
Emotions, Cognition, and the Societal Dynamics of East-West Polarization

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Gulnaz Sharafutdinova
King's College London

"Historical epochs are like volcanoes. Everything that has accumulated through the years under a thin surface of everyday events suddenly breaks open, like lava, and comes to the surface."

- Vladimir Ermolenko¹

The dramatic snowballing of events—Russia's annexation of Crimea, ongoing war in eastern Ukraine, the downing of Malaysian Airliner MH17, sanctions—have remade the global political scene. Polarization, confrontation, and media-fuelled hysteria exist on all sides. Levels of anti-American sentiment in Russia and anti-Russian sentiment in the West have skyrocketed, propelled by media portrayals and outright propaganda, which has been especially evident on Russian television.

The emotional makeup of Russian society is especially complex and ambivalent. On the one hand, the number of Russians living in constant fear of a new world war, according to the Moscow-based Levada Center, reached 27 percent this past July, while 52 percent are generally concerned about it.² On the other hand, VTsIOM, another polling agency, reported that the sense of social well-being in Russia in August hit a record high in terms of life satisfaction, material well-being, and social optimism, with numbers reaching 79, 76, and 77 percent, respectively.³ Russian President Vladimir Putin's ratings have also remained unprecedentedly high at 82-86 percent over the last few months. It appears as if the events that have startled the world, producing anxiety and fear of Russia in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, have worked to boost Russians' sense of well-being, self-confidence, patriotism, and faith in their president.

¹ "A Letter to a friend from Russia," <http://gefter.ru/archive/12118>

² <http://www.levada.ru/15-08-2014/strakhi-rossiyan>

³ This is also confirmed by the experts of the Levada Center. See: <http://www.levada.ru/19-08-2014/ekspertiza-rossiyane-na-podeme>

Political scientists have so far been reluctant to embrace emotion as a way of understanding political processes. The issue has been left for more casual journalistic coverage, as exhibited recently, with the media providing psychological accounts to help explain the Ukraine crisis.⁴ Such omission is regrettable, even if understandable, as I discuss below. The study of emotional underpinnings and drivers of political processes is important from analytical, policy-making, and political perspectives. Analytically, taking emotions into account allows for making sense of the *rationality* of particular actions that otherwise might appear irrational and difficult to comprehend. The actions of Putin with regard to Crimea specifically have often been interpreted as *irrational* and not bearing any relation to Russia's long-term interests. If one focuses on the economic and political burdens associated with integrating Crimea into Russia, this is a plausible viewpoint. But this is so only if one understands interests as a set of preferences delinked from meaning, identity, history, and memory. Once interests are seen as embedded in meaning, Putin's actions become more sensible as they placed the Crimea issue right at the core of Russia's struggles with its national identity, post-imperial legacies, and the emotional trauma Russian society experienced after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Crimea could arguably be seen as a newly-found public fetish representing the recovery (if only partial) of the lost pride and prestige associated with the Soviet Union.

Many observers focus on the role of propaganda campaigns in reshaping Russian society, blaming Putin and his political regime for carefully constructing such campaigns during the 2000s and cultivating anti-Westernism and anti-Americanism throughout the last decade. The political crisis in Ukraine led to the unleashing of an especially virulent propaganda campaign in Russia invoking the hated images of fascism and "Banderites" supposedly working in cahoots with the United States, which, in turn, seeks to take over the world. Even after the May 2014 presidential election in Ukraine, which demonstrated that radical nationalist candidates had less than two percent support among the population, the narrative about the U.S.-supported bloody, fascist, junta regime in Kyiv persisted.

Even a single session of watching Russian television channels these days provides an unforgettable impression of the sensationalized messages pounded over and over into the eyes and ears of Russian audiences, messages aimed at emotional mobilization on geopolitical grounds.⁵ However, sociologists and psychologists assert that propaganda does not work on people who are not susceptible to it.⁶ People do not believe what they do not want to believe and process information selectively, with the aim of affirming their pre-existing beliefs. Most recent studies show that even when their beliefs are

⁴ For example, articles by Sean Guillory, Leonid Bershidsky, and Boris Grozovsky at: <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/117493/russia-suffering-post-traumatic-stress-disorder>; <http://www.snob.ru/selected/entry/75421>; <http://www.colta.ru/articles/society/3939>

⁵ For example, http://www.gazeta.ru/lifestyle/style/2014/08/a_6170429.shtml

⁶ <http://www.snob.ru/profile/10069/blog/79594>

shown to be false, people are likely to change them only under immediate threat.⁷ Unsurprisingly, more and more observers have recently turned their attention to the state of Russian society and the reasons for its susceptibility to such open brainwashing.⁸

So why do the majority of Russians believe the misinformation projected on Russian television channels? What do various strands of relevant literature and data tell us?

