

# FRAMING SANCTIONS IN THE RUSSIAN MEDIA: THE RALLY EFFECT AND PUTIN'S ENDURING POPULARITY

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes a paradoxical situation: sanctions have real negative effects on the Russian economy, but are not recognized by the population as a problem. The article analyzes the key strategies used to deproblematize the economic sanctions (and the Russian food embargo) that were used in four Russian newspapers from March 2014 to December 2014. Drawing on agenda-setting theory, we assume that the use of deproblematization strategies in the media discussion on economic sanctions proves to people that the effects of the sanctions are not severe. The second section discusses another puzzle: against the background of a large-scale economic and political crisis in Russia, Vladimir Putin's support is increasing. We explain this outcome using the rally-around-the-flag effect. We argue that Russia's media discussion can explain why the rally effect in Russia is substantially more stable than in other countries.

Russia's annexation of Crimea on March 18, 2014, had a significant impact on Russia's relations with the West. Public discussion about the annexation of Crimea was largely ideological. Countries have adopted

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various positions on the issue and defended them in various ways, including through the media. It is possible to accuse the Russian<sup>1</sup> and the Western media<sup>2</sup> of promoting a politically desirable public opinion on this issue. Western countries have supported Ukraine in the conflict and described Russia as the aggressor. Thus, the declared purpose of the economic sanctions Western countries imposed on Russia is the return of Crimea to Ukraine and the revision of Russian foreign policy.

A number of governments imposed sanctions on Russian individuals and businesses immediately after the annexation of Crimea. Initially, the sanctions had the largest impact on the country's image and involved only a travel ban on the officials named in the sanctions list to the countries that introduced these measures. Later, the sanctions were extended, and additional countries supported them. In addition, the West began to impose economic constraints on Russia. Thus, in July 2014, a new package of sanctions targeted certain Russian raw materials and defense companies, and in September, restrictions limited loans to Russian companies and individuals. One reason for the expansion of economic sanctions was the conflict in Eastern Ukraine.

International sanctions against Russian individuals, businesses and officials became an iconic topic in 2014 for the Russian media. The possible consequences of the sanctions were actively discussed. In 2014, the central and regional press published 92,155 articles on this issue, according to an analysis of the Integrum database.<sup>3</sup> The sanctions also attracted substantial public attention. According to surveys by the Levada Center, the issue was repeatedly named as the most memorable event of the month prior to the survey (21-28% of respondents).<sup>4</sup>

After the sanctions were implemented, Russia faced serious economic problems, including a decline in foreign trade and GDP per capita. The sanctions contributed to other economic problems in Russia, including the drop in the price of oil, ruble devaluation, inflation, and budget deficits.<sup>5</sup> However, unexpectedly, the economic sanctions were not recognized by the population as a problem. Opinion polls revealed

<sup>1</sup> Marlene Laruelle. 2016. "The Three Colors of Novorossiya, or the Russian Nationalist Mythmaking of the Ukrainian Crisis." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 32 (1): 55-74; Yuri Teper. 2016. "Official Russian Identity Discourse in Light of the Annexation of Crimea: National or Imperial?" *Post-Soviet Affairs* 32 (4): 378-396.

<sup>2</sup> Oliver Boyd-Barrett. 2015. "Ukraine, Mainstream Media and Conflict Propaganda." *Journalism Studies*, October, p. 1-19.

<sup>3</sup> In comparison, 54,964 articles were published on the Olympic Games, whereas Crimea was mentioned in 97,678 articles (according to the Integrum database of print media).

<sup>4</sup> For example, see the research of the Levada Center "Sanctions: evaluations and expectations". URL: <http://www.levada.ru/28-08-2014/sanktsii-otsenki-i-ozhidaniya>.

<sup>5</sup> Vladimir Mau. 2016. "Between Crises and Sanctions: Economic Policy of the Russian Federation." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 32 (4): 350-377.

that a large proportion of Russians did not perceive negative effects from the sanctions for the country as a whole (62 percent) and for themselves personally (92 percent).<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the Russian food embargo was positively evaluated.

We assume that these perceptions are due to the purposeful construction of the image of the economic sanctions in the media. Although the public has observed the price increases connected with the sanctions,<sup>7</sup> it believes that the sanctions and, in particular, the food embargo will benefit domestic manufacturers and therefore the country as a whole.<sup>8</sup> Of course, the fate of domestic producers is routinely discussed in the media and represents a topic that is approved and supported by the public.<sup>9</sup> However, such optimism with respect to the economic sanctions is surprising. Thus, the measures, which initially had a negative intention and were applied as a “punishment” for Russian foreign-policy decisions, were received with unexpected enthusiasm in the citizenry. Since public opinion on these issues is influenced by the mass media, we will pay attention to the media framing<sup>10</sup> of sanctions and, especially, to the strategies of its deproblematization.

### Media-Constructed Problems and “Non-Problems”

In this study, we assume that the population’s assessment of certain issues as important and relevant is largely connected with how the media discusses them. According to agenda-setting theory, the intensity of the debate in the media can influence people’s perception of certain events as important.<sup>11</sup> Thus, for example, there is a link between popular perceptions about the most important issues in candidates’ programs and the frequency of references to these issues in the media.<sup>12</sup> Numerous empirical examples

<sup>6</sup> For example, the VTsIOM press release “Anti-Russian sanctions: Causes and Consequences”, August 14, 2014. URL: <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=114934>.

<sup>7</sup> For example, <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=115168>.

<sup>8</sup> For example, <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=115517>.

<sup>9</sup> Anastasia Kazun. 2014. “Otnoshenie Naseleniya K Vstupleniyu Rossii v VTO [Public Attitude Towards Russia’s Accession to the WTO].” *Monitoring obshchestvennogo mneniya: ekonomicheskie i sotsial’nye izmeneniya* 124:6, p. 98–111.

<sup>10</sup> Dietram Scheufele. 1999. “Framing as a Theory of Media Effects.” *Journal of Communication* 49 (1): 103–122.

<sup>11</sup> James W. Dearing, Everett Rogers. 1996. *Agenda-setting*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

<sup>12</sup> Maxwell E. McCombs, Donald Shaw. 1972. “The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media”. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 2: 176–187.

have illustrated this theory: The Gulf War,<sup>13</sup> Watergate,<sup>14</sup> environmental pollution,<sup>15</sup> and even organ donation.<sup>16</sup>

As work on agenda-setting theory evolved, researchers added more nuance to our understanding of it. Accordingly, some proposed drawing attention to the specific characteristics of the situation or the person who shapes public opinion. This modification of the theory was called second level agenda-setting. For example, if a study of the discussion in the U.S. media about foreign countries shows that widely discussed countries are perceived as important to U.S. interests, this result corresponds to the classical theoretical model – so-called first level agenda-setting. While a conclusion about the correlation between a number of negative articles about a country in the media and the percent of people who perceive the country as unfriendly for the U.S. relates to second level agenda-setting.<sup>17</sup> Later, these ideas were developed into the network agenda-setting model, according to which different agendas can be combined in “bundles.”<sup>18</sup> Therefore, researchers should pay attention not only to specific issues (information about which is regarded as independent), but to the connections between different issues.

