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ARTICLE



Moscow elites and the use of coercive foreign policy

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to analyze differences between Russian opinion leaders on the basis of Russian elite studies conducted in 2008, 2012 and 2016. We divide elites into two groups – supporters and opponents of official regime foreign policy – based on their attitudes toward the official governmental positions on Russian–US relations and examine their attitudes over the past decade (2008–2016). Analyzing the attitudes of elites who strongly support the official agenda versus those who are more oriented toward the West will help determine whether there has been wholesale elite consolidation around President Putin’s policy agenda or whether any significant scepticism about current Russian foreign policy remains.

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Introduction

Russia’s relations with Europe and the United States are now more tense than at any point since the dissolution of the Soviet Union due to the events surrounding Crimea, the unstable situations in eastern Ukraine and Syria, and allegations of cyber-meddling in Western elections. The subset of surveys in the Survey of Russian Elites that were conducted between 2008 and 2016 present a unique opportunity to examine elite views on the Kremlin’s foreign policy and explore whether they have changed or stabilized over the past decade.

In particular, we examined the questions that focus on support for coercive measures to see whether Russian elites align with the idea of using military force or halting the delivery of Russia’s natural resources as a lever to achieve Russian foreign policy goals.

Drawing on Allison et al. (2011), Diligensky and Chugrov (2000), and a number of official sources and news agencies included in the references list, we developed an index based on key questions tapping into support for and opposition to regime foreign policy, especially policies relating to the United States and the West. These included attitudes toward NATO expansion, perceptions of a threat from the United States, and whether Russia should follow a Western or a uniquely Russian path. Based on these variables, we categorized elites into supporters of the official Russian foreign policy (referred to throughout this article as “supporters”) and opponents of official Russian foreign policy (“opponents”). (For specifics on the creation of the index, see the online appendix, Table A1.) Comparing each individual year, the most telling trend – visible in Table 1 – is that the percentage of supporters is highest – and the percentage of opponents the lowest – in the most recent 2016 data.¹ (Those who answered “don’t know” or refused to answer a question included in the index were excluded from this analysis.)

Given the small number of opponents in several years, we opted to combine the respondents from the 2008 through 2016 surveys for this analysis because only in these years were the coercive

Table 1. Distribution of supporters and opponents by survey year (2008–2016).

Year	Supporters		Opponents	
	%	N	%	N
2008	82%	185	18%	41
2012	72%	142	28%	56
2016	88%	189	13%	27

Source: Data from survey of Russian Elites, 1993–2016.

action questions of interest included. Combining these three waves, the sample divided into 81% supporting the regime foreign policy and 19% opposing the official foreign policy line.

We then found that elites expressed broad consensus on issues of national security and territorial issues. For example, majorities of both supporters and opponents alike believe that the national interests of Russia extend beyond its current territory (67% of supporters and 55% of opponents combined from 2008–2016).² Moreover, both opponents and supporters took proximity to Russia's borders into account when expressing their opinions about various countries. For instance, although the 2008 data show clear differences between supporters and opponents in their attitudes toward the accession or possible accession of various post-communist countries to the EU, both groups held progressively less favorable opinions when that grouping was closer to Russia. For instance, among supporters, opinion was slightly more favorable toward the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland joining the EU (22%) than for the Baltic republics (16%) or CIS countries (19%). Opponents are also somewhat more favorably inclined toward the Visegrad countries (56%) joining the EU than the Baltic states (48%) or CIS countries (46%).

