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When the Party's Over: Political Blame Attribution under an Electoral Authoritarian Regime[1]

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Abstract

How is the perception of the state authorities affected when an economic downturn interferes with citizens' patriotic unity? Which reaction takes the upper hand: a 'rally around the flag' born of geopolitical success, or grievance over economic misfortune? By means of a survey experiment, we aim to explore the mechanisms of blame and credit when a rally around the flag coincides with a major economic downturn, and we estimate the effects of the Crimean events and the economic crisis on how Russians assess the performance of federal political institutions. Our findings suggest that economic hardships are attributed exclusively to the government and the State Duma, while it is only the president who benefits from the rally around the flag. Moreover, the president receives additional benefit when the 'patriotic unity' priming meets the 'economic hardship' priming, thereby resulting in a double rally around the flag effect. This suggests that the president stands apart from state institutions when responsibility is assigned, and he is the only one to enjoy national consolidation around him, which is further reinforced by poor economic conditions. Spotlighting the president increases his popularity and consequently increases the costs of political divides, while the legislature and the government can be exploited as scapegoats for policy failures.

Key words: blame attribution, economic crisis, rally around the flag, public opinion, electoral authoritarianism, Russia, survey experiment.

Word count: 7,928

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Introduction

Since 2013, Russia has found itself in an economic recession stemming from domestic economic imbalances and a sharp drop in oil export prices. By fall 2014, citizens' purchasing capacity had shrunk dramatically following the imposition of economic sanctions and the implementation of the Russian reciprocal embargo. At the same time, the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 boosted Vladimir Putin's political ratings to at least 80% (Frye et al. 2017).[2] The phenomenon of a sudden increase in political support due to temporary patriotic consolidation around the national leader has given rise to the term 'rally around the flag' (Mueller 1970), and in Russia this coincided with a creeping economic stagnation. Despite the currency crisis in fall 2014 and the subsequent recession, political support for the state leadership and the president in particular remained abnormally high.

How do Russians evaluate the performance of political institutions in times when a high level of patriotism coincides with economic recession? Does rallying around the flag reinforce credit attribution and, conversely, to what extent do economic grievances reinforce blame attribution? In this study, we aim to explore the mechanisms of blame and credit when a surge in patriotism coincides with a major economic downturn. Moreover, we estimate the effects of the Crimean events and perceptions of economic crisis on how Russians assess the effectiveness of federal political institutions. We rely on the results of a countrywide representative survey carried out in August 2016 where treatment questions are randomized. We start by testing how overall attitudes towards said events and the state of the economy affect citizens' evaluation of political institutions. We then explore whether evaluation of state institutions differs under Crimea priming – the question item 'Do you support the Russian leadership's decision of Crimea's joining the Russian Federation?' – when it is presented alone versus when the question about Crimea is followed by the question about the state of the economy ('Many experts claim that Russia is now undergoing an economic crisis. Do you agree with them?'). This setup enables us to see whether the rise in patriotism compensated for the lack of economic effectiveness or whether the poor economy tarnished the geopolitical success.

There are concerns that respondents in regimes with limited freedom of speech may falsify their preferences (Kuran 1991). If so, this may pose additional complications for the reliability of the results, and accordingly we model priming effects in order to grasp the potential sensitivity of the Crimean events when coupled with a question on the poor state of the economy. A combination of the questions on Crimea and the economic crisis thus forms an experimental group, while respondents in the control group answered only the question on the Crimean events. Comparison of the mean values of the two groups allows us to capture the systematic skewing (if any) in the respondents' answers. The priming questions were immediately followed by the evaluations of the effectiveness of the state authorities.

Our findings suggest that economic hardship is primarily attributed to the government and the State Duma while the president escapes condemnation. At the same time, it is only the president who benefits from the rally around the flag. Contrary to our expectations, combining priming on the economy and Crimea does not produce a disillusionment effect; instead, the latter reinforces rallying around the president. In other words, the president receives additional benefit when the 'patriotic unity' priming is combined with the 'economic hardship' priming—a double 'rally around the flag' effect. However, perceptions of the Crimean events and the economy may not be independent: state-sponsored mass media frame the economic hardship as originating from the Western sanctions, rather than resulting from domestic mismanagement. Russian media present

[2] Previous scholarship (e.g., Frye et al. 2017) provides evidence that the true preferences of Russian citizens are not that far from the numbers reported by the Russian pollsters.

the struggle with the economic downturn as the state leadership's determination to cope with exogenous challenges.

Institutional designs determine blame attribution mechanisms and who ultimately benefits from high levels of patriotism: presidential systems turn citizens' attention towards the executive rather than legislative bodies (Tilley and Hobolt 2014). Under personalist dictatorships that tend to embrace presidentialism, legislatures serve as scapegoats for domestic policy failures. Such distribution of attention and blame spotlights the president, and thereby increases his/her popularity. The latter consequently increases the costs of political divides among the elites and the opposition. As soon as legislatures come to operate as the primary cooptation mechanisms under authoritarian regimes, rallying effects decrease the costs of power sharing and cooptation for the incumbent (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007, Svolik 2012). In the Russian context, this would suggest the shrinkage of the ruling coalition in favor of its core supporters and further deinstitutionalization of legislatures.

