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ARTICLE



Do elites matter in Russian foreign policy? The gap between self-perception and influence

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the findings of the Survey of Russian Elites from the perspective of Russian elites' perceptions of their individual and group influence on Russian foreign policy. In the current Russian elite structure, state enterprise managers, executive branch officials, and military/security officers are far more influential than members of other sub-groups when it comes to foreign policy. However, the survey results show that despite being members of the elite, respondents in all sub-groups generally found their ability to influence foreign policy decisions to be quite limited. That being said, the data show that representatives of less influential elite sub-groups are more confident about their impact on the decision-making process than representatives of more influential elite sub-groups. As such, there is a gap between elite sub-groups' perception of their influence and their actual level of individual and group influence on Russian foreign policy. The article discusses various manifestations of this gap, as well as possible causes and implications.

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Introduction: changing landscape of Russian elites

Over a quarter of a century, the Survey of Russian Elites (Zimmerman, Rivera, and Kalinin 2019) has shown a remarkable swing in the foreign policy attitudes and political preferences of Russian elites, from mostly liberal and pro-Western foreign policy orientations to illiberal attitudes and militant anti-Americanism (Sokolov et al. 2018). During this same period, the elite structure evolved from high fragmentation in the 1990s to a reformatting of the "winning coalition" (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003) around Vladimir Putin in the 2000s to the more centralized hierarchy of the last decade (Gel'man 2015; Taylor 2018). The transformed elite structure is typical of a number of post-Soviet personalist authoritarian regimes (Hale 2014); it also closely resembles some elite patterns in the Soviet past (Zimmerman 2014, Chapter, 5). While the dramatic changes in elite attitudes have been convincingly analyzed through the prism of major disillusionment and resentment (Sokolov et al. 2018), the reconfiguration of Russian elites and their changing role in Russian politics and policy-making have also affected their perceptions of influence, especially in the realm of Russian foreign policy.

In Russian politics, the 1990s was marked by "pluralism by default" (Way 2015). Amid the ruins of the defunct Soviet system, which brought about political opening and deeply fragmented the Russian state (Sergeev 1998; Volkov 2002), competing cliques of Russian elites attempted to exert

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed [here](#).

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their influence in different policy arenas. This political competitiveness and turbulence gave rise to new ideas and attitudes among elites, which affected mass preferences as well (Kullberg and Zimmerman 1999). Over time, however, pluralism among Russian elites became increasingly “managed” (Balzer 2003) and constrained under the leadership of Vladimir Putin. With the consolidation of Russia’s authoritarianism, mechanisms of elite recruitment changed dramatically (Rivera and Rivera 2018; Taylor 2018), in turn affecting elites’ influence over the political decision-making process. The former pluralism and elite competition were almost completely wiped out, replaced by a hierarchical “single power pyramid” (Hale 2014) headed by Putin, who was indisputably the dominant actor. This elite structure, most commonly described in Russian political jargon as “the power vertical” – a system with bureaucratic mechanisms of control and subordination in a context where informal ties are increasingly important and there is hidden yet stiff competition among various cliques for power, rents, and resources (Gel’man 2016).

The consolidation of this elite structure in the twenty-first century benefited certain elite sub-groups closely linked to Putin’s “inner circle” (comprised of top officials, the heads of state companies, and business tycoons), while the rest of the Russian elite held subordinate positions in this hierarchy. This configuration of elites has been analogized to “the solar system” (Petrov 2011) and dubbed the “Politburo 2.0” model (Minchenko and Petrov 2012, 2017) due to the informal checks and balances in this coalition of Russian elites. These changes served to increase the disparity between different elite groups’ levels of influence. Some key segments of the Russian elite exerted significant influence on decision-making, both because of their formal status and because of informal networks within the Kremlin, while the remaining elite sub-groups, despite their prominent positions on the political, economic, and societal landscape, became less influential, both overall and in particular policy areas. The intra-elite separation into core and semi-peripheral sub-groups perhaps became most visible in the realm of Russian foreign policy.