Thus, we can assume that the mass media, to a certain extent, construct social problems and attract public attention to these issues. The background of such a constructivist approach to social problems is supplied by a paper published by Richard Fuller and Richard Myers,<sup>19</sup> who noted that the existence a negative fact does not necessarily make it a problem. For example, discrimination against the black population was observed in the southern and northern states in the U.S. However, this discrimination was not defined as problematic at all times and in all places. Guided by this logic, the proponents of this approach believe that when

<sup>13</sup> Shanto Iyengar, Adam Simon. 1993. “News Coverage of the Gulf Crisis and Public Opinion: A Study of Agenda-Setting, Priming, and Framing”. *Communication Research* 3: 365–383.

<sup>14</sup> David H. Weaver, Maxwell E. McCombs, Charles Spellman. 1975. “Watergate and the Media: A Case Study of Agenda-Setting”. *American Politics Quarterly* 4: 458–472.

<sup>15</sup> Christine R. Ader. 1995. “A Longitudinal Study of Agenda Setting for the Issue of Environmental Pollution.” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 2: 300–311.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas H. Feeley, Aisha K. O’Mally, Jessica M. Covert. 2016. “A Content Analysis of Organ Donation Stories Printed in U.S. Newspapers: Application of Newsworthiness”. *Health Communication* 4: 495–503.

<sup>17</sup> Wayne Wanta, Guy Golan, Cheolhan Lee. 2004. “Agenda Setting and International News: Media Influence on Public Perceptions of Foreign Nations”. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 2: 364–377.

<sup>18</sup> Hong Tien Vu, Lei Guo, Maxwell E. McCombs. 2014. “Exploring “the World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads: A Network Agenda-Setting Study.” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 91: 669–686.

<sup>19</sup> Richard C. Fuller, and Richard R. Myers. 1941. “The Natural History of a Social Problem.” *American Sociological Review* 6 (3): 320–329.

we study poverty we must seek to understand what makes poverty a social problem and why individuals define it as such. However, this statement should not imply that the numerous researchers who have studied poverty or its causes have been counterproductive.<sup>20</sup>

A significant role in the process of constructing problems is played by the representatives of various interest groups, which try to change a situation.<sup>21</sup> In addition, the lack of effective action to solve a problem could result in increased media attention on the problem. However, government action to address a problem can attract even more public attention.<sup>22</sup> Thus, a problem in the process of being formulated in the public space becomes a form of leverage, which requires specific action by the authorities. Thus, they have a need to develop strategies to deproblematize a situation (counter-rhetorical strategies), i.e., to construct “non-problems.”

Of course, the simplest way to divert attention from a problem is to eliminate it from the information agenda, for example, by a ban on media discussion of an issue.<sup>23</sup> However, implementating this strategy requires many resources (e.g., power, administrative resources).<sup>24</sup> In addition, in today's society, opportunities to control mass communications are limited because of the emergence of new communication channels and the increasing importance of the Internet. In this context, more complex mechanisms for decreasing public attention on issues have partly replaced bans and taboos. One strategy with which to perform deproblematization resembles a rethinking of priorities. It is possible to focus on issues that are more convenient for the government and not to pay attention to other, negative facts. This strategy was clearly illustrated in an article by Yasaveev, in which he demonstrated that federal Russian TV channels paid particular attention to the problems of terrorism, crime and drug abuse while ignoring the problems of alcoholism and corruption.<sup>25</sup> The possible explanation of this effect is governmental media policy.

However, the range of strategies used to deproblematize various

<sup>20</sup> Joel Best. 2003. “Social Problems.” In *Handbook of Symbolic Interactionism*, Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, p. 981–996.

<sup>21</sup> Herbert Blumer. 1971. “Social Problems as Collective Behavior.” *Social Problems* 18 (3): 298–306; Malcolm Spector, and John Kitsuse. 1987. *Constructing Social Problems*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

<sup>22</sup> Michelle Wolfe, Bryan D. Jones, and Frank R. Baumgartner. 2013. “A Failure to Communicate: Agenda Setting in Media and Policy Studies.” *Political Communication* 30 (2) 175–192.

<sup>23</sup> Murray Edelman. 1988. *Constructing the Political Spectacle*. University of Chicago Press.

<sup>24</sup> Olessia Koltsova. 2000. “Kto i Kak Vliyaet Na Proizvodstvo Novostey v Sovremennoy Rossii [Who and How to Affect the Production of News in Modern Russia].” *Pro et Contra* 4:5, p. 82–108.

<sup>25</sup> Iskander Yasaveev. 2006. “Konstruirovaniye «Ne-Problem»: Strategii Deproblematizatsii Situatsiy [Construction of a ‘Non-Problem’: Strategies for Deproblematizing Situations].” *Zhurnal sotsiologii i sotsial'noy antropologii*, 9 (1): 91–100.

issues is substantially wider.<sup>26</sup> Counter-rhetoric strategies can deny the importance and urgency of a problem as such (unsympathetic counter-rhetoric) or refute suggested ways to solve it (sympathetic counter-rhetoric). In the first case, it is possible to present counterexamples, or a situation can be represented as a series of unrelated incidents. Additionally, attempts can be made to discredit the participants in a discussion. When sympathetic counter-rhetoric is used in a discussion, a problem may be described as inevitable and ways of solving it as no less dangerous than the problem itself.<sup>27</sup>

Empirical research on deproblematization strategies in the Russian mass media focus on a variety of issues, from the excess of glamor in the public space<sup>28</sup> to Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO)<sup>29</sup>. Generally, all of the strategies described by Ibarra and Kitsuse are used in Russian public debate.<sup>30</sup>

## Method

This article analyzes the key strategies used to deproblematize the economic sanctions (and the Russian food embargo) in four leading Russian newspapers from March 2014 to December 2014. Although Russia has a large number of registered print media, many only exist nominally, or primarily reprint and rewrite reports from other sources. Thus, it seems logical to focus on discussions that occurred in the most prominent newspapers: *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, *Novaya Gazeta*, *Argumenty i Fakty* and *Kommersant*. We selected the most influential print media using the Title Popularity Ranking (TPR) of printed Russian media. This ranking is based on the following three parameters: circulation, advertising prices and citation ratios (i.e., the citation of one media outlet in other print-media outlets). Thus, TPR evaluates the popularity of a media outlet among the general population, advertisers and journalists. Because of its composite

<sup>26</sup> Peter Ibarra, and John Kitsuse. 2003. "Claims-Making Discourse and Vernacular Resources." In *Challenges and Choices: Constructionist Perspectives on Social Problems*, N.Y.: Aldine de Gruyter, p. 17–50.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Evgenia Nim. 2010. "O Sotsiologakh, Televedushchikh, Rytsaryakh i Chuchelakh: Dekonstruksiya Mediadiskursa Sotsial'nykh Problem [About Sociology, Television Presenters, Knights and Stuffed: The Deconstruction of Media Discourse of Social Problems]." *Zhurnal issledovaniy sotsial'noy politiki* 8 (1): 13–32.

<sup>29</sup> Anastasia Kazun. 2015. "Konstruirovaniye Publichnoy Diskussii i Strategii Deproblematizatsii Vstupleniya Rossii v VTO [Construction of Public Debate and Deproblematization Strategies of Russia's Accession to the WTO]." *Zhurnal institutsional'nykh issledovaniy* 7 (1): 95–111.