However, elites differed in their views related to other foreign policy questions. Supporters express a greater sense of threat from the United States (88% of supporters vs. just 4% of opponents)³ and a greater sense of hostility from the United States toward Russia (79% of supporters vs. just 28% of opponents).⁴ Moreover, the 2016 survey showed that despite the small number of elites in the opponents category, there are clear differences between supporters and opponents in their attitudes toward Russia's actions in Crimea. Supporters of regime foreign policy believe the Russian government's "reunification" of Crimea is in line with post-Soviet international agreements and law (72% feel so strongly, 24% somewhat), while opponents tend to question its legality (30% strongly, 22% somewhat).⁵ Similarly, supporters tend to blame the United States (82%) and Europe (45%) for igniting the crisis in Ukraine, while opponents tend to blame the Yanukovych government (74%).⁶

In correspondence with their tendencies to support regime policy, a majority of supporters in the 2008–2016 surveys favor the current political system (49%) or a more democratized Soviet-style system (35%). In sharp contrast, a majority of the opponents prefer a Western-style democracy (60%).⁷

Use of military force and economic resources

Moscow elites are clearly aware of the freeze in bilateral relations, as overall elite perceptions of the United States as a threat to Russia's national security (71%)⁸ and the perceived hostility of the United States toward Russia (69% somewhat or very hostile),⁹ have reached all-time highs in the 2016 Russian elite survey. This prompts questions about how supportive Russian elites would be toward using military force if they perceive a risk to their national security or desire to achieve military balance with the West. It also warrants examining elites' willingness to support utilizing Russia's vast natural resources as a means of influencing or reacting to other states' behavior.

As [Figures 1](#) and [2](#) show, the sharpest differences between opponents and supporters of regime foreign policy lie in two specific end results: to achieve military balance with the West and to strengthen the United Nations. Supporters are much more motivated than opponents to find military action permissible if it would achieve a military balance with Western states. Opponents

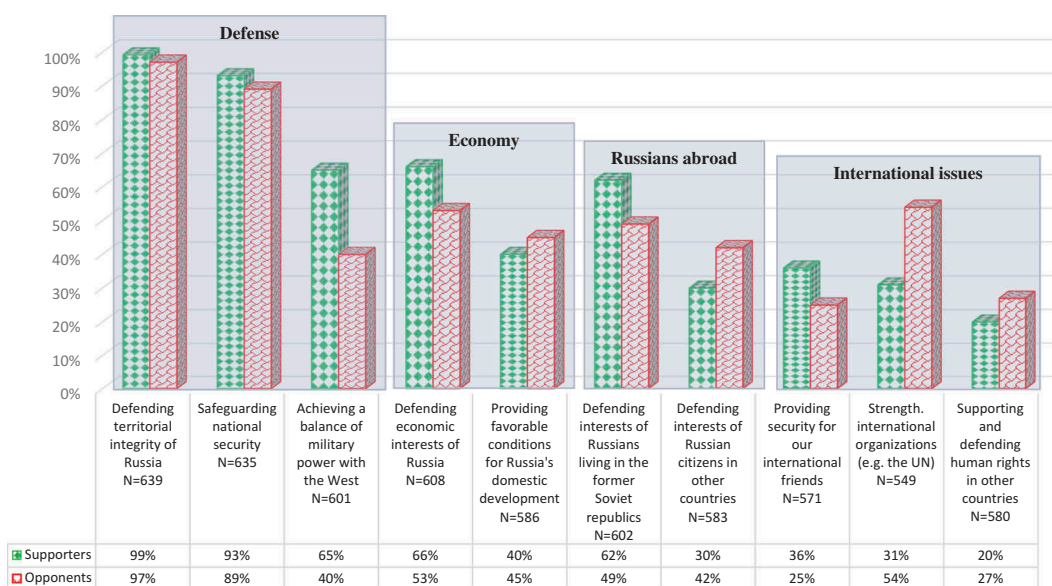


Figure 1. Purposes for which the use of the Russian military is permissible, percentage of responses by group.

Source: Data from survey of Russian elites, 1993–2016.

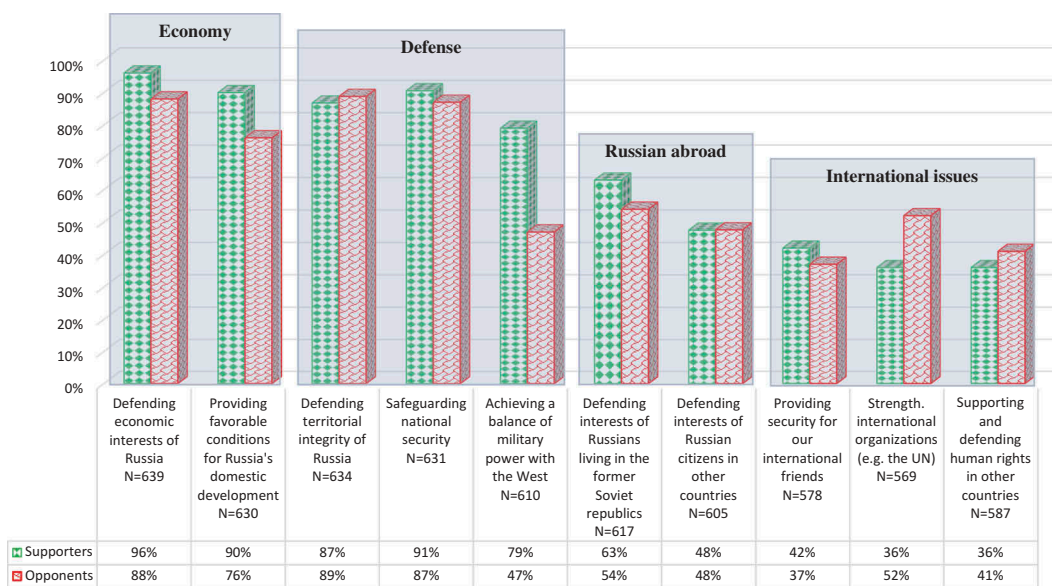


Figure 2. Purposes for which the halting of the delivery of natural resources is permissible, percentage of responses by group.

Source: Data from survey of Russian elites, 1993–2016.

are much more motivated to action than supporters if the end goal is to strengthen the United Nations.

Figure 1 shows that two in three regime policy supporters favored using force to achieve a balance of military power with the West (65%) compared to only four in 10 opponents (40%).¹⁰ By the same token, Figure 2 shows that eight in 10 supporters endorsed using Russia's natural resources to achieve a balance of military power vis-à-vis the West (79%) compared to just

under half of opponents (47%). Both of these results seem to reflect the substantially greater sense of threat and hostility from the United States among supporters than opponents.

Opponents stand out in their relatively greater support for action to strengthen the United Nations. [Figure 1](#) shows that opponents in the 2008–2016 surveys are much more likely than supporters to favor using the Russian military to strengthen international organizations such as the UN (54% vs. 31%).¹¹ Opponents are also significantly more likely than supporters to favor halting natural resources to strengthen the United Nations (52% opponents vs. 36% supporters; see [Figure 2](#)).

Outside of these two items, Moscow elites differ little in terms of scenarios in which they would find these coercive tactics permissible or impermissible. About 9 in 10 supporters and opponents alike overwhelmingly supported using military force and halting the delivery of natural resources to support the defense of Russia's territorial integrity and to safeguard Russia's national security (see [Figures 1 and 2](#)). Large majorities of both supporters (96%) and opponents (88%) favored halting the delivery of natural resources to defend Russia's economic interests, though supporters were more likely than opponents to favor using military force in this instance (66% vs. 53%).

When it came to defending the interests of Russians living in the former Soviet Union, solid majorities of both groups of elites favored halting the delivery of natural resources but fewer than half of opponents endorsed the use of military force. Only minorities of elites were willing to use either tactic to defend the interests of Russians living in other countries (outside the former Soviet republics), to provide security for Russia's international friends, or to protect and defend human rights in other countries.

Conclusions

Overall, the results confirm the presence of elite consolidation around Putin's foreign policy agenda. The percentage of elites that can be categorized as supporters of the regime's foreign policy is at an all-time high in the 2016 data (88%), and majorities seem to share President Putin's views toward US intentions. These elite survey findings coincide with public opinion polls showing high levels of support for Russian actions in Crimea and Syria, and the view that the United States is trying to limit Russia's international influence.¹²

The two main differentiating points between supporters and opponents on the use of coercive actions emerge in two scenarios: achieving a military balance with the West and strengthening the United Nations. Supporters are much more likely to approve of the use of force to achieve military balance with the West, likely reflecting their greater sense of hostility and threat from the United States. In contrast, while opponents are generally more dovish than supporters, opponents are more likely to approve of the use of force to strengthen the United Nations, reflecting a less negative outlook toward the United States and perhaps signaling a desire to maintain a stake in the international system.

Despite these two clear differences, it is important to note that there are more examples of elite convergence than divergence on the willingness to use force or halt the delivery of natural resources to achieve foreign policy outcomes. Supporters and opponents are overwhelmingly committed to using these coercive tactics to defend Russia's territorial integrity and safeguard Russia's national security. They are also of the same mind when it comes to which scenarios are less deserving of these strategies, such as defending human rights in other countries or providing security for international friends.

Despite the general consolidation around regime foreign policy, this analysis shows that there is a key segment of Moscow elites who believe that it is unreasonable for Russia to try to compete militarily with the United States. This segment also sees the United Nations as one avenue for Russia to remain involved in international institutions in a period of isolation from the West.

Though battered and bruised, these survey data reveal that some opposition to Russia's current foreign policy still exists among Moscow's influential elites.

Notes

1. It is also possible to calculate these categories from the 1999 and 2004 data, though these were excluded from the rest of the analysis because the coercive action questions – our variables of interest – were not included in those years. In 1999, 75% were supporters and 25% opponents; in 2004, 71% were supporters and 29% were opponents.
2. There are various opinions about the national interests of Russia. "Which of the two statements below is closer to your point of view? 1. The national interests of Russia for the most part should be limited to its current territory. 2. The national interests of Russia for the most part extend beyond its current territory." The combined sample of respondents in the 2008–2016 surveys included 500 supporters and 118 opponents.
3. "Do you think that US policies represent a threat to Russian national security?" This question had a combined total of 606 respondents in the 2008–2016 waves.
4. "For each country that I will name, please tell me how friendly or hostile you think this country is toward Russia today: very friendly, rather friendly, neutral, rather hostile, or very hostile: US." Figures are for those selecting "rather hostile" and "very hostile." Total combined sample is 634 respondents in the 2008–2016 waves.
5. "Do you agree that in annexing Crimea, Russia violated post-war and post-Soviet international agreements and international law?" Total sample size is 214 from the 2016 wave only.
6. "In your opinion, what led to the crisis in Ukraine?" There were seven responses from which they could choose; they are not listed here. Total sample size is 216 in the 2016 survey.
7. "What type of political system, in your opinion, is most appropriate for Russia? 1. The Soviet system that existed before *perestroika*. 2. The Soviet system, but in a different, more democratic form. 3. The current political system. 4. A Western-style democracy." Combined sample size is 556 in the 2008–2016 waves.
8. "Do you think that US policies represent a threat to Russian national security?" Combined sample size is 606 in the 2008–2016 waves.
9. "For each country that I will name, please tell me how friendly or hostile you think this country is toward Russia today: very friendly, rather friendly, neutral, rather hostile, or very hostile: US." Combined sample size is 634 from the 2008–2016 surveys.
10. For each of the following sections, all data presented are based on a combined sample of respondents from 2008 through 2016.
11. Although it is unclear exactly how the Russian military would be used to strengthen the United Nations, the question was asked consistently across 3 years and the result is consistent with the use of natural resources. We focus here on the fact that helping the United Nations is the stimulus in the question and of greater import to opponents than supporters.
12. For polling data, see Bashkirova and Partners (2017).

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