Russian foreign policy decision-making has become extremely centralized under Putin. By the time of the 2016 Survey of Russian Elites, it was no longer the arena for major open discussions and stark disagreements among elites that it had been in the 1990s (Kullberg and Zimmerman 1999); dissenting voices were truly marginal. Unlike economic policy, which remains an area in which fiscal conservatives (who believe that financial and monetary stability should be the top priority of the Russian state) and interventionists (who promote active state expansion into the Russian economy and large-scale state investments in development projects) openly struggle for influence (Zweynert 2017), foreign policy has turned into a “sacred cow” that is off-limits for discussion. This is the result of two dynamics. First, the mass public considers Russian foreign policy under Putin to be a major (if not the only) “success story” of the Russian leadership. According to polling data, the most important achievements of this foreign policy in the public’s eye are the strengthening of Russia’s international status and restoration of its military capabilities under Putin (Levada Center 2017). Second, several institutions and organizations nominally in charge of Russian foreign policy-making (such as the State Duma and the Federation Council) lost their autonomy and influence in the 2000s and 2010s, while expert organizations such as the Russian Academy of Sciences have been confined to certain narrow niches. As a result, Russian foreign policy has increasingly become solely Putin’s domain. These dynamics were most apparent in 2014, when Putin almost unilaterally launched Russia’s actions in Crimea, consulting only – as he himself proudly declared – with a narrow group of his closest aides (Kondrashov 2015). According to Bloomberg (Pismennaya, Arkhipov, and Cook 2014), the only economic consideration vis-à-vis Crimea was that of Russia’s currency reserves. Once economic advisors assured Putin that the country could withstand possible international sanctions, the Crimean gamble was launched – and smoothly executed.

As the 2016 wave of the Survey of Russian Elites demonstrated (Zimmerman, Rivera, and Kalinin 2019), despite certain disagreements among elites regarding foreign policy, they are largely loyal and favor an increasingly assertive foreign policy, as we will demonstrate later in this article. That being said, the restriction of foreign policy decision-making to a small circle of elites undoubtedly

affects their perceptions and preferences. In the following sections, we will compare the self-perceptions of representatives of various sectors of the Russian elite regarding their individual and group efficacy in the realm of foreign policy and attempt to explain the gap between these self-perceptions and their actual influence as observed in the 2016 Survey of Russian Elites. Some possible explanations of this disjuncture and their implications for further analyses of Russian elites are also discussed.

Sub-groups of the Russian elites: perceptions of individual and group efficacy

In the Survey of Russian Elites, respondents in the 2008, 2012, and 2016 waves were divided into seven elite sub-groups: (1) media; (2) science/education; (3) private business; (4) state-owned enterprises; (5) executive officials/ministries; (6) legislative branch (those involved with foreign policy issues); and (7) military/security agencies. Respondents from all groups were asked to respond to questions about how they perceived the foreign policy influence of their respective group (“Do you think that people like you can influence decisions in the realm of foreign policy?”) as well as their own personal influence (“And how about you personally?”). In addition, respondents had to evaluate the influence of several organizations, institutions, and individuals on current Russian foreign policy, on a scale from 1 (very little influence) to 5 (the greatest possible influence). The list of entities included the president, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, the State Duma, regional leaders, business leaders, and public opinion. Thus, respondents had the opportunity to express their own sense of their individual and group efficacy in the foreign policy arena. By political efficacy, we mean the “feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process” (Campbell, Gurin, and Miller 1954, 187).

We assume that different sub-groups of elites have highly divergent levels of influence over Russian foreign policy, given both elites’ functional specialization and the recent dynamics of Russian elite politics. The reduction of the political autonomy of certain institutions and organizations in Russia and the concentration of power in the hands of Putin and his “inner circle” (Gel’man 2015; Taylor 2018) have contributed to some elite sub-groups growing in influence at the expense of others. This trend toward the division of Russian elites into a highly influential “core” and less influential “semi-periphery” also corresponds to the “Politburo 2.0” model of Russian elites, which is based on expert evaluations of the role of elite actors in Kremlin politics (Minchenko and Petrov 2012, 2017). The information we collected within the framework of this model suggests that three specific elite sub-groups – state enterprise managers, executive branch officials, and military/security officers – are by far the most influential when it comes to foreign policy. Other elite sub-groups, such as representatives of the legislature, private business, the media, and science/education, are conceptualized as “non-influential” elites who have a relatively low impact on the foreign policy decision-making process.

