

National Identity and Public Opinion: Russia's Changing Domestic Demand for Foreign Policy¹

Marharyta Fabrykant, National Research University Higher School of Economics

marharyta.fabrykant@gmail.com, mfabrykant@hse.ru

The ongoing return of nationalism in the public political discourse suggests the compatible and probably preceding rise in the strength and perceived importance of national identity in the mass consciousness. Electoral success of politicians appealing to national pride and national greatness around the world appear to confirm this notion. The same slogans of national empowerment, however, can respond to very different and even opposite national identity attitudes: the majority of the population may be enthusiastic about the state of their country and require its confirmation or, on the contrary, unhappy and require change or at least the promise of change. The supply side of policymaking is more visible, so much so that it is tempting to believe that it simply mirrors or even shapes the less accessible popular demand, especially if a policy is successful. This success may nevertheless be short-lived if its demand-side roots are misinterpreted. With regard to national identity attitudes, the case of Russia, especially compared to that of the US, provides some illuminating evidence.

The survey data collected in 1996 demonstrate the initial gap within the Russian national identity between relatively high levels of pride in the country's accumulated achievements in the spheres of symbolic prestige, such as arts or sports, and low pride in the spheres directly related to wellbeing, such as the economy, social security, justice, or democracy. Importantly, pride in the nation's political influence in the world at that period is relatively low and therefore falls within the quality of life related rather than symbolic spheres. It means that *Russians regard the country's political influence of the world, as matter not of prestige, but of vital importance for well-being*. Interestingly, pride in the armed forces, rather high at that period, falls into the predominantly symbolic category, probably as a more easily visualized symbol (e.g. during military parades) if the more abstract notion of a country's political influence. The survey data from other countries show that this contrast between the relatively low pride in quality of life related achievements and high pride in symbolic achievements is not at all universal. It is not found in most countries including the US, where the levels of pride in the country's achievements in various spheres are more or less compatible.

¹ Note. This policy memo is based on the following paper: Fabrykant, M., & Magun, V. (2019). Dynamics of National Pride Attitudes in Post-Soviet Russia, 1996–2015. *Nationalities Papers*, 47(1), 20-37.

Nor should this gap be considered Russia's permanent defining feature. The data collected in 2003 and in 2012 using the same survey items indicate considerable diminution of the difference in the levels of the two categories of national pride attitudes. The initial difference might be largely contingent upon the dire circumstances of the early years of Russia's post-Soviet transition. The rapid growth in the level of pride in the quality of life related achievements in the 2000s are due partly to this relatively low start but more significantly, they occur in time with the consistent growth of Russia's economy. Importantly, this increase in national pride, although more marked in the period between 2003 and 2012, is observed already between 1996 and 2003. It indicates that the gap between national pride in symbolic and quality of life related achievements started to mend as early as in the 1990s, and the slogan of "rising up from the knees" appeared to respond to rather than engender this demand. Here again, this dynamics as well as the original gap itself is not observed in most countries. In the US in particular, the levels of national pride attitudes between 1996 and 2003, remained roughly the same (except a slight growth in pride in economy), and between 2003 and 2012, got somewhat lower, especially as regards pride in quality of life related achievements including democracy, political influence, fairness and equality, and economy. Thus, in the 2000s, national pride in quality of life related achievements in Russia and the US were changing with different speed and in opposing directions: in Russia, rapidly rising, and in the US, slowly falling.

The second obvious major objective factor affecting Russians' national pride after the economic growth of the 2000s is the incorporation of the Crimea. The period between 2012 and 2014 is marked by the rapid growth in pride in nearly all kinds of achievements – not only political influence, the armed forces, and the country's history, but also economy, democracy, fairness and equality for all groups, social security, science and technology, and – obviously in reaction to the Sochi Winter Olympics of 2014, sports. For many of these national pride attitudes, the net growth over these two years was compatible to that of the preceding nine; in other words, the incorporation of the Crimea made the growth in Russians' national pride comprehensive and nearly five times as fast as in the 2000s. As to how durable this effect was, the evidence is rather more complicated. According to the data collected in 2015, the majority of national pride attitudes, including pride in the country's political influence in the world, remained the same as in 2014, and three – pride in fairness, economy, and sports – even somewhat decreased. For pride in fairness and sports, it amounted to the return to the 2012 level, and the lower level of pride in the economy can be easily attributed to the depreciation of the Russian ruble in December 2014 following the drop in oil prices. The two kind of national pride that continued to grow are pride in the armed forces and in democracy. While the former is quite predictable, the latter seems rather counterintuitive. The reason for Russians' increasing pride in their country's progress in democracy development becomes clearer when the data on the quantitative dynamics in national pride are complemented with its substantive