Our study contributes to the literature on how the rally around the flag effect operates under non-democratic conditions, how it interacts with economic blame attribution, and whether potentially sensitive questions skew the respondents' evaluations of institutional performance. The study also contributes to the literature on public opinion under non-democratic conditions, mechanisms of blame attribution, and the political consequences of economic recession in non-democratic regimes. The paper consists of a theory section followed by a research design and results section, and finally discussion.

Theoretical Framework

According to the economic voting literature, economic crises affect the domestic political regime and may result in changes within the government (Haggard 2000; Gasiorowski 1995). Previous large-N cross-sectional analysis suggests that, in general, economic downturns tend to harm the stability of political regimes and lead to changes of government in democracies, or even facilitate a slide into authoritarianism. On the other hand, the nature and extent of the political damage caused by an economic crisis depends on adjustment policies and coalitional politics (Pepinsky 2009, 2012). Some political regimes succeed in absorbing the shock of the crisis through rearranging their relations with interest groups and even ruling coalitions. By comparison with democracies, autocracies enjoy more leeway in their responses to such crises and economic downturns due to the ability to strengthen their clientelistic ties (Golosov 2016). If overall economic wellbeing decreases, the cost of additional votes also drops, which opens up opportunities for electoral clientelism and vote-buying. As voters' vulnerability grows, it becomes easier to exercise control over their actions. An authoritarian context makes these citizens particularly vulnerable in cases of political non-compliance. The worse the economic conditions, the more support the incumbent receives (the 'tragic brilliance' thesis) (Diaz-Cayeros, Magaloni, and Weingast 2003; Magaloni 2006).

In democratic regimes, subjective perceptions of economic dynamics play a decisive role in explaining political support (Kaufman 2009; Gélineau 2013). Authoritarian regimes are, on average, less economically sustainable than democracies; however, there are notable instances where authoritarianism is supported by a relatively high per capita income (e.g., China, Singapore, Malaysia, or Russia). If the economy deteriorates gradually without severe demand shocks, or the crisis affects certain sectors of industries more heavily than others, perceptions of the economic situation may vary significantly. This is why one needs to control for subjective perceptions of the economy in order to define whether or not given economic issues are sufficiently salient for the respondents.

One of the mechanisms for sustaining authoritarian regimes during a crisis is to provoke short-lived but effective nationalistic events to boost support for the regime. All else being equal, the rally around the flag effect increases political support for the ruling authorities (Mueller 1970; Chatagnier 2012). Such consolidating events, usually military conflicts, downplay the opposition's criticism of those in power and temporarily strengthen the incumbent's position. The key point is that the rally around the flag effect brings about an increase in political support not only for the president in presidential systems, but for all related institutions, including political parties, and the government (Hetherington and Nelson 2003). Thus, the beneficial effects of consolidating patriotic events tend to spill over onto other political institutions—the legislature, the police, and the parties.

Current developments in Russia offer a rare opportunity to explore the mechanisms of responsibility attribution under an electoral authoritarianism which is simultaneously experiencing high levels of patriotism and suffering a creeping economic recession. The signs of an impending crisis were already visible in 2013 (some scholars even prefer to speak of an ongoing crisis dating from 2008; see Robinson 2013). Russian economists registered the alarming signals of approaching crisis in fall 2013 (*Vedomosti*, September 23, 2013), and when it erupted a year later, the ruble underwent several waves of depreciation. At the same time, oil prices dropped, economic sanctions harshened, capital outflow increased, and the inflation rate reached 11.4%—twice the forecast figures—and the Central Bank made several attempts to improve it (*Interfaks*, January 12, 2015). Macroeconomic indicators in fall 2014 indicated a decrease in real wages, contraction in household consumption, and mass deposit outflow. These developments appear particularly striking in the context of growing endorsement of Vladimir Putin in foreign policy terms.

On March 16, 2014, the results of a referendum favored the political independence of the Republic of Crimea. Two days later, Crimea entered the Russian Federation, thereby forming two new federal units: Sevastopol, a city with federal status, and Crimea, a twenty-second republic. The secession was carefully orchestrated by the Russian authorities and took place without outright violence, although it featured the unofficial presence of the Russian military with no identifying marks, whom observers immediately dubbed 'green men'. Russia continues to deny any military interference with the secession.

The actions by the Russian government and the military were widely declared unlawful intervention and violation of the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Within the next six months, the EU, USA and other countries imposed their first package of international sanctions upon Russia, including bans on international trade and the introduction of blacklists of Russian officials travelling to the US and EU.

Figure 1 demonstrates the dynamics of Putin's approval rating from 1999 to 2017; we observe a steady decline in support from 2010 until the winter Olympic Games in 2014. The rating skyrocketed immediately after the annexation of Crimea, from about 61% to 89%. After 2016, we observe a slight decline in support to 80%, which still reflects an extremely high level of support for the president.

[Figure 1 near here]

The literature offers several insights into how the state of the economy and geopolitical events independently translate into political support. However, there is a lack of understanding of how the two factors interact and how the surge in patriotism and the poor state of the economy affect the sustainability of political institutions under authoritarian rule. Drawing on the Russian studies literature and comparative political economy literature, we assume that those who are in favor of Crimea joining the Russian Federation will be less critical of Russian political institutions,

controlling for other factors. By contrast, those who agree that the economic crisis is severe will be more critical of Russian political institutions.

