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A Blind and Militant Attachment: Russian Patriotism in Comparative Perspective

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A Blind and Militant Attachment: Russian Patriotism in Comparative Perspective

Abstract

Much of the literature on patriotic sentiment in post-Soviet Russia leans on the results of public opinion surveys administered to Russian citizens. Absent a comparison group, such evidence, while helpful, can leave one adrift in trying to assess the significance of any particular polling result. Here, we draw on a shared set of questions from multiple waves of the Inter-national Social Survey Program's National Identity and Role of Government modules, as well as the World Values Survey, to benchmark the responses of Russians to those of citizens in a diverse group of middle and high income countries. This exercise highlights that while Russians are not unusual in the degree to which they have a benign attachment to and/or pride in their country, they stand out for espousing a patriotism that has remained consistently blind and militant since at least the mid-1990s. We speculate as to the underlying cause and highlight a potential consequence: the nature of Russian patriotism has lowered the cost to the Russian leadership of military aggression.

JEL-Codes: P000, P200.

Keywords: patriotism, Russia, post-imperial syndrome.

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1 Introduction

У нас нет никакой и не может быть никакой другой объединяющей идеи, кроме патриотизма.

We neither do not nor cannot have any unifying idea other than patriotism.

Vladimir Putin, February 3, 2016

Several years ago, an arguably prescient report issued by the Brussels-based [International Crisis Group](#) (2018) sounded an alarm:

Since the early 2000s, Russia has witnessed a rebirth of patriotic mobilisation. This revival is not spontaneous; it is underpinned by a concerted state effort to instill patriotic values, celebrate Russia’s military past and promote Moscow’s recrudescence as a global power. Though not without its critics inside Russia, this mobilisation appears to have helped build support among ordinary citizens for Moscow’s more assertive foreign policy ... [G]rowing patriotism is part and parcel of a wider trend in Russia that appears to lower the potential costs to the government of military action outside the country ...

That there could be a connection between patriotic sentiment and military aggression raises the stakes for understanding the nature of Russian citizens’ attachment to their country. To this end, our article examines two propositions fundamental to the ICG report’s warning – one, that Russian patriotism is threatening and, two, that it became increasingly so after the turn of the century. Drawing on survey data collected across three decades, we present support for the first of these propositions but cast doubt on the second. Inspired by an established literature on the varieties of national attachment, we benchmark Russian citizens to those in a diverse group of middle and high income countries with respect to measures of both a *benign* patriotism and one that is *blind* and *militant*. While their responses suggest Russians are not unusual with respect to the former, they point to them being consistently so with respect to the latter. There is, that is, a decidedly aggressive edge to Russian patriotism in the twenty-first century. However, its origin, contrary to the ICG report, pre-dates the Putin era. By our survey-based measure, a *blind* and *militant* patriotism appears as entrenched in the mid-1990s as in the mid-2010s. Moreover, it is multi-generational. Younger Russians may be less prone to the sentiment than their older compatriots, but they are much more so than their peers in other countries.

Patriotism, broadly understood as a sense of identification with and feelings of attachment to one’s country, has long been characterized as two-dimensional. Borne of the World War II experience, an older, largely descriptive literature contrasts a more benign variety with one that emphasizes militarism and uncritical allegiance to one’s country ([Curti, 1946](#); [Adorno et al., 1950](#); [Morravay, 1959](#); [Sommerville, 1980](#)). A more recent, survey-based literature builds on this duality. [Kosterman and Feshbach \(1989\)](#), for example, differentiate between the more in-group-oriented “love for and pride

in one’s nation,” and the more aggressive “orientation toward national dominance.”¹ Relatedly, the seminal work of [Schatz et al. \(1999\)](#) contrasts a self-critical, “constructive” patriotism with one that espouses a my-country-right-or-wrong allegiance. Reviewing the large literature, [Schatz et al. \(1999\)](#) comment that two elements consistently underlie the more malign strain: “(a) whether patriotism is necessarily linked to aggressive militarism and hostility toward outgroups, and (b) whether patriotism demands blind and uncritical allegiance to country.” In our analysis below, we integrate survey questions that touch on these *blind* and *militant* elements of national attachment; separate questions capture the more benign expressions of patriotism.

Much of the writing on post-Soviet Russian patriotism draws on similar distinctions, and unlike the ICG, downplays the hold over the population of the more malign variety. [Bækken \(2021\)](#), for instance, explores the success of state-led efforts to inculcate a “military patriotism” in Russian society, concluding that while it appeals to some, the public, on balance, “seems to be at odds with the state’s conception of patriotism as ‘blind’ and state-oriented ... [and instead prefers] patriotic sentiment ‘untainted’ by political life and less dependent on military tropes.” [Goode \(2016\)](#) develops a similar point, contrasting Russians’ “love for the Motherland,” which is genuine and private, with “being patriotic,” which is inauthentic and performative in its support of regime initiatives, including foreign aggression. Although not referencing patriotism explicitly, [Sherlock \(2020\)](#) largely concurs, arguing that Russians prioritize practical, domestic concerns and are disinclined to support a “forceful external posture, including in the ‘near abroad’.”

