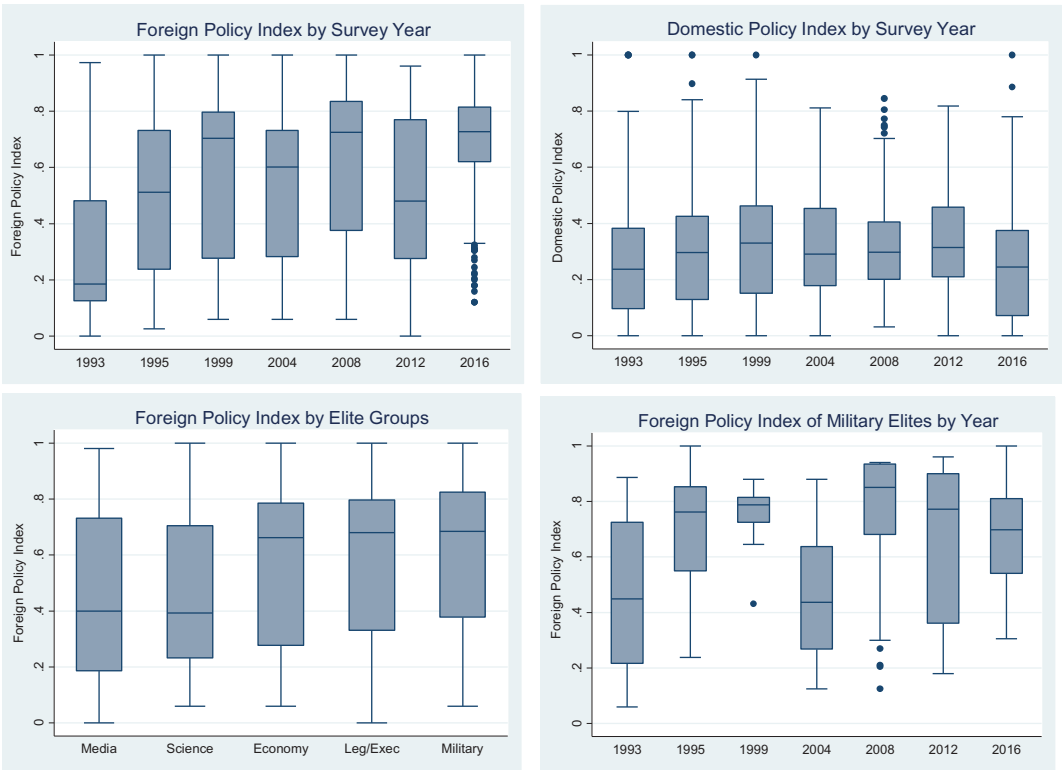


Figure 1. Box plots of the foreign policy and domestic policy indices.

box marks the median. A longer box therefore represents a broader range of values and a shorter box indicates a narrower range of values.

As the upper left-hand plot in [Figure 1](#) demonstrates, if we look at the two end poles, 1993 and 2016, Russian foreign policy elites have become more anti-American over time. Yet, there is considerable variability in the range and median levels of hostility during the intervening years. For example, the median hostility level was lower in 2012 than in any year prior, except for 1993. Additionally, we see that positions on the index became heavily compressed in the anti-U.S. direction in 2016. In contrast, the upper-right hand plot in [Figure 1](#) shows more consistency of elite attitudes regarding domestic policy over time.

The temporal variation revealed in foreign policy beliefs likely reflects very real differences in the foreign policy pursued under Boris Yel'tsin in the 1990s and that of Vladimir Putin in the 2000s. During the 1990s – the highpoint of political openness in post-Soviet Russia, where genuine division existed between the president and the legislature, as well as within the legislature – Russian elites engaged in very real ideological battles about Russia's positioning vis-à-vis the West and the extent that Russia wanted to emulate Western institutional models. A foreign policy identity based on "liberal internationalism" was initially dominant under Yel'tsin, ultimately moving towards democratic developmentalism (Clunan 2009). Both orientations, however, viewed the West as part of the "in group" toward which it was trying to orient its policy. Once Putin consolidated political control and eliminated the remaining vestiges of independent power, Russia adopted a more assertive, anti-Western policy orientation.