<sup>30</sup> Iskander Yasaveev. 2006. Konstruirovaniye «Povestki Dnya»: Sotsial'nye Problemy Rossiyskogo Obshchestva v Novostyakh Federal'nykh Telekanalov [Agenda-Setting: Social Problems of Russian Society in the News the Federal TV Channels]. Scientific notes of the Kazan State University. Humanitarian Sciences.

nature, we can assume that this rating accurately reflects the real market situation of the publications.

Additionally, the print publications included in the sample represent different viewpoints: pro-government (*Rossiyskaya Gazeta*), the political opposition (*Novaya Gazeta*), a popular mass newspaper (*Argumenty i Fakty*) and a business publication (*Kommersant*). Thus, we consider the discussion that appeared in the four newspapers, which could be placed at the poles of two axes: ideological stance and information category. Between March 2014 and December 2014, these newspapers published 3,173 articles on the sanctions and the Russian food embargo.

After the sampling, we performed a search for the articles in these newspapers that use the keyword “sanctions” using the Integrum database.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, articles that were not relevant to our study focus were excluded from the analysis. Articles that expressed opinions on the potential and/or actual impact of the sanctions (and the introduction of the Russian food embargo, i.e., “anti-sanctions”) on the Russian economy were considered to be relevant. The analysis did not include articles that mentioned sanctions that did not refer to the economic sanctions implemented against Russia (i.e., the word was used in another sense or in relation to another country) and articles that mentioned the sanctions as a challenge for the domestic economy in passing.

This research relates public opinion and the debate as expressed in the print media. We do not analyze the position of business representatives (whose attitude toward the current situation in Russia is nevertheless interesting<sup>32</sup>) because this topic is suitable for a separate study. Another limitation of this study is the relatively low level of media freedom in Russia. The Press Freedom Index characterizes the circumstances in Russia as “unfavorable.” During the period covered by the study, Russia was ranked 148th (of 180 countries).<sup>33</sup> Many researchers have examined the pressure experienced by the media in Russia.<sup>34</sup> However, several factors make our research reliable. First, we do not analyze the views of interest groups regarding the economic sanctions but focus on the media framing of this problem in Russia. Newspapers that are loyal to the government may play a substantial role in the deproblematization of sanctions. Therefore, the significant number of such newspapers does not constitute an obstacle

<sup>31</sup> The Integrum database contains extensive print media archives: approximately 500 Russian magazines, and more than 250 central and 1,000 regional newspapers.

<sup>32</sup> Andrei Yakovlev, Irina Levina, and Anastasia Kazun. 2015. *Attitude to the National Leader Through the Lenses of Investment Climate Assessment: The Case of Russia*. Working papers by NRU Higher School of Economics 98. Series WP BRP “Economics/EC.”

<sup>33</sup> Press Freedom Index 2014. <http://rsf.org/index2014/en-index2014.php>.

<sup>34</sup> Olessia Koltsova. 2006. *News Media and Power in Russia*. London: Routledge; Elena Vartanova. 2000. “Media v Postsovetskoy Rossii: Ikh Struktura i Vliyaniye [Media in Post-Soviet Russia: Their Structure and Role].” *Pro et Contra* 5 (4): 61–81.

for research on this process. In addition, the sample of newspapers and magazines used in this study includes the opposition press (e.g., *Novaya Gazeta*), which should enable us to analyze the features of the coverage of the sanctions in print media with an alternative ideological orientation. Therefore, although television has a larger audience, for the purposes of this study, it is preferable to analyze print media. Russian television engages in propaganda more than the press. Television limits the possibilities of the government's opponents to participate in discussions. The print media are more independent and enable us to analyze the discussion in detail, including the statements of the opposition. In addition, according to certain theories, the press constructs a hierarchy of the issues that receive media coverage and structures the discussion on topical issues, whereas television only "highlights" certain aspects of such issues.<sup>35</sup>

## Empirical Results

### *Discussion of Economic Sanctions: Their Intensity and Related Topics*

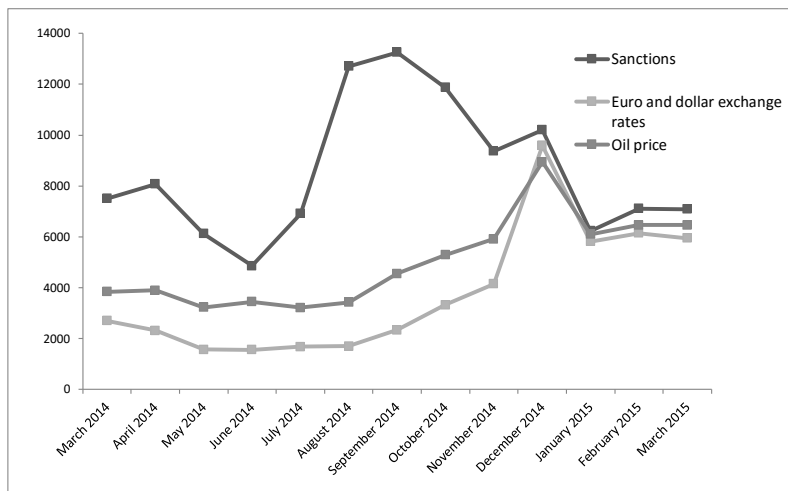
The debate regarding the economic sanctions originated immediately after the publication of the first sanctions list in March 2014. However, the issue only began to attract widespread attention in August-September 2014, when in response to the actions of the U.S. and the EU, the Russian government introduced a food embargo (Figure 1). This decision by the Russian government limited the import of products from the countries that joined in the sanctions. Thus, during that autumn, the issue remained prominent in the information agenda for several reasons. First, this period was the most difficult for businesses because of the need to adapt to the new conditions. As an interest group, businesspeople can be divided into two opposing groups. One group (primarily food businesses that operate in the domestic market) benefited from the food embargo. The other (importers) suffered significant losses. However, each of the parties actively participated in the public debate, seeking to protect and promote its interests. In addition, the food embargo provided the authorities a favorable opportunity to demonstrate their attention to the needs of domestic manufacturers. If economic sanctions could be perceived as an indicator of government weakness, the response from the Russian side had to demonstrate a willingness to confront the "external enemies." Accordingly, the representatives of this interest group have also been interested in participating in the media debate.

<sup>35</sup> Elena Dyakova. 2003. "Massovaya Politicheskaya Kommunikatsiya v Teorii Ustanovleniya Povestki Dnya: Ot Effekta K Protsessu [Political Mass Communication in the Theory of Agenda-Setting: From the Effect to the Process]." *Politicheskie issledovaniya* 3: 109–119.



Simultaneously, the food embargo was a more interesting topic for the public. Changes in the food assortment in stores became apparent, whereas limits on the entry of certain officials into the U.S. and the EU have virtually no impact on citizens' lives. The media are interested in publishing articles that have the most relevance for their audience. This approach enables them to sell more copies and more effectively attract advertisers. Therefore, the intensification of the debate on the sanctions after the introduction of the Russian food embargo was partly due to the activities of interest groups and partly a result of the topic's public "marketability."

Figure 1. Intensity of the debate on economic sanctions, the euro and dollar exchange rates and the price of oil (March 2014 - March 2015)



**Note:** The graph shows the number of articles about the issues in the Russian press (according to the Integrum database).