The survey results demonstrate that members of all elite sub-groups – both those we classify as “influential” and those deemed “non-influential” – are rather skeptical about their influence on Russian foreign policy. Despite being members of the elite, survey respondents answered the question “Can people like you influence decisions in the realm of foreign policy?” by indicating that they and people like them had limited ability to influence foreign policy decisions. This skepticism has also somewhat increased over time (see the link to Figure A1 in the online appendix). In 2016, no survey respondents perceived their group’s influence to be “significant” or “decisive,” and the overall majority of interviewees stated that people like them cannot affect foreign policy decisions. The share of respondents who claimed to have no influence over Russian foreign policy ranged from 66% for executive branch officials and 67% for military/security officers to 92% for managers of state-owned enterprises. The only elite sub-group to cut against this trend was the legislative branch, 70% of whose representatives felt that people like them had at least “some influence” on foreign policy in 2016. This nevertheless represents a significant decline in perceptions of influence

compared to 2012, when 29% of legislative respondents claimed to have “significant” influence over foreign policy.

Managers of state-owned enterprises appear to have the least belief in their own power (only 8% claimed to have “some influence” in 2016), but no more than 34% of any group (except for the legislative branch) believed that representatives of their group could shape foreign policy decisions. However, whereas the share of those respondents who claimed to have “some influence” on Russian foreign policy remained relatively stable among state-owned enterprise managers and ministerial officials between 2012 and 2016, this was not the case for the officers in the military and security agencies. Instead, they perceived that their collective influence on foreign policymaking had grown over time: whereas in 2012, only 12% of this sub-group believed that people in the force structures had “some influence” on Russian foreign policy, by 2016 this figure stood at 33%.

Having asked about elites’ perceptions of the efficacy of their own group in influencing Russian foreign policy, the survey then asked about perceptions of individual efficacy (“And how about you personally?”). Only two answers were available to respondents: yes or no. To compare responses to these two questions about perceptions of influence, we created a 10-point scale. For the question, “Do you think that people like you can influence decisions in the realm of foreign policy?” (to which there were four possible answers), we coded “no influence” as 0, “some influence” as 3.33, “significant influence” as 6.66, and “decisive influence” as 10. For the question, “And how about you personally?,” we assigned 10 points to the answer “yes” and 0 points to the answer “no.” Thus, the answers to each question were transformed into scores that could be plotted on a graph (see Figure 1).

By comparing the answers to these two questions, we were able to see that elite respondents grew even more skeptical over time about their personal ability to influence foreign policy than they were about their sub-group’s ability to do so. As Figure 1 shows, between 2008 and 2016, all elite sub-groups except the media and military/security agencies recorded a major decline in their perceptions of their individual influence. As of 2016, almost all of those working in private business,

