

From Soft to Hard Power: the Effect of RT (“Russia Today”) on Political Preferences

Maria Snegovaya

Study Rationale

Correspondence between domestic economic conditions and support for domestic policy issues, as well as incumbent electoral success, has interested political scientists for a while.

Experimental studies that examine economic voting use hypothetical scenarios (Sigelman, Sigelman and Bullock 1991, McKelvey and Ordeshook 1990, Quattrone and Tversky 1988) or attempt to alter respondents’ subjective perceptions of the economy (Mutz 1998, Hetherington 1996). Scholarship on this topic discovered a strong impact of sociotropic treatment on voting behavior (Lewin, 1991; Ansolabehere, Meredith and Snowberg 2014; Kramer 1983; Peltzman 1990).

However, its effect may depend on context. Klasnja and Tucker (2013) found that in a low corruption countries voters reacted negatively to corruption regardless of the state of the economy; while in a high corruption countries voters reacted negatively to corruption only when the state of the economy was also poor. They also discover that in low corruption countries *sociotropic* corruption voting was relatively more important, while in a high corruption context *pocketbook* corruption voting (or voting based on one's own personal experience with corruption, i.e., being asked to pay bribes) was equally prevalent.

However, few studies focus on relationship between domestic economic conditions and foreign policy preferences. This study attempts to fill in this gap.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

Scholars refer to “guns vs butter” dichotomy as the trade-off between military and consumer spending: as a country invests more in its military (produces more guns), it must reduce household consumption (butter). If the focus is on military buildup, the only way to sustain its household consumption is through an overall elevation of production. However, under economic stagnation or decline overall production elevation is infeasible, state has to prioritize guns over butter, and audience costs of such an approach may become unbearably high. Such overinvestment in military buildup at the expense of public spending led to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Just as the Soviet Union, because of its foreign policy strategy in the recent years the Russian government has consistently prioritized ‘guns’ over ‘butter’ by increasing investment in its military budget (external defense and internal security) at the expense of a range of domestic social and economic needs, such as health care, education, and pensions (Oxenstierna 2016). This resulted in consistent increase of the military budget share in GDP and a respective reduction in public welfare spending.

To what extent such priorities of the Russian government were supported by the Russian population? Two streams of scholarship exist on this topic. One group of Russia scholars argues that after Crimea annexation Russians embraced the Kremlin-imposed great power narrative and anti-Westernism and became largely indifferent to the economic situation. This allowed the Kremlin to shift the social contract in Russia from economic performance to geopolitical status (Goble 2019; Guriev 2016). Under this approach, more nationalist anti-Western rhetoric and initiatives by the Russian leaders deflected mass attention from domestic problems and fostered domestic solidarity through a “rally ’round the flag” effect (Simmel 1995; Coser 1955; Woodwell 2007)

Yet another group of scholars questions this assumption, as accumulating evidence suggests that retrospective economic evaluations work in Russia just as they do in other countries. First, studies find little evidence of a rally around the flag effect in light of worsening

economic conditions (Frye 2019). Second, while Kremlin's story that Russia is a resurgent great power reclaiming its rightful place on the global stage tends to inspire the Russians, they also view the external environment with caution and are wary of an aggressive foreign policy (Sherlock 2019). Third, multiplying evidence suggests that as the economic situation in Russia worsens (economy stagnates, and real disposable incomes decline), the salience of policy preferences among the Russians shift from foreign policy to domestic policy issues. As polls indicate, the mass society increasingly wants the government to emphasize domestic socio-economic development, not the production and demonstration of hard power. For example, the 2018 analysis by the RAS Institute of Sociology has demonstrated that Russians still wanted Russia to be a "great power" but on condition that the state will take care first of the welfare of its own citizens. Russia's "statehood and military power," which have been a priority in Russia's mass consciousness since 2014, have in 2018 become secondary to social justice and democracy/self-expression.¹

While circumstantial evidence suggests that Russians increasingly favor 'butter' over 'guns' under economic strain, few studies attempted to causally address this question. This paper aims to do just that by focusing on the relationship between the negative economic (*sociotropic*) concerns and the support for militarization on the mass level. The expectation is that the support for assertive foreign policy should be decreasing and salience of domestic policy increasing among respondents who are more concerned about the country's or personal economic situation.