However, by the end of the year, the intensity of the debate on the economic sanctions began to decrease amid increasing interest in the ruble exchange rate and oil prices. Because media "throughput" is limited,<sup>36</sup> to a certain extent, more pressing economic issues replaced this topic in the newspapers. However, in several cases, different economic problems did not compete among themselves for attention. Instead, they formed "bunches" that attracted increasing attention to each of the bunch's

<sup>36</sup> Stephen Hilgartner and Charles L. Bosk. 1988. "The Rise and Fall of Social Problems: A Public Arenas Model." *American Journal of Sociology* 94 (1): 53–78.

components.<sup>37</sup> In this regard, it is logical to analyze not only the articles on economic sanctions but also the articles on topics related to them.

Initially, the discussion about the economic sanctions was strongly connected with Crimea's annexation into Russia. In March 2014 (directly after the Crimean status referendum on March 16, 2014), more than 50 percent of the articles on the sanctions contained references to the peninsula. Thus, the main focus of the discussion shifted in the direction of the question "why?" At this stage of the public debate, news articles often emphasized a connection between Crimea's accession to Russia (as the cause) and the sanctions against Russia (as the consequence).

Table 1. Number of articles on sanctions that contained references to Crimea, oil prices and the ruble exchange rate

	Percentage of articles on sanctions that contained references to:		
	<i>Crimea</i>	<i>Oil prices</i>	<i>Ruble exchange rate</i>
March 2014	51.7	12.0	11.4
April 2014	37.8	10.6	9.5
May 2014	26.1	12.1	9.5
June 2014	22.2	10.2	9.0
July 2014	22.8	6.3	9.0
August 2014	18.2	8.0	8.4
September 2014	15.7	12.9	10.2
October 2014	11.2	16.2	14.1
November 2014	12.1	23.4	23.6
December 2014	18.3	23.6	25.3
January 2015	16.3	24.4	22.7
February 2015	12.8	19.7	19.2
March 2015	17.8	19.8	17.7

**Note:** Calculated for the Russian press using the Integrum database.

However, subsequently, the percentage of articles on the sanctions that also referred to the accession of Crimea began to decrease and by November 2014 did not exceed 12 percent. Simultaneously, the number of articles that referred to the ruble exchange-rate fluctuations and changes

<sup>37</sup> Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts. 2013. *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

in oil prices increased. Thus, the discussion began to focus more on the implications of the sanctions, and media attention on the reasons for imposing the measures decreased. The discourse of “why?” was replaced by the discourse of “what now?” The sanctions had become a familiar situation, and the public was no longer interested in the reasons for them. Questions regarding the consequences of the deterioration of relations with Western countries and ways to adapt to the new conditions became more relevant for Russians than information about reasons for sanctions implementation.

As is well known, the effectiveness of economic sanctions is low. In few cases have sanctions resulted in changes in the sanctioned country's policies.<sup>38</sup> It is logical to assume that one reason for this effect is the shift in the public debate from an analysis of the causes of the sanctions to a discussion on how to adapt to the sanctions. As researchers note, media freedom decreases in a country on which economic sanctions have been imposed.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, in this case, we can expect the public debate to be influenced by external actors who seek to create a certain image of the problems.<sup>40</sup>

### *Deproblematization Strategies*

Even if the losses caused by economic sanctions are assessed as significant,<sup>41</sup> unsympathetic counter-rhetoric<sup>42</sup> prevails in the public discourse (Table 2). That is, generally, the media stress that the situation is not a problem. Thus, immediately after the implementation of the first sanctions package, the *anti-patterning strategy* gained popularity. This strategy drew attention to the fact that the measures had not significantly damaged the Russian economy or its financial markets. Thus, the economic sanctions appeared to the newspaper reader as a series of separate negative episodes primarily related to officials and legal entities.

Generally, the popularity of this strategy during the initial period of the sanctions can be explained by the details of the issue's development. In fact, during the first stage, the sanctions affected the country's image

<sup>38</sup> Robert A. Pape 1997. “Why Economic Sanctions Do Not Work.” *International Security* 22 (2): 90–136.

<sup>39</sup> Dursun Peksen. 2010. “Coercive Diplomacy and Press Freedom: An Empirical Assessment of the Impact of Economic Sanctions on Media Openness.” *International Political Science Review* 31 (4): 449–469.

<sup>40</sup> Peter Dreier. 1982. “The Position of the Press in the U. S. Power Structure.” *Social Problems* 29 (3): 298–310; Olessia Koltsova. 2000. “Kto i Kak Vliyaet Na Proizvodstvo Novostey v Sovremennoy Rossii [Who and How to Affect the Production of News in Modern Russia].” *Pro et Contra* 4 (5): 82–108.

<sup>41</sup> For example, “Putin praised the losses from the sanctions of \$160 billion.” *Forbes*, April w7, 2015. URL: <http://www.forbes.ru/news/287237-putin-otsenil-poteri-ot-sanktsii-v-160-mlrd>

<sup>42</sup> Peter Ibarra, and John Kitsuse. 2003. “Claims-Making Discourse and Vernacular Resources.” In *Challenges and Choices: Constructionist Perspectives on Social Problems*, N.Y.: Aldine de Gruyter, p. 17–50.

more than its economy. Subsequently, the first package of sanctions against Russian companies (defense and raw materials) was adopted in July 2014. Until that moment, the sanctions only restricted entry to certain countries for individual Russian citizens. Thus, the sanctions did not directly influence the economy. However, an indirect impact of the first sanctions list on the business climate occurred because of Russia's decreasing attractiveness as a business partner. However, the media wrote little about the problem in these terms.

By the end of 2014, when the anti-patterning strategy began to be less frequently applied, the "*telling anecdote*" strategy gained popularity. This strategy involves using examples to refute the claim that the economic sanctions are a problem. Generally, these counterexamples can be separated into two levels: the world level and the Russian regional level. For instance, a significant number of articles in the print media included references to the experience of other countries (primarily China and Iran), which also faced economic sanctions. In addition, the emphasis was not on the fact that the country did not suffer significant losses as a result of the sanctions, but on the fact that the measures by Western countries were an incentive for development.

Table 2. Matrix of counter-rhetoric strategies used in the media discussion regarding economic sanctions<sup>43</sup>

Sympathetic counter-rhetoric	Unsympathetic counter-rhetoric
<p>Naturalizing</p> <p>"Of course, sanctions are unpleasant for every country except perhaps the U.S. However, at the same time, in some sectors, they are essential to us. In the agricultural sector for sure. &lt;...&gt; It is clear that it is easier to accept a roll-back and to import Moroccan apples than to grow your own. However, we are obliged to provide ourselves with agricultural products! And in this regard, the sanctions are necessary for us to shake ourselves and wake up." [AiF, December 3, 2014]</p>	<p>Telling anecdote</p> <p>"Twenty-five years ago, the U.S. imposed sanctions against China because they condemned the crack-down in Tiananmen Square. The sanctions were very similar to those that are now operating against Russia. &lt;...&gt; So what? Now, the economy of the West has greatly weakened, but China is the second-largest economy in the world, and the United States is China's debtor. In fact, the sanctions are a chance for the Russians to make the country rich and cease to look back at the U.S." [AiF, November 5, 2014]</p>

<sup>43</sup> The classification of counter-rhetoric strategies is based on the theory of Ibarra and Kitsuse.