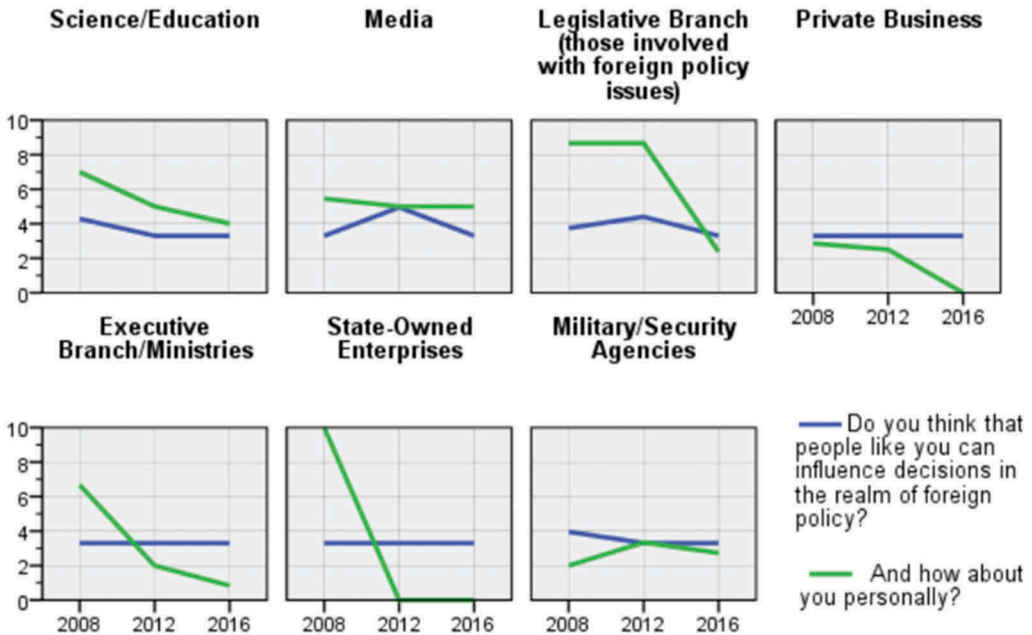


Figure 1. Comparing elite groups’ estimations of their individual and institutional influence on Russian foreign policy. Source: Survey of Russian Elites 1993–2016 (Zimmerman, Rivera, and Kalinin 2019).

the executive branch, and state-owned enterprises had no belief whatsoever in their personal power to influence foreign policy decisions. Such low levels of efficacy support the conclusion that Russian foreign policy agency is concentrated in the hands of the president and his inner circle.

As of 2016, representatives of the legislative branch and military/security officers believed in themselves as individuals about as much as they did in their respective elite sub-groups. Meanwhile, only two elite sub-groups, working in the media and science, had greater belief in themselves than in their respective elite sub-groups when it comes to the possibilities of influencing foreign policy. Members of less influential elite sub-groups' privileging of individual efficacy over group efficacy may be the result of insufficient information and an inaccurate understanding of the capacity of their sub-groups or organizations, although this is hard to assess.

In addition to comparing individual and group efficacy levels, we also wanted to test whether perceptions of influence correspond to the actual influence of elite sub-groups. We compared the data available in the Survey of Russian Elites with the expert analysis of elite sub-groups' influence presented in the Politburo 2.0 model (Minchenko and Petrov 2012, 2017). In this model, the most important group, the military, was coded 7; state enterprise managers, 6; executive branch officials, 5; private business, 4; the legislative branch, 3; media, 2; and the least important, science/education, 1. In so doing, we aimed to test the relationship between the Politburo 2.0 expert assessment of elite group influence and the assessments of elites, who belong to those groups, using their answers to this question in the Survey of Russian Elites ("Do you think that people like you can influence decisions in the realm of foreign policy?").

If representatives of influential groups are rather skeptical about their individual capacity to influence the foreign policy decision-making process, non-influential elite sub-groups should feel even less efficacious. Surprisingly, however, the correlation analysis demonstrated a statistically significant *negative* correlation between expert assessments of the influence of elite sub-groups as established by the Politburo 2.0 analysts and elites' perceptions of their own group's ability to influence foreign policy decisions (Spearman $R = -.172$, p -value = 0, $N = 704$). Contrary to expectations, representatives of *less* influential elite sub-groups are much *more* confident about their role in the foreign policy decision-making process than their counterparts from more influential elite sub-groups. It may be that less influential elite sub-groups are less aware of the actual decision-making levers in foreign policy, causing them to overestimate their contribution to this process. More influential elite sub-groups not only have more access to information, but also (and more importantly) find themselves closer to the top of the "power pyramid" (Hale 2014), or the center of elite networks where decisions are made. This is why survey respondents from more influential elite sub-groups tend to rate their ability to influence foreign policy lower than do "non-influential groups."

Another explanation might be rooted in the use of different resources by the two groups of elites. As Henry Hale (2014) argues, while most influential post-Soviet actors primarily rely upon their clientelist networks, their less influential counterparts rely upon their ideational resources, which play a secondary role in an environment of "patronal politics." We might assume that more influential and better-informed elite sub-groups are more flexible and able to adapt to ever-changing Russian politics and policymaking, whereas less influential elites might express their ideational preferences and perceptions. These assumptions, considerations, and expectations, however, cannot be proved on the basis of the current survey data and merit further analysis during future waves of the Survey of Russian Elites.

