

THE RALLY 'ROUND THE FLAG EFFECT IN RUSSIA: HOW AN INTERNATIONAL CRISIS TURNS  
REGIME OPPONENTS INTO REGIME SUPPORTERS

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A thesis submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in  
Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies.

Chapel Hill  
2015

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## ABSTRACT

Anna Yudina: The Rally ‘Round The Flag Effect In Russia: How An International Crisis Turns Regime Opponents Into Regime Supporters  
(Under the direction of Graeme B. Robertson)

Russia’s annexation of Crimea in March 2014 caused more than condemnation from the international community, it also led to a significant surge in Vladimir Putin’s approval ratings—a paradigmatic instance of a “rallying” effect. This study looks at who switched from opposing the regime to supporting it after the rally event and explores the rallying phenomenon in a new, yet largely uncharted environment. To study opinion change on an individual level, I use panel data and analyze the responses of individuals that participated in the same survey in both October 2013 and July 2014. In the Russian case three main factors are strong predictors of rallying: attention to state TV, seeing oneself as a “patriot” and favorably assessing one’s finances. These characteristics emphasize an important conflict between two critical factors: that of economic grievances and that of patriotism. The outcome of this clash is likely to determine Russia’s political future.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my most sincere gratitude to my advisor, Dr Graeme Robertson, who not only provided me with the necessary data and statistical analysis but also guided and supported me throughout the long writing process. Without him I couldn't have written this thesis, and one could not have asked for a better supervisor.

Furthermore, I would like to thank Dr Jonathan Weiler who patiently discussed my ideas with me, encouraged me to look at my research from a number of different angles, and offered me much valuable advice and insight.

I would also like to express my genuine gratitude to Dr Milada Vachudova who always inspired me to think outside the box and focus on interesting arguments, let alone intriguing puzzles.

Finally, I thank my husband who often had to endure my many writing-related frustrations and who was always there for me—to support, help, and encourage.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Snow Revolution that swept through the streets of central Moscow in the winter of 2011-2012 brought little change to Russia's existing political regime. A power shift did not follow; instead, the country saw extensive arrests of protesters followed by generous prison sentences. The opposition, never particularly pampered by the government, encountered even harsher treatment by the regime. But despite such a gloomy start, a year later, in January 2013, more than 80,000 people gathered in the heart of the city for a so-called "march against scoundrels."<sup>1</sup> These protesters were very similar to the ones who took to the streets in December 2011—middle-aged, well-educated people with very liberal views and negative attitudes to Vladimir Putin.<sup>2</sup> Their discontent gradually translated into far-from-perfect presidential approval ratings; by the end of 2013, Putin's popularity level had dipped to an all-time low of 61%.

In March 2014, right after Putin proudly announced that as a result of a highly controversial referendum Crimea has "rejoined Russia," Putin's popularity increased dramatically, reaching 80%. The country's population was passionately supportive of Russia's politics: according to the independent Levada Center, close to 90% of respondents said they were proud and happy about the move. In the course of the next few months Russians were gradually introduced to new sanctions imposed by the US and the EU, Russia's unexpected import bans and creative laws. And yet in August 2014, about 86% of Russians said they approved of the president's actions – an astonishing number even for Putin. What seemed even more astonishing was that numerous well-educated middle-aged liberals, the ones who just 12 months earlier were holding signs that read "Shame on You, Putin! Go

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2013/01/12\\_a\\_4920953.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2013/01/12_a_4920953.shtml)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.levada.ru/07-02-2013/opros-na-marshe-protiv-podletsov-13-yanvarya>

away!" were now among those who supported the president. The country seemed to be experiencing the so-called rally-round-the-flag effect.

The instance of a rallying event in Russia poses two important questions: Who are the people who passionately opposed the ruling regime just a year before, but in 2014 changed their mind about the president? And why did some of these individuals change their opinions about Vladimir Putin and turn from passionate oppositionists into eager regime supporters? In this paper I use panel data analysis to solve the first half of this complex puzzle: understanding who rallied around the Russian flag would allow me to take the next step and explain what reasons were behind this relatively abrupt opinion change. I find that in the Russian case three main factors serve as strong predictors of rallying and distinguish those who changed their mind: attention to state TV, seeing oneself as Russia's patriot and favorably assessing one's family finances or the change in the financial situation.

The results place Russia close to the US, which has been the main focus of rally-round-the-flag literature so far. However, the paper emphasizes a number of important differences that might have meaningful implications for the study of public opinion in competitive authoritarian regimes as well as for Western policy-makers attempting to open a dialogue with Russia and influence its highly controversial foreign politics. The fact that unlike the US only those whose finances had improved around the time of the crisis rallied in Russia allows me to highlight the importance of the state of the country's economy for the president's popularity at a time of crisis. However, the overwhelming significance of patriotic feelings and the unabated popularity of Putin despite the worsening economic conditions point to the equal salience of national pride in the rallying situation. It thus accentuates the biggest difference between Russia and the US: the yet unresolved opposition between the factor of economic grievances and that of patriotism in Putin's Russia. The power of the patriotism frame, in turn, could give an answer to the second half of the puzzle: the shift of opinion even among regime opponents might happen when the focus moves from the strictly domestic environment into the



sphere of international politics, and the patriotism frame gets activated in the face of a foreign threat to the country.

The rest of the thesis is divided into six parts. First, I give a general overview of the rallying phenomenon in both democracies and authoritarian regimes. Second, I analyze the implications of this paper for future research of the phenomenon in the Russian regime and look at the existing literature on the rally-round-the-flag effect. Third, I consider the role of the media in affecting individuals' likelihood to rally. Fourth, I evaluate the applicability of the results presented in the US-focused literature to the Russian case. Fifth, I generate a number of hypotheses based on the existing research and test them on the example of Russia. Sixth, I evaluate the results and conclude with a general discussion, considering also alternative explanations of Putin's increased popularity.

## GENERAL FRAMEWORK

The existence of a rally-round-the-flag effect has been widely recognized by scholars. They agree that international conflicts (followed by potentially threatening situations) have a significant effect on sociopolitical attitudes and cause the popularity of a country's leader to surge upwards. But while the effect's existence is not disputed, its nature and internal mechanisms are not that obvious. In his groundbreaking paper *Presidential Popularity from Truman to Johnson* that focused solely on the United States, John Mueller defined which events are capable of leading to rallying around the flag. According to his definition, a rally event: "(1) is international; (2) involves the United States and particularly the President directly; and (3) is specific, dramatic, and sharply focused." Other political scientists have subsequently applied the concept broadly and tested its applicability on a number of different foreign crises that led the population to briefly but decisively support the president. The key disagreement, however, continued to revolve around the question of who changes her/his opinion about the country's leader and rallies round the flag, and why.

Today, the majority of the existing literature on the effect continues to focus on the US. Supporting the concept of the rally phenomenon, a strong causal link is believed to exist between the country's unsatisfactory domestic political conditions and its intrusive foreign policy. Earlier research has demonstrated that domestic circumstances can indeed have a profound effect on the country's participation in a foreign conflict (Ostrom and Job 1986, James and Oneal 1991). The president is believed to make foreign policy decisions based on the idea that the country's involvement abroad will direct people's attention from domestic troubles and force them to rally around the leader in the face of a potential foreign danger. Many scholars focus on the use of this tactic in the US prior to elections

to give the current president's popularity a boost (Polsby 1964, Waltz 1967, Mueller 1973, Brody 1984).

