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Sociology of Political Support in Russia: The Ukraine Crisis, Putin and the Dynamics of Public Opinion

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ABSTRACT

Since the Ukraine crisis in 2013, citizens of Russia have improved their attitudes toward the foreign and domestic policies of their government. This process culminated in an 89% approval rating (according to Levada Center) of President Putin in 2015. In particular, Russian citizens gave unusually full support to Russian authorities in the area of foreign policy. President Vladimir Putin and his foreign policy regarding the Ukraine crisis, which became the focus of Russian mass media, took firm control of the situation to a degree unprecedented for contemporary political regimes. This study examines effects of agenda-setting in the contemporary political process of Russia. The authors claim that public opinion in Russia has changed in favour of President Vladimir Putin after the Ukraine crisis as a result of agenda-setting. The findings suggest that public support was one of the main reasons for Russian foreign policy with regards to the Ukraine crisis.

Keywords: Agenda-setting theory, public opinion, Putin, Russia, Ukraine crisis

INTRODUCTION

Why did President Vladimir Putin decide to use military force to retake the Crimean Peninsula and to support separatists in Donbass, Eastern part of Ukraine, in 2014 despite very dangerous consequences, including economic sanctions from the international community? The Ukraine crisis has various foreign and domestic dimensions and while foreign policy introduced a new wave of confrontation with the West and the European Union (Braun, 2014), domestic policy resulted in new levels of popularity for President Vladimir Putin (Deliagin, 2015). Several researchers in foreign affairs tend to examine the Ukraine crisis from a point of view traditional for international

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relations, i.e., considering Ukraine a critically important part of the Kremlin's foreign policy toward restoration of Russian 'domination' in Eurasia (Tsygankov, 2015).

However, many scholars of international relations have admitted that domestic factors played a very important role during the Ukraine crisis. For example, Michael Rywkin remarks that 'the Kremlin's propaganda seems to be destined to satisfy two purposes: elevate the morale of its own masses and display disrespect of Western governments' (Rywkin, 2015). Mikhail Suslov highlights the role of popular geopolitics in Russian media, concluding that 'taking Crimea from Ukraine is tightly linked to the reshuffling of the mental landscape of the Russians' (Suslov, 2014). Pro-Kremlin political analyst Mikhail Deliagin stresses the integration of Crimea with Russia is able to serve as a national project that 'could revive Russia while allowing its leaders to root out traitors and other undesirables from among the Russian elites' (Deliagin, 2015). In his article, Deliagin emphasises the domestic aspects of the Ukraine crisis for Russia believing that the Ukraine crisis was used by President Vladimir Putin to strengthen his position in the political system of Russia through the well-known technique of agenda-setting to mobilise public support.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to examine the dynamics of public opinion in Russia during the Ukraine crisis. It reveals the mechanisms of agenda-setting through comparative study of agenda-setting in the USA, France and the Russian Federation. It also attempts to describe the following :

- to define agenda-setting as a political technique;
- to describe dynamics of public opinion in the USA, France and the Russian Federation during military operations;
- to verify if agenda-setting technique has influenced public opinion in Russia during the Ukraine crisis.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

This study's framework is based on the theory of agenda-setting. The agenda-setting theory was developed by several well-known researchers such as McCombs, Shaw, Weaver, Graber, Scheufele, and others (Graber, 2010; McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 2014; Scheufele, 2000). The theory claims that political actors sometimes create events so important that the mass media will not be able to ignore them. The establishment of a favourable agenda is highly effective but rarely used in practice. A term known as 'framing', which in contrast to agenda-setting, focuses not on the events but on their characteristics, and relating these events to already-known categories or frames (Oliver, & Johnston, 2000; Weaver, 2007).

For a better understanding of this phenomenon, it's necessary to know that modern political systems tend to involve mass media in all kinds of activities in order to influence public opinion inside the given country as well as abroad. One of the most successful strategies in this aspect is the

active management of the agenda in mass media, or agenda-setting. In its most general form, agenda-setting can be described in terms of 'relative media emphasis on certain issues' (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2006). Managing agendas can direct public interest to a particular topic, change public priorities and even, if the issue affects the interests and emotions of the people, alter the behaviour of the audience (Achkasova, 2012).