Besides assessing individual and group efficacy in Russian foreign policy decision-making, survey respondents also evaluated the influence of other political actors on Russian foreign policy. Representatives of all seven elite sub-groups were presented with a list of organizations, institutions, state agencies, and individuals. The list included the president, the State Duma, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, political parties, business elites, regional leaders, and public opinion. Respondents were then asked to estimate these groups' influence on current

Russian foreign policy on a scale of 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest). Unsurprisingly, in all three surveys between 2008 and 2016, all Russian elites viewed the president as the leading actor shaping foreign policy, with an average score of 4.93 out of 5 in 2016 (see Figure A2 in the online appendix). By contrast, public opinion, regional leaders, and political parties consistently received very low scores by both influential and non-influential elite groups combined,¹ averaging 2.04, 2.31, and 2.33 out of 5, respectively, in 2016. Elites' estimations of the role of other foreign policy actors, however, have changed. In 2008 and 2012, business elites were considered to be the second most influential actors in foreign policy (behind the president), averaging 3.81 in 2008 and 4.12 in 2012. By 2016, their influence was rated much more modestly, at an average of 3.35, for a distant fourth place.

Respondents' perceptions of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense demonstrated the opposite pattern. In 2008 and 2012 respondents considered their influence to be in the intermediate range (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs averaged 3.72 in 2008 and 4.02 in 2012, while the Ministry of Defense averaged 3.61 in 2008 and 3.66 in 2012). Yet by 2016 their perceived influence had greatly increased: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reached an average of 4.26 (second only to the president) and the Ministry of Defense climbed to 4.03 (third place).

The combined effect of these trends reflects a major decline in perceptions that Russian business elites had foreign policy influence, perhaps reflecting the broader decline in the role of business in Russian politics under Putin (Frye 2017; Miller 2018). At first glance, the perception that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense, the major state agencies in charge of their respective policy fields, are increasingly influential could be viewed as a sign that bureaucratic rationalization of foreign policymaking in Russia has occurred amid ongoing international tensions. Even so, there is an observed disjuncture between military and security agency representatives' relatively low perceptions of their own group influence (to repeat, in 2016, just 33% of respondents from this group believed that people like them had "some influence" on Russian foreign policy) and other elites' perceptions of the Ministry of Defense as relatively powerful.

The fundamental problem in analyzing the self-perceptions of various segments of the Russian elite regarding their individual and group efficacy, as well as their assessments of other actors, is related to the prevalence of personalized elite networks and informal governance practices in Russia (Ledeneva 2013; Gel'man 2016; Taylor 2018). These networks, concentrated around the top of the "power pyramid" (Hale 2014), are plausibly more decisive for presidential foreign policy positioning than formal offices in the power hierarchy. This is why the real political and policy influence of certain organizations or state agencies in Russia may depend greatly on their top leadership (ministers, etc.) and their informal relationships with the president and his "inner circle" – in fact, the latter may be even more important than formal positions in the governmental apparatus (Petrov 2011; Minchenko and Petrov 2012, 2017). When the head of the state organization is replaced, the organization may lose its power and resources. Such was the case of the Ministry of Economic Development in 2007, after former minister German Gref (2000–2007) left to become CEO of the state-owned financial giant Sberbank. Similarly, the perceptions that the Ministry of Defense's influence is growing might be a side effect of Sergei Shoigu, a powerful representative of Putin's "inner circle," having been appointed to the post of Minister of Defense in November 2012. In sum, changes in organizational leadership can significantly transform overall perceptions of an organization's influence.

Overall, the major gaps in elite perceptions reflect the very nature of policymaking in personalist authoritarian regimes, which tends to demand that individual leaders balance between powerful members of "winning coalitions" (Buono de Mesquita et al. 2003) rather than relying upon established hierarchies such as a professional bureaucracy, the military, or a ruling party. In the field of foreign policy, this balancing act contributes to a low level of institutionalization of the policymaking process (in stark contrast to the Soviet period) and may cause certain misperceptions among Russian elites regarding their influence on foreign policy.