In considering ideological attachments among political elites more broadly, Jennings (1992) has noted that variation in ideological consistency among political elites might be more common than is generally recognized, since most studies of elite constraint have been drawn from elected partisans, candidates, or party officials – groups with long, distinguishable cleavages at the elite level. Jennings notes that, "It is not obvious that single-issue interest group leaders, for example, would have comparably high ideological coherence across a range of attitudes" (1992, 436). We can examine this proposition using the Survey of Russian Elites, which includes respondents from a broad cross-section of foreign policy elites. As Zimmerman (1995) explains, the survey sample was drawn to represent what the survey designers saw as the five key sectors of post-Soviet Russian society: the media (N = 203), science and educational research institutes (N = 194), the economy (N = 364), the legislative and executive branches of government (N = 395), and the military and security agencies (N = 208). Score distributions on the Domestic Policy Index, with differences over time represented by the upper right-hand plot in [Figure 1](#), showed very little variation across elite groups, with all groups except military and security agency elites showing near-identical ranges and means between 0.28 and 0.30. Military and security agency elites held more reactionary positions, with a mean of 0.41 and a median of 0.39. The distribution of scores on the Foreign Policy Index, which are displayed for all survey years in the lower left-hand plot in [Figure 1](#), reveals more meaningful differences between elite groups.

As the lower left-hand plot demonstrates, media elites and those from science and education tend to hold positions that are less hostile toward the United States than elites in other fields. Elites from military and security agencies, not surprisingly, hold the strongest anti-US positions. Nevertheless, the bottom left-hand plot does not display change over time, which reveals a more complex picture of variation across and within each elite group, with most groups adopting more anti-US positions over time. The one exception is the military and security agency group, which is displayed in the bottom right-hand plot of [Figure 1](#), revealing that this group was most anti-US in 2008, with some softening in their positions in the 2012 and 2016 surveys. This volatility may reflect reactions to military involvement in post-Soviet territories and the ratification of a new START treaty in 2010, events that were particularly significant for military elites.⁴

While the distributions plotted in [Figure 1](#) provide a helpful overview of Russian elite belief systems, they tell us little about the strength of ideological constraint and its consistency over time. To gain some insight into this question, we can examine the average correlation among those

survey questions that comprise the belief system, which is a measure scholars have often employed to determine the overall level of ideological constraint within a sample. The higher the average inter-item correlation, the greater the degree of constraint displayed by respondents. In other words, when responses to one question representing an indicator of a belief system reliably predict the response to another question that represents the belief system, we can say that these indicators reflect strong underlying constraint. Using the five questions from the Foreign Policy Index, I calculated the average inter-item correlation for these data, which is equal to 0.32. The average inter-item correlation for the four Domestic Policy Index questions is also 0.32, so the same degree of constraint is present on both dimensions.⁵

Does an average inter-item correlation of 0.32 suggest a high, average, or low level of ideological constraint? Compared to other studies that have examined elite ideological constraint using inter-item correlations, this number is relatively low. In Converse's original study (1964) of congressional candidates, the mean inter-item coefficient among domestic issues was 0.53 and the correlation among foreign issues was 0.37. Miller, Hesli, and Reisinger's (1995) study reported an average inter-item correlation of 0.39. These authors also cited published studies of elites in the United States, France, and Sweden that report average inter-item correlations ranging from 0.46 to 0.72, suggesting that Russian elites exhibit weaker constraint than elites in advanced democracies, whose attitudes across a range of questions appear more tightly bound to underlying belief structures.

It is, however, important to recognize a potential methodological limitation to average inter-item correlations as measures of ideological constraint when comparing across groups. In an insightful paper by Barton and Parsons (1977), the authors point out that correlation coefficients are affected not only by the structuring of beliefs, but also by the heterogeneity of populations. They note that, "Within an elite group with a relatively homogeneous belief system – say the military – there will be little variance to start with, and the narrow range of variation which exists may represent idiosyncratic differences on particular items rather than structured ideological splits" (161). Thus, a reliance on average inter-item correlations can be misleading if a group is relatively homogenous in its belief system scores. Barton and Parsons recommend a number of other statistics that can be calculated and used to measure belief system constraint across different groups. Mean attitude scores for items in the belief system – such as the indices created above – can show the positioning of groups relative to the hypothesized latent structure, and the standard deviation of the item responses shows whether there is high or low consensus about the item in the specific sample of respondents. Additionally, we can compare the mean of all individual respondents' standard deviations across items included in the belief system to gauge the overall degree of attitude inconsistency in the group. Taken together, these statistics allow us to look at various components of ideological constraint, including the degree to which elites are individually consistent in their attachment to the belief system, share a consensus about the values in the belief system, and are consistent, as a group, in their positioning in the belief system.