The agenda-setting theory was first formulated in-depth in 1972 by McCombs and Shaw (1972). Unlike the representatives of the Chicago sociological school, who developed the theory of opinion leaders and two-step communications, the founders of agenda-setting theory indicated that the influence of media on the behaviour of citizens could be treated in a variety of ways. The influence of opinion leaders is an important factor, but it does not fully explain the problem. The original hypothesis of agenda-setting theory emphasises that 'the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the amount of attention to political problems' (McCombs, & Shaw, 1972). In other words, the media can both gloss over some important political issues but give undue importance to others.

Subsequent verification of this initial hypothesis led to the emergence of additional conceptual positions (Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal, 1981). For example, the authors of agenda-setting theory were able to distinguish the existence of two types of events: 'obtrusive' and 'unobtrusive'. As specified by Dyakova and Trachtenberg (1999), obtrusive events are where 'people have direct and constant experience, such as inflation and unemployment, they acquire social significance as a result of personal experience'. On the contrary, 'unobtrusive events are about topics in relation to which people have no personal experience, and the media serve as the sole teacher and a source of information about these issues' (Dyakova, & Trachtenberg, 1999). These problems or events can be such complex phenomena as the 'greenhouse effect', 'bird flu', 'war on terror', 'gay marriage' and so on. In this observation, we see the first important limitation of the theory of agenda-setting. In order for 'unobtrusive' events to cause interest, they must be unexpected and large-scale enough to seem like they have the potential to affect everyone.

The most important consequence of the theory of agenda-setting is that the shifting attention of the general public is almost always superficial and short-lived. Since the vast majority of people do not have a high level of personal expertise regarding 'unobtrusive' problems, they are not able to assess what is really happening. They either have to trust the opinion of 'opinion leaders' or avoid any judgment of conformist considerations tending toward the opinion of the majority. Graber explains this idea in her classic book 'The Power of Media in Politics', pointing out that the vast majority of citizens in modern countries learn their views on political matters through mass media (Graber, 2010). At the same time, citizens are neither political experts nor certified political analysts, and they do not have the capacity, time or effort required for

political education. As such, the political ideas that citizens do absorb are very superficial and sometimes self-contradictory (Gerber, Huber, Doherty, Dowling, & Ha, 2010).

In recent years, there has been intense discussion around the problem of connecting the theory of agenda-setting and the achievements of modern discourse analysis (McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 2014). Weaver, one of the founders of the theory of agenda-setting, says there are two levels of setting the agenda. He explains further in his paper 'Thoughts on Agenda Setting, Framing, and Priming': at the first level, one talks about the prominence given to some of the events or issues at the expense of others, and at the second level, one stresses the preferential illumination of certain aspects of events or issues (Weaver, 2007). This point of view leads to an extremely broad interpretation of agenda-setting theory. In this paper, we use the 'classic' theory of agenda-setting, focusing on the first level of events.

However, one should be aware of the importance of priming (the order in which the events appear in mass media) and framing (the attribution of any particular event or situation to already-known categories or to a frame, offering a simple and intuitive interpretation) in modern political communication (Scheufele, 2000). For example, Goncharov believes that in today's media-centric political system, it is much easier to work with framing and priming than such complex structures as ideologies or costly and risky activities of large-scale events (Goncharov, 2012). Thus, literature review indicates that there are two almost opposite answers to the main research question of this paper. On one hand, Scheufele (2000) and Goncharov (2012) stress that under current conditions the agenda-setting approach is not possible anymore, and, on the other, the founders of the agenda-setting concept, Weaver and McCombs, allow theoretical possibility of using this approach in the new environment.