The main focus of this broader literature has been the US and other democratic regimes, because it is in democracies that public opinion is thought to matter the most. Unlike authoritarian regimes, democracies have very strict limitations on the power of the state, checked by and dispersed among a number of institutions. Politicians thus go through cycles of elections, in which poor performance may and does eventually result in an election defeat. Thus, public opinion plays a great role in such regimes, serving as a litmus test of public attitudes and consequently as an indication of the future career of politicians. Authoritarian governments differ greatly from liberal democratic ones. The fact that such states have fewer limitations on the regime's power and less rigorous control exercised by various institutions has meant that limited attention has been paid to authoritarian regimes in connection to the rally round the flag effect. Earlier studies emphasized that authoritarian governments are not hesitant to use power to deal with domestic discontent (Gurr 1988, Russett and Barzilai 1990). But despite the fact that they possess hypothetically the ability to use coercive means against their populations that democracies lack, rarely do they resort to this method. Even most non-democratic regimes care to some degree about public opinion and thus are reluctant to employ such radical means. As Levy and Vakili (1992) note, "[E]ven authoritarian regimes must maintain a minimal level of public acceptance or at least apathy towards their policies and their position of political authority." They add that such regimes are tempted to use patriotic sentiment of the population to legitimize the government's actions, even more so in unfavorable economic circumstances. "The construction of an external threat and pursuit of a belligerent foreign policy against that threat is one means adopted by political elites for this purpose, though its success is by no means assured," write Levy and Vakili.

While nationalistic sentiment remains a strong tool for making the population rally in authoritarian states, it is not the only one. Hence, Bunce and Wolchik (2011) note that another source

of rally effects in authoritarian regimes could be US pressure. To illustrate that, they cite the population's overwhelming support for Slobodan Milosevic immediately after NATO bombings of Serbia in 1999. Grauvogel and von Soerst (2013) also look at undemocratic countries and argue that broad (as opposed to targeted) sanctions imposed on authoritarian regimes may serve as a potential (though unwilling) origin of the rally-round-the-flag effect in these countries. For this to happen, the authoritarian regime in question must enjoy "strong claims to legitimacy and have only limited linkages to the sanction sender." Iran and Cuba may serve as two vivid examples of how US-led comprehensive sanctions instead of weakening and undermining the regime strengthened it and caused extensive rally-round-the-flag effect instances (Amuzegar 1997, Schreiber 1973). In case of a strong authoritarian leader who enjoys high levels of support, sanctions are "explained" to the population as an attack on the entire society, which further reinforces support for the authoritarian leader.

Since the majority of existing literature has looked at how the rally-round-the-flag effect has unfolded in the US and left instances of this phenomenon in other countries considerably less explored, my research is likely to have far-ranging implications for politicians, observers, and scholars of both Russian politics and international relations. For international decision-makers, this thesis will be helpful in understanding and predicting public opinion and reaction to an international crisis in competitive authoritarian regimes in general, and Russia in particular. It also helps us understand when such regimes might instigate international conflicts in order to boost the leader's popularity domestically. Not just any international conflict will lead to a similarly strong rallying phenomenon. We need to know what elements and attributes of a conflict are essential for generating a powerful rallying effect before we can predict when an authoritarian leader may choose a conflict to pump up her/his ratings. Further, this research will pinpoint the arguments made by the regime that caused an upsurge of public approval. Coupled with the vitally critical components (i.e. historical grievances of the population and feelings of patriotism), understanding which people are more likely to rally allows

researchers to predict what groups of citizens the ruling regime will be likely to focus on when “selling” the crisis to the population.

For specialists in Russian politics, my research identifies areas where opposition forces can attempt to reverse recently inflated pro-regime sentiment by exposing the fault lines along which the rally-round-the-flag effect operates. The insight into who is more likely to rally might allow oppositional groups and parties to deploy this knowledge to undermine or contest the regime. By understanding what arguments are most persuasive to rallying individuals, the opposition can attempt to undermine these arguments and challenge the rationale for getting involved in the international crisis as well as confront the view that the West constitutes a threat to the nation. Being aware of which of the regime’s lines of reasoning proved to be the most effective might help opposition groups to counter these facts and present the population with alternative explanations and evidence.

For Western politicians, the research shows how some of their well-intended policies,<sup>3</sup> including those to confront international aggression, might instead strengthen the regime in the competitive authoritarian state like Russia. While this thesis does not provide specific evidence that non-confrontational and behind-the-scenes diplomacy would constitute a better solution, it at least highlights some unintended consequences of well-meaning policies. Finally, the thesis contributes to the existing body of academic literature on the rally-round-the-flag effect and public opinion by examining an area that has yet to be explored. By looking at the case of Russia, I broaden the theory from its initial focus on the US and democracies to a broad theory that can be applied across numerous countries and regions. I aim to compliment the literature on Eastern Europe and be instrumental in finding variables that could be tested comparatively.

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<sup>3</sup> See Kelley 2012

## LITERATURE REVIEW

I begin, in this section, by reviewing the existing literature on the rally-round-the-flag phenomenon. I examine the various variables that have been tested to determine who rallies and who doesn't. I evaluate the likelihood of obtaining similar results in Russia despite the considerable social and political differences between the US and Russia. I then proceed by generating a number of hypotheses concerning the personalities of those individuals who are likely to rally around the flag based on the existing literature, bearing in mind Russia-specific particularities, and test my hypotheses. The results will be instrumental in understanding whether my hypotheses can be applied comparatively.

My paper focuses on individuals who rally around the flag, in other words, the people whose change of mind about the leader of the country (from negative to positive) coincided with the country's involvement in an international crisis. Here it is important to differentiate between those who rally and simple regime supporters: while the former group of people switched camps and present interest for my research, the latter technically cannot "rally" since their opinion about the leader had been formed before the crisis and didn't change for the better. My research thus revolves around those who had initially opposed the leader, but who changed their opinion after an international crisis.

The literature on the rally-round-the-flag effect follows two distinct paths when analyzing the phenomenon: scholars look at either the characteristics of people who rally or at the characteristics of the event that triggered the rally in the first place. In this paper I will be focusing solely on the characteristics of rallying individuals since I will be analyzing one event and thus have no variance of international issue. However, in this section I will, in addition to describing the existing theory on

individuals' characteristics, also talk about the research that defines what crises typify rallying events to allow for a fuller understanding of the phenomenon and the literature that has been studying it.

Among the scholars who analyzed the characteristics of rallying individuals, Edwards and Swenson (1997) argue that the people that ended up rallying were inclined to support the president and her/his actions from the start. Additionally, they found that "party identification, evaluations of the president's leadership and support for her/his economic and foreign policies" largely determine who will rally. Among other characteristics, they look at the age of respondents and find that younger people (18-29 and 30-44) were unlikely to rally: the percentage of those who changed their opinion about the president decreased slightly after the rally event. Quite on the contrary, they observed that older people (45-64 and older) were more likely to rally – the percentage of older individuals who changed their minds about the country's leader increased, though insignificantly, after the crisis. Further, Edwards and Swenson add that media had a certain effect by "reinforcing" the potentially already positive view of the president that people had. Thus, those who paid attention to the news and approved of the way the president was dealing with the international crisis, were much more likely to rally than those who were not exposed to the media. Furthermore, Iyengar (1991) found that the media, by airing news about the international crisis and the president's actions in response to this crisis, draw people's attention to the event and artificially boost its importance in the eyes of the public. Greater attention may thus lead to an improved view of the president: "The themes and issues that are repeated in television news coverage become the priorities of viewers. Issues and events highlighted by television news become especially influential as criteria for evaluating public officials." Close attention to the news broadcast by state media might lead to a change in opinion (from disapproval to support) about the president.

Baum (2002), somewhat similarly to Edwards and Swenson, argues that what tilts the balance of an individual's opinion is the definiteness of this opinion. In other words, those who don't outright oppose the president, but are rather closer to being undecided, will be more eager to change their

opinion about the president in response to an international crisis. He adds that the population's focus on foreign affairs at the time of crisis will also influence the scale of the rally-round-the-flag effect: the less attention the population pays to the country's foreign affairs immediately prior to when the conflict occurs, the larger the rally effect will be. Zaller (1992) suggested that a person's decision to rally is contingent on his or her level of "political awareness or sophistication". Baum applies Zaller's model and finds that the individuals with extremely low levels of political awareness will remain highly uninterested in international affairs and their opinions will hardly change even at the time of a serious international crisis. The opinions of the extremely politically aware will also likely remain unchanged, since their opinions have been long since formed and they tend to not pay attention to new political information. This, based on Zaller's model, leaves us with the moderately aware individuals, who constitute the majority of all those who rally round the flag. In order to measure an individual's political awareness Baum uses levels of education.

Feinstein (2010) claims that the rally-round-the-flag effect occurs when "established nationalistic frameworks become more salient, and individual citizens experience widespread feelings of nationalist pride, confidence in the government, and hope with respect to the outcomes of war". He thus shifts the emphasis on the people's positive feelings toward the country's authorities and argues that a nation-wide rally phenomenon occurs when individuals feel proud of and confident in the country's leader and her/his policy decisions. In the context of my research this means that I can expect those individuals who expressed more nationalist sentiment and demonstrated pride of Russia's actions to be more likely to rally round the flag. I will consequently expect that the individuals who didn't demonstrate similar sentiment will be less likely to change their minds about Russia's president and rally.

Horowitz and Levendusky (2012) find that what matters in predicting a leader's support among the population is the rationale the president uses to explain why he backed down in an international conflict and the reaction of the elites to this decision. Thus, those who think backing



down in the conflict was the right thing to do or that the president's reaction was legitimate and necessary, will see him as a competent and well-informed leader. I believe that the population's reactions might take a similar path when the president attempts to explain getting involved in an international crisis, not only backing down in one. I suggest that those individuals who believe that the reasons to get involved in an international crisis were legitimate and the president did the right thing will rally. Similarly, those who thought the rationale behind getting involved in a crisis was not legitimate and the president made a mistake will be unlikely to rally.

Parker (1995) notes that in the course of an international conflict the US was involved in, people were more inclined to disregard economic difficulties and assess their economic situation more favorably than they would have done at a time of international calm. She notes that in the face of an international conflict individuals tend to be more likely to put aside their economic grievances and unite, rallying round the flag. Thus, both those who subjectively assessed their economic situation as favorable as well as those who saw it as unfavorable or deteriorating, rallied. However, this feeble agreement and willingness to ignore economic difficulties persists solely during the time of the crisis. Soon after, Parker argues, evaluations of economic conditions go back to the pre-conflict level.

Finally, when considering gender, Conover (1988), Gilens (1988), Fite, Genesi, and Wilcox (1990), and Conover and Sapiro (1993) note that compared to men, women demonstrate more concern about international crises. Page and Shapiro (1992) and Mueller (1973, 1994) similarly argue that in most cases of an international conflict that involves the use of force, women would be more opposed to military action than men.

Turning to the literature that focuses on event characteristics, Lai and Reiter (2005) put forward the idea that rallies happen in the case of a direct threat to national wellbeing. Kam and Ramos (2008) support this belief and argue that during a short period of time the country's involvement in an international crisis will make voters see the president as a national leader acting in

the best interests of the nation. The crisis thus will trigger the national feelings of some individuals, allowing the president to enjoy a tentative rise in popularity.

Brody (1991) argues that a rally happens when opposition leaders “refrain from comment” or support the president and his actions. The media then magnifies the opposition reaction, and the opposition approval (or lack of criticism) leads the public to think that the president is doing her/his job well. Gaines et al. (2007), Jacobs and Page (2005) and Zaller (1992) similarly argue that it is the balanced elite reaction that shapes public opinion, especially in a situation of an international conflict. When the elite fails to criticize the president and her/his actions, it becomes a signal for those who had previously opposed him that she/he is doing the right thing (Groeling and Baum 2008).

In the next section I will look at the levels of media importance in the studies of the rally-round-the flag effect and attempt to evaluate its significance for the Russian case of the rallying phenomenon.

## THE MEDIA EFFECT

Despite their different foci, the two paths of rally-round-the-flag research have one characteristic in common; they both emphasize the importance of the media. In his analysis of the likelihood of rally events, Brody (1991) stated that people's personal opinions formed prior to the event might not be the only source of judgment. The media coverage of the rally event that individuals are exposed to on TV can contribute to forming (or changing) their opinion of this event. The international crisis that triggers the rally phenomenon, Brody argues, usually happens so abruptly and the specific details about the crisis are available to so few state officials that the only information is coming from the media and the elites. The latter, however, (even regime opponents) at first abstain from hurried judgments until more information is available. As a result, either a lack of overt criticism or weak support of the country's leader is being broadcast on TV and ultimately leads to a positive balance of elite commentary that is available for the public.

Similarly to Brody's idea, Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder (1982) talked about the importance of the media in forming public opinion. "The standards people used in evaluating the president, what they felt was important in his job performance, seemed to be influenced by the news they watched on television," they noted. A few years later, in his book "Is Anyone Responsible?" Iyengar developed this idea, taking it a little further. He argued that television essentially sets the political agenda since "events highlighted by television news become especially influential as criteria for evaluating public officials and choosing between political candidates. There is also evidence that television news persuades viewers to alter their opinions." Paired with Brody's claim that during international crises the public is forced to turn to the generally sympathetic-to-the-president media for any information on the crisis, Iyengar's argument suggests that those who pay close attention to the media during a crisis

will rally. What's more, Baum and Groeling (2004) claimed that a typical viewer lacks information to reach a decision of whether to support or oppose her/his president's behavior. "Instead they rely on information shortcuts, or heuristic clues, most notably the opinions of trusted political elites, primarily as reflected in the media."

Despite the fact that Brody's analyses focused on the likelihood of the emergence of the rally event and didn't look at the characteristics of rallying individuals, Edwards and Swenson (1997) applied his theory to an individual level. In the panel data analysis they conducted, they looked at the crisis in Iraq in 1993 and hypothesized that those who paid the closest attention to the media should have been most likely to rally around President Clinton since the media commentary of the crisis was extremely positive. They found, however, that attention to the media in itself did not characterize those who rallied. Instead, they noted that "exposure to the media substantially increase[d] the probability that those with positive evaluations of the president's handling of foreign policy will rally."

Drawing on the research of Brody, Iyengar, Baum and Groeling, I also turn my attention to importance of the media. However, despite its undeniable significance, I expect to find that close attention to the media is not in itself enough to be a signal that an individual will rally round the flag. This expectation is based on the lack of certainty that attention to the media equals attention to political news. I thus expect that when paired with acute interest in politics, attention to the media may lead to rallying effects.

In the next section, I will attempt to evaluate the applicability of the results presented in the US-focused literature to the Russian case. I will analyze the differences between the two regimes that I expect to affect my results. I will then proceed to generating a number of hypotheses.

## APPLICABILITY OF PREEXISTING THEORY TO RUSSIA

Although I have no reason to believe that most of the results presented in the previous research of the rally-round-the-flag effect will not hold in the Russian case, some might not work exactly in the same way in an environment that differs greatly from the political climate of a liberal democracy that is the US. Thus, I believe that due to the specifics of the Russian case, the relative temporal proximity of the Cold War, and major historical grievances, the correlation between age and the likelihood of rallying will be much higher in the Russian case than in the case of the US. Furthermore, I believe there might be differences in what role individual economic difficulties played in determining who rallied in Russia. While there is no reason to believe the link between the population's economic grievances and presidential popularity will differ greatly in Russia from that in the US, the relative tolerance of individuals to economic hardships in Russia might be lower, thus changing the weight that the economic situation plays in the country. In this section I will look into the Russia-specific considerations that might affect the nature of the rallying effect in the country and analyze why I believe they might develop differently in the Russian context.