Table 1 contains four statistics for both the foreign policy and domestic policy dimensions that allow us to examine various aspects of belief system structure across elite groups. The first column for each belief system dimension contains the average inter-item correlations for the items included in the Foreign Policy and Domestic Policy indices, respectively. The second column displays the mean score on the indices. The third column reports the standard deviation for the indices and the fourth column shows the mean of individual respondents' standard deviations from the grand mean of the index. Collectively, these statistics can tell us about groups' positioning relative to each other, groups' substantive positioning on the latent variable, and group homogeneity, further contextualizing the average inter-item correlation coefficient.

The average inter-item correlations in Table 1 reveal meaningful differences in levels of attitudinal constraint across different elite groups, with elites from the military and security agencies

Table 1. Comparative statistics on belief system structure by elite group.

Group	Foreign Policy dimension				Domestic Policy dimension			
	Average inter-item correlation	Mean FP Index	Standard deviation of FP Index	Mean of individual standard deviations from grand mean FP Index	Average inter-item correlation	Mean DP index	Standard deviation of DP Index	Mean of individual standard deviations from grand mean DP Index
Media	.36	.45	.29	-.09	.34	.28	.20	-.03
Science and education	.34	.47	.27	-.08	.31	.28	.19	-.02
Economy	.30	.55	.27	.002	.29	.28	.18	-.03
Legislative and executive	.34	.59	.26	.04	.35	.30	.20	-.01
Military	.20	.62	.25	.07	.18	.41	.19	.11

consistently showing weaker levels of constraint than other elite groups on both the foreign and domestic policy dimensions. The remaining four groups have average inter-item correlations that are closer to each other, suggesting comparatively greater ideological constraint among these groups.

The mean scores on the Foreign Policy and Domestic Policy indices reflect the general trends observed in the indices' distribution in [Figure 1](#) above. Military elites hold the strongest anti-US feelings, with a mean of 0.62 on the Foreign Policy Index. Mean scores for domestic policy show significantly less variation across elite groups, with the exception that the military has a higher mean, suggesting this group is more anti-reform than the other elite groups. Examination of standard deviations adds another layer to the analysis, demonstrating that all of the elite groups show considerable variation in their responses. As the standard deviations are generally lower for the Domestic Policy Index, we can infer that there is greater homogeneity of beliefs regarding domestic institutions than in foreign policy posturing toward the US.

The final statistic, the mean of individual respondents' standard deviations on the attitudinal indices, provides an interesting measure of attitudinal consistency within the group. We see similar means for the Domestic Policy Index across the first four subgroups, demonstrating that they are relatively consistent in their beliefs and relatively close to each other. In contrast, the positive mean of the military group demonstrates that this group holds more conservative positions than elites as a whole. The means are more diverse for the Foreign Policy Index, but none is particularly large, suggesting similar degrees of attitudinal consistency across groups.

We can also examine similar statistics over time to determine whether the attitudes that comprise the two belief systems identified among Russian foreign policy elites become more or less interdependent. [Table 2](#) reports the same suite of statistics as [Table 1](#), but calculated by survey year. The average inter-item correlations show considerable volatility in ideological constraint over time. The highest inter-item correlation for the foreign policy questions occurred in 1995, and the highest for domestic policy occurred in 1993. While the overall correlations are relatively similar for both dimensions in the 1990s, they drop sharply in 2004. The correlations for the Foreign Policy Index never returns to the levels of the early 1990s, although the correlation for the domestic index improves by 2016. These trends suggest that elites in the 1990s showed greater ideological commitment to the two belief systems identified in the factor analysis and that the degree of functional interdependence among the respective survey items has, in general, decreased with time.

Volatility over time is further reflected in the Foreign Policy Index's mean scores, with the lowest mean in 1993 (0.30) and the highest mean in 2016 (0.69). The standard deviations for the means are consistent over time, never varying by more than 0.07, suggesting that even as elites' positions on the index changed over time, the relationship between attitudes on specific index items and overall positioning on the index was generally similar, though broad, comprising almost one

Table 2. Comparative statistics on belief system structure by survey year.