<p>Tactical criticism</p> <p>“The British foreign secretary vividly described for the newspaper <i>Daily Telegraph</i>, whose sanctions will be applied to Moscow in response to her desire to restore historical justice and <i>to avoid bloodshed in Crimea</i>.” [<i>Rossiyskaya Gazeta</i>, March 24, 2014]</p>	<p>Antipatterning</p> <p>“In 2008 and now, the sanctions of Washington were more symbolic. What has Russia (the country, rather than a number of officials, businessmen and banks) really lost this time?” [AiF, March 26, 2014]</p>
	<p>Counter-rhetoric of insincerity</p> <p>“Banks and oil companies form a queue for government support as if they have suffered from the sanctions.” [AiF, November 5, 2014]</p> <p>“A special role in this war (of sanctions) will be played by the “national traitors” (<i>natsional-predateli</i>), who under the guise of fighting for the purity of Russian corporate companies will try to undermine the position of the flagships of the national economy.” [<i>Rossiyskaya Gazeta</i>, July 4, 2014]</p>
	<p>Counter-rhetoric of hysteria</p> <p>“Sanctions against individuals who are not related to Ukraine but were mentioned in the delirious essays of Nemtsov and Navalny (Do you remember these former politicians?) are completely inadequate.” [<i>Rossiyskaya Gazeta</i>, March 26, 2014]</p>

**Note:** The matrix and the translations are provided by the author.

In unison with the optimistic reference to the experience of other countries, representatives of the Russian regions noted increasing opportunities to develop domestic producers following the restriction of competition that resulted from the Russian food embargo. Interestingly, several years earlier, free competition connected with Russia's accession to the WTO was described in the media as the way to develop the Russian economy.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Svetlana Barsukova and Anastasia Korobkova. 2014. Russia's Accession to the WTO: The Debate in the Russian Mass Media / Working papers by NRU Higher School of Economics. Series WP4 “Sotsiologiya rynkov”. Available at: <http://www.hse.ru/da->

However, later, a switch occurred in the public debate, and protectionism began to be perceived as the best condition for the development of domestic production rather than free-trade policies. However, the high assessment of the importance of domestic production remained constant. Import substitution (*importozameshenie*) became a magical incantation that not only evoked the view that the sanctions were a “non-problem” but also the desirability of the current form of relations with Western countries (particularly the food embargo).

Two additional strategies emphasize the reasons to distrust the interest groups that problematize the issue. Thus, the *counter-rhetoric of insincerity* stresses that the groups that emphasize the negative impact of the sanctions on Russia are not concerned about the public good but about promoting their own interests. In this case, business representatives can be accused of trying to lobby on behalf of their industries to obtain preferential treatment (e.g., state subsidies, loans) under the pretext of the losses incurred as a result of the sanctions. Thus, these entrepreneurs only pretended to suffer from complications in relations with Western countries. The representatives of other groups can also be accused of insincerity. Thus, politicians can use discussion about economic sanctions to attract popular support. Even members of the expert community, who should provide objective comments, may use the sanctions to pursue personal goals, for example, self-promotion.<sup>45</sup> Occasionally, this practice can influence the argumentation.

However, this strategy does not necessarily enable one to identify interest groups with transparent motives. For example, the media mentioned a group whose purpose according to an article in *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* was to “undermine the position of the flagships of the national (Russian) economy” (Table 2). In the public discussion, this group was labeled as “national traitors.” Based on the articles in the press, the group’s goals are not clear. It appears that the group’s representatives seek only to destroy the existing order. We can assume that reality is not so simple. Most likely, the label “national traitors” hides political opponents of the government, who (like the government) may attempt to use the crisis to obtain public support.<sup>46</sup> Labels are used for their emotional impact on the audience and to persuade readers that the alternative viewpoint is destructive and dangerous.

Another counter-rhetoric strategy (*counter-rhetoric of hysteria*)

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<sup>45</sup> Olessia Koltsova. 2000. “Kto i Kak Vliyaet Na Proizvodstvo Novostey v Sovremennoy Rossii [Who and How to Affect the Production of News in Modern Russia].” *Pro et Contra* 4 (5): 82–108.

<sup>46</sup> Nicole Hirt. 2015. “The Eritrean Diaspora and Its Impact on Regime Stability: Responses to UN Sanctions.” *African Affairs* 114 (454): 115–135.

closely resembles the previous strategy and involves accusing those who problematize economic sanctions with excessive emotionality. Thus, in certain cases, statements regarding the negative consequences of the economic sanctions are presented as unfounded panic reactions. Opponents are presented as incompetent and their actions depicted as emotional and illogical.

Sympathetic counter-rhetoric, in which a situation is recognized as problematic, is substantially less popular. These strategies emphasize that attempts to solve the problem will result in more serious negative consequences. Thus, at the initial stage of the debate on the sanctions, it was mentioned that the alternative to the accession of Crimea, which resulted in the sanctions, was a significant number of victims among the peninsula's Russian-speaking population. These views can be attributed to the strategy of *tactical criticism*, in which the solutions proposed for problems seem to be more dangerous than the problems themselves. For example, in this case, a set of alternatives was formulated in terms of the economic sanctions vs. a potential military conflict in Crimea. Thus, the reader understood that the case required choosing between the greater and lesser evil. Accordingly, the current situation represents the best alternative. When the president made his decision regarding the annexation of Crimea, he was forced to act as he did because of external threats. Thus, Putin's decisive action helped avoid significant losses. Naturally, the discussion on the necessity of Crimea's annexation ended as the focus of the debate subsequently shifted from an analysis of the causes of the situation to an analysis its implications.

In November and December 2014, the strategy of *naturalizing* gained a degree of popularity. In this strategy, the negative effects of the sanctions on the Russian economy are natural, because, for a long period domestic production, did not develop and the level of corruption was high. Thus, the deterioration of relations with Western countries was a blow for Russia but one that was bound to occur because the economy was in decline before the sanctions were implemented. Therefore, according to this strategy, it is now necessary to adapt to the new conditions, and the sanctions could be an incentive for development and an indicator of internal economic problems.

After consideration of the main strategies used in the press to deproblematize the economic sanctions, we can explain the prevalence in the discussion of unsympathetic counter-rhetoric by noting that in terms of propaganda this group of strategies was more effective. The public was insufficiently aware of the actual and potential consequences of the economic sanctions. Thus, it was possible to attempt to convince the public that negative effects of the sanctions were virtually absent. In contrast, sympathetic counter-rhetoric is useful in those cases in which a

problematic situation is obvious to the audience. In such circumstances, it is easier to convince the reader that the alternatives are less favorable than trying to make the reader believe that the difficulties that he or she senses do not exist.

*Which Media Were Most Important to the Deproblematization of Economic Sanctions?*

Media owned by the government play the most important role in the deproblematization of economic sanctions. These media support government decisions and provide information regarding the actions of the government and the president in the desired manner. Of course, the government can also influence the media that it does not own. However, the potential impact on public debate in its own media is much larger. This study demonstrates that counter-rhetoric strategies were most often used in *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, which is the official newspaper of the Russian government. Articles in *Argumenty i Fakty* also frequently contained strategies to deproblematize economic sanctions because this newspaper belongs to the Moscow city administration. Many Russian media are affiliated with the government. This situation creates the possibility of maintaining the desired image of the government and of affecting public opinion. However, despite the limited freedom of the Russian media, the images of the economic sanctions that were created in the mass media were varied and not always positive.