Elite sub-groups and their foreign policy attitudes

If our above-stated assumptions explaining the gap between Russian elites' perceived and real influence on foreign policy are correct, then elite sub-groups included in the last three waves of the Survey of Russian Elites should be expected to differ in their views of domestic politics and foreign policy based on whether they are "influential" or "non-influential." To test this prediction, we used three questions from the Survey of Russian Elites: about the most appropriate type of political system for Russia, about the respective roles of military force and economic potential in international relations, and about the scope of Russia's national interests. Two of the selected questions reveal a serious discrepancy between the responses of the "influential" and "non-influential" elite sub-groups.

Over time, Russian elites responded differently to the question about the type of political system that is most appropriate for Russia. During all three survey waves under consideration (2008, 2012, and 2016), "influential" elite sub-groups considered the current political system to be the best option. The proportion of "influential elites" espousing this view increased over this period from 42% in 2008 to 51% in 2016. The opinions of the "non-influential" elites followed the same trend, but at a slightly lower level: the share of sub-group members supportive of the current political system increased from 33% in 2008 to 48% in 2012. The share of those who supported a reformed version of the Soviet system correspondingly decreased, from 42% and 47% among "influential" and "non-influential" elites, respectively, in 2008 to 28% and 24% in 2016. The unreformed version of the Soviet political system – that is, the system that existed before *perestroika* – received almost no support. Support for Western-style democracy, meanwhile, peaked in 2012, when 27% of "influential" and 40% of "non-influential" foreign policy elites favored this political system. By 2016, amid Russia's ongoing conflict with the West, the share of proponents of Western-style democracy had declined to 24% among "non-influential" elites and 19% among their "influential" counterparts: the latter were 5 percentage points less likely than members of "non-influential" elite sub-groups to accept the claim that Western-style democracy is appropriate for Russia (see the online appendix, Figure A3).

Thus, the data show that Russian elites have unequivocally rejected both Soviet and Western-style political systems. We hypothesize that the reasons for their preferences are not only ideational but also pragmatic. Specifically, today's Russian elites ascended to the top of the "power pyramid" and have maintained their status under the current political system; any changes to the status quo may be perceived as very risky and undesirable. Certainly, "the ruling elites do not have a demand for the increase in competitiveness in domestic politics. The observation of risks, entailed by the high level of political competition in the West, does not create enthusiasm within the Russian political elites" (Minchenko and Petrov 2017, 4), especially given the recent rise of political turbulence in Europe, the US, and other parts of the world. In this geopolitical game, the stability of the Russian ruling elite under the current political system (preferred by all sub-groups of Russian elites) may be also viewed as a competitive advantage over Western elites' dependence on uncertain electoral results.

The issue that illuminates differences in the ways in which the attitudes of "influential" and "non-influential" elite sub-groups change over time is the role that military force and economic potential, respectively, should play in international relations. As Figure 2 shows, in 2012, 48% of respondents from "influential" elite sub-groups believed that military force ultimately decides everything in international relations, whereas just 26% of respondents from "non-influential" elite sub-groups felt the same.

In 2016, the majority of respondents from "influential" elite sub-groups (55%) saw military force as more important than the economic potential of states in international relations. Yet it remained a slightly more contested position for those belonging to "non-influential" elite sub-groups (around 50%), who were roughly equally split between proponents of militarist and economic positions. It is also important to observe the difference in timing: support for the view that military force is