Therefore, to address this question, we provide analysis of three cases (the USA, France and the Russian Federation) followed by comparative analysis of the public opinion polls and search queries in the search engine Yandex. Classic works in the field of agenda-setting were based on research of the agenda in the media, the agenda of the citizens and on the results of elections or public opinion polls. The present study used a combination of methods that allow the researchers to capture all three dimensions. The most problematic point deals with a possible subjective interpretation or selection of events that have influenced public opinion. In the case of Russia, it is the referendum on the status of Crimea and further military operations in eastern Ukraine.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Agenda-setting in the United States of America: the Case of George W. Bush

There have been few cases where the approval rating of a head of state exceeds 85%. One recent example is the approval

rating of George W. Bush right after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Figure 1 shows the dynamics of Bush's approval during his two terms as president of the United States, as well as some of the events that generated great public interest. The study does not claim that these developments alone determined changes in the rating of George Bush. Obviously, any level of support is based on several factors. However, it is clear that the George W. Bush's ratings peaked after 9/11 and subsequent military action in Iraq. In the second case, we see two peaks of popularity: immediately after the war and again after the capture of Saddam Hussein. In this case, we deal with the phenomenon of personification, a well-known PR strategy that suggests that good news should always be delivered by a person involved so as to evoke human emotions in the audience. In this respect, Saddam Hussein was the old 'good' enemy, well known to the general public. After his capture, Bush's ratings decreased steadily, although he was still popular enough to earn him a second term.

Analysing the dynamics of George W. Bush's support, it becomes apparent that agenda-setting can radically and quickly mobilise support and attract political opponents. In the case of the events surrounding the 9/11 terror attacks, Bush's approval rating rose to about 35% immediately after the attacks, gained about 20% at the outset of the Iraq War, and climbed another 10% after the capture of Saddam Hussein. Questionable intelligence about the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, followed by military operations there, led to complicated and sometimes disadvantageous long-term implications for the US in the Middle East and around the world. But in the short term, waging this war had real benefits for George Bush personally and for his group of high-ranking political supporters.

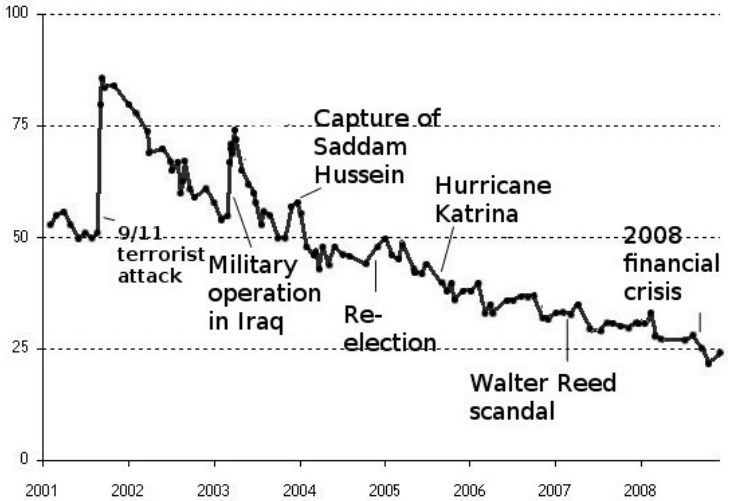

Figure 1. Political agenda and approval of George W. Bush as president of the USA
Source: Compiled by authors, based on data from Pew Research Center (Bush and Public Opinion, 2008)

Military developments in the Middle East and American counter-terrorism operations continued, but these have effectively lost its value in terms of agenda-setting. The combined effect of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the Iraq War, and economic difficulties gradually but irreversibly reduced the level of support for George Bush to very low levels (less than 25% approval rating by the end of his second term).

Controlling the Political Agenda in France: The Case of François Hollande

François Hollande is one of the poorest-rated presidents in the modern political history of France. Figure 2 shows his approval ratings of his activities and some events in the political life of France between 2012 and 2015 (Cotes de popularités ministers, 2015). It's clear that not all the had an impact on François Hollande's ratings. For example, there were two military operations in Africa with the participation of the French armed forces, neither of which led to a noticeable improvement in President Hollande's ratings. We see that the support curve does not have such sharp fluctuations as in the case of George Bush. Attempts to reverse the situation through limited military operations in Africa have not yielded significant results. The adoption of the law on same-sex marriage and the unity of the nation after the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attacks added a few percentage points for François Hollande, but still could not radically improve the slide in his popularity. François Hollande went down in history as the French president with the lowest ratings ever. Moreover, French Prime Minister Manuel Valls enjoys higher levels of approval than François Hollande himself (Techniquement, François Hollande peut descendre encore plus bas dans les sondages, 2014).