The research conducted by Edwards and Swenson (1997) shows a very small correlation between age and the probability of rallying. Their work demonstrates that people over 45 tend to be just a little more likely to rally round the flag than younger people. In Russia, however, I expect the correlation between age and likelihood of rallying to be much higher and presume that older people will be much more likely to rally than younger people. For older generations, the Cold War and the power struggle between the USSR and the US is a much more salient event than for the younger generation—a great number of older individuals not only remember the circumstances of the Cold War well, but also preserved a suspicious attitude towards the US. For them, the patriotic feelings that

the regime has actively tried to appeal to during the Ukrainian crisis likely resonate more strongly than with younger generations. Moreover, a great number of these people continue to perceive Crimea as part of the USSR; for them, Putin's controversial referendum and annexation of the territory was a clear example of historical justice and not violation of international law. I thus expect that older people will be significantly more likely to rally round the Russian flag, and the correlation between age and likelihood of rallying will be much more prominent and conspicuous than in the case of the US.

Furthermore, I expect that individuals' economic situation and economic grievances in particular might have a different weight in determining who will rally in Russia. In the US-focused literature, there has long been a strong link between presidential popularity and the economy. Mueller (1970) emphasized the effect that the country's economy has on the levels of presidential approval, whereby a sinking economy leads to dipping presidential popularity. Similarly, numerous subsequent studies found a strong economic influence on presidential approval ratings (Stimson 1976, Monroe 1978, MacKuen 1983, Kernell 1978). However, as Parker (1995) argues in her research, financial grievances of the population can be put aside and not affect a leader's popularity during a rally event. She notes that international crises cause the US population to put aside their economic struggles and unite (even if only for a short period of time) around the president. Thus, despite the strong link between a country's economy and presidential approval ratings, rally events have the ability to "overpower" the negative consequences of falling economy and bring a population together.

In Russia, similarly to the US-focused literature, it is possible to trace the direct correlation between presidential popularity and the country's economic situation. In 2005, 2008/2009 and 2013 Putin's popularity in Russia markedly decreased;<sup>4</sup> at the same time, these three time periods mark significant drops in the country's economic growth.<sup>5</sup> Hence, in the absence of a rallying event, Russia

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.forbes.com/sites/markadomanis/2013/06/11/vladimir-putins-approval-rating-isnt-actually-declining/>

<sup>5</sup> [http://intermarketandmore.fianza.com/files/2014/10/russian\\_gdp\\_and\\_oil\\_price.jpg%20http://intermarketandmore.fianza.com/files/2014/10/russian\\_gdp\\_and\\_oil\\_price.jpg](http://intermarketandmore.fianza.com/files/2014/10/russian_gdp_and_oil_price.jpg%20http://intermarketandmore.fianza.com/files/2014/10/russian_gdp_and_oil_price.jpg)

and the US seem to be quite similar as regards the relationship of presidential support by the population and the state of the economy.

However, the Russian economic environment is not identical to that of the US. In 2013, about 15% of Americans were reported to live below the poverty line.<sup>6</sup> Another 35% of the country's population was said to be struggling and barely making it just above the poverty line. And while it is an impressively shocking figure, the situation in Russia is even more dismaying. In Russia in 2013, the number of people who live below or just above the poverty line equaled about 68%.<sup>7</sup> The presented numbers signify that many more individuals in Russia are forced to care about the smallest changes in their economic situation than in the US and Russians are much more likely to notice the slightest decline in their income level. Thus, while I believe that Russians, just like Americans, will be willing to put their economic grievances aside during an international crisis, they might be more susceptible to negative changes in the country's economy and individuals' financial situations than Americans. This might mean that despite their willingness to put aside financial grievances during an international crisis period and rally, Russia's population might be more sensitive to the changes in the economy and could be quicker to switch back to not approving (or disapproving) the president if their economic situation doesn't improve.

In the next section I lay out my hypotheses. And though they are based on the US-focused research, I will take into account my assumptions (described above) about the dissimilarity of Russia's political and economic climate from that of the US will be taken into account.

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<sup>6</sup>[http://www.salon.com/2013/05/30/half\\_of\\_americans\\_living\\_below\\_or\\_near\\_poverty\\_line\\_partner/](http://www.salon.com/2013/05/30/half_of_americans_living_below_or_near_poverty_line_partner/)

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/new\\_site/population/bednost/tab1/1-2-1.htm](http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/population/bednost/tab1/1-2-1.htm)

## HYPOTHESES

The reviewed literature allows me to generate a number of general hypotheses that could be applicable to a broad multi-country analysis. Building on Edwards and Swenson's (1997) argument, I can hypothesize that:

**H1: Those who rallied in Russia between October 2013 and July 2014 did not radically oppose the regime, instead, they demonstrated just mild discontent.**

**H2: I expect those who rallied to have paid closer attention to state news broadcast on Russia's federal channels.**

**H3: I expect that the older an individual is, the more likely she/he will be to rally.**

**Moreover, I anticipate the correlation between age and likelihood of rallying to be quite significant in the Russian case.**

Using Baum's application of Zaller's model that deals with individuals' political awareness and its affect on the likelihood of rallying, I can hypothesize that:

**H4: Since people with low levels of political awareness are unlikely to be involved in rally events and people with high levels of political awareness are unlikely to change their formed opinions, I expect to find people with moderate political awareness were more likely to rally. Political awareness is measured by paying closer attention to a number of various media outlets, not limited to state TV channels.<sup>8</sup>**

However, unlike Baum, by political awareness I understand close attention to and interest in international news coming from a variety of sources and not limited to Russia's federal channels (as

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<sup>8</sup> Despite the seeming contradiction to H2, the two hypotheses look at different groups of people that are both likely to rally. While in H2 I focus on the effect of state TV on individuals, H4 talks about individuals' varying levels of interest in politics. I hence argue that those who are moderately interested in politics (and thus use multiple media outlets as media sources) are likely to rally as well.



measured by time spent reading/consulting news sources). It is often measured with a number of questions about politics (Zaller 1992; Price and Zaller 1993; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996).

Lai and Reiter (2005) suggest that rallies happen in the case of a direct threat to national wellbeing. I thus hypothesize that:

**H5: Those who rallied must have seen the Ukrainian crisis as a direct threat to Russia's wellbeing/security.**

The extensive research of Page and Shapiro (1992) and Mueller (1973, 1994) who argue that women are more likely to be opposed to use of force in international crises allows me to put forward the hypothesis that:

**H6: Women were less likely to rally than men.**

Based on Feinstein's (2010) theory, I can hypothesize that:

**H7: Individuals who rallied round the flag, expressed more nationalistic sentiment and were proud of Russia and Russia's handling of the international conflict.**

Building on the work of Horowitz and Levendusky (2012), I hypothesize that:

**H8: Individuals who rallied considered the president's explanation of the country's involvement in the conflict legitimate/the only right thing to do.**

Finally, according to Parker (1995), in the US context, rallying individuals included those whose economic situation both improved and deteriorated in the time of the international crisis; thus, the change in one's financial situation didn't have any effect on determining who will rally. And even though I believe that Russia's population might be more sensitive to negative changes in their finances than their American counterparts (as I discussed in the previous section), I believe that the change (positive and negative) in an individual's economic situation as well as her/his subjective evaluation of the financial situation in the family will have no significant affect on the probability of rallying. I thus hypothesize that:

**H9: Individuals' subjective evaluation of their financial situation at the time of the crisis as well as the change (either positive or negative) in their economic situation will have no to little effect on their willingness to rally. I thus expect that both people whose economic situation has improved and decreased in the time before the crisis will rally.**

In the next section I will turn to the description of my data and methodology. I will explain why I use panel data analysis in my work and why it will allow me to get the most accurate and precise results in determining who rallied in Russia. I will then evaluate the results.