Responsibility attribution can also be confounded by a number of other factors such as partisanship (Cantu and Garcia-Ponce 2015), interest in and knowledge of politics (delli Carpini and Keeter 2000), and media consumption (Druckman 2014, Prior 2013). Partisanship serves as a 'perceptual screen' for citizens in selecting institutions for evaluation and how they are subsequently blamed or credited. Frye (2017) finds evidence that partisanship plays a central role in responses to economic sanctions: Putin skeptics tend to blame the Russian government more than Putin supporters when provided with information about the sanctions imposed on Russia. Those who support United Russia, and Vladimir Putin personally, selectively punish institutions for political failures. Oppositionists, on the other hand, put more blame on the incumbent for all negative outcomes, without praising him for the positive ones. However, knowledge of how the political system operates, and which bodies bear responsibility for which policy areas, would lead to more accurate attribution of blame and credit, thereby alleviating partisan effects (Dalton 1984, Gomez and Wilson 2001).

On the other hand, higher exposure to politically-charged information shifts people's perceptions of political events and may form specific causal mechanisms or narratives. State television has consistently praised Vladimir Putin for the peaceful and 'procedurally legitimate' (i.e., referendum-based) return of Crimea, while distancing the president from economic troubles and barely mentioning the economic recession in the news. The only TV channel that repeatedly addresses various aspects of domestic and international economy is RBC, which only attracts a narrow (if knowledgeable) share of viewers (Rosenfeld 2018).

This means that the Russian government can largely escape blame due to the wave of patriotism and deliberate skewing of information by the media. Media propaganda does not operate in a direct and unmediated way. Rather, it interacts with partisanship: oppositionists watching pro-incumbent news tend to deem the information to be less credible and, conversely, consuming friendly media will reinforce their prior beliefs about the state of affairs. Our data allow us to estimate partisan effects and effects of media consumption based on self-reported information. Unfortunately, we cannot explore the effects of political knowledge due to the absence of relevant survey questions. For instance, education would not be a good replacement for the measurement of competence as the majority of Russian respondents obtained a higher education and there is little variance to explore.

Research Design and Results

We conducted a population-based survey experiment in August 2016, carried out by the Levada Center, one of the leading independent polling agencies in Russia. The survey sample consists of 1,601 respondents aged over 18 years and is representative of the population of Russia (for descriptive statistics see Table A in the Appendix). In a nationwide survey, we randomly assigned priming questions, so that the first group was exposed to the question about the respondents' attitude towards the joining[3] of Crimea to the Russian Federation ("Do you support the Russian leadership's decision of Crimea's joining the Russian Federation?"[4]); we refer to this as the Crimea

[3] We avoid the term 'annexation' in the question wording since it clearly implies the illegal nature of the event for respondents and could skew further responses, or the term 'rejoining', to prevent the opposite bias.

[4] We formulated questions for the main explanatory variables based on our knowledge of the general public attitude toward Crimea joining Russia and the economic crisis. Preliminary expectations about the answers to these questions were obtained from the media and all-Russia surveys, which earlier reported that almost 83% of the Russian population supported Crimea joining Russia, while about 70% (in August 2016) agreed that Russia was undergoing an economic crisis. We expected that the wording of our priming questions (1) would not provide any new information for respondents and (2) would provoke a positive answer to both questions.

group. The second group received a question on evaluation of the state of the national economy ("Many experts claim that Russia is now undergoing an economic crisis. Do you agree with them?"); this is the Economy group.[5] Respondents in the third group received the two questions in sequence: the question on the state of the economy followed the question on Crimea; this is the Crimea + Economy group (see Figure 2). The questions that measure outcome variables immediately followed the priming questions.

[Figure 2 near here]

The outcome variables are the evaluations of the president, the State Duma, and the government. We asked respondents to rate these authorities' performance on a scale from one for 'extremely ineffective' to four for 'extremely effective'. The questions for evaluation were asked in a sequence starting with the evaluation of the State Duma, followed by that of the president, and then the government[6] (see Figure 3 for univariate distribution of the outcomes by group). We measure the main effects of replying 'yes' to both priming questions, that is, supporting Crimea joining the Russian Federation and recognizing the economic crisis in Russia. We then estimate the interaction effect on the evaluation of the state leadership from replying 'yes' to these questions when they are asked consecutively. For all estimations, we use the same set of control variables: age, gender, education, size of settlement, federal district, political preferences (voted for United Russia, the party of power, and Vladimir Putin, the incumbent president, at previous elections), frequency of watching news on federal TV, and trust in objectivity of news coverage on federal TV channels.

[Figure 3 near here]

The president's score is the highest in all three groups. It is noteworthy that it is higher in the group primed on economy and highest when the two questions occur in sequence. The Duma's mean in the Economy group is lower than that in the Crimea group and higher than that in the Crimea + Economy group. The government's evaluation score is highest in the Economy group and lowest in the group with both questions.

As we expected, the vast majority of respondents endorsed Crimea joining Russia. About 92% in the Crimea group supported the statement. In the Crimea + Economy group, the share of supporters is almost the same: 93% of respondents endorse Crimea joining the Russian Federation, while only 7% do not. About 84% of respondents in the Economy group agree that there is presently an

[5] Initially, we used the group with no priming questions as the control group, but we did not include it in the analysis as using it does not correspond to the initial research question. If we compare treatment groups with the control one, we will learn how much priming shifts people's responses. However, this is not the only purpose of the study: rather, we wish to explore how both events shift blame attribution compared to the group with the Crimea event. To this end, one should take the 'single-treatment group' (the Crimea group) as baseline and the 'double-treatment group' (Crimea + Economy) as the experimental group.