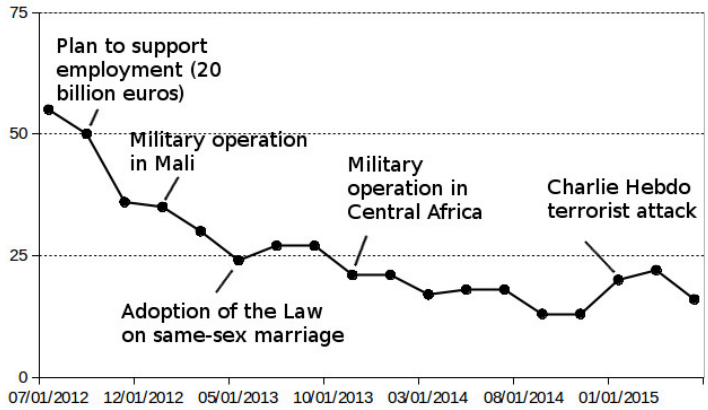

Figure 2. Political agenda in France and approval of François Hollande
Source: Compiled by authors, based on data from TNS-Sofres (http://www.tns-sofres.com)

The interpretation of Hollande's support from the point of view of agenda-setting theory is fraught. Compared with the United States, France's military operations did not cause any significant increase in Hollande's ratings. This is because the Hollande had to deal with economic problems and issues related to his personal life. In the US, George Bush undertook active and strong actions after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The president introduced drastic foreign and domestic policies in addition to starting fairly large-scale military operations known as the War on Terror. In contrast, Hollande was not able to offer comparable solutions for France's domestic and foreign issues. The actual problems in the economy were accompanied by scandals in his personal life. Under these circumstances, the events that could potentially have improved Hollande's ratings did not result in successful presidential actions. As Achkasova rightly pointed out, 'the media, that set the agenda for the mass audience, decide about what will people think, although it is unknown what these people will think' (Achkasova, 2012). In the case of François Hollande, military operations and other events were unable to divert the attention of the French people away from everyday problems such as economic difficulties and high unemployment. At the same time, the personal life of François Hollande was a smart 'unobtrusive' story for the media, providing a reason to disapprove of his both political activities and official duties.

The Ukraine Crisis and the Public Opinion in Russia

To begin with, one should note one very important fact: approval ratings of Vladimir Putin as the president or prime minister of Russia has always been very high and never actually went down to the danger level of 50%. Twice the ratings approached the level of 60% (but not less). The first time this happened was during a programme of 'social welfare monetisation'. The second instance occurred during and after the so-called 'protest wave' in 2011-2012. Sociologists have taken to using the phrase 'Teflon rating' to describe this paradoxical phenomenon in which no bad news seems to be able to damage Putin's popularity in Russia. Thus, it can be concluded that the high level of Putin's support has been and will continue to be a long-lasting phenomenon in Russia.

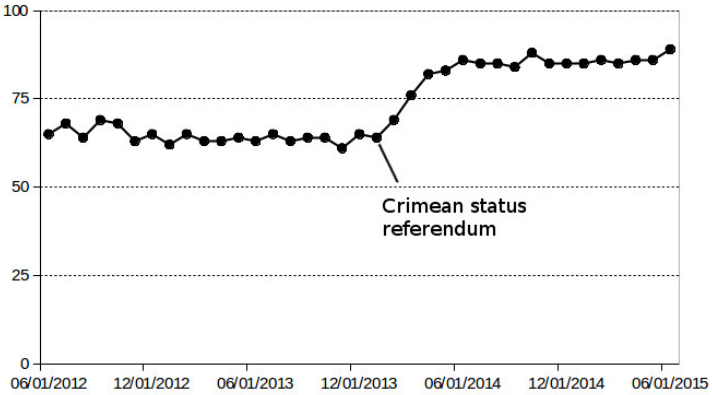

Figure 3. Political agenda and approval of activity of President Putin in 2012-2015
Source: Compiled by the authors, based on data from the Levada Center (http://www.levada.ru)