Propaganda, Emotion, and Cognition

First, let us attend to the issue of how exactly propaganda works. There is a large body of literature in the cognitive sciences that focuses on the interconnection between emotions and cognition.⁹ Researchers have shown unambiguously that anxiety affects interpretation: more anxious individuals tend to interpret ambiguous information in congruence with their fears and perceived threats (although context and contextual information are also very important for resolving ambiguity). Furthermore, a wide range of emotions—anger, sadness, anxiety, and more positive emotions—affect judgment; even how people estimate the likelihood of various outcomes appears to be partially a function of their mood. The central message that emerges from this literature concerns the inter-linkage between emotions and information-processing/interpretation/judgment. Emotions represent an important element in the construction of social cognition (or the societal-level understanding of present problems). Their understanding is therefore important for getting at the *societal-level* reasoning and rationality.

Propaganda on Russian television has clearly targeted the emotional state of society, specifically aiming at increasing the level of public anxiety and reviving historically-rooted national fears and hatreds associated with fascism and World War II. Furthermore, it is evident that propaganda messages have manipulated the national wounds associated with the loss of international stature and the perceived “greatness” of the Soviet Union, positing the return of Crimea as a morally superior, responsible, and justified action on Russia’s part. The new rule-making claimed and asserted by Russia on this international boundary issue was interpreted by the public as a “return” of the country to the category of “great powers” that is free to construct rules rather than be bound to follow existing ones. The resulting ambivalence in public opinion data—showing widespread fears of a new world war along with a newly found sense of well-being and self-confidence—are not surprising in this picture. They only show that propaganda has had an effect in determining public perceptions and that it was a multi-faceted instrument hitting at a number of soft spots on the public’s “emotional” body.

⁷ <http://www.newyorker.com/science/maria-konnikova/i-dont-want-to-be-right>

⁸ <http://www.colta.ru/articles/society/3939>

⁹ For an excellent, if selective review, see Isabelle Blanchette and Anne Richards, “The Influence of Affect of Higher Level Cognition: A Review of research on interpretation, judgment, decision-making and reasoning,” *Cognition and Emotion* 24, 4 (2010).

What these “soft spots” are can be gleaned through public opinion polls and through cultural studies that apprehend the deeper emotional, perhaps even subconscious, layers of Russian society that are not amenable to opinion poll analysis.

Attitudes, Opinions, and Emotional Resonance

Opinion polls are better at capturing the cognitive side: what people think about certain issues (including what they think about “how they feel”). By its very design—relying on information-processing based on language—opinion polls are not able to get at the subconscious level and uncontrolled emotional responses. Still, they have much to contribute to understanding the mindset of Russian society and comprehending the processes and public reactions unfolding in recent months. One opinion that stands out in its consistency is a popular view about Russia’s place in the world. Sixty-six percent of Russians in 2000 and 65 percent in 2010 thought that Russia as a country deserves a place of greater respect.¹⁰ Consistent with this view, popular expectations grew that the president should focus on making Russia a great power that deserves respect in the world.¹¹ Fifty-seven percent saw that as a priority for the president, standing second only to the issue of “social justice” (which 77 percent saw as a priority) and ahead of “law and order” (which stood at 51.5 percent). The annexation of Crimea was interpreted by many as a huge step toward returning that greatness. The number of respondents that noticed increasing respect toward Russia increased from 25 percent in 2012 to 44 percent in 2014.¹²

In terms of perceptions of external threats and enemies, the majority of Russians (51 percent) thought in 2010 that an external threat to Russia existed (with that proportion reaching 61 percent in 2014).¹³ Furthermore, the West was considered the number one external threat; almost a third of Russians—32 percent—thought that foreign/external threats to Russia were coming from the West (while 29 percent thought the external threat was associated with the Islamic world).¹⁴ It is also clear that the external threat associated with the West is mostly linked to the United States; consistently in 2003, 2007, and 2010, anywhere between 73 and 76 percent of Russians thought that the United States was an aggressor that tries to control all countries in the world.¹⁵

Quite revealing as well are the polls showing mass confusion in popular assessments of the results of the end of the Cold War. In 2007, almost two decades after the fall of the

¹⁰ <http://www.levada.ru/archive/strana-i-mir/kak-vy-schitaete-rossiya-zanimaet-seichas-v-mire-polozhenie-kotorogo-zasluzhiva>

¹¹ <http://www.levada.ru/15-02-2012/ezhik-v-tumane>

¹² http://www.ng.ru/politics/2014-08-08/3_opros.html

¹³ <http://www.levada.ru/archive/strana-i-mir/kak-vy-schitaete-sushchestvuet-li-v-nastoyashchee-vremya-kakaya-libo-vneshnyaya>