In line with the above I formulate the following hypothesis.

H1. Respondents who receive negative sociotropic treatment tend to prioritize domestic over foreign policy issues.

Which social groups are likely to amend its foreign policy preferences as they perceive the economic situation as worsening? I explore how two subgroups that feature prominently in theories of sociotropic perceptions react to my treatments. To control for heterogeneous impact of partisanship on support for more assertive foreign policy, I included the question: "Some people approve of the activities of President Putin and some people disapprove. Do you approve or disapprove of the activities of President Putin in the period of 2017-2018?"

To control for the impact of individual economic conditions on reaction to information about country's economic situation I also asked respondents, "How has your family's economic condition changed in the last 12 months?" Respondents were given a 5-point scale: (1) much worse, (2) somewhat worse, (3) no change, (4) somewhat better, and (5) much better.

Description of the sample to be used in the study

The experimental survey is designed to measure the change in attitudes towards foreign policy preferences depending on increased concerns about the national economy (sociotropic) situation.

The sample used will include two pilot experimental surveys of 400 respondents representative to the population in Russia across Russian cities and socio-demographic profile. And then run a full survey of 1,200 respondents representative to Russia's general population. Respondents are interviewed in front of their computers in their place of residence. For the internet survey the potential respondents will be randomly selected from the existing CISR Online panel. During the recruitment process the new panelists are informed and they orally agree to participate in the market research surveys based on voluntary basis come and go. During the survey the participants will be completing a survey and reading treatment material (a newspaper excerpt) of total duration of approximately 20 minutes.

¹ <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3792003>

Experimental Design

This section introduces the experiment design meant to test my research question. The experiment will include subjects broadly representative of the nation as a whole (negative sociotropic prime; positive sociotropic prime; neutral sociotropic prime and control). The group size will differ: pilots will include 400 respondents total and the final experiment will include 1200 respondents total (300 respondents per each).

The study presented treatment subjects with short segments from news stories that were either negative, positive or neutral with respect to the economy in general. One of three possible news segments alternatively reported (1) a negative outlook on decline in real incomes of the population of Russia, or (2) a positive outlook on dynamic in real incomes of the population of Russia (sociotropic), (3) a neutral outlook on Russia's economic situation. For the purpose of analysis, subjects were collapsed into either negative sociotropic, positive sociotropic, neutral sociotropic news or control conditions. I introduced the positive and neutral economic treatment along with control group to check whether any economic priors or only negative economic priors influence respondents' foreign policy preferences.

After participants are exposed to the news article, they are asked two post-treatment questions about the articles' content. During these questions the articles were kept on the screen in a reduced form, with the ability to expand the full view by pressing on it. The following questions were asked:

How did you understand the content of the above article?

- *The economic situation remain the same*
- *The economic situation have increased recently*
- *The economic situation have declined recently*
-

How interesting do you find the information provided in the article?

- *Very interesting*
- *Somewhat interesting*
- *Somewhat not interesting*
- *Not interesting at all*

Outcome measures. The key outcome measure to address the H1 are questions that directly introduce the "guns vs butter" dichotomy:

Please tell us, to what extent do you agree with the following statement: "We must spend more on defense, even if it can create some problems for our economic development."

- *1 – fully agree;*
- *2 – somewhat agree*
- *3 – somewhat disagree*
- *4 - fully disagree*

Please tell us, to what extent do you agree with the following statement: "Russia's internal problems now are more important than any external threats"

- *1 – fully agree;*
- *2 – somewhat agree*
- *3 – somewhat disagree*
- *4 - fully disagree*

Please tell us, to what extent do you agree with the following statement: "For Russia, it is more important to be economically strong than militarily strong."

- *1 – fully agree;*
- *2 – somewhat agree*

- 3 – somewhat disagree
- 4 - fully disagree,

Would you prefer Russia to be first and foremost:

- A great power, which other countries respect and fear
- A country with a high living standard even though it may not be one of the most powerful countries in the world.

Here are four possible policy priorities for Russia. What do you think Russia's policy priorities should be? Please rank these from 1 (highest priority) to 4 (lowest priority).