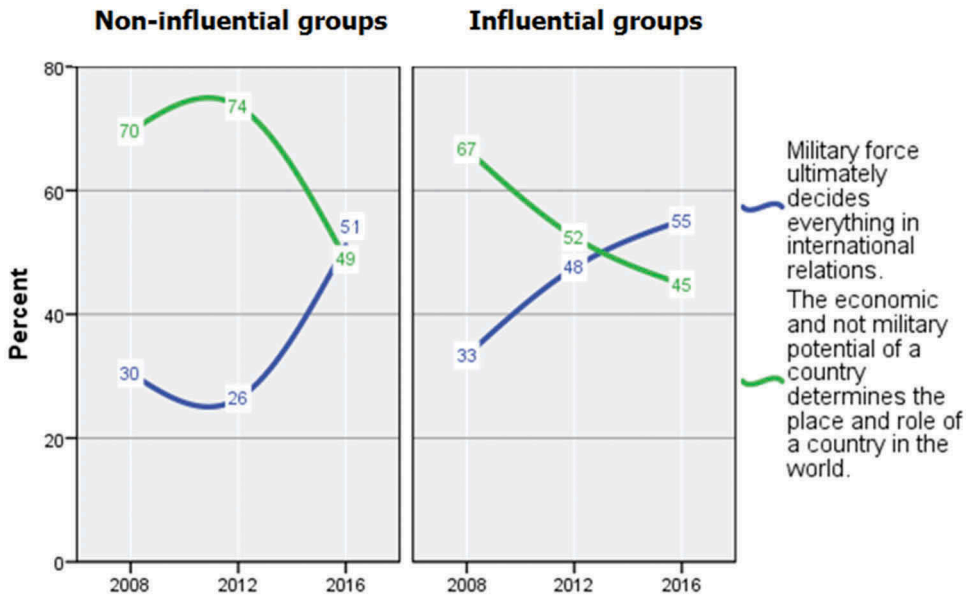


Figure 2. Role of military and economic force in international relations.
Source: Survey of Russian Elites 1993–2016 (Zimmerman, Rivera, and Kalinin 2019).

decisive in international relations has been rising among “influential” elite sub-groups since 2008, whereas it has thus far been apparent in “non-influential” sub-groups only in 2016. One might expect that the persistence and gradual tightening of the current sanctions regime imposed by Western countries would contribute to the spread of anti-Western sentiments, expressed, in particular, in the militarization of preferences among the Russian elite. With each subsequent round of sanctions, it is becoming more difficult for the Russian state to respond effectively. In the absence of plausible alternatives, the perception that military power is the key instrument available to Russia in international relations has become more common among all elite sub-groups. In particular, “non-influential” elites dramatically changed their views between 2012 and 2016, thus contributing to convergence of elite perceptions on the importance of military force in the international arena over time. Indeed, by 2016, members of “influential” elite sub-groups were more than 20 percentage points more likely to claim that military force is decisive in foreign policy than they were in 2008.

The conventional wisdom is that the militarist turn among Russian elites was fueled by Russia’s actions in Crimea and subsequent military adventures in the Donbas and Syria, which brought some short-term “rally around the flag” effects. At the same time, “the securitization of political economy in Russia” (Connolly 2016) greatly benefited Russian elites, and especially “influential” elite sub-groups, which were able to increase their budgets; legitimately claim more powers, personnel, state orders, procurements, and investment; and effectively use the ongoing international conflict for the purposes of domestic rent-seeking.

Contrary to the differences observed in the two previous questions, the answers to the question about the scope of Russia’s national interests in 2016 do not reveal any appreciable gap whatsoever between the preferences of “influential” and “non-influential” Russian elites. The dynamics of the changes between 2008 and 2016, however, merit further exploration (see Figure A4 in the online appendix). Our analysis found that elite sub-groups have adapted differently to the prevailing anti-Americanism (Sokolov et al. 2018) in Russian foreign policy. Respondents from “influential”

elite sub-groups changed their views dramatically between 2012 and 2016. The share of respondents who answered that Russia's national interests extend beyond its current territory increased by 50 percentage points in that period, from 33% to 83%. Respondents from "non-influential" sub-groups also became more amenable to this point of view, although unlike for their "influential" counterparts, this was the majority opinion during all years under study (in 2012, 52% of representatives of these sub-groups supported this position, a figure that increased to 82% in 2016).

However, there are some important caveats that must be taken into account in any analysis of the scope of Russia's national interests. The opinion that Russia's national interests should extend beyond its current territory grew by 30 percentage points among "non-influential" sub-groups between 2012 and 2016. Yet these interests can be interpreted by respondents in different ways: one cannot necessarily assume that such a view of Russia's national interests necessarily entails conflict with other states. Some respondents, especially those from academia (such as the science/education elite sub-group), could have been expressing favorability toward using soft power techniques or furthering economic cooperation with states beyond Russia's borders. Others, meanwhile, may have been indicating support for Russia's actions in Crimea in 2014, a move that is not recognized by the West, as well as for other uses of military force abroad. Such differences in the conceptualization of "national interests" by various segments of the Russian elite require further analysis that goes beyond the scope of this research.