[6] This approach leads respondents to compare the three political institutions with each other instead of evaluating them separately. Asking them to evaluate the government after the president, for example, might skew the evaluation of the government toward lower estimates, since the less popular government is to be compared with the extremely popular president. However, in the three groups the evaluation questions are asked in the same order, so that the shift in assessment between the groups can only be attributed to the effect of the treatment, even though the president is being systematically assessed in comparison with the Duma.

economic crisis in Russia, while slightly more, 87%, do so after answering the question on Crimea in the Crimea + Economy group (see Tables B and C of the Appendix).

We measured the main effects running OLS regressions while using the affirmative answers for the Crimea variable and the Economy variable as references. We find that the Duma's and the government's evaluation are not significantly affected by support for Crimea joining the Russian Federation. While those who do support this rate the president 0.48 units higher, which is higher by 12% on average [7] (see Figure 4; Table D of the Appendix), we find the opposite when measuring the main effect of recognition of the poor state of the Russian economy: the president's rating is the only one that remains unchanged when respondents agree that the crisis exists, while the Duma and the government are rated slightly lower (see Figure 5; Table E of the Appendix), 3% lower on average. Affirmative answers to both priming questions (see Figure 6; Table F of the Appendix) suggest that assessment of the government is more retrospective (i.e. praising it for the Crimean success and blaming it for the economic failure). The president is praised for Crimea and is not associated with the poor economy; the Duma's effectiveness is negatively associated with recognition of the economic crisis.

[Figures 4, 5, 6 near here]

We expect that revealing true preferences about the annexation of Crimea and the state of the economy in Russia might be problematic due to desirability bias and preference falsification issues (Kuran 1991). Especially in authoritarian settings, people might feel that their anonymous responses will be compromised, and so they protect themselves by voicing socially desirable answers rather than their true opinions. Thus, we complement measuring the main effects with estimation of the priming effect of the question on Crimea, and then the question on Crimea followed by the poor economy. We assume that mentioning the economic crisis after mentioning the annexation of Crimea events will in itself prime more critical assessment of the political institutions. Since the priming questions were randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups, we measure the average treatment effect (ATE) (Rubin 1977, 2005). We ran OLS regression with a dummy for the experimental group[8] including all controls similarly to previous models. The results in Figure 7 (and in Table G of the Appendix) suggest that under conditions of high levels of patriotism, interference from the economic crisis does not decrease, but even somewhat boosts support for the president, by 0.21 units (5%), while having no effect on perceptions of the government's and the State Duma's effectiveness. To prove that the results presented are robust, we provide randomized statistical inference (Table H of the Appendix).

[Figure 7 near here]

One of the potential limitations of the chosen design might be the fact that we cannot ensure that both priming questions produced orthogonal effects as we initially assumed. From previous surveys, we derived initial expectations that these events are independent: Russian citizens consistently mention the rise of consumer prices, the rapid impoverishment of the majority of the population, and other economic misfortunes, as the main issues of concern.[9] Conversely, the annexation of Crimea is viewed as an unambiguously positive event. However, the Russian media

[7] According to the 1 to 4 Likert scale mentioned earlier.
[8] We coded the Crimea group with '0' and the Crimea + Economy group with '1'.
[9] The Levada Center website: https://www.levada.ru/2017/08/31/samye-ostrye-problemy-2/

largely framed the economic crisis as harm produced by international sanctions rather than internal politics (Frye 2017). State television has considerably contributed to the narratives of responsibility attribution by incessantly stressing aggression from the West and presenting the president as defender of national interests.

Exposure to Media

Biased media coverage in Russia plays an important role in shaping attitudes to the annexation of Crimea and evaluation of the state of the economy in Russia. To test whether the effect of state propaganda could have significantly contributed to shaping public opinion on these issues, we included in the model two variables that measure the frequency of consumption and the perception of the truthfulness of messages transmitted via TV. The Frequency of Watching News on TV variable is on a 4-point scale, where '1' stands for 'never' and '4' stands for 'daily'. For the Trust in Objectivity variable, '4' denotes evaluation of news as objective, while '1' indicates a lack of trust in news on the state TV channels. We also included the Going Online variable (Internet), which serves as a proxy for access to alternative news. The variable is measured with a 4-item scale, where '1' stands for 'never' and '4' stands for 'daily'. The results plotted in Figure 8 demonstrate that trust in the objectivity of news causes support for the authorities to skyrocket. However, the frequency of news consumption makes little difference to evaluations (See Figure 8, 9 and 10 in the Appendix), while frequent Internet use *decreases* support for the president. The quality of news consumption, or believing in the trustworthiness of the news reported, thus has a more pronounced impact on supporting incumbents compared to only consuming propaganda regardless of attitude to its reliability.

[Figure 8 near here]

Income

We measured the effect of respondents' income on the outcome variables in two ways. The Purchasing Capacity variable is measured on a three-item scale with respondents' income categories being 'rich', 'average income', and 'poor'. We also used a variable measure of the respondent's family income: 'What can you spend your monthly salary on?' (see Figures 11, 12). The results demonstrate that income does *not* have a significant effect on the perception of effectiveness of the incumbents.