## DATA AND METHODOLOGY

To test the presented hypotheses and to understand what types of individuals rallied in Russia, I will use panel data analysis. In other words, I will analyze the responses of individuals that participated in the same survey at two different points in time – October 2013 and July 2014. Using panel data gives me a rare opportunity to study opinion change on an individual level and put a face to the abstract idea of the rally-round-the-flag effect in Russia.

The survey was conducted online by a Russian research firm Synovate ComCon and focused on Russia's bigger cities with a population over a million (which includes Moscow, St Petersburg, Novosibirsk and twelve others).<sup>9</sup> The segment of the population that was of most interest for my research included better-off, educated people who were active users of Internet. A sample of 350,000 individuals from around Russia participated in Synovate ComCon's Internet panel. However, for the purposes of this research, the target sample was narrowed down to include better-off people aged between 16 and 65 with some levels of higher education and residing in a city with the population over one million. Invitations were divided according to gender and age. Moreover, respondents were then selected based on their education level, city of residence, and income level. To test the income level, respondents were asked, "How would you describe the financial status of your family?" They were then presented with six possible answers and were requested to pick one response that more accurately reflected their economic situation. Only those respondents who evaluated their financial situation as 3 and higher<sup>10</sup> were asked to continue filling out the full questionnaire. In the end, we

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.statdata.ru/goroda-millionniki-rossii-po-naseleniu>

<sup>10</sup> The possible answers were: (1) Not enough money even for food; (2) We can buy food, but it would be hard to buy clothes; (3) We can buy food and clothes, but it would be hard to buy a television, fridge, or washing machine; (4) We can buy major household appliances, but would not afford a new car; (5) Our earnings are enough for anything, but such expensive things like a dacha or an apartment, and (6) No financial difficulties, could buy a dacha or apartment if needed.

were able to narrow down our target group to about 1,200 respondents.

Among this target group, however, only 715 completed the second round of the survey in July 2014. After analyzing the data of who withdrew from the survey, I was not able to find a pattern that would have a significant impact on our results—the proportional makeup of the various categories (gender, education level, age, etc.) stayed roughly the same. One observation that is nevertheless worth mentioning is an increase in the number of those who said they were following politics closely in the second round compared to the first one. This rise in numbers, though of interest, could be explained by the large international crisis Russia was involved in just prior to and during the second round of the survey as well as the relative geographical proximity of this crisis.

The internet survey that we used for this research has four main distinctions from a nationally representative survey: First, I am only interested in the individuals who live in bigger cities, and this group of people constitutes just over 31 percent of the national sample.<sup>11</sup> Second, one of our points of interest was some level of higher education, which eliminated about 67 percent of the national sample. Further, only Internet users finished filling in out the presented questionnaire, and the group of Internet-literate individuals constitutes about 59 percent of the national sample. And finally, we were only interested in the group of people who were financially secure enough to be able to at least afford food and clothes. This will roughly translate into a monthly income that exceeds RUB15,000 (about \$450 at the time) and would include about two-thirds of the national sample. Combined, the group of individuals that is of direct interest for this research constitutes about 11.3 percent of those in a nationally representative sample of Levada Center.

There are a number of reasons why I chose the described sampling method as opposed to a nationally representative sample in this research. Firstly, since the focus of this work is the opinion change within Russian opposition, panel data analysis would help us, while holding individuals constant, trace the changes in their opinions—a broader and more inclusive sample would not give us

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<sup>11</sup> I will use the national sample data provided by Russia's independent survey company, Levada Center.

the necessary details about the people who oppose the ruling regime and their change of mind. Sorting through in order to separate a smaller, more refined, sample leads to a noticeable increase in the level of opposition mood, and as a result, leads to more statistical significance assigned to the answers of individuals. However, since we focus only on a small part of the nationally representative sample, the results we get for this group will not be applicable to the country's broad population. This could be a significant problem for research that looks to make implications for the country's population as a whole and analyze general movements, but since I am most interested in the relationship between regime opponents and the regime, this drawback does not hinder my analysis.

Secondly, as Hsiao (2006) argues, panel data allows researchers to analyze human behavior more accurately. Another benefit of this methodology (and, arguably, one of the main ones for the purposes of this thesis) is the ability to weigh the relative importance of different independent variables. By not including certain independent variables into the equation, we will be able to analyze the importance or influence of these variables in tilting the balance of an individual's opinion. But most importantly, this methodology will allow us to predict the likelihood of certain types of individuals to rally in the case of an international crisis.

Panel data analysis is infrequently used in the rally-round-the-flag literature. Only a few studies have used this method to trace individual changes within the framework of the rally-round-the-flag effect. In 1997, Edwards and Swenson used panel data analysis in their research to find out who were the people that rallied and changed their opinion about President Clinton following US bombing attacks on Iraq. Their research, though undoubtedly highly significant for the study of the phenomenon, leaves some potentially meaningful variables unanalyzed. For example, their research does not examine individuals' economic conditions – a variable that was found to be closely linked with presidents' popularity. Another factor that was not analyzed though could be of certain interest, is the pronounced nationalist sentiment likely to be expressed by those who rally.

In 1994, McLeod, Eveland and Signorielli employed panel data analysis to study the dissipation of rally effects after the Persian Gulf War. They find that a year after the rally event the support of the president and the approval of his actions give way to disappointment and reverse change of opinion. In 2009, Kriner and Schwartz used panel data analysis to argue that factors that align with or oppose individuals' pre-existing partisan biases will play a significant role in determining who will rally around the flag and when.

The previous studies that used panel data analysis to look at the rally-round-the-flag effect served as a valuable basis for my research. In this thesis I build on them, including a number of new variables that I show have a significant effect. Moreover, my analysis of the Russian case breaks new ground and allows me to take a fresh look at the rally-round-the-flag effect in a largely unexamined setting of Eastern Europe and the new authoritarian environment.

In the next section I will analyze the results and summarize the findings. I will then discuss the broader implications of my research and touch upon the important questions on the topic that need to be addressed in future research.

## RESULTS

There are a number of different ways of analyzing panel data (Finkel 1995). In this paper, I have data from a two-wave opinion survey. The principal dependent variable of interest is the level of approval for President Putin as expressed in each of the waves. Since the level of approval in the second round is clearly dependent at least in part on the level of approval in the first round, I estimate a static-score panel model (Plewis 1985), which includes a lagged dependent variable. To capture any non-linearities in the effect of the lagged dependent variable, I also include a squared lag. To reduce problems of collinearity between the lagged dependent variable and the squared lag, I zero-center both variables. The remainder of the independent variables either do not vary between the two waves (e.g. sex, previous voting behavior) or are lagged. The one exception is family finances, where I include both the lagged effect and the change between rounds, as I expect both measures of a respondent's current financial situation to affect levels of presidential approval.

Tables 1 and 2 present the results. The models used are ordered probit to take into account that the dependent variable has four ordered categories, though the results are substantively unchanged if we use OLS models. Tables 1 and 2 present odds-ratios, which represent the change in the odds of being in particular category on the dependent variable for a one unit change in the independent variable. Odds ratios of 1 indicate no change, while scores less than 1 indicate a negative effect and scores greater than 1 positive effects. Z statistics are shown in parentheses. Since we include a lagged dependent variable, the coefficients in the model can be interpreted as the effect on the presidential approval, but also as the effect on the change in presidential approval controlling for previous approval. Since my hypotheses relate to rally effects – or changes in presidential approval – I use the latter interpretation.