Thus, the business paper *Kommersant* published primarily neutral articles on the economic sanctions that presented a variety of views on the implications of the measures. Most of the articles that used deproblematization strategies were published in the paper during the first months after the sanctions were implemented (spring-summer 2014). Subsequently, the articles were generally neutral. *Novaya Gazeta* did not participate in deproblematizing the deterioration of Russian relations with Western countries. On the contrary, most of the articles in the newspaper emphasized the significant losses to the economy and Russia's reputation that would result from the economic sanctions and food embargo.

This distribution of roles among newspapers is not surprising. It is related to their editorial policies. Thus, considering that the government was most interested in deproblematizing the sanctions, it is logical that counter-rhetoric strategies prevailed in the newspapers which are a platform for statements by this interest group and to a certain extent loyal to the government. *Novaya Gazeta* can be grouped among the oppositional media outlets, which explains why this newspaper covered the difficulties connected with the sanctions. The ideological neutrality of *Kommersant* may be related to the characteristics of its readership. In part, the paper is



oriented toward businesspeople, who to a certain extent are aware of the consequences of the sanctions. Accordingly, *Kommersant* tried to maintain the discussion at the expert level and based primarily on rational arguments while avoiding emotional assessments and statements.

## Discussion

To what extent is the deproblematization of sanctions in the Russian media important for domestic policy? In this section we examine the possible effects of media discussion on political stability. Influencing public opinion is definitely the purpose of the heads of pro-government media<sup>47</sup> in Russia and to some extent they succeed. We assume that the characteristics of media discussion about economic sanctions may partly explain the paradox of Putin's rising popularity during the conflict with Western countries and the economic crisis.

Vladimir Putin is the most popular political figure in modern Russia history. According to opinion polls, Putin's approval rating increased from 61-65 percent in late 2013 to 80 percent in March 2014 and reaching 89 percent in the summer of 2015.<sup>48</sup> In addition, these dramatic increases occurred during episodes of strife, e.g., the conflict in Ukraine, the deterioration of relations with the Western countries after the annexation of Crimea, the imposition of economic sanctions and the Russian food embargo. In fact, Russia is politically isolated and faces serious economic problems (e.g., the devaluation of the ruble, falling oil prices).<sup>49</sup> Obviously, the situation in the country does not appear favorable with respect to the growth of the national leader's popularity. However, the latest research indicates that President Putin's approval rating is real and that the possible overstatement of his approval rating does not exceed a small number of percentage points.<sup>50</sup> Thus, public approval of government actions began to increase after the large-scale protests of the winter of 2011-2012, despite a difficult economic and political period when there was little to celebrate.

Is the national leader's popularity growth in such circumstances absurd and unprecedented? In reality, no. History provides examples of more remarkable increases in the popularity of national leaders against the backdrop of crisis than that of Putin. For instance, according to Gallup opinion polls, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, President George W. Bush's

<sup>47</sup> Olessia Koltsova. 2000. "Kto I Kak Vliyaet Na Proizvodstvo Novostey v Sovremennoy Rossii [Who and How to Affect the Production of News in Modern Russia]." *Pro et Contra* 4 (5): 82-108.

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.levada.ru/indikatory/odobrenie-organov-vlasti/>.

<sup>49</sup> Vladimir Mau. 2016. "Between Crises and Sanctions: Economic Policy of the Russian Federation." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 32 (4): 350-377.

<sup>50</sup> Timothy Frye, Scott Gehlbach, Kyle L. Marquardt, and Ora John Reuter. Forthcoming. "Is Putin's Popularity Real?" *Post-Soviet Affairs*.

approval rating increased 35 percent in one week.<sup>51</sup> The attack on Pearl Harbor resulted in a 12 percent increase in Franklin Roosevelt's popularity.<sup>52</sup> The Falklands War played an important role in the re-election of Margaret Thatcher,<sup>53</sup> and the Gulf War increased George H. W. Bush's approval rating from 58 to 89 percent for two months.<sup>54</sup> This effect has also been observed for other heads of states. The phenomenon of increasing support for national leaders against the background of external threats and crises has been termed the rally-around-the-flag effect.<sup>55</sup> The effect occurs when an event displays certain characteristics: citizens unite around the national leader after sudden events of an international scale that are relevant to the country as a whole. The personalized "other" is equally important. That is, the damage caused by natural disasters or industrial accidents does not contribute to the popularity of the authorities. On the contrary, such incidents are often perceived as the indicators of weakness.

We propose the hypothesis that should be tested in the following studies: the economic sanctions and the Russian food embargo, which occurred after the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, became the basis for a large-scale rally-around-the-flag effect in Russia and the increase in Putin's approval rating. Moreover, we assume that the strategies of the media can make this effect more stable and last longer. Below we show why this assumption is plausible.

Many researchers have noted the substantial influence of the media in triggering the rally-around-the-flag effect.<sup>56</sup> The knowledge of individuals regarding consolidating events is mediated by discussion in the media because only a small part of the population is directly involved in such events. Thus, it is difficult to deny the impact of mass communications on the rally-around-the-flag effect. After all, individuals perceive not the problem itself but its media image.<sup>57</sup> In addition, in explaining the impact

<sup>51</sup> Matthew A. Baum. 2002. "The Constituent Foundations of the Rally-Round-the-Flag Phenomenon." *International Studies Quarterly* 2: 263–298.

<sup>52</sup> Baum, The Constituent Foundations of the Rally-Round-the-Flag Phenomenon, 263–298.

<sup>53</sup> Chris Ogden. 1990. *Maggie: An Intimate Portrait of a Woman in Power*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

<sup>54</sup> Barbara Norrander, and Clyde Wilcox. 1993. "Rallying around the Flag and Partisan Change: The Case of the Persian Gulf War." *Political Research Quarterly* 46 (4) 759–770.

<sup>55</sup> John E. Mueller. 1970. "Presidential Popularity from Truman to Johnson." *The American Political Science Review* 64 (1): 18–34.

<sup>56</sup> Samuel Kernell. 1978. "Explaining Presidential Popularity: How Ad Hoc Theorizing, Misplaced Emphasis, and Insufficient Care in Measuring One's Variables Refuted Common Sense and Led Conventional Wisdom Down the Path of Anomalies." *American Political Science Review* 72 (2): 506–522; Lian Bradley, and John R. Oneal. 1993. "Presidents, the Use of Military Force, and Public Opinion." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 37 (2): 277–300; Brian Newman and Andrew Forcehimes. 2010. "'Rally Round the Flag' Events for Presidential Approval Research." *Electoral Studies* 29 (1): 144–154.

<sup>57</sup> Michael A. Cacciatore, Dietram A. Scheufele, and Shanto Iyengar. 2016. "The End of

of the media on the rally effect, researchers note that, during crises, events occur suddenly and quickly replace one another.<sup>58</sup> Under such difficult circumstances, the authorities have a monopoly on information, whereas opposition leaders who suffer from a deficit of reliable information prefer to refrain from commenting.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, criticism of government action is virtually absent from public discussion. It is logical that the media audience believes that its government's actions are correct and that the national leader will contribute to overcoming the crisis.