The Ukraine crisis in 2014 has two major parts. The first one was about Russian occupation of the Crimea Peninsula in the beginning of 2014 followed by the referendum in Crimea. The second part was caused by secession of Donbass, Eastern part of Ukraine, which take part in the late of 2014. A detailed analysis of Putin's ratings over the last three years reveals that 2-3 months after the referendum in Crimea and the official decision of Russia to include Crimea in the Russian Federation, Putin's approval ratings increased by 20% (Figure 3). Preceding events in Ukraine were connected with the so-called 'Euromaidan', meaning the overthrow and subsequent flight of Ukraine's current president Viktor Yanukovych. However, these previous events had no significant effect on Putin's ratings. Thus, the decision to include Crimea in the Russian Federation was a landmark event that has had a significant impact on the political agenda of contemporary Russia.

The Ukraine-Russia relations since the collapse of USSR were characterised by economic issues. The crucial problem was the price of oil and the fees imposed by Ukraine for transporting it to Europe, a key Russian market. Historically the Crimean Peninsula was part of the Russian Soviet Republic from the moment when the USSR was formed. However, in 1954, this region was transferred to the Ukrainian Soviet Republic in order to improve governability and boost economic growth. Under the Soviet Union, this question had no importance, but today border movement and controls have taken precedence in international relations, unprecedented for Europe. Additionally, the Russian language is not a state language in Ukraine. The request to grant Russian language a state status played a major role in the Ukraine Crisis because almost all the population of Donbass and Crimean Peninsula speak Russian.

It is also necessary to take into account the internal political situation in Russia that is associated with the so-called 'protest wave' of 2011-2012 (Gel'man, 2013; White, & McAllister, 2014). Many authors have

discussed possible scenarios of the political developments in authoritarian countries when ruling elites face large-scale protests (Finkel & Brudny, 2012; Koesel & Bunce, 2013). It is likely that internal political mobilisation and rallying citizens around a national leader is one of the most likely scenarios in this case (Gerber, 2014; Gerber, 2015; Gjerde, 2015). Hence, it becomes clear that a new political agenda in contemporary Russia is not about international affairs, but rather about domestic policy to consolidate its authoritarian political system.

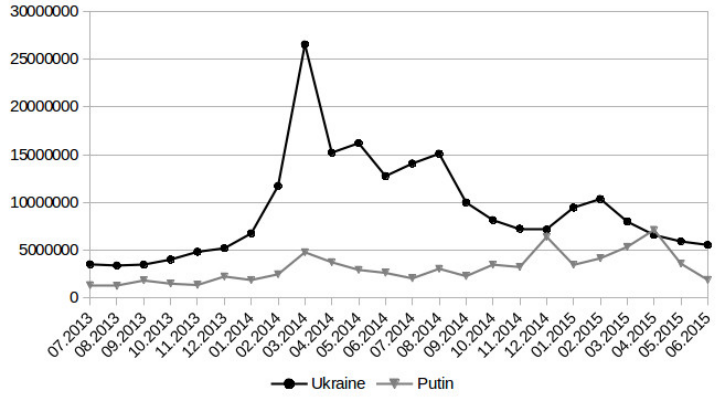

Figure 4. Search queries in Yandex for keywords 'Ukraine' and 'Putin'
Source: Compiled by the authors, based on data from Yandex (http://www.wordstat.yandex.ru)

Figure 4 displays the dynamics of search queries in Yandex for the keywords 'Ukraine' and 'Putin'. The picture represents the dynamics of real political interests among citizens of Russia. One can see that the attention given to Ukraine and Putin by Russian Internet users has grown considerably since the beginning of the events surrounding Crimea and eastern Ukraine. While the interest in Ukraine then levelled off (though at a level two times higher than it was initially), the interest in Putin has only increased. someone can observe misalignment of the trends in the second half of the time period. There was a great deal of attention given to the Ukraine crisis in the beginning, but since then Putin has occupied the central position in the political agenda of Russia.