Table 1 addresses the first six hypotheses of my paper. Model 1 controls for presidential approval individuals demonstrated in round 1 of the survey. The coefficient that is associated with Approval R1 implies that individuals' past approval has a positive and statistically significant impact on one's current approval, holding the effects of all other variables included in the model constant (3.05). However, to test my first hypothesis and see whether the degree of previous disapproval has any effect on the likelihood of rallying, we included the squared lag in order to capture non-linearity. The results show that my expectations were not supported and that more moderate degrees of presidential disapproval are not positively associated with the likelihood of rallying ( $p > 0.1$ ). In addition, model 1 shows that being a non-voter and voting previously for Ziuganov (representative of the systemic opposition) or Prokhorov is statistically significant and is negatively associated with the likelihood of rallying (0.77, 0.65, and 0.72 respectively) even controlling for the previous level of approval. Furthermore, the model shows that more favorable perceptions by individuals of their own financial situations in the first round is statistically significant and is positively correlated with the likelihood of rallying (1.30).

In the second model, I look at the effects that the number of information sources the individuals used had on their likelihood of rallying. The results show that watching state TV is both statistically significant and associated with a higher likelihood of rallying (1.51). At the same time, being a LiveJournal user (a popular blogging website that has been actively and predominantly used by the Russian opposition) will be associated with lower odds of individuals approving of Putin and rallying (0.61).

Model 3 looks at the effect that an individual's interest in politics has on the likelihood of rallying. Contrary to my expectations, the results demonstrate that neither the overall interest in politics (Interest R1), nor having a moderate level of political awareness (i.e. being moderately interested in politics) (Interest R1 squared lag) has any statistical significance and affects the



likelihood of rallying ( $p > 0.1$ ). The variables, which were statistically significant in the first model, remain statistically significant in model 3.

Model 4 is the biggest model of my regression table, and it looks at the effects of both the exposure to various media sources and individuals' interest in politics on the likelihood of rallying; additionally, it also incorporates an interaction term between the level of interest in politics and exposure to state TV. The model shows that the interaction term fails to reach statistical significance ( $p > 0.1$ ). Thus, being more interested in politics as well as being interested in politics and being exposed to state TV at the same time doesn't affect the likelihood of rallying (0.96 and 0.92 respectively). Being a state TV viewer, however, continues to be statistically significant in this model (1.57), and so is being a LiveJournal user (0.62). The statistical significance of being a non-voter or being a Ziuganov or Prokhorov voter isn't stable and varies throughout the models: model 4 shows that being a non-voter or a Prokhorov voter loses its statistical significance, while being a Ziuganov voter remains statistically significant and negatively associated with the likelihood of rallying. The reason for this is the fact that regime and opposition supporters choose different media sources—opposition supporters are more likely to use LiveJournal to get their news, while regime supporters are more likely to turn to state television (Robertson 2015). As a result, when I control for media use, the statistical significance of political preferences appears to decline.

Models 5 and 6 look at the effect of individuals' perceptions of Ukraine as Russia's enemy in the first round and the second round respectively on the likelihood of rallying. The results in model 5 demonstrate that individuals' perceptions of Ukraine as Russia's enemy in the first round of the survey have no statistical significance ( $p > 0.1$ ). Moreover, contrary to my expectations, Model 6 shows that seeing Ukraine as Russia's enemy in round 2 of the survey is statistically significant and is negatively associated with individuals' likelihood of rallying. However, since this question wasn't relevant in round 1 of the survey (because in October 2013 the anti-Yanukovich protests had not yet begun and it

was impossible to predict the conflict that has since unfolded), I can't compare the results from the two rounds and interpret the significance of the results that we got in round 2.

**Table 1**

DV: Putin Approval	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Ordered Probit	Previous Approval	State TV	Political News	Interaction	Ukraine Threat 1	Ukraine Threat 2
Non Voter	0.77** (-2.00)	0.81 (-1.59)	0.76** (-2.05)	0.81 (-1.57)	0.75** (-2.08)	0.81 (-1.45)
Prokhorov	0.72** (-2.30)	0.79 (-1.60)	0.72** (-2.26)	0.79 (-1.58)	0.73** (-2.12)	0.73** (-2.01)
Ziuganov	0.65** (-2.09)	0.67* (-1.94)	0.66** (-2.07)	0.68* (-1.87)	0.75 (-1.32)	0.71 (-1.61)
Private Sector	0.91 (-0.98)	0.91 (-0.95)	0.90 (-1.03)	0.89 (-1.06)	0.91 (-0.93)	0.93 (-0.69)
Wealth	1.05 (0.72)	1.05 (0.71)	1.06 (0.78)	1.06 (0.79)	1.02 (0.34)	1.02 (0.20)
Education	1.02 (0.13)	0.99 (-0.10)	1.02 (0.13)	0.98 (-0.11)	1.03 (0.18)	1.04 (0.24)
Female	0.97 (-0.26)	0.94 (-0.64)	0.96 (-0.38)	0.91 (-0.85)	0.97 (-0.33)	0.94 (-0.56)
Age	0.98 (-0.56)	0.94 (-1.48)	0.98 (-0.53)	0.93 (-1.48)	0.99 (-0.12)	0.96 (-0.82)
Moscow	0.88 (-1.19)	0.92 (-0.83)	0.89 (-1.10)	0.93 (-0.68)	0.87 (-1.29)	0.90 (-0.92)
Finances R1	1.30*** (2.90)	1.30*** (2.86)	1.29*** (2.82)	1.29*** (2.83)	1.33*** (3.10)	1.29*** (2.59)
Change Finances	1.40*** (4.22)	1.42*** (4.36)	1.40*** (4.20)	1.43*** (4.40)	1.47*** (4.59)	1.41*** (3.97)
Approval R1	3.05*** (12.91)	3.01*** (12.45)	3.06*** (12.82)	3.01*** (12.30)	3.01*** (12.27)	3.08*** (12.08)
Approval R1 (squared lag)	1.07 (0.93)	1.11 (1.37)	1.07 (0.89)	1.10 (1.29)	1.04 (0.58)	1.08 (0.96)
State TV R1		1.51*** (3.82)		1.57*** (4.01)		
Vkontakte R1		1.07 (0.59)		1.08 (0.62)		
Live R1		0.61*** (-3.67)		0.62*** (-3.51)		
Facebook R1		1.05 (0.36)		1.07 (0.48)		
Interest R1			0.96 (-0.53)	0.98 (-0.22)		
Interest R1 (squared lag)			1.03 (0.48)	1.04 (0.49)		
Interest*TV				0.92 (-0.58)		
Enemy R1					0.97 (-0.79)	
Enemy R2						0.91** (-2.50)
Observations	583	583	581	581	537	492

z-statistics in parentheses \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

Table 2 presents a set of models that examines the impact of patriotism on the likelihood of rallying. I measured patriotism in four different ways: as subjective self-perception of individuals as belonging to (1) the Russian state, (2) Russian culture, (3) Russian ethnic group, or (4) the main religious denomination in Russia. The results show that feeling part of the Russian state, seeing oneself as ethnically Russian, and feeling a sense of belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church were all statistically significant and positively associated with higher likelihood of rallying (1.16, 1.12 and 1.13 respectively). The only variable that was not statistically significant was feeling part of Russian culture (0.99). This could be explained by the vagueness of the concept of culture and the unpredictability of the individuals' interpretation of it. Additionally, culture is often closely linked to education, higher levels of which, in turn, are associated with lower degrees of support for the regime and higher degrees of support for the opposition.