An interesting example of media influence on the appearance of the rally-around-the-flag effect is the case of the Gulf War. The media coverage of the events in the Middle East was not completely objective. Thus, directly prior to the outbreak of hostilities, the number of supporters and opponents of U.S. policy regarding the war was similar.<sup>60</sup> However, television news outlets ignored the opposition to the president's administration, which did not approve military aggression. Supporters of this position received less than 1 percent of screen time.<sup>61</sup> Thus, public opinion regarding the Gulf War significantly changed directly after the start of the Desert Storm military operation. The number of Americans who supported such actions increased by more than 16 percent, and the number of opponents of military action in the Middle East fell by 26 percent.<sup>62</sup> Subsequently, this gap continued to increase.<sup>63</sup>

Such dramatic changes in public opinion can be explained by a rally-around-the-flag effect that partly involves the specifics of the media coverage of an event. However, we can assume that the unequal representation of different positions in the media not only influences the public to perceive a president's decision as correct but also encourages dissenters to conceal their opinions. Thus, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann noted that due to the fear of being isolated individuals are less likely to voice their opinions if they assume that they are in the minority.<sup>64</sup> This theory was subsequently

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Framing as We Know It ... and the Future of Media Effects." *Mass Communication and Society* 19 (1) 7–23.

<sup>58</sup> Richard Brody. 1991. *Assessing the President: The Media, Elite Opinion, and Public Support*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

<sup>59</sup> Brody, *Assessing the President*.

<sup>60</sup> John E. Mueller. 1993. "American Public Opinion and the Gulf War: Some Polling Issues." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 57 (1): 80–91.

<sup>61</sup> Gene Ruffini. 1992. "Press Failed to Challenge the Rush to War. The Media and the Gulf War" in Hedrick Smith (eds.), *The Media and the Gulf War*. Washington, DC: Seven Locks Press, 282–292.

<sup>62</sup> John E. Mueller 1993. "American Public Opinion and the Gulf War: Some Polling Issues." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 57 (1): 80–91.

<sup>63</sup> Barbara Allen, Paula O'Loughlin, Amy Jasperson, and John L. Sullivan. 1994. "The Media and the Gulf War: Framing, Priming, and the Spiral of Silence." *Polity* 27 (2): 255–284.

<sup>64</sup> Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. 1984. *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion, Our Social Skin*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

developed, and the idea of the spiral of silence was transformed into a theory of preference falsification,<sup>65</sup> according to which a person's private and public opinion are not the same things. That is, individuals falsify the opinions that they believe to differ from majority views because they fear the disapproval of society or state sanctions. Therefore, the media debate affects the perception of an issue and the estimation of a situation and can encourage individuals who disagree with the policy of the authorities to falsify their preferences. One should not underestimate the role of the media in constructing the rally-around-the-flag effect. Therefore, the assumption, that Putin's popularity is connected with media discussion about the external threats has some validity.

Moreover, previous studies have demonstrated that economic sanctions may contribute to the consolidation of the public around the national leader. A recent example is the case of the UN sanctions against Eritrea.<sup>66</sup> In 2009, an arms embargo was imposed on Eritrea, the country's bank assets were frozen, and a ban on the entry of Eritrean leaders into United Nations countries entered into force. Under these circumstances, representatives of the government and the opposition attempted to exploit the sanctions for their own purposes. For the authorities, such measures have become a way to create a rally-around-the-flag effect and attract resources (including taxes) to reduce the negative effects of sanctions. This strategy has been successfully implemented and enabled the government not only to maintain but also to strengthen its position.

Researchers note that sanctions imposed on a country with an undemocratic regime often do not achieve their original objectives.<sup>67</sup> In certain cases, they result in an increase in support for the national leader. However, this outcome is only possible under certain conditions.<sup>68</sup> First, it is important that public approval of a government be high prior to the sanctions. The choice of the rhetorical strategies that will be used to justify the circumstances is also significant. In addition, the sanction should not be applied by the key partners of the country or should only apply to certain aspects of the economic relations between countries. Under these conditions, economic sanctions cause the rally effect and increase the level of support for the government.

Obviously, these conditions are fulfilled in modern Russia. For example, the economic sanctions and the Russian-imposed food embargo

<sup>65</sup> Timur Kuran. 1995. "The Inevitability of Future Revolutionary Surprises." *American Journal of Sociology* 100 (6): 1528–1551.

<sup>66</sup> Nicole Hirt. 2015. "The Eritrean Diaspora and Its Impact on Regime Stability: Responses to UN Sanctions." *African Affairs* 114 (454): 115–135.

<sup>67</sup> Julia Grauvogel and Christian von Soest. 2014. "Claims to Legitimacy Count: Why Sanctions Fail to Instigate Democratisation in Authoritarian Regimes." *European Journal of Political Research* 53 (4): 635–653.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

counter-sanctions only apply to certain groups of goods and services, and Putin's popularity before the annexation of Crimea exceeded 60 percent. Thus, the level of support for the president was high at the time that the sanctions were implemented. Accordingly, it is appropriate to speak of a rally-around-the-flag effect in this context.

The rally effect works in Russia for reasons that go beyond the Crimean annexation and sanctions implementation. Putin's rating increased in crisis situations in the past (Figure 2). Thus, the president's high approval rating at the turn of 1999-2000 can be attributed to Putin's participation in resolving the conflict in Chechnya (The Second Chechen War). In addition, a "honeymoon effect," whereby immediately after an election victory a president receives considerable support from the public,<sup>69</sup> was also significant. Putin became acting president after the early departure of Boris Yeltsin, who resigned on December 31, 1999. As a result of the honeymoon effect, Putin's approval rating was 84 percent in January 2000. The Moscow theater hostage crisis (also known as the Nord-Ost siege) also resulted in a short-term increase in Putin's support in 2002. The next time the president's popularity was significantly higher than 80 percent occurred in 2003 due to the confrontation with the U.S. over Iraq. Although in this case the conflict was diplomatic, not military, the image of an external enemy was successfully formed, which resulted in an increase in support for the national leader. Later, an increase in Putin's popularity occurred against the background of the conflict with Georgia in 2008. Thus, the rally-around-the-flag effect has been observed in Russia after numerous acts of terrorism and armed conflicts.

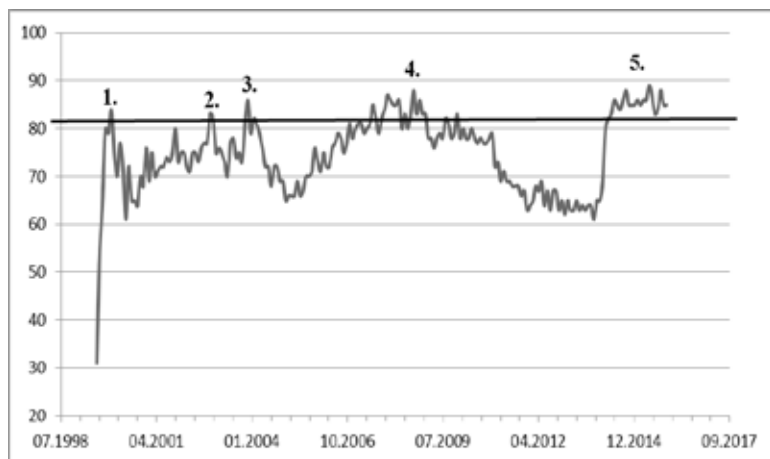
However, President Putin's rating was closely linked not only with international crises but also with Russia's economic situation. This effect was significant after the president's assumption of office in 2000 and before the start of mass protests in 2011-2012. It was assumed that Putin's decreasing level of support during this period, when a deterioration of the economic situation was not observed, would be short-lived and the economy would remain a significant factor.<sup>70</sup> Additionally, national turmoil, nationalism and anti-Americanism would not significantly affect Putin's popularity. However, this forecast was inaccurate. The most significant and steady increase in Putin's approval rating was recorded after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. This effect persists despite the economic sanctions and the Russian food embargo, the ruble's devaluation and the

<sup>69</sup> Matthew N. Beckmann and Joseph Godfrey. 2007. "The Policy Opportunities in Presidential Honeymoons." *Political Research Quarterly* 60 (2): 250-262; Paul Gronke and John Brehm. 2002. "History, Heterogeneity, and Presidential Approval: A Modified ARCH Approach." *Electoral Studies* 21 (3): 425-452.