Year	Foreign Policy dimension				Domestic Policy dimension			
	Average inter-item correlation	Mean FP Index	Standard deviation of FP Index	Mean of individual standard deviations from grand mean FP Index	Average inter-item correlation	Mean DP Index	Standard deviation of DP Index	Mean of individual standard deviations from grand mean DP Index
1993	.37	.30	.26	−0.25	.39	.28	.21	−0.03
1995	.39	.48	.28	−.06	.37	.31	.22	.002
1999	.38	.58	.28	.03	.38	.34	.22	.04
2004	.17	.53	.24	−.02	.25	.32	.20	.01
2008	.33	.64	.25	.10	.29	.31	.18	.01
2012	.20	.52	.26	−.03	.21	.33	.17	.03
2016	.22	.69	.21	.14	.37	.25	.19	−.06

quarter of the length of the scale. In contrast, positions on the Domestic Policy Index are more stable. Examination of the Domestic Policy Index mean for each survey year shows that the mean never varies by more than 0.08 between any two survey years and the standard deviations become smaller in the 2000s. The mean of individual respondents' standard deviation for foreign policy is very interesting, as it shows much greater inconsistency across elites in 1993 and 2016 than in any intervening year. This statistic tells us that, as a group, foreign policy elites did not hold particularly consistent positions about the attitudes on the Foreign Policy Index. This is not true of the Domestic Policy Index, which displays small, consistent means of individuals' standard deviation over time.

This analysis points to four findings with regard to ideological constraint and its variation in strength and consistency. First, the military and security agency elites stand apart from the other elite categories as displaying weaker levels of ideological constraint on both the foreign policy and domestic policy belief systems. Military elites also hold the strongest anti-US position on the Foreign Policy Index and the strongest anti-reform position on the Domestic Policy Index. Third, elites' expressed opinions on the questions that comprise both the foreign and domestic policy belief systems were more highly correlated in the 1990s than in the 2000s, indicating that ideological commitment has generally decreased over time. Fourth, individuals' positioning on the foreign policy belief system has become more inconsistent over time, suggesting that even though these attitudes cluster together to form a belief system, this belief system does not serve to structure the views of all elites.

Sources of variation in belief system scores

Russian elites' positioning on the two belief systems identified in the factor analysis has changed both over time and across elite groups. While variation in beliefs about the structure of domestic political institutions is more limited, there is considerable diversity in positioning with regard to anti-US foreign policy beliefs. The mean Foreign Policy Index score reached its highest anti-US placement in 2016, and the standard deviations reported in [Tables 1](#) and [2](#) reveal meaningful heterogeneity in positioning on the index, independent of the higher mean.

In order to better understand which characteristics correspond to variation in positions on the Foreign Policy and Domestic Policy indices, I calculated pooled cross-sectional ordinary least squares regressions for the full elite survey sample, including several independent variables that might serve as possible sources of difference among Russian elites. First, I tested whether differences exist across elite groups, treating membership in each group as an independent variable and leaving out legislative and executive elites as a base category. Membership of different elite groups is the only demographic characteristic on which there is potentially meaningful variation in the sample, as the overwhelming majority of elites surveyed are male, ethnic Russian, Russian-born,

and with higher education.⁶ In short, while demographic characteristics might serve as important predictors of attitudes across the Russian mass population, they are largely invariant among elites and therefore cannot explain differences in ideological positions.

Second, I tested four variables that relate to political affiliation and identification. The first is a dummy variable indicating whether or not an individual is a member of a political party, based on the hypothesis that individuals who join a political party might have more structured ideological beliefs than those who choose to act as non-partisans. The next two test party identification, a broader concept than party membership (see Miller and Shanks 1996; Colton 2000). Survey respondents who indicated that they were not members of a political party were then asked, “Which party or movement most closely reflects your views?” The third-most common response to this question was “no party or movement,” suggesting that not all elites identify with a political party. Using responses to this question and the question on party membership, I created two dummy variables. The first captures identification with the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), the most dominant opposition in the 1990s. Individuals were coded as “1” if they were a member of KPRF or said that this was the party that best reflected their views (N = 116). Individuals who were members of a party other than KPRF, were not members of a political party, or expressed sympathies for a different party were coded as “0.” The second variable captures identification with United Russia, the pro-Kremlin party that emerged in the Putin era. Individuals were coded as “1” if they were members of United Russia or said that this was the party that best reflected their views (N = 355); they were coded as “0” if they were members of a different political party, were not members of a political party, or expressed sympathies for a different party.⁷ The fourth variable is a dummy variable for whether or not an individual was previously a member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Collectively, these four variables tell us whether ideological positioning varies according to political allegiances and identifications.