[Figures 11, 12 near here]

The Role of Partisanship

Given the fact that the existing party system does little to represent actual ideological preferences, we have to resort to a more simplistic distinction between Putin skeptics and Putin supporters. This cannot capture a meaningful variety of ideological preferences and excludes important groups of respondents. On the other hand, asking whom a respondent voted for at the last election can allow us at least to differentiate between pro-government voters and oppositionists. To construct the Political Preferences variable, we used two questions from the Levada Center's regular 'Omnibus' survey: 'Whom did you vote for at the previous presidential elections?' and 'Whom did you vote for at the previous parliamentary elections?' The answers to these questions—we assume—serve as indicators of the political views possessed by the respondents. We merged these two variables and coded '1' for previous support for Vladimir Putin and United Russia and '0' otherwise. The

results plotted in Figure 13 indicate that the main effects of the affirmative answers to the priming questions remain the same, while previous support for Vladimir Putin and United Russia at elections is positively associated with evaluation of the government and the president.

[Figure 13 near here]

Partisanship predictably plays a decisive role in assessment of institutional performance. Those who support Crimea joining the Russian Federation demonstrate significantly higher approval of the president and somewhat higher approval of the government. Meanwhile those who agree that Russia is undergoing a severe economic crisis assess the government and the State Duma more negatively. The effects are larger for the government. Assessment of the president's performance does not depend on perceptions of the economic crisis.

Discussion

The mechanisms of political blame attribution vary with regimes and institutional designs. The results of our survey experiment demonstrate that respondents associate different political institutions with various public policies. The case of Russia clearly shows that there is a perceptual difference in assessing the president and other institutions: the president and to an extent the government benefit from international actions that are deemed successful, while the government and the legislature bear the responsibility for domestic policies. This 'division of labor' replicates itself in the contexts of the economy and international relations. We observe selective attention to various political bodies and selective punishment: the president is seen as responsible for international affairs, while the State Duma and the government are considered responsible for internal affairs.

The latter provides additional evidence that a presidential institutional design turns respondents' attention towards the executive rather than legislative bodies. The attitudes toward the State Duma tell us that respondents hold it accountable for policy areas where it has little say. The Russian legislature has no impact on the formation of the federal government and it seems puzzling why it should bear responsibility in policy areas where it does not make any decisions. At the same time, the State Duma is the only institution that does not benefit from the rally around the flag and operates as a scapegoat for domestic policy failures. However, the State Duma does not decide much in the realm of international affairs either. This finding should not be interpreted as the lack of respondents' political sophistication, but rather as the fact that the Russians do not credit the State Duma with geopolitical victories. This is not a general lack of credit, but rather the lack of credit given to the Russian legislature, which often plays the role of scapegoat in multiple contexts, including the ongoing economic crisis.

We find evidence that respondents do adjust their evaluations when economic hardships flare up in times of high levels of patriotism, but this shifts public attitudes in a quite unexpected way. The president's evaluations reflect a double rallying effect when both primings—Crimea and the economy—collide. People react differently to the question regarding the poor economy in times of patriotic consolidation and evaluate the president's performance more highly (compared to conditions of patriotic consolidation without economic hardships). The latter stems from the link between a perceived external threat and the negative role of sanctions, which is transmitted and reinforced by the state-sponsored media as opposed to the 'defensive' stance of the Russian government. A majority of respondents may view the economic downturn as a result of exogenous threats rather than a homegrown crisis.

In summary, there are patterns of political blame attribution stemming from the institutional 'division of labor' between the president, the government, and the State Duma in the eyes of most

respondents. Russians attribute failures in economic policies primarily to the government and to the State Duma. We are still observing the echo of the patriotic surge after the annexation of Crimea, of which the president remains the main beneficiary. Ultimately, the president benefits from cherry-picked political successes, while the government and especially the State Duma serve as scapegoats.

The state-sponsored media largely define how blame and credit are attributed. Media consumption under non-democratic regimes poses a challenge to scholars, as the public's true preferences are unobservable; it is difficult to differentiate between genuine opinion and a falsified preference. The Russian political regime still allows for alternative sources of information, although the latter are under the constant pressure of state censorship and financial limitations. The Russian media debate around the economic crisis has not attracted much attention and is mostly limited to specialized media outlets such as the RBC TV channel or the *Vedomosti* newspaper, which target a relatively narrow segment of the public. State-sponsored media broadcast the narrative that economic hardship originates from elsewhere and Russian authorities have to cope with exogenous threats allegedly imposed by the US and EU. Such framing reinforces support for the political leadership and results in a stronger 'rallying' effect for the president.

That said, blaming the guilty depends on how perceptions are formed. As long as Russian citizens believe that the government—and to some degree the State Duma—bear responsibility for poor economic performance, in the event of further deterioration they will blame not the president, but the government and, perhaps, the Duma. Thus, the president is to be blamed only for policies that are believed to be within his/her realm of decision-making. The recent pension reform and a decrease in mass support for the president illustrate this idea. Social security and welfare are areas of responsibility of the executive, including the president. It is hardly possible to shift the blame for these to foreign actors, and the media campaign has proved to be more ambiguous in blame attribution. The unavailability of a scapegoat and less coherent media framing has resulted in a dramatic decrease in political ratings. However, this remains a subject for deeper and more rigorous research.