transformations. Over the time, national pride in Russia was increasing not merely in absolute values but also in its correlation to another national identity related attitude – the belief in national superiority. Over the years, Russians would come to understand “doing well” as “doing better” than others. The two national pride attitudes that most strongly gained in competitiveness are, understandably, pride in the country’s political influence, and, again puzzlingly, pride in democracy. The fact that pride in Russia’s democracy has been growing and simultaneously becoming more competitive may be due to the popular understanding of democracy as “all things good” including material wellbeing and the general stability of the social order. The growing competitiveness may then be interpreted as a reaction to external critique of the situation with democracy in the contemporary Russia. Since democracy is popularly perceived as “all things good”, democracy-themed accusations are interpreted as the general criticism of the country and cause the indignant reaction of “we are not worse than you” which then easily transforms into the easily available continuation “not worse but even better”.

Here again, this correlation and its increase over time are not universal. In the US, there was no such increase: initially, in 1990s, the correlations between various facets of national pride and belief in national superiority were approximately as high as they came to be in Russia by 2015. Unlike in Russia, over the two decades they mostly remained the same, and the competitiveness of the pride in sports and the armed forces even somewhat decreased.

Taken together, these data yield a number of important takeaways. First, the current state of Russia’s national pride, despite its rather unusual than universal path of its development, is not extraordinary and does not set Russia apart from any other countries. On the contrary, the evolution of Russia’s national identity attitudes over the last two decades has made it closer to some other countries, and the US in particular. Generally speaking, Russia and the US arrived to roughly compatible levels of national pride and its competitiveness, albeit this similarity is obscured by the opposite paths – those of rapid increase and slight decrease, respectively. What occasionally appears in the public sphere as an increased rivalry between the two countries is due, at least as far as the public opinions is concerned, not so much to differences as to similarities.

Second, the growth in Russia’s national pride are considerably more realistic than they are sometimes believed to be and are primarily fuelled not by propaganda but by objective achievements. The ups and downs of various dimensions of national pride closely follow specific historical events in specific, and follow them rather quickly. For this reason, maintaining the present relatively high level of national pride would require new achievements perceived as such by the majority of the population and based on hard facts, not just general affirmations of the country’s superiority. The supply side follows rather than creates demand for high national pride by attempting to provide the required objective grounds.

Third, the increased competitiveness of Russia's national pride means an increased popular demand for Russia's integration into the global world order. Unlike exceptionalism, superiority implies comparison with other countries and therefore requires shared criteria of countries' achievements providing comparability. It means that now, unlike apparently in certain earlier periods in Russia's history, the notions of *Sonderweg* are relatively less attractive to the majority of Russians than the alternative view on Russia as, to use Shleifer and Treisman's phrase a "normal country" – provided that Russia is seen as having reasonably high chances of succeeding on the shared, "normal" terms and given that success is defined as superiority of other countries. The notion of world politics as a zero-sum game where "being good" is defined as "being better than others" here goes together with the wish for global integration and playing by the shared rules as opposed to self-isolation and belief in national exceptionalism. For the majority of contemporary Russians' competition and integration are not mutually opposed, as is the opinion of many experts and policymakers, but go hand in hand. Against this background rationale, reacting to Russia's international actions that are internally regarded as achievements but externally criticized with direct rebuke is perceived by the majority of Russians as an attack at Russia's actual and potential level of achievements in general, and the critique of general or generalizable features, such as the state of affairs with democracy, even more so. This perceived general attack may be interpreted in the mass consciousness as an attempt to isolate Russia from the global world order viewed as the sphere of opportunities for potential achievements. In the framework defined by competitiveness, these alleged attempts at isolation may be viewed as motivated by a wish to get rid of a dangerous rival possessing high chances of success. For this reason, any general negative reactions to any Russia's moves undesirable for other international actors are likely to cause not merely weaker effects than more specific, factual, and restrained critique, but to lead to unintended consequences contrary to what was intended – namely, to reinforce inclinations towards *Sonderweg*-motivated self-isolation among the minority and stimulate even stronger demand for new victories in the global zero-sum game competition in the majority. The latter would then result in further moves causing the same reaction getting all the parties deeper into the downward spiral of increasing competitiveness increasingly accompanied with increasing hostility. This hostility is originally not at all an integral part of competitiveness, as indicated by the fact that national pride attitudes and the belief in national superiority in Russia are very weakly correlated with measurements of xenophobia. These correlations, unlike the correlations between national pride and the belief in national superiority, are consistently weak and do not increase with time. Thus, competitiveness is an ambivalent resource that may result in Russians' increased hostility towards other countries, especially those regarded as major rivals, or, alternatively, in Russia's increased global integration. The second, positive scenario may prevail provided Russia gets chances for achievements that are recognized as such both internally and externally.