Lastly, as the data were being analyzed as a pooled cross-section, I included dummy variables for each survey year, treating 1993 as a base year. These variables allow us to consider differences over time across the sample.

As Table A3 in Appendix A demonstrates, there is meaningful difference between those predictors that tend to affect ideological positions on foreign policy and those that tend to affect domestic policy positioning. For the model examining variation on the Foreign Policy Index, the only predictor variables that are not statistically significant are membership of the group of economic elites and party membership. Additionally, while membership of the media or science and education elite groups is negatively correlated with anti-US positioning on the Foreign Policy Index, all of the rest of the variables are positively correlated. In other words, using 1993 legislative and executive elites as a baseline category and holding everything else equal, Russia’s foreign policy elites have become more hostile toward the US over time. We also see that change over time appears to be more consequential than differences in elite group membership. For example, all else being equal, simply having been surveyed in 2016 instead of 1993 increases one’s hostility toward the United States by a coefficient of 0.37 – more than a third of the distance of the 0–1 scale. The strength of the year variables in shaping scale positioning is likely driven by events and the way they have contributed to particular pivots in foreign policy. In contrast, membership in one or another elite group changed one’s positioning on the scale by no more than 0.15. Similarly, identification with United Russia or having previously been a CPSU member increases anti-US hostility only slightly. KPRF identification, however, has an independent effect of increasing hostility toward the US by 0.19, about one-fifth of the scale of the Foreign Policy Index.

These findings contrast sharply with the model examining ideological positioning on the Domestic Policy Index, which has fewer statistically significant predictors. With regard to elite groups, the only variables that are statistically significant are membership in either the economic or military and security groups. While members of the economic elite are slightly more pro-reform than the base group of legislative and executive elite, the size of the coefficient is very small, only

0.03, suggesting that the substantive difference is negligible. Military and security elites, however, are more likely than legislative and executive elites to hold anti-reform positions. The survey year variables are either not statistically significant or have substantively small coefficients, confirming the trends observed from other statistics above that ideological positions on domestic policy have remained relatively constant over time. Similarly to the Foreign Policy Index model, identification with the KPRF is statistically significant and positive. All else being equal, identification with the Communists increases one's opposition to reform by 0.17. Party membership, in general, correlates positively with pro-reform attitudes, but the substantive effect is minimal. At a basic, mathematical level, these findings are not surprising since there was simply less variation in the distribution on the Domestic Policy Index than on the Foreign Policy Index.

Conclusion

This article sought to empirically answer four specific questions regarding Russian foreign policy elites: (1) Do Russian foreign policy elites' attitudes reflect constrained belief systems? (2) What is the content of their belief systems? (3) Is there variation in ideological constraint among different groups of foreign policy elites? (4) How have elite belief systems evolved and changed over time? In order to answer these questions using the Survey of Russian Elites, a number of methodological techniques were employed – including a factor analysis model to identify latent clusters of interdependent beliefs, the construction of two indices to measure these dimensions, comparison of mean correlations and standard deviations to examine consistency across groups and over time, and a pooled cross-section regression analysis to clarify the possible sources of variation in ideological positioning.

This combination of methodological approaches produced several findings. First, the factor analysis model revealed two underlying dimensions of beliefs. There appears to be a belief system that structures ideas about the United States as a military rival and a separate, independent belief system concerned with the structuring of domestic political and economic institutions. These belief systems do not encompass all attitudes regarding foreign or domestic policy objectives. Second, the ideational positioning of Russian elites vis-à-vis indices constructed around these belief systems reveals much greater variation in the distribution of attitudes about foreign policy than domestic policy, likely revealing that foreign policy elites, in particular, might have a broader range of views on questions close to their area of expertise. Third, examination of both the average inter-item correlation of items on the foreign policy index and the mean of individual standard deviations on index items reveals that the degree of ideological constraint and ideological consistency within the foreign policy belief system has actually declined over time. Fourth, among elite groups, individuals from the military and security agencies stand out, exhibiting less constrained beliefs than elites from other domains, as well as stronger anti-US and anti-reform positions. Lastly, the regression analysis further revealed that differences between elite groups are less consequential than change over time in explaining variation in positions on these dimensions.