CONCLUSION

It should be noted there is a very important question about the possibility of using the agenda-setting theory for analysing political communication in non-democratic countries (Dyakova, 2002). It is impossible to speak about any kind of totalitarian control over the mass media in modern Russia. The Russian media sphere is more competitive than, for example, in China, especially in relation to the Internet. The international non-governmental organisation Reporters

Without Borders indicates in its world press freedom index that Russia belongs to the category of countries with a 'complicated situation' regarding freedom of the press in 2010, ranking 148th out of 180 (Reporters sans Frontiers, 2014). At the same time, China is in the category of countries with a 'very difficult situation' in the field of freedom of speech, ranking 175th out of 180. Moreover, as indicated by S. Della-Vigna and E. Kaplan, Rupert Murdoch's Fox News managed to increase voter turnout for the Republican Party by 4-8% in the United States in the states where it was broadcast (Islam, 2008). This suggests the influence of the media in democratic political systems. Thus, the impact of agenda-setting may differ in authoritarian and democratic regimes, but the effect is present in both systems.

The agenda-setting theory can be applied to studies focused on post-Soviet transformations because public opinion has become a vital part of domestic and foreign policies in these countries. Many authors have discussed the phenomenon of President Vladimir Putin's long-lasting popularity (Finkel & Brudny, 2012; Gerber, 2014; Gerber, 2015; Gjerde, 2015; Koesel & Bunce, 2013; Mishler & Willerton, 2003; Nikolaev, 2012; Persson & Petersson, 2014; Wood, 2011). One factor of his popularity deals with the use of public relations techniques that help to produce an image of a unique political leader. Moreover, Russian authorities have recently successfully applied an agenda-setting approach to influence public opinion in Russia and abroad. For example, the latest development in Syria on the eve of the 70th session of the United Nations General Assembly almost completely shifted the attention of the world and public opinion from the crisis in Ukraine to the situation in Syria. In the last decade, Russia has developed a broad network of mass media and PR agencies to promote its foreign policy, for example making TV channel 'Russia Today' (RT) the most notable outlet for the Russian government and its foreign policy.

In scientific literature, there are two theories related to this phenomenon: institutional effectiveness and cultural tradition. The institutional effectiveness hypothesis emphasises good economic performance of the regime (Anisimov, 2014; Mishler & Willerton, 2003). The cultural tradition hypothesis focuses instead on Putin's abilities to activate and to resemble old political culture archetypes that are rooted deeply in the subconscious of Russians (Nikolaev, 2012; Persson & Petersson, 2014; Wood, 2011). Both factors have had a positive impact on Vladimir Putin's high ratings. It is also important to note that before the recent events, Vladimir Putin's rating reached its maximum (88%) in September 2008, immediately after the armed conflict in Ossetia and Abkhazia (Volkov, 2015).

To sum up, agenda-setting is able, in some cases, to achieve very impressive results and to cause a significant increase in the level of support and the mobilisation of supporters. This is especially true in cases of serious armed conflicts. This is the

reason why in order to solve some internal political problem, some political forces have used the method of a 'small victorious war'. If successful, military confrontations can have a significant effect on public opinion in favour of the winner and divert the attention of citizens away from real socio-economic and political problems. In this regard, there is no more adequate theory for the analysis of empirical data than the theory of agenda-setting. However, it is important to understand that agenda-setting theory is only effective in the case of 'non-intrusive' events. Also, it should rely on prevailing social stereotypes followed by a combination of priming, spin-doctoring or framing. It is important to have a reputable leader capable of mobilising supporters. Thus, it is not surprising that in the case of President Vladimir Putin, the active use of foreign policy events has led to a drastic increase in political support in spite of the declining socio-economic situation. Economic concerns have been compensated for so far by the reputation of successful economic policy in previous years.

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