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Appendices

Table A. Summary Statistics

Variable	Description	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Duma Evaluation	Evaluation of the State Duma's effectiveness, where 1 – extremely ineffective and 4 – extremely effective	1,468	2.24	0.86	1	4
President Evaluation	Evaluation of President Putin's effectiveness, where 1 – extremely ineffective and 4 – extremely effective	1,532	2.95	0.82	1	4
Government Evaluation	Evaluation of the government's effectiveness, where 1 – extremely ineffective and 4 – extremely effective	1,489	2.31	0.84	1	4
Gen	Gender	1,601	1.55	0.50	1	2
Age	Age (in years)	1,601	44.74	16.85	18	94
Edu	Level of education: 1. primary school, secondary school and vocational school (PTU) 2. secondary school (10 or 11 classes) 3. vocational school (PTU) based on secondary school 4. secondary specialized education (technical school) 5. higher education	1,601	3.57	1.35	1	5
Crimea	Do you support the Russian leadership's decision of Crimea's joining the Russian Federation? 1 – yes, 0 – no	892	0.93	0.26	0	1
Economy	Many experts claim that Russia is now undergoing an economic crisis. Do you agree with them? 1 – yes, 0 – no	824	0.86	0.35	0	1
Frequency of watching news on TV	How often do you watch news on state TV channels, where 1 – never, 4 – daily?	1,578	1.93	1.02	1	4
Trust in objectivity of news on TV	How objective in your opinion are news on state TV channels, where 1 – extremely biased, 4 – very objective?	1,451	2.74	0.76	1	4
Purchasing capacity	1 -poor; 2 - average; 3 -rich	1,601	2.11	0.66	1	3

Family income	Household monthly income	1,601	30,375.75	29,888.28	98	300,000
Internet (Frequency of going online)	How often do you go online, where 1 – never, 4 – daily?	1,601	2.80	1.27	1	4
Federal district	1. Northwest 2. Central 3. South + North Caucasus 4. Volga 5. Ural 6. Siberia 7. Far East	1,601	3.46	1.68	1	7
Size of settlement	1. Moscow 2. urban area with more than 500 thousand dwellers 3. urban area from 100 to 500 thousand dwellers 4. urban area with up to 100 thousand dwellers 5. rural area	1,601	3.33	1.30	1	5
Political preferences	Voted for Putin and United Russia at previous election, where 1 – voted, 0 – did not vote	1,198	0.54	0.50	0	1

Table B: Distribution of answers on the question about Crimea by group

Do you support the Russian leadership's decision of Crimea's joining the Russian Federation?		Freq.	Percent
Crimea Group			
	Yes, I do support	394	92.27
	No, I don't support	33	7.73
	Total	427	100.00
Crimea + Economy Group			
	Agree	434	93.33
	Disagree	31	6.67
	Total	465	100.00

Source: Levada Center, authors' dataset, 2016

Table C: Distribution of answers on the question about the state of the economy by group

Many experts claim that Russia is now undergoing an economic crisis. Do you agree with them?		Freq.	Percent
Economy Group			
	Agree	309	84.20
	Disagree	58	15.80
	Total	367	100.00
Crimea + Economy Group			
	Agree	398	87.09
	Disagree	59	12.91
	Total	457	100.00

Source: Levada Center, authors' dataset, 2016

Table D. Main effects of support for Crimea's joining Russia, controls included

VARIABLES	(1) Duma[10]	(2) President	(3) Government
Approved of the annexation of Crimea	-0.13	0.48***	0.18
	(-0.99)	(3.30)	(1.37)
Gender	-0.05	0.03	0.07
	(-0.83)	(0.42)	(1.11)
Age	-0.01	-0.05***	-0.02
	(-0.92)	(-3.60)	(-1.49)
Age^2	0.00	0.00***	0.00
	(0.99)	(3.46)	(1.19)
Education	0.02	0.03	0.01
	(0.72)	(0.98)	(0.34)
Family income	0.00	-0.00	0.00
	(0.17)	(-0.19)	(0.15)
Size of settlement *(Moscow – baseline)*			
more than 500 thousand	0.16	-0.21	0.11
	(1.19)	(-1.60)	(0.87)
from 100 to 500 thousand	0.11	-0.35**	0.04
	(0.92)	(-2.78)	(0.35)
up to 100 thousand	0.13	-0.44***	-0.04
	(1.02)	(-3.37)	(-0.31)
rural area	0.09	-0.45***	-0.06
	(0.65)	(-3.47)	(-0.42)
Federal district *(Northwest – baseline)*			
Central	0.04	-0.14	0.15
	(0.33)	(-1.37)	(1.24)
South + North Caucasus	0.07	0.04	0.25*
	(0.51)	(0.41)	(2.00)
Volga	-0.01	-0.06	0.15
	(-0.06)	(-0.59)	(1.07)
Ural	0.15	0.12	0.23
	(1.07)	(0.85)	(1.49)
Siberia	-0.13	-0.08	-0.08
	(-0.88)	(-0.59)	(-0.58)
Far East	-0.19	0.48***	-0.08
	(-0.93)	(2.82)	(-0.33)
Political preferences	0.18*	0.25***	0.27***
	(2.44)	(3.74)	(3.78)
Frequency (news on TV)	0.13***	-0.11**	0.07~
	(3.31)	(-2.81)	(1.81)
Trust in objectivity (news on TV)	0.36***	0.35***	0.42***
	(7.57)	(7.08)	(8.56)

[10] All dependent variables are centered around the mean.

