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The Cost of War: A Comment and a Reply

In the July/August issue of *Intereconomics*, Ilona Sologoub argued that increasing the cost of war would limit the ability of an authoritarian state to wage a war. Here, Charles D. Coleman comments on this statement and offers clarification, followed by a reply from Sologoub.

Charles D. Coleman

The Cost of War: A Comment on “Ukraine’s EU Integration: A Long Way Home” by Sologoub

Sologoub (2022) mischaracterizes my argument (Coleman, 2002) for democracies’ being less likely to go to war than dictatorships. I do not claim, contrary to Sologoub (2022), that the cost of war is the deciding factor. Instead, I argue that governmental structure is decisive. An autocrat’s ability to allocate the benefit of war to himself while imposing the cost on his population increases his willingness to go to war compared to a democratic government whose people bear both the benefit and cost of war. The autocrat simply sees a many times higher net benefit to himself than does a citizen of a democracy, who may very well see a net cost. In the polar case of pure autocracy, increasing the cost of war has no effect on an autocrat’s decision making because the autocrat does not bear the cost. The only exception occurs when economic damage reduces the autocrat’s ability to extort rents. Note that this is a necessary but not sufficient condition. History has examples of autocracies whose citizens accepted very high war costs, whether by force or ideology.

Rather, deterrence to war is created by reducing the resources available for war and creating the risk that the

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Charles D. Coleman, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington DC, USA.

autocrat will lose power. The latter is done by going to war with the autocrat or by creating internal withdrawal of support for an autocratic regime. Some Russians have already demonstrated their opposition to the war in Ukraine by leaving Russia, protesting within and outside Russia and engaging in sabotage. The internationally forced reduction in imports has reduced Russians’ standard of living. The Russian military’s dependence on imported semiconductors has resulted in its severely reduced ability to rearm after foreign supplies were cut. The increasing number of lost servicemen has damaged Russian citizens’ morale, especially when the losses are covered up. Due to preference falsification (Kuran, 1995), Chapkovski and Schaub (2022) find that Russian war support is lower than reported by standard opinion polls. To gain an idea of the true changes in Russian war support, Chapkovski and Schaub’s (2022) experiment should be repeated regularly with the addition of testing for preference falsification regarding support for Putin. Revolution or rebellion may occur in Russia should support for the war and Putin fall low enough (Kuran, 1995). Since war support varies across Russia, the outbreak of rebellion could create civil war between areas of strong and weak support for the war with Ukraine.

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Ilona Sologoub

The Cost of War: A Reply

I thank Dr. Coleman for his comments and additional explanations. Taking into account that it is people who bear the cost of war both in democracies and autocracies, I think one can infer that democratic governments are less likely to start a war because they are more responsive to public opinion, i.e. the feedback mechanisms from people to government is much more sensitive in democracies, while autocracies often deliberately break down these mechanisms. For example, when Putin became the president in 2000, the first thing he did was to destroy more or less independent media. This mission was accomplished by 2002. In Ukraine, then President Kuchma's attempt to destroy independent media (by, among other means, killing the journalist Georgy Gongadze) resulted in mass protests that lasted from November 2000 until March 2001.

As for the Russian society, while I can agree that war support there may be lower than officially reported, Chapkovski and Schaub's (2022) experiment shows that it is still very high. Whether it is 70% or 80% is not that important. If people are afraid to even tell pollsters what they think, one cannot expect them to create an active protest movement. In addition, the question that is not asked by Chapkovski and Schaub (2022) is – why do some Russians not support the war? Judging from what we hear from Russian opinion leaders who have now left Russia and are very vocal in Europe and the EU, and from what we see in Russian social media, very few Russians feel compassion for Ukrainians. Rather, they understand that sanctions will lower their standards of living and that the war outside Russia inevitably implies more repression inside the country (both are aimed at cementing support for Putin). Moreover, during the past six months, Russians have written about 145,000 delations about people who “distribute Ukrainian propagan-da”, i.e. try to tell the truth about the war (Focus, 2022). The majority of the population that supports the war is

much more aggressive and ready to act than the minority that does not.

While a civil war in Russia is possible, it will not be between those who support the war and those who do not. It will have either ethnic or economic reasons (i.e. peoples of Russia will demand independence as they did in 1990 (Corbet and Gummich, 1990) or people will demand that more taxes stay within their own region rather than go to Moscow), or both, as the Russian empire continues to dissolve. Historically, losing a war has accelerated the dissolution process and triggered revolutions in the Russian empire (e.g. 1903-1904 war with Japan or WWI).

Hitler's Nazi state was defeated by allies bombing Germany and occupying Berlin. Now the civilized world must consider what Putin's defeated Nazi state will look like.

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