<sup>70</sup> Daniel Treisman. 2014. "Putin's Popularity since 2010: Why Did Support for the Kremlin Plunge, Then Stabilize?" *Post-Soviet Affairs* 30 (5): 370-388.

deterioration of relations with many countries (including Turkey at the end of 2015). Accordingly, the economic situation has ceased to be decisive in determining the national leader's approval rating.

Figure 2. Approval rating of Vladimir Putin as president or prime minister



**Note:** 1. The honeymoon effect and the Second Chechen War; 2. The Moscow theater hostage crisis; 3. Confrontation with the U.S. over Iraq; 4. The armed conflict in Georgia (South Ossetia); 5. Crimea annexation, the conflict in eastern Ukraine, the economic sanctions.

**Source:** Levada Center, <http://www.levada.ru/indikatory/odobrenie-organov-vlasti/>

However, this situation was not fully unexpected. Researchers note that the rally-around-the-flag effect against the background of a crisis can distract attention from economic problems.<sup>71</sup> The effect's stability is more surprising. Generally, the rally effect is maintained for a relatively short period. According to estimates, the president's popularity typically returns to the original level within 6 months.<sup>72</sup> Other researchers have noted that the decrease in popularity after the rally event is 5-6 percent per month on average<sup>73</sup> (however, considering the scope of the effect, these estimates are similar). In Russia, Putin's approval rating has been above 80 percent for two years. In part, this all-time high stability of the rally effect can be

<sup>71</sup> Tir Jaroslav and Shane P. Singh. 2013. "Is It the Economy or Foreign Policy, Stupid? The Impact of Foreign Crises on Leader Support." *Comparative Politics* 46 (1): 83-101.

<sup>72</sup> Barbara Norrander and Clyde Wilcox. 1993. "Rallying around the Flag and Partisan Change: The Case of the Persian Gulf War." *Political Research Quarterly* 46 (4): 759-770.

<sup>73</sup> John E. Mueller. 1970. "Presidential Popularity from Truman to Johnson." *The American Political Science Review* 64 (1): 18-34.

explained by Russian cultural characteristics. Researchers have noted that the increase in the national leader's rating after a tragedy lasts longer in certain countries than in others.<sup>74</sup> However, Russian cultural characteristics cannot fully explain such large differences in rally-effect longevity compared with other countries. Typically, the cultural factor can explain differences of a few months but not a year and a half.

Another possible explanation for Putin's unusually stable popularity is that several rally events have affected the president's approval rating. Thus, initially, the consolidation of society occurred against the background of the annexation of Crimea, followed by a rally effect fueled by the economic sanctions, the imposed food embargo, the destruction of sanctioned products during live broadcasts, the conflict with Turkey, and so on. Thus, we have been observing a series of conflicts that could generate rally effects. However, the question arises: "Why aren't people disappointed in the government, which is unable to solve the problem but only provokes more conflict?" Studies on terrorist attacks reveal that repeated attacks typically result in a decrease in the popularity of the authorities rather than additional increases.<sup>75</sup> Thus, this explanation is also questionable.

Therefore, we propose another interpretation for the stability of rally effect: the media coverage of the problems and conflicts in contemporary Russia. Deproblematization strategies of the press enable maintaining public attention on an issue without provoking public anxiety. Thus, considerable attention by citizens to an event is essential to the creation of the rally-around-the-flag effect. In addition, to sustain the effect, the public's attention must not weaken, and the public must not problematize the issue and associate it with incompetence by the authorities. All of these problems can be solved using counter-rhetoric strategies; examples of which have been provided in the article.

## Conclusions

The media framing of sanctions may explain why the consolidation of Russian society in a situation of external threat is more stable than usual. The deproblematization of the economic sanctions has several objectives. The counter-rhetoric strategies convince readers that the consequences of the imposed restrictions are not serious and can be overcome by uniting the population and implementing import substitution policies. Previously, researchers have noted that the consolidation of society around the national leader as a result of sanctions is only possible when the sanctions do not

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<sup>74</sup> Peter Thisted Dinesen and Mads Meier Jæger. 2013. "The Effect of Terror on Institutional Trust: New Evidence from the 3/11 Madrid Terrorist Attack." *Political Psychology* 34 (6): 917–926.

<sup>75</sup> Christophe Chowanietz. 2011. "Rallying around the Flag or Railing Against the Government? Political Parties' Reactions to Terrorist Acts." *Party Politics* 17 (5): 673–698.

cause catastrophic damage to the economy.<sup>76</sup> The Russian media that are loyal to the government tried to convince the population of precisely this absence of negative effects of the sanctions. Second, the construction in the media of Vladimir Putin's image as a strong leader who can withstand external threats was no less important. Thus, the annexation of Crimea was described as a necessary measure related to the situation in Ukraine (i.e., mass protests, nationalists coming to power). The introduction of the Russian food embargo (anti-sanctions) was similarly explained. These measures are described as a reaction to the aggressive actions of the West with the aim of protecting Russia against an expansion of the sanctions.

Currently, Russia faces a severe economic crisis (e.g., the devaluation of the ruble, increasing inflation and decreasing oil prices, which are important for the Russian economy). Additionally, Russia's relations with many countries have deteriorated since the annexation of Crimea. The national leader's popularity should decrease under such circumstances, particularly because Putin's approval rating has long been closely associated with assessments of the country's economic situation.<sup>77</sup> However, the decrease in his approval rating has not occurred. On the contrary, the president's popularity has substantially increased. This phenomenon can be explained by the rally-around-the-flag effect, which causes the popularity of national leaders to increase during international conflicts and crises. The rally effect has been strengthened by the discussions in the media, which contribute to a consolidation of society as it confronts external threats. In the case of economic sanctions, strategies of deproblematization played an important role in structuring the public understanding of the issue.

## Acknowledgements

The study was implemented in the framework of the Basic Research Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) in 2016.

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<sup>76</sup> Julia Grauvogel and Christian von Soest. 2014. "Claims to Legitimacy Count: Why Sanctions Fail to Instigate Democratisation in Authoritarian Regimes." *European Journal of Political Research* 53 (4): 635–653.

<sup>77</sup> Daniel Treisman. 2014. "Putin's Popularity since 2010: Why Did Support for the Kremlin Plunge, Then Stabilize?" *Post-Soviet Affairs* 30 (5): 370–388.