Frequency of going online	0.05	-0.05	-0.01
	(1.39)	(-1.49)	(-0.27)
Constant	-1.26*	0.00	-1.33***
	(-2.52)	(0.01)	(-2.89)
Observations	586	609	593
R-squared	0.17	0.29	0.27
F test	6.00	9.34	9.96
Prob >F	0.00	0.00	0.00

t-statistics in parentheses,*** p<0.005, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, ~ p<0.1

Table E. Main effects of recognition of economic crisis, controls included

VARIABLES	(1) Duma	(2) President	(3) Government
Agree that there is an economiccrisis	-0.31***	-0.01	-0.30*
	(-2.90)	(-0.17)	(-2.46)
Gender	-0.02	0.09	0.09
	(-0.25)	(1.24)	(1.30)
Age	-0.02	-0.04**	-0.03*
	(-1.37)	(-2.79)	(-2.45)
Age^2	0.00	0.00**	0.00*
	(1.60)	(2.60)	(2.40)
Education	0.01	-0.03	0.01
	(0.49)	(-0.93)	(0.42)
Family income	0.00	-0.00	0.00
	(0.63)	(-0.06)	(1.55)
Size of settlement *(Moscow – baseline)*			
more than 500 thousand	0.19	-0.36*	-0.02
	(1.44)	(-2.41)	(-0.16)
from 100 to 500 thousand	0.19	-0.44***	0.03
	(1.52)	(-3.16)	(0.28)
up to 100 thousand	0.14	-0.43***	0.02
	(1.18)	(-2.98)	(0.18)
rural area	0.08	-0.40***	-0.11
	(0.58)	(-2.85)	(-0.82)
Federal district *(Northwest – baseline)*			
Central	0.02	-0.17	0.12
	(0.14)	(-1.37)	(0.81)
South + North Caucasus	-0.03	-0.03	0.29~
	(-0.20)	(-0.19)	(1.82)
Volga	0.05	0.08	0.34*
	(0.37)	(0.63)	(2.20)
Ural	0.22	0.14	0.28~
	(1.37)	(1.00)	(1.72)
Siberia	0.07	-0.10	0.02
	(0.43)	(-0.69)	(0.13)
Far East	0.01	0.53***	0.23
	(0.04)	(3.24)	(0.76)
Political preferences	0.15*	0.35***	0.24***
	(1.97)	(4.85)	(3.02)
Frequency (news on TV)	0.07~	-0.10*	0.02
	(1.77)	(-2.08)	(0.44)
Trust in objectivity (news on TV)	0.44***	0.41***	0.43***
	(8.76)	(6.85)	(7.80)
Frequency of going online	0.05	-0.01	-0.00
	(1.46)	(-0.14)	(-0.01)
Constant	-1.22**	0.15	-0.70

	(-2.81)	(0.30)	(-1.45)
Observations	535	553	538
R-squared	0.25	0.30	0.29
Prob >F	0.00	0.00	0.00

t-statistics in parentheses,*** p<0.005, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, ~ p<0.1

Table F. Main effects of recognition of economic crisis in Russia and support for the annexation of Crimea, controls included

VARIABLES	(1) Duma	(2) President	(3) Government
Appr. of the annex. of Crimea	-0.08	0.58*	0.36~
	(-0.44)	(2.47)	(1.78)
Agree that there is an econ. crisis	-0.24~	0.05	-0.28*
	(-1.83)	(0.36)	(-1.97)
Gender	-0.09	0.08	0.10
	(-1.03)	(0.87)	(1.14)
Age	-0.03	-0.03~	-0.04*
	(-1.42)	(-1.89)	(-2.06)
Age^2	0.00	0.00~	0.00~
	(1.42)	(1.88)	(1.80)
Education	0.05	-0.02	0.04
	(1.31)	(-0.49)	(1.08)
Family income	0.00	-0.00	0.00
	(0.47)	(-0.81)	(0.65)
Size of settlement *(Moscow – baseline)*			
more than 500 thousand	0.10	-0.19	0.13
	(0.57)	(-0.96)	(0.67)
from 100 to 500 thousand	0.18	-0.36~	0.16
	(1.04)	(-1.88)	(0.92)
up to 100 thousand	0.08	-0.29	-0.01
	(0.49)	(-1.50)	(-0.06)
rural area	0.03	-0.32	-0.09
	(0.18)	(-1.63)	(-0.47)
Federal district *(Northwest – baseline)*			
Central	0.01	-0.08	0.29~
	(0.08)	(-0.49)	(1.70)
South + North Caucasus	0.18	0.09	0.51***
	(0.98)	(0.63)	(2.91)
Volga	0.15	0.02	0.47*
	(0.79)	(0.12)	(2.48)