- Invest more in infrastructure
- Lower back the retirement age
- Invest more in developing modernized nuclear defense systems
- Invest more in the war in Syria

Analysis

The main analysis will include comparing the impact of treatment 1 (sociotropic negative) against treatment 2 (sociotropic positive), treatment 3 (sociotropic neutral) and control group. The above responses will be analyzed using OLS (with sample weights and with individual level controls) and using Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test. I plan on aggregating three questions that introduce 'guns vs butter' hypothesis into a single index.

I will then estimate the impact of treatment among respondents with different degrees of partisanship and those who economic situation has worsened in the last 12 months.

References

- Ansolabehere, Stephen, Marc Meredith, and Erik Snowberg. (2014). "Macro-Economic Voting: Local Information and Micro-Perceptions of the Macro-Economy." *Economics & Politics* 26 (3): 480–510
- Fiorina, Morris. 1981. *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Frye, T. (2019). Economic Sanctions and Public Opinion: Survey Experiments From Russia. *Comparative Political Studies*, 52(7), 967–994.
- Goble, Paul. (2019) "Impulses Behind Stalin's Anti-Cosmopolitan Campaign Haven't Disappeared," *Window on Eurasia*.
- Guriev, Sergei. (2019). "It's Not the Economy, Stupid," *The New York Times*, December 25.
- Healy, Andrew J., Mikael Persson, and Erik Snowberg. (2017). Digging into the Pocketbook: Evidence on Economic Voting from Income Registry Data Matched to a Voter Survey. *American Political Science Review*. 111, 4, 771–785.
- Hetherington, M. J. 1996. "The Media's Role in Forming Voters' National Economic Evaluations in 1992." *American Journal of Political Science* 40(2).
- Kiewiet, D. Roderick, and Michael S. Lewis-Beck. 2011. "No Man is an Island: Self-Interest, The Public Interest, and Sociotropic Voting." *Critical Review* 23 (3): 303–19.
- Kinder, Donald, and D. Roderick Kiewiet. 1979. "Economic Discontent and Political Behavior: The Role of Personal Grievances and Collective Economic Judgments on Congressional Voting." *American Journal of Political Science* 23: 495–527.
- Klašnja, M. and Joshua A. Tucker. (2013). The economy, corruption, and the vote: Evidence from experiments in Sweden and Moldova, *Electoral Studies*, Volume 32, Issue 3.
- Kramer, Gerald H. 1983. "The Ecological Fallacy Revisited: Aggregate-versus Individual-level Findings on Economics and Elections, and Sociotropic Voting." *American Political Science Review* 77 (1): 92–111
- McKelvey, R. D, and P. C. Ordeshook. 1990. "A Decade of Experimental Research on Spatial Models of Elections and Committees." In *Advances in the Spatial Theory of Voting*, ed. M.J. Hinich, J. Enelow, pp. 99–144. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press
- Middleton, JA. (2011) *What Do We Know about Economic Voting?* Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale University
- Mutz, D. C. 1998. *Impersonal Influence*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Oxenstierna, Susanne. (2016). Russia's defense spending and the economic decline, *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Volume 7, Issue 1.
- Peltzman, Sam. 1990. "How Efficient is the Voting Market?" *The Journal of Law & Economics* 33 (1): 27–63.
- Quattrone, G. A, and A. Tversky. 1988. "Contrasting Rational and Psychological Analyses of Political Choice." *American Political Science Review* 82(3):7.
- Sherlock, Thomas. (2019). *How Russian Society Challenges Putin's Grand Narrative: Perceptions of Domestic Problems and External Threats after Crimea*. (Part of a draft chapter for a book-length manuscript)
- Sigelman, L., C. Sigelman, and D. Bullock. 1991. "Reconsidering Pocketbook Voting: An Experimental Approach." *Political Behavior* 13(2).
- Taylor, Brian. (2013). *Kudrin's Complaint: Does Russia Face a Guns vs. Butter Dilemma?* Ponars Eurasia, Policy Memo. Available at: <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/kudrin%E2%80%99s-complaint-does-russia-face-guns-vs-butter-dilemma>