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The Nature of Russian Patriotism

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Russia has conducted an aggressive foreign policy in the "near abroad" and elsewhere since 2008, culminating in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February of this year. This has been at least tacitly, if not always actively, supported by the large swaths of the Russian population.

For example, according to surveys by independent pollster Levada Center, support for the war in Ukraine has been relatively stable since its beginning, ranging between 74% and 81%. Similar, if not even more enthusiastic support was expressed after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Although it is widely recognized that population surveys in the current political environment in Russia are unreliable, it is clear that, at the very least, most Russians have not had strong objections to Russia's military aggression.

Is this evidence of simple rallying around the flag during a war and perhaps the effectiveness of Putin's propaganda over the last 20 years, or are there deeper reasons for the militant attitudes of the Russian population?

One way of answering this question is to compare Russia to other countries over a period of more than two decades using a consistent set of survey questions.

Our main source of information is the National Identity (NI) module of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) supplemented with the Role of Government (RG) module of the same survey. Russia participated in all three waves of the NI ISSP conducted in 1995, 2003, and 2013 as well as in the 1996, 2006, and 2016 waves of RG ISSP. These surveys use representative samples for each participating country.

The NI ISSP module contains several questions that can be used to distinguish what the literature calls "blind and militant" patriotism from its more benign forms. The former can be gauged by whether the respondent agrees with the statements "[My country] should follow its own interests, even if this leads to conflict with other nations" and "People should support their country even if the country is in the wrong." Benign patriotism, on the other hand, is reflected in whether the person has a close connection to his/her country, whether the person prefers being a citizen of his/her country than any other country, and whether the person's country is better than most other countries in the world.

We used so-called factor analysis to combine the two questions measuring the degree of blind and militant patriotism and the three benign patriotism questions into two indexes or factors, and then ranked countries according to the averages of these factors.

Of the 15 countries that participated in all three waves of the NI ISSP, Russia ranked first in terms of blind and militant patriotism in every wave, leaving all other countries far behind. If we include all 44 countries that participated in at least one survey wave, then Russian respondents fall slightly behind Bulgaria in 1995 and behind Turkey in 2013, staying firmly in first place in 2003.

This is particularly noteworthy since, with respect to patriotism of the benign variety, Russian respondents are in the bottom third of countries in each wave of NI ISSP. For comparison, the U.S. is in the middle of the pack on the blind militancy measure and in the top four countries with respect to benign patriotism. We obtain similar results if we look at each question separately.

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A related issue we can examine using the RG ISSP data is the attitude of people in different countries to increasing spending on the military versus other types of government expenditures. Of the 17 countries participating in the same waves, Russia is in first place in 1996 and 2006, significantly outpacing second place Israel and far ahead of the United States. In 2016, however, Russia falls to third place behind Israel and Hungary.

Looking at all 45 countries that took part in at least one wave of the survey, Russia remains first in 2006, but falls to second place slightly behind Cyprus in 1996 and to ninth place in 2016. The priority the Russians gave to military spending in the first wave is particularly remarkable, given the generally poor economic situation and low provision of non-defense public goods in the mid-1990s. The lower priority placed by Russian respondents on increasing defense spending in the third wave can be readily understood, given the long

period of rising defense budgets and the apparent ease of capturing Crimea from Ukraine in 2014.

Interestingly, the results for Russia relative to other countries are not driven by any particular generational cohorts. The older generations in all countries are more patriotic in both militant and benign sense, and Russia is not an exception. However, in Russia, unlike in other countries, the older generations tend to assign a higher priority to defense spending.

There are no methodologically consistent cross-country data on blind and militant patriotism prior to 1995, but we can use World Values Survey (WVS) to evaluate the importance citizens assign to country's military strength as early as 1990. Here the respondents were asked to choose between high economic growth, strong defense and making cities and countryside more beautiful as the country's goals for the next 10 years.

The most interesting finding here is that of the 16 countries participating in both the second and third waves of the survey (i.e., 1989-1993 and 1994-1998) Russia was in seventh place in 1990 but jumped to second place behind only China by 1995 while remaining either dead last or next-to-last in terms of benign nationalism.

What can we conclude from all of the above? Clearly, Russia's predisposition towards blind and militant patriotism did not start with Putin. In fact, it is possible that Putin realized that aggressive foreign policy would be to his political advantage precisely because he understood the nature of Russian patriotism.

Also, we should not overestimate the effectiveness of Putin's propaganda. It appears to be working probably only because its claims have found fertile ground in the Russian audience.

What remains unclear is whether the current militant nature of Russian patriotism has its roots in the economic collapse and humiliation of the early 1990s (the so-called "post-imperial syndrome") as might have been suggested by the apparent decline in the relative importance of strong defense in 1990. Or perhaps the attitudes in 1990 were an exception, and the prevalence of blind and militant patriotism in Russia has a much older history.

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