These findings have several scholarly and substantive implications. First, they support constructivist arguments about the importance of ideas in shaping national interests through the mechanism of elite attachments. While a comprehensive accounting of the ways in which the empirical findings presented here confirm specific claims in debates about Russian foreign policy is beyond the scope of this article, the results reveal evidence of a belief system oriented specifically around attitudes toward the United States. Moreover, attitudes toward Europe and the former Soviet states do not form such a strong ideological attachment. Whether this finding is a cause or rather an effect of a broader discourse on national identity cannot be assessed with the available survey data, but its empirical manifestation suggests the credibility of explanatory frameworks that look further than rational, realist calculations in evaluating Russian foreign policy.

Second, the comparatively low level of ideological constraint expressed by Russian elites 30 years after the start of perestroika suggests that their core beliefs are much shallower than those of elites in other geopolitically significant countries. Third, the content of those belief systems that have emerged is disconcerting. The absence of ideological constraint with regard to aspects of foreign policy other than animus toward the United States leaves elites with few core principles around which to organize in developing policies. Likewise, the absence of constrained beliefs regarding civil liberties suggests that support for political and economic competition revealed in the Domestic Policy Index is not based on a sense of ethical fairness and individual rights. If Russian foreign policy elites play a decisive role in shaping either mass opinion or the development of specific policy outcomes, this analysis suggests there is little reason to suspect that these belief systems will inspire elites to adopt more cooperative relations with the United States or multilateral institutions dominated by Western powers. If ideological constraint among Russian elites – which already appears weaker than ideological constraint among elites in other countries – is actually becoming even less constrained with time, we are left to wonder whether Russian political elites are operating primarily in an ideological vacuum.

Additionally, the overall weakening of ideological constraint on the foreign policy belief system, together with the movement of positions on the Foreign Policy Index in the direction of greater hostility toward the United States, is consistent with interpretations of Russian elite activity that emphasize the role Putin has played in shaping Russia's image of itself in the twenty-first century. Shlapentokh and Bondartsova (2009) suggest that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Russia lacked an ideology that could unite the majority of Russian elites and masses. They identify an imperial element of the "official" post-Soviet ideology that is inspired by nostalgia for Russian greatness and the Soviet Union's previous geopolitical importance. Putin has built on this imperial element to develop what Taylor (2018) calls the "code of Putinism," which rests on conservatism, anti-Americanism, and a powerful state. The high mean on the Foreign Policy Index, which corresponds with the movement of Russian foreign policy toward a more confrontational position vis-à-vis the West, could be further evidence that the ideas central to Putinism are becoming more prominently entrenched. Whether elite positioning played a causal or reactive role in shifting more towards confrontation is beyond the scope of the present analysis, but the identification of this trend within the larger study of ideological constraint suggests several productive avenues for future research.

Notes

1. This pattern matrix uses an oblimin rotation, which allows for the two factors to be correlated. The factors are positively correlated with a coefficient of 0.39.
2. Shlapentokh and Bondartsova (2009) note that Stalin is a key figure in the imperial ideology of post-Soviet Russia, since no other past political leader symbolizes the success of the Soviet empire. This logic likely explains why this particular question correlated with other components of foreign policy beliefs.
3. See Appendix B for more details on the construction of the Foreign Policy and Domestic Policy indices.
4. The 2008 survey was conducted in March, April, and May, before the war with Georgia. Major military reforms were initiated in Russia in early 2009. With regard to other notable military events, the 1999 survey was conducted in November, after the NATO bombing campaign in Yugoslavia; the US invasion of Iraq began in March 2003, one year before the 2004 survey; and the NATO-led coalition intervened militarily in Libya in March 2011, 18 months before the 2012 survey.
5. A correlation table of all 19 questions examined in the factor analysis model can be found in (online) Appendix A, Table A2.
6. Earlier models tested for these variables and found them to be insignificant and unhelpful to model fit. Additionally, while the elites surveyed ranged in age from 24 to 86 at the time of their interviews, preliminary models found age to be uncorrelated with other variables in the model and not statistically significant, so it is excluded here.
7. Individuals who identified with the Unity or Fatherland–All Russia movements that preceded the formation of United Russia were coded as "0."

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