For their part, in 2012 "influential" elite sub-groups were quite sure that Russia's national interests were limited to its current territory. This stance reflected Russian foreign policy at that time. When the situation changed dramatically in 2014 (with Crimea and Donbas), these elites quickly reshaped their views in line with the new foreign policy course in order to safeguard their dominant status. They may likewise claim loyalty to any future state-directed policy, however far this may move away from current policy. But the question remains of who will determine the future agenda. If even "influential" sub-groups of Russian elites cannot predict – never mind influence – future decisions, how could their views reflect anything but Kremlin-approved statements? ²

Concluding remarks

Both classical and contemporary elite theorists (Mosca [1923] 1939; Higley and Field 1980) define elites as societal actors who systematically affect politically meaningful decisions. On the face of it, the results of the last three waves of the Survey of Russian Elites seem to challenge this perspective, demonstrating that elite representatives, as a rule, consider their own capacity to influence Russian foreign policy to be limited. Moreover, as of 2016, representatives of only two elite sub-groups – the media and science/education – had greater belief in their individual capacity to influence foreign policy than that of the groups to which they belonged. For their part, representatives of the legislative branch and military/security officers believed – or rather disbelieved – in themselves as individuals about as much as they did in their respective sub-groups. Overall, however, perceptions of *group* influence were still higher than those of *personal* influence. Thus, elites' vision of their own impact on Russian foreign policy somewhat contradicts classical ideas about the social role of elites as influential actors. These trends may be associated with the personalist nature of the Russian political regime, as well as with the weakness of formal institutions, which continues to be the framework of policymaking in Russia, especially in the realm of foreign policy.

In our view, the differences in the assessments and opinions of representatives of various elite sub-groups may be explained by their positions in the "power vertical" hierarchy. The president's unchallenged dominance has greatly empowered informal elite networks, and in the absence of a system of checks and balances, his "inner circle" has taken on outsized importance. Being a part of these elite networks gives some actors a huge advantage. Those who find themselves outside these elite networks, meanwhile, have little power to influence decisions. Based on the Politburo

2.0 model, we determined that state enterprise managers, executive branch officials, and military/security officers are far more influential than other elite sub-groups. We therefore divided elite sub-groups into two broad categories: “influential” and “non-influential.” We found that “influential” elite sub-groups are more pragmatic and less ideological: they adapt quickly to changes in top-down policy and express their loyalty to what they understand to be the regime’s major foreign policy orientation. We can infer that the key goal of elites in the “influential” groups is to preserve or increase their status and resources and retain their positions in the power hierarchy. Less “influential” groups, meanwhile, tend to hold onto their ideational orientations, which determine their attitudes, policy preferences, and behavior to a greater degree.

This is not to say that “non-influential” elite sub-groups with limited influence on foreign policy hold no interest for the researcher. On the contrary, the gap between their perceptions of their individual influence and their actual role in the system is particularly intriguing. Members of the legislative elite, for instance, have been excluded from decision-making in most policy areas over the past decade or so (Remington 2014). Nevertheless, they still consider themselves influential actors in Russian foreign policy. Elites in private business, meanwhile, appear to be fully aware of their limited power to influence the policy process, resulting in a narrower gap between perceptions and reality. Our explanation for this is that the closer an elite sub-group is to the top of the “power pyramid,” the more the group is aware of what is going on and the more skeptical it is regarding its own ability to influence political and policy outcomes. Interestingly enough, the closer elites are to the top of the power hierarchy, the more they see the current political system as the best way of governing contemporary Russia. As long as Russian elites support the political status quo, their role in Russian foreign policy will remain subordinate at best, and the gap between elites’ self-perceptions and actual influence will likely persist.

Notes

1. There was no significant difference between “influential” and “non-influential” sub-groups in their assessments of institutions, which is why we present the data in aggregated form.
2. One should take into account that while preference falsification and social desirability biases are not often observed in mass surveys (Frye et al. 2017), representatives of elite groups could be much more cautious in this respect.

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