¹⁴ <http://www.levada.ru/archive/strana-i-mir/ot-kogo-na-vash-vzglyad-prezhde-vsego-iskhodit-vneshnyaya-ugrozav-ot-davshikh-p>

¹⁵ <http://www.levada.ru/archive/strana-i-mir/dlya-vas-ssha-seichas-eto>

Berlin Wall, 36 percent of respondents could not give a clear answer to the question about what the end of the confrontation with the West meant for Russia. Thirty-one percent thought that Russia had lost in its confrontation with the West, while 33 percent thought that Russia had gained, along with others, from ending the confrontation with the West.¹⁶ Despite these divided opinions, 78 percent of respondents thought that Russia should promote mutually beneficial links with the West, while only 11 percent thought Russia should distance itself from the West.¹⁷ This last point is a good illustration of the difficulties involved in using opinion polls to get at public emotions (unless studying these emotions has been placed at the very center of research). Designed to get respondents' reactions on an array of questions, opinion polls do not allow for testing the intensity of responses to emotionally charged issues or for distinguishing between issues that are more or less emotionally charged without further and more in-depth probing. The explosive character of the emotional responses associated with the Ukraine crisis indicates that these emotions have been in the process of gestation and accumulation for some time but are only now finding a moment for open and public expression. Cultural studies appear to possess better means at getting at the emotions that society has been harboring beneath the surface for a particular period of time.

How could a study show what lies underneath the social surface? One method advanced in cultural studies is through art and literature. "[A]rt is the incision in the real which allows something unexpected to emerge or erupt, and let[s] us glimpse or guess at what lies beneath the surface of things."¹⁸ Art and literature do not speak for themselves entirely and depend on what viewers and the readers bring to the text, what they hear, and what they see. It is the public resonance of a piece of art, movie, or work of literature along with the public's identification with the sentiments promoted by these pieces that reveal they have touched on something important, something that might have been hidden beneath the surface, a powerful emotional charge that was discharged upon confronting that piece of art.

In short, this is a method of getting at societal traumas, fears, and aspirations by studying the creative pieces that have caused powerful public resonance and could therefore be explored as a gateway into the collective unconscious.

Russian director Alexei Balabanov's film *Brat (Brother) 2* (2000), for example, is one such creative piece that can serve as a powerful conduit into the Russian psyche. A sequel to the original *Brat* (1997), a film tracking its main character Danila (played by Sergei Bodrov, Jr.) as he returns from military service and faces life during the thuggish 1990s

¹⁶ <http://www.levada.ru/archive/strana-i-mir/v-rezultate-izmeneniya-vneshnepoliticheskogo-kursa-strany-v-kontse-80-kh-godov->

¹⁷ <http://www.levada.ru/archive/strana-i-mir/kak-vy-schitaete-rossii-seichas-sleduet>

¹⁸ Couse Venn, "Identity, diasporas and subjective change: The role of affect, the relation to the other, and the aesthetic," *Subjectivity* 26, 1 (2009), 10.

in St. Petersburg, *Brat 2* takes Danila to Chicago as he seeks to avenge a friend and restore justice. A gangster flick, *Brat 2* became a cult film, featuring aggressive anti-Westernism, xenophobia, and sexism, and it turned its main character, a hitman, into a cult personality. Yana Khashamova, who uses *Brat* and *Brat 2* (along with other Russian films) to explore Russia's collective imagination about the West, argues that the Russian public underwent shifting sentiments and contradictory reactions towards the West as it faced the challenges of adjusting its national identity to a new global environment. Early fantasies of the West turned illusory during the painful 1990s and were replaced by aggressive anti-Western sentiments, anti-Americanism, and admiration for Russia's moral superiority, as is evident in *Brat 2*.¹⁹ The massive admiration and following for Danila reflects just how closely the sentiments promoted by the film coincided with the public's mood and aspirations, especially those of Russian youth.

Arguably, Putin's actions vis-a-vis Ukraine and the West have been underpinned by the same sentiment, likening Putin to Danila, and have subsequently been admired by millions of Russians. Putin's surging approval rating in opinion polls seems to indicate that the Russian public has seen its fantasies resurface as reality in recent initiatives of the Russian president. The pull of the Kremlin's propaganda messages are arguably that much more enticing given such pre-existing fantasies. The awakening from these fantasies is doomed to be painful and traumatic, once again, and can only be delayed by the continuing and, arguably, heightening confrontation with the West.

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¹⁹ Yana Khashamova, *Pride and Panic: Russian Imagination of the West in Post-Soviet Film* (Intellect Books), 2007, 112.