Survey data, in providing tangible, if coarse, measures of a complex phenomenon, feature prominently in discussions of Russians’ patriotic sentiment and, relatedly, their foreign policy preferences. For instance, in a book on its connections to militarism, [Pynnöniemi \(2021\)](#) describes patriotism as being at a low ebb at the end of the Yeltsin years, citing evidence that “[I]n 1999 only 2% percent of Russians agreed that the people around them made them feel proud of their nation.” [Laruelle \(2009\)](#) makes a similar point, referencing a 2002 survey in which “20 percent said that nothing [about life in contemporary Russia] made them feel proud.” [Sherlock \(2020\)](#), justifying his skepticism that Russian patriotism is particularly blind and/or militant, further illustrates the centrality of survey data:

Russians are often reluctant to risk greater economic difficulties for the sake of the state and its foreign policy ... According to surveys administered by the Institute of Sociology, only 8% of respondents in late 2015 were “absolutely” willing to approve policies designed to restore Russian international power and defensive capacity “even if these measures were linked to a significant decline in their standard of living,” while 30% were “somewhat willing” to endure such costs...

¹They refer to the former as “patriotism” and the latter as “nationalism.” We steer clear in this article of discussing nationalism, understood as a sentiment linked to ethnic identity. Although the literature relating to Russian nationalism, so defined, falls outside the scope of our study, we engage with work on Russia in which nationalism is discussed as a variety of patriotism, shorn of its ethnic connotations.

In support of the same point, [Frye \(2021\)](#) cites a recurring Levada Center polling question that asks Russians whether they rather their country be “a great power which other countries respect and fear,” or “a country with a high standard of living, albeit not one of the strongest countries in the world.” Only in one year since the turn of the century, Frye emphasizes, has the first option elicited more support.

The above are but a handful of examples of how public opinion surveys are deployed to make points about the nature of Russians’ attachment to their country. Though we find such data helpful, in the absence of benchmarks to provide context, they can leave a reader adrift in trying to assess whether a specific percentage of positive responses constitutes sentiment that is noteworthy in the manner suggested by the researcher. Is Russia actually low in patriotic sentiment if 20 percent of its population agree that nothing about life in the country makes them proud? Is Russia truly untroubled by an aggressive brand of patriotism if 38 percent of its population are at least “somewhat” willing to accept “significant” declines in living standards for the sake of military goals and foreign policy victories? To answer either question, it would help to be able to compare Russians to citizens of other countries. Cross-country comparisons, after all, are regularly used to shed light on all sorts of phenomena, both objective and subjective. Discussions of post-Soviet Russian patriotism, however, have been almost entirely devoid of this type of bench-marking. Here, we address this gap using primarily the data from the National Identity module of the *International Social Survey Program* (NI ISSP).² Doing so leads us to the conclusion that Russians’ patriotism is unusually *blind* and *militant*.

In addition to the spatial (cross-country) dimension, our discussion involves drawing comparisons across time. Unlike much of the literature on post-Soviet Russian patriotism, which can effectively be categorized as foregrounding either the 1990s ([Oushakine, 2009](#)) or the Putin years ([Sperling, 2009](#); [Laruelle, 2009](#); [Goode, 2018](#); [Bækken, 2021](#)), our analysis bridges the two eras. Drawing on survey questions asked consistently across three decades, beginning in the mid-1990s, we highlight a patriotism that has been surprisingly stable and largely impervious to the changes over this period in Russia’s internal and external environments. We thus regard with skepticism any achievements attributed to the Putin-era, state-led campaign to (re-)inculcate in Russian society a “militarized patriotism,” centered on nostalgia for the Soviet Union and its victory in World War II ([Sperling, 2009](#); [Laruelle, 2009](#); [International Crisis Group, 2018](#)).

²Several articles carry out exercises somewhat similar to ours here. [Kasianenko \(2020\)](#), also using the three waves from the NI ISSP, charts changes over time in multiple measures of nationalist sentiment in a set of East-Central European countries, including Russia. [Coenders et al. \(2021\)](#), using the NI ISSP, traces trends in “nationalism,” understood as “the view that one’s own country and people are unique and superior,” across 20 European countries, but not Russia. Also using the NI ISSP, [Grigoryan and Ponizovskiy \(2018\)](#) analyze Russians’ attitudes towards migrants as a function of three dimensions of national identity, including “political” and “cultural” patriotism. None of these NI-ISSP-based studies draws distinctions between Russians and respondents from other countries with respect to patriotism. [Sanina \(2018\)](#) draws on cross-sectional data from Wave 6 of the *World Values Survey* to benchmark patriotic sentiment in Russia to that in China, Singapore, and the United States.

But if not of recent origin, whence the blind and militant patriotism we see in the survey data? A diverse array of authors persuasively describe the early 1990s as a sort of crucible, a period whose twin shocks of economic collapse and imperial dissolution forged Russians’ post-Soviet identity (Oushakine, 2009; Alexievich, 2016; Sharafutdinova, 2020). Related references to a “post-imperial syndrome” (Gaidar, 2010; Kasamara and Sorokina, 2012; Kailitz and Umland, 2019) suggest a national attachment shaped by the resentment over status lost and the hunger for its recovery, conditions not inconsistent with a patriotism that is far from benign. Although our primary empirical analysis begins with a 1995 survey, we present, by way of conclusion, complementary evidence based on 1990 data that the character of Russian patriotism did indeed take a militant turn earlier in the decade.

We structure the remainder of the article as follows. In the next section, we introduce the *International Social Survey Program* and *World Values Survey* data that is the basis of our comparative analysis. Section 3 explains our methodological approach and presents our main findings. Section 4 speculