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Public opinion in Putin's Russia

The public sphere, opinion climate
and 'authoritarian bias'

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Public opinion in Putin's Russia: The public sphere, opinion climate and 'authoritarian bias'¹

Russian public opinion polls regularly report approval ratings of 84% to 86% for President Vladimir Putin – but can we trust those figures? This question has come to the fore after the events of 2014. Although Putin's decision to annex Crimea, with the subsequent broad confrontation with the West, was seen by many as extremely damaging for the country's long-term development, Putin's approval ratings have shown almost unquestioning support for his policies. Does this support reveal deep-rooted anti-Westernism in Russian society, or an imperialistic mood? Or is it the result of intense propaganda campaigns and polling fabrications?

The question could be broadened: just what is 'public opinion' under an authoritarian regime? What do poll figures really mean, and how should they be interpreted? While there has been much focus on Putin's popularity, little attention has been paid to similar or even higher figures for, e.g., Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev. A few years ago, Aliyev's approval ratings were around 80%; now, amidst the deterioration of country's economy in the wake of the collapse of oil prices, the figure is up to 95%. In China and Vietnam, indisputably authoritarian countries, purported support for the government is consistently above 90%. Does this mean that these governments are almost twice as effective as those in the USA or the UK, where opinion polls show approval for the authorities as being mostly below 50%? Or does it reflect a distortion of the public sphere under authoritarian regimes?

In the analysis, I lean on the tradition in public opinion studies that accentuate the importance of external influences in shaping people's preferences and attitudes, underscoring the role of elite discourse in public opinion (Converse 1964; Zaller 1992). Second, I follow the tradition of studies that stress the influence of authoritarian institutions on the willingness of the populace to express preferences publicly and

¹ This paper was presented at NUPI on 12 December 2016. See the recording of the seminar here: <http://www.nupi.no/en/Events/2016/Public-opinion-in-Putin-s-Russia-what-we-know-and-what-we-miss-analyzing-polls-and-survey-data>

frankly. The concepts of ‘opinion climate’ and the ‘spiral of silence’ developed by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1984) point to the common tendency for people to correct/ alter their attitudes under the influence of the prevailing mood in society. The main argument put forward here is that the systematic distortion of the public sphere by authoritarian institutions has led to systematic misrepresentations in polling data – a stable shift that may be identified as an ‘authoritarian bias’.

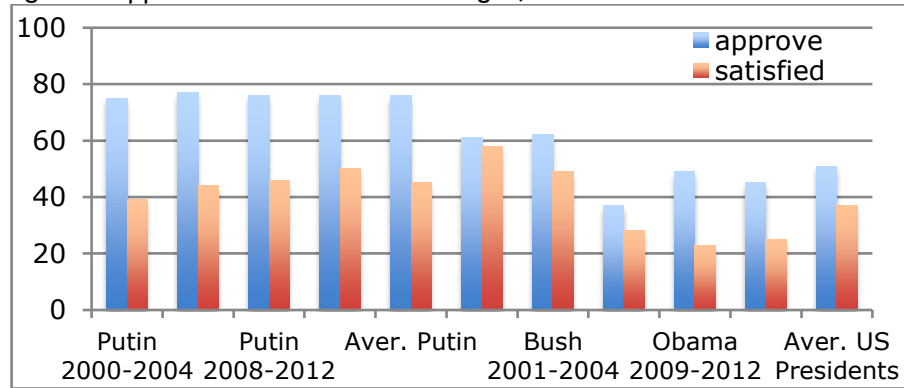
Putin’s extreme popularity and super-majority effect

Putin appears to be an extremely popular leader, and his popularity has been a major factor in the evolution of today’s political regime in Russia. With an average 76% approval throughout his 17 years in power, Putin has consistently outperformed the three US presidents during this period, with their approval averages of 51% over the past 20 years.² Of course, this might simply reflect Putin’s greater efficiency as president. But polling data do not necessarily prove this.

In addition to the regular ‘approval’ questions, respondents in Russia and the USA are typically asked whether they are satisfied with the current situation in the country. The average of those who respond ‘satisfied’ is 44% in Russia over those 17 years and 37% in the USA over the 20-year period. It is reasonable to suppose that the more satisfied the people are with the situation, the more inclined will they be to approve of the leader. But on average, the share of those who say that they ‘approve’ of the job of the president in the USA exceeds the share of those who are ‘satisfied’ by 14 points (51% against 37%) – whereas in Putin’s Russia the corresponding figure is 32 points (76% against 44%). This huge disparity reflects the main structural difference in the patterns of presidential approval. If the gap between satisfaction and approval were the same as in the USA, average approval for Putin should be about 61% – as it was in Bill Clinton’s second term and George W. Bush’s first term.

² Here and elsewhere I use the data from the Levada Center for Vladimir Putin and from Gallup for US presidents.

Figure 1. Approval and satisfaction averages, Russia and the USA



Sources: Levada Center, Gallup.

In the USA, the approval/satisfaction gap varies with different periods and presidents. It is usually higher during a new presidency (the ‘honeymoon’) or after a ‘rally-round-the-flag’ event like 9/11. After the 2007 financial crisis, satisfaction in the USA dropped from an average of 45% in 2000–2006 to an average of 23% in 2007–2016. Despite this, Barack Obama’s average approval rate was 48%. The difference here can be attributed largely to the partisan effect in US politics: Democrats were less willing to blame their president for the current situation, with average approval for Obama among Democrats being 83%, whereas satisfaction was only about 39%. This situation is typical in US politics: the vast majority of supporters of the president’s party tend to approve of him – even those who say they are not satisfied – whereas supporters of the opposition party are inclined to disapprove and give a lower assessment of the state of affairs (Brooks 2001; Jones 2015; Smith 2016).

This sheds some light on Putin’s exceptional ratings: That so many respondents declare themselves not satisfied but still do not blame Putin can be attributed to the limited influence of the Russian opposition. With opposition access to media being restricted, dissatisfaction is to a lesser extent translated into disloyalty, and that can explain the gap between the share of ‘not satisfied’ and ‘not approving’.

By limiting the opposition’s access to media, authoritarian regimes achieve higher polling numbers than they would have under free competition. In turn, evidence of overwhelming support creates a self-sustaining mechanism. Winning by a supermajority, authoritarian regimes will have the opportunity to change legislation and the rules of the game in ways advantageous to them, as well as to create an image of

invincibility, demobilizing potential political opponents (Magaloni 2006). Similarly, high approval ratings help to strengthen regime legitimacy and induce people to turn a blind eye to the regime's flaws and deficiencies.

The state media portrayal of all-embracing support for the leader affects the opinion climate. Indeed, Putin's popularity has become so well-established that the pollster's question 'Do you approve of Vladimir Putin as president?' ends up sounding more like 'Do you, like the vast majority of the rest of the country, approve of Vladimir Putin, or do you belong to the small minority that does not?' It requires a stronger motivation to express a negative answer: the respondent is forced to express not only his or her attitude to President Putin but also to the supposed majority of the nation. Thus, distortions in the public sphere first lead to overestimation of the popularity of the leader in opinion poll data; and second, they exert pressure on survey respondents to align their personal attitudes with those of the majority.

How and when could the spiral of silence emerge?

The annexation of Crimea led not only to an abrupt increase in Putin's approval ratings, they have also had a far broader effect. For example, the average level of trust in Russia's main state and public institutions increased by 8 points (from 52% to 60%).

Experts usually point to the 'rally-round-the-flag' effect to explain rising loyalty to a political regime in wartime. But what are the mechanisms of such mobilization in an authoritarian regime? First and foremost, it is the intense propaganda machine, or rather, the growing 'informational involvement'. The events of 2014 drew in large audiences for the TV news, which is tightly controlled. The average time people spent watching the TV news in 2014–2015 increased by 30%. The more people were exposed to the propaganda, the more did they become indoctrinated with the officially propagated doctrines and attitudes.

The intense propaganda campaign was accompanied by growing hostility toward those who expressed alternative views. Combined with intensified repression of the opposition, this further worsened the climate of opinion and curbed the willingness of dissidents to show their attitudes publicly. 'The Crimean syndrome', with a sharp rise in loyalty to the regime, can be explained by a two-way mechanism: increasing informational involvement and political mobilization of some groups, and the suppression of other groups' propensity to display their attitudes and assessments publicly.

Evidence of a step-by-step deterioration of the opinion climate in Russia over the last 10 years can be traced in polling data. As Table 1 shows, the Russian public is surprisingly distrustful of other people's assessments of the government, and of Putin in particular (see Q1). While in 2005, 51% said that they believed other people were sincere when giving an assessment of the powers-that-be, this share dropped to 30% in 2013. After the annexation of Crimea, trust increased in parallel to the growing approval of Putin, but started to decline again in 2016. Moreover, the majority of respondents (64% in 2013 and 53% in 2016) are inclined to assume that there is a gap between people's private and publicly announced attitudes. While not many respondents confirm they feel fear or discomfort publicly (Q2), the share of those who say that they feel free is also rather low (around 30%).

Table 1. Opinion climate in Russia: trust in other people's publicly expressed attitudes; perceptions of freedom of expression

	Before Crimea			After Crimea		
	2005	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
<i>Q 1. Do people speak honestly about their attitudes regarding state authorities, regarding Vladimir Putin – or they hide what they think?</i>						
Honestly	51	43	30		48	42
Partly honestly, partly hide	23	27	33		31	32
Mostly hide	22	24	31		17	21
<i>Q2. Do you feel free to speak your attitude toward the policy pursued by the leaders of the country?</i>						
Yes, always and everywhere		29	33	38	38	30
Yes, but with some limitations, not everywhere		34	31	28	33	37
No, I am afraid or feel discomfort		13	11	6	10	12
Do not feel such a need		29	21	26	17	18

At first glance, the slight growth post-Crimea of the share of those who say they trust other people's public attitudes and feel free to express their own would appear to run counter to our hypothesis. However, it should be remembered that the figures reflect only those who agree to participate in opinion surveys. While some groups are mobilized by the propaganda campaign, others are demobilized and become more prone to remain silent. Therefore, the problem is not necessarily a fabrication of poll results, but may be a matter of non-response.

Response rates are a sensitive question for the polling industry in Russia. They are usually rather low, not exceeding 30–35%. That level, while insufficient by international standards, can give quite a representative picture – if the non-response is balanced. However, the 'rally-round-the-flag' and propaganda campaign may have changed this. After the annexation of Crimea, Putin's approval ratings rose sharply, from an average of 63% to 85%. One might assume that 22% of those who had previously not approved changed their attitude. But when we consider the problems of response rate and changes in opinion climate, the issue becomes more complicated.

Table 2 presents two models explaining the change in approval rating with a 35% response rate. The first assumes a politically balanced distribution of those who agree to participate in the survey and a basically similar distribution of preferences in both groups. The second model assumes a politically motivated decision to participate. In this model, changes in poll results reflect the declining willingness of discontented sectors of the public to participate in opinion polls, and the growing readiness among those mobilized by the information campaign to express their positive attitude publicly. This model demonstrates that, to achieve the same statistical effect of Putin's popularity spiking, the propaganda campaign would have to compel 8 people (from every 100) who held positive views but had previously decided against answering questions in an opinion poll to take part, and 7 with negative views who previously would have participated now to decide against taking part in the survey.

Table 2. Two models of approval rating change

		Before Crimea		After Crimea	
Approval rate	Response rate	Approve of Putin: 63%	Do not approve: 34%	Approve of Putin: 85%	Do not approve: 15%
		Politically neutral distribution of responding/non-responding citizens			
Responding	35	22	12	30	5
Non-responding	65	41	23	55	10
		Politically biased distribution of responding/non-responding citizens			
Responding	35	22	12	22+8=30	12-7=5
Non-responding	65	41	23	41-8=33	23+7=30

If to compare to election campaigns: As is well known, the final outcome of an election depends not only on the distribution of voter preferences, but on electoral mobilization of the supporters. Similarly, opinion poll data reflect not only the distribution of current preferences, but also the willingness of different groups to express their attitudes publicly.

We find some indirect evidence supporting this hypothesis in opinion polls. Table 3 summarizes data from the Levada Center on whether people say that they feel free to express their attitudes. Before the annexation of Crimea, 23% thought some negative consequences, such as harassment or persecution, might be likely. After the annexation, the figure rose to 26–28% (see Q2 and Q4). But this slight growth is provided by those who agreed to participate in surveys. Even among this group, every fourth respondent felt that negative consequences were likely.

Table 3. Probable costs of expressing criticism in opinion poll interviews

	Before Crimea		After Crimea	
	2009	2011	2014	2015
<i>Q1. Are people with non-typical political views free to express their views in Russia without risk of being prosecuted or harassed?</i>				
Absolutely or mostly free	48.7	36.5		
Not so much, or not free	34.5	50.3		
<i>Q2. Could people who criticize the authorities in opinion poll interviews be persecuted or harassed by the authorities later?</i>				
Yes	23		28	
Unlikely	46		44	
No	21		17	
<i>Q3. Why are people unwilling to give their opinion in poll interviews?</i>				
They are afraid of negative consequences				28
Other reasons				22
Do not agree that people are unwilling				34
<i>Q4. Would you say you are afraid to express your attitudes to the current situation in the country in opinion polls?</i>				
Yes				26
No				64

Table 4 presents some important results. Before the annexation of Crimea, those who approve and disapprove estimated the probability of harassment for criticism equally, but after annexation, the situation changed. Amongst those loyal to Putin, evaluations of the probability of

negative consequences rose only slightly, whereas among those who do not approve of Putin it jumped to nearly 40%.

Table 4. Probability of harassment after interview (see Table 3, Q2)

	Before Crimea (2009)		After Crimea (2015)		Changes	
	Approve of Putin	Do not approve	Approve of Putin	Do not approve	Approve	Do not approve
Yes	22	24	26	37	+4	+13
Unlikely	46	44	46	36	0	-8
Definitely no	21	22	18	13	-3	-9
Do not know	11	10	10	14	-1	+4

This result strongly supports our hypothesis of a deterioration in the climate of opinion after the Ukraine crisis. Before Crimea, supporters and non-supporters of Putin estimated the probability of experiencing harassment roughly equally, but after Crimea we note a significant disparity. The fact that post-Crimea, almost 40% of those who do not approve of Putin believe that critical responses entail consequences reflects the pressures felt by this group. However, also 26% of those who approve of Putin expect negative consequences of their criticism – which indicates the need for caution in interpreting the results of opinion polls in today's Russia. The differences in threat perceptions among Putin supporters and non-supporters render the probability of politically-motivated decisions about whether not to participate in opinion surveys high, and show how an authoritarian regime can affect poll results.

Concluding remarks

This policy brief has examined some of the mechanisms whereby authoritarian institutions may affect the results of opinion polls. The analysis is based on the assumption that people's assessments and preferences not only reflect their personal attitudes and predispositions but also are strongly influenced by the opinions and attitudes of others:

- People are influenced by elite discourse, and its misrepresentation in state-controlled media lead to distortions in the balance of assessments of the current regime.
- People's attitudes are affected by what they believe to be the common view on a subject. When approval of the leader is viewed as the social norm, the psychological costs of opposing rise significantly.
- People's preferences and attitudes are affected by expected social costs (social or governmental repression). These expectations launch a 'spiral of silence' whereby the discontented are less willing to express their attitudes publicly.

All this has led to a shift in the distribution of preferences in polling data that can be called the 'authoritarian bias'.

This does not mean that opinion poll results under an authoritarian regime are inherently flawed – but they do require sophisticated interpretation and analysis. While we can trace trends and changes, we should be very careful about absolute figures, always bearing in mind that loyal attitudes are likely to be overrepresented and critical ones underrepresented. Accordingly, we should be careful about glibly explaining away public opinion phenomena under an authoritarian regime with such blanket concepts as 'political culture', 'path dependency' or 'tradition': It may be that authoritarian institutions affect opinion more than do the shadows from the past. And, at the very least, we should be aware that, in case of a crisis undermining these authoritarian institutions, the purported balance of preferences could change very quickly indeed.

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