Finally, model 5 in the Table 2 looks at the effects of individuals' perception of Russia's actions in Ukraine as legitimate on the likelihood of rallying. The results show that the belief that Russia's actions in eastern Ukraine are legitimate is strongly and positively associated with the likelihood of rallying (1.76). Moreover, contrary to my hypothesis, the second set of models (i.e., Table 2) demonstrates the extreme stability of the coefficients that are associated with a favorable or improving financial situation (see Finances R1 and Change Finances). The impact of individuals' perceived income status and improvement of their financial situation on rallying does not change in the two sets of models; it remains positive and statistically significant. The coefficients of being a non-voter or being a Ziuganov or Prokhorov voter are not stable as their statistical significance, when present, varies throughout the models, though remains negatively associated with the likelihood of rallying. While being a non-voter is statistically significant in models 2, 3, 4, and 5, it lacks statistical significance in model 1. Similarly, being a Prokhorov voter is statistically significant in models 1, 2, 3, and 4 and loses its statistical significance in model 5. Likewise, the coefficient associated with being a

Ziuganov voter is statistically significant in models 1, 3, and 4 and loses its statistical significance in models 2 and 5.

The perceived favorable financial situation of the individuals, sense of belonging to the Russian state, Russian ethnic group, and Russian Orthodoxy as well as attention to state TV are thus the three most statistically significant variables that have a strong positive impact on the likelihood of rallying. And while the effect of TV and strong nationalistic and patriotic feeling are not atypical in the US-based studies, our finding that the economic situation of individuals matters a lot is significant and suggests a new look at the Russia's case in connection with the rally-round-the-flag effect. In the next section I will look more closely at the results and discuss their political implications as well as analyze the possible reasons for lack of support for a number of my hypotheses.

**Table 2**

DV: Putin Approval	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Ordered Probit	State	Culture	Ethnicity	Orthodoxy	Legitimacy
Non Voter	0.81 (-1.59)	0.77** (-2.00)	0.76** (-2.12)	0.76** (-2.08)	0.76* (-1.84)
Prokhorov Voter	0.75** (-2.00)	0.72** (-2.30)	0.72** (-2.26)	0.72** (-2.24)	0.82 (-1.27)
Ziuganov Voter	0.62** (-2.30)	0.65 (-2.09)	0.64* (-2.20)	0.66** (-2.04)	0.71 (-1.56)
Private Sector	0.89 (-1.15)	0.91 (-0.97)	0.90 (-1.06)	0.89 (-1.10)	0.97 (-0.24)
Wealth	1.06 (0.77)	1.05 (0.72)	1.07 (0.91)	1.05 (0.67)	1.03 (0.37)
Education	1.04 (0.24)	1.02 (0.14)	1.02 (0.11)	1.03 (0.19)	1.11 (0.62)
Female	0.96 (-0.40)	0.98 (-0.24)	0.97 (-0.32)	0.92 (-0.83)	1.08 (0.67)
Age	0.96 (-0.91)	0.98 (-0.53)	0.96 (-0.99)	0.96 (-0.97)	0.96 (-0.97)
Moscow	0.87 (-1.38)	0.89 (-1.18)	0.84 (-1.62)	0.86 (-1.49)	0.92 (-0.76)
Finances R1	1.30*** (2.88)	1.30*** (2.90)	1.31*** (2.99)	1.31*** (3.00)	1.28** (2.43)
Change Finances	1.41*** (4.33)	1.40*** (4.21)	1.41*** (4.33)	1.43*** (4.47)	1.44*** (4.07)
Approval R1	2.90*** (12.17)	3.05*** (12.88)	3.04*** (12.86)	2.93*** (12.31)	3.01*** (10.91)
Approval R1 Sq	1.07 (0.94)	1.07 (0.93)	1.07 (0.89)	1.07 (0.91)	1.12 (1.37)
State Patriot	1.16*** (3.48)				
Culture		0.99 (-0.12)			
Nation			1.12** (2.54)		
Orthodoxy				1.13*** (3.57)	
Bloodshed					1.76*** (9.26)
Observations	583	583	583	583	512

z-statistics in parentheses \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

## GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The idea for writing this paper emerged following Putin's rising popularity in March 2014, as more and more former regime opponents changed their opinions about the president and rallied around the Russian flag. The results I obtained allowed me to answer the question of who were these people and what characteristics they shared, which eventually put me one step closer to answering another big question: Why did they change their opinion and why did Putin's gambit turn out to be so successful?

A lot of research has been dedicated to studying the rally-round-the-flag effect, but Russia and Eastern Europe remain largely underexplored. In this paper I shifted the study of this phenomenon from its usual US focus and analyzed who are the people that changed their opinions about the president for the better in Russia amidst the ongoing Ukrainian crisis. My goal was to determine whether they are similar to the ones who rally in the US, whether analogous incentives are at work in an authoritarian regime as in a liberal democracy and whether it is possible to predict how certain people will react to an international crisis both in Russia in the coming years and in other authoritarian regimes?

Previous research found that the variables that mattered most in determining who will change their opinions about the president and rally were the (1) degree of previous disapproval of the president, (2) attention to news channels coupled with lower degrees of previous disapproval, and (3) perception of the international conflict as deadly and threatening to the wellbeing of the country in question. On the other hand, previous studies have suggested that gender, age, and the economic situation of individuals don't have a significant effect on one's likeliness to rally. In this paper I uncovered both similarities and differences in the case of Russia. Similar to the case of the US, I find

that gender and age does not affect the likelihood of rallying in Russia. Unlike the American case, however, I find that the degree of previous disapproval of the president seems to have no effect on the probability of rallying. Being a viewer of state TV, however, proves to have a very significant effect on the likelihood that individuals will rally. Furthermore, the Russian case demonstrates that the individuals who rallied expressed much more nationalist sentiment and pride in Russia than those who didn't change their opinion about the president; they perceived themselves as belonging to the Russian state, Russian ethnicity, and Russian Orthodox Church. And though a similar result was found in the US as well, its effect in Russia is bigger and more significant. This finding, though not unexpected, points to the power of patriotism and nationalist sentiment in the country that remains in full effect a year after the start of the crisis despite a worsening economic situation. The power of patriotism can thus also explain the somewhat counterintuitive change of opinion about the president among recently passionate regime opponents. It seems that when a conflict is presented to the population as a struggle between "us" and "them", strife between Russia and the West, and an attack by the West on Russia, even former regime opponents are willing to rethink their opinion about the president and rally around the Russian flag.

One of the possible explanations of the salience of nationalistic sentiment might lie in the regime type. Leaders of different regimes often play the patriotism card, which remains a very strong motivation to rally around the president in the face of an international crisis; but is the endurance of this patriotism appeal the same in all rally cases? When analyzing the Persian Gulf War and the rallying effect in the US that followed, Parker (1995) notes that most of the rallying was gone within the first 10 months after the conflict. Similarly, McLeod, Eveland, and Signorielli (1994) found that a year after the Gulf War, the support for the president returned to its pre-conflict levels and the rallying effect dissipated. Today in Russia, more than a year after the controversial referendum in Crimea, Putin's popularity and support ratings continue to hover around 90 percent.<sup>12</sup> This post-crisis

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.levada.ru/25-03-2015/martovskie-reitingi-odobreniya-i-doveriya>



timeframe in Russia thus differs from what previous studies found in the case of the US. More research is necessary to draw definitive conclusions about the consistency of such outcomes and to conclusively tie them to regime types, but one of the explanations might be the varying durability of the rallying effect in democracies and competitive authoritarian regimes. As Levy and Vakili noted, using patriotic sentiment is a popular means of legitimizing a leader's actions in authoritarian regimes. This logically follows because authoritarian regimes have to rely more on exploiting patriotic feelings than on the ballot box for legitimacy. Thus, putting additional stress on the feelings of patriotism and national belonging might explain the more durable and stronger rallying effect.