Ural	0.38~	0.16	0.44*
	(1.88)	(0.99)	(2.11)
Siberia	-0.10	0.13	0.09
	(-0.52)	(0.81)	(0.49)
Far East	-0.23	0.77***	0.28
	(-0.81)	(4.20)	(1.00)
Political preferences	0.12	0.16~	0.27**
	(1.22)	(1.89)	(2.79)
Frequency (news on TV)	0.02	-0.03	0.02
	(0.38)	(-0.66)	(0.32)
Trust in objectivity (news on TV)	0.32***	0.44***	0.36***
	(5.60)	(5.99)	(5.41)
Frequency of going online	0.04	-0.02	-0.04
	(0.93)	(-0.33)	(-0.86)
Constant	-0.56	-0.84	-0.94
	(-0.94)	(-1.39)	(-1.62)
Observations	298	308	300
R-squared	0.22	0.33	0.32
F test	3.93	5.62	6.22
Prob >F	0.00	0.00	0.00

t-statistics in parentheses,*** p<0.005, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, ~ p<0.1

Table G. Average treatment effect estimation

VARIABLES	(1) Duma	(2) President	(3) Governnt
Crimea+Economy vs Crimea	-0.07	0.21***	0.05
	(-1.08)	(3.19)	(0.76)
Gender	-0.06	0.04	0.08
	(-0.89)	(0.66)	(1.28)
Age	-0.02	-0.04***	-0.02
	(-1.08)	(-3.55)	(-1.43)
Age^2	0.00	0.00***	0.00
	(1.14)	(3.40)	(1.10)
Education	0.02	0.02	0.01
	(0.76)	(0.78)	(0.33)
Family income	0.00	-0.00	-0.00
	(0.60)	(-0.72)	(-0.00)
Size of settlement *(Moscow – baseline)*			

more than 500 thousand	0.17	-0.30*	0.08
	(1.37)	(-2.11)	(0.60)
from 100 to 500 thousand	0.12	-0.42***	0.01
	(1.07)	(-3.13)	(0.06)
up to 100 thousand	0.16	-0.54***	-0.08
	(1.35)	(-3.90)	(-0.68)
rural area	0.10	-0.52***	-0.11
	(0.82)	(-3.84)	(-0.86)
Federal district *(Northwest – baseline)*			
Central	0.02	-0.12	0.13
	(0.15)	(-1.05)	(1.10)
South + North Caucasus	0.03	0.12	0.29*
	(0.25)	(1.10)	(2.31)
Volga	-0.03	0.01	0.17
	(-0.21)	(0.05)	(1.30)
Ural	0.14	0.16	0.25~
	(1.00)	(1.16)	(1.67)
Siberia	-0.12	-0.07	-0.07
	(-0.88)	(-0.50)	(-0.50)
Far East	-0.20	0.54***	-0.06
	(-0.96)	(3.20)	(-0.24)
Political preferences	0.18*	0.28***	0.27***
	(2.50)	(4.39)	(3.91)
Frequency (news on TV)	0.12***	-0.10**	0.07~
	(3.17)	(-2.76)	(1.89)
Trust in objectivity (news on TV)	0.36***	0.39***	0.44***
	(7.36)	(8.03)	(9.51)
Frequency of going online	0.05	-0.05	-0.01
	(1.37)	(-1.50)	(-0.27)
Constant	-1.26**	0.24	-1.27***
	(-2.78)	(0.58)	(-2.93)
Observations	594	618	602
R-squared	0.17	0.28	0.27
F test	5.67	9.26	10.28
Prob >F	0.00	0.00	0.00

t-statistics in parentheses, *** p<0.005, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, ~ p<0.1

Table H. Randomized Statistical Inference

Crimea vs Crimea + Economy	t-test	Wilcoxon rank-sum test	Fisher-Pitman permutation
State Duma Evaluation	0.02	0.05	0.05
President Evaluation	0.02	0.01	0.01
Government Evaluation	0.24	0.26	0.25

Note: p-values are obtained from several test statistics to estimate whether there is a statistically significant difference in the variables' means in the Crimea and the Crimea + Economy groups. We complement a t-test with Wilcoxon rank-sum (Mann-Whitney) and Fisher-Pitman (10, 000 replications) statistical inference tests, the latter is also referred to as a randomization test. The latter shows whether the Monte Carlo permutation test supports the results obtained from the normal approximation and proves robustness of the balances acquired. The results show that the means for the Duma and the President's evaluation are significantly different in the Crimea and Crimea + Economy groups.

Table I. Balance Checks

Groups	Test statistic	Crimea vs Crimea + Economy
Gender		
	t-test	0.15
	Wilcoxon rank-sum	0.15
	Fisher-Pitman permutation	0.15
Age		
	t-test	0.40
	Wilcoxon rank-sum	0.40
	Fisher-Pitman permutation	0.40
Education		
	t-test	0.05
	Wilcoxon rank-sum	0.03
	Fisher-Pitman permutation	0.03
Purchasing Capacity		
	t-test	0.89
	Wilcoxon rank-sum	0.67
	Fisher-Pitman permutation	0.66
Political Preferences		
	t-test	0.90
	Wilcoxon rank-sum	0.90
	Fisher-Pitman permutation	0.90
Size of Settlement		
	t-test	0.30
	Wilcoxon rank-sum	0.28
	Fisher-Pitman permutation	0.29
Federal District		
	t-test	0.91
	Wilcoxon rank-sum	0.83
	Fisher-Pitman permutation	0.83

Note: This table reports the same statistic as Table H. The results show that there is no statistically significant difference in the means of the balanced variables except for Education.