Another possible explanation of why the rallying effect in Russia might be more durable than in the US is the two countries' contrasting political systems. While the US system is much more conflicted and divided and is characterized by distinct bipartisanship, in Russia, despite the existence of both the systemic and non-system opposition, there is hardly any real alternative to the ruling regime. Thus, the post-crisis dissipation of the rallying effect in the US might be characterized primarily by the decrease in the presidential popularity among the representatives and supporters of the opposing party. In Russia, due to the lack of a clear and powerful opposition, such transition fails to happen, which potentially causes the rallying effect to last longer.

Yet another possible explanation of the notable durability of the rallying effect in Russia might be the nature of the rally event itself. In his research, Lee (1977) points out the artificiality of the assumption that different types of international crises lead to the same impact on the population reaction and the durability of this reaction. Instead, he suggests six categories of international events that lead to varying staying power of the rallying effect: "(1) wars and military crises that included actual or potential involvement of US troops; (2) end of a war or military conflict that involved US forces; (3) summit conferences between the US and other powers; (4) new foreign policy bills that attract the attention of general public; (5) international setbacks or achievements; and (6) events that directly involve the president, such as assassination attempts." He then notes that "[t]he events that

tend to have relatively lasting impact on presidential popularity are wars and military crises, with the average duration of five months.” The classification proposed by Lee does not include, however, non-military terrorist attacks. And though the examples he analyzed in his work fit perfectly in the described categories, the rally event that followed the tragedy of the 9/11 terrorist attack may ask for a new category.

The crisis that claimed thousands of civilian lives took place in the US itself as opposed to a foreign country like Iraq, thus making it much more real to the broad population. Such geographical proximity and unequalled relevance of the event has hardly been the case during the Iraq crises in the 1990s as well as those that followed 9/11. The terrorism threat from outside the country activated the “us” versus “them” mentality that facilitated and enhanced patriotic feelings. As a result, George Bush’s popularity not only leapt and reached an astonishing high of 90%, but remained at a high level for much longer than five months; it wasn’t until September 2003, exactly two years after the attack, that presidential popularity rating returned to its pre-crisis levels.<sup>13</sup> What is equally important, Bush’s high popularity level was coupled with an (admittedly mild) economic recession in the country, a recession which, nevertheless, failed to bring down presidential approval ratings.<sup>14</sup>

The rallying instance in Russia analyzed in this paper seems to have some characteristics in common with the 2001 crisis in the US. Though the crisis began over Crimea, which at the beginning of March 2014 was still Ukrainian territory, it very soon became Russian and thus shifted the crisis from happening on foreign land to occurring in Russia. The vocal condemnation of the international community, coupled with Russia’s broad anti-sanctions that affected the general population and the state media presentation of the crisis as an unjustified attack by the West, served as a spark that triggered the “us” versus “them” mindset. These similarities between the two cases (post-9/11 US and the one described throughout this paper) lead me to suspect that it is the nature of the rally event that

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<sup>13</sup><http://www.gallup.com/poll/116500/presidential-approval-ratings-george-bush.aspx>

<sup>14</sup>[http://www.economist.com/blogs/freexchange/2009/08/what\\_kind\\_of\\_recession\\_was\\_200](http://www.economist.com/blogs/freexchange/2009/08/what_kind_of_recession_was_200)

determines the durability of the consequent surge in presidential popularity. Further research is, however, necessary to definitively talk about the interconnection between the two factors.

Yet the biggest difference between Russia and the US that has the most significant political implications lies in the sphere of economics. Whereas Parker (1995) demonstrated that individuals' economic situation has little affect on the likelihood of rallying in the US (where the population is willing to put their financial grievances aside and support the president in times of crisis), the situation looks reversed in Russia. My results show that positive change (or lack of negative change) in the financial situation of an individual is the strongest predictor of rallying in the country. With the number of people living below or just around the poverty line higher than that in the US, the economy is what matters for the population. Therefore, it's more likely that any (even slight) change in an individual's economic situation will be felt much more acutely than in the US. While people remain better off or their financial situation improves, they will be willing to change their opinion about the president for the better and rally round the Russian flag.

The findings have important political implications for Russia. If it is the economy that matters the most for the population and determines whether more people will rally and support the president, the coming year might bring bad news for the regime. According to Synovate ComCon, in January 2015 the number of people whose economic situation declined has reached an all-time (since they began monitoring in 2008) high of 65% (as opposed to the average of 35% since 2009). This might mean a gradual decline in the president's popularity and slow drop in his support. However, Putin's popularity ratings in January 2015 show that the number of people who support him, following a slight dip at the very end of 2014, is back in the upper-eighties.<sup>15</sup> But despite the seeming contradiction, these numbers don't counter my expectations for two reasons. First, one should take into account the lag between the worsening economic situation of the population and the drop in the president's popularity ratings, which takes time and might still follow. And second, it is important to bear in mind

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.levada.ru/25-03-2015/martovskie-reitingi-odobreniya-i-doveriya>

the way the so-called “anti-sanctions” were presented and described to the Russian population by the government. When in August 2014 Russia effectively banned most food produce coming from the EU, the US, and a number of other countries that joined the anti-Russian sanctions, Russians didn’t notice at first. Foreign food was still available in the stores since supermarkets had impressive supplies and didn’t immediately raise prices for both foreign and domestic products. Weeks later, however, as familiar foreign food started to disappear from the stores at a fast pace and the prices for Russian goods gradually increased, the general population started to get nervous—the sanctions no longer affected just the chosen few from Putin’s inner circle, but more and more people were beginning to feel the consequences of the geopolitical conflict.

According to Grauvogel and von Soerst (2013), only broad sanctions (as opposed to targeted) have the ability to spark a strong rallying effect in authoritarian regimes. For that to happen, the authoritarian leader must be perceived as a strong legitimate leader. If we look at the Russian case, we see that Putin initially had only the former – he was viewed as a legitimate leader; the sanctions imposed by the EU and the US, however, were very targeted and hurt Putin’s inner circle and certain companies owned by his associates as well as a number of banks and oil companies. They very soon turned into broad sanctions when the Russian government introduced the “anti-sanctions” and effectively banned the import of most of Western European and American food products into the country. And despite the fact that anti-sanctions were entirely the initiative of the Russian government, they were presented to the population as the only way to “repel the aggression of the West” and not surrender to the “intrusive demands” of the EU and the US. Therefore, the regime managed to transform very targeted sanctions into broad ones that affected most of the country’s population. As a result, both conditions for the occurrence of the rally-round-the-flag effect, mentioned by Grauvogel and von Soerst, were present in Russia as former regime opponents changed their opinion about Putin. Thus, the non-fading popularity ratings that we

observe today might be the aftermath of an impressive reframing campaign that has managed to be extremely effective thus far.

The results of my research point to two possible outcomes for the regime in the near future depending on what has more weight for the Russian population, financial grievances or feelings of patriotism and national pride. If the deteriorating financial situation dominates the feelings of patriotism, we might expect a decline in presidential popularity in the coming months. However, if national pride proves to carry more weight for Russians and leads them to put their economic grievances aside, then we should expect continued high presidential ratings and the unfading support of the president despite the non-vanishing economic crisis. Hence, the question remains of which frame is stronger and will have more lasting effects: that of nationalist sentiment or that of financial hardship.

Further research is necessary to study the rally-round-the-flag effect in Russia. A number of important questions remain: Is the Russian case illustrative of other authoritarian regimes? Can the obtained results be applicable to other Eastern European countries? Since this paper looked at the change of opinion for the better, my results don't look at and establish a relationship between changing economic situation and opposing the regime. Thus, another series of questions arises: Will the worsening economic situation lead to the growth of the opposition? How will the regime respond to the declining popularity ratings? Are Western sanctions effective in the case of a strong authoritarian regime or are they instrumental in strengthening the regime? I hope that in the coming years I will have a chance to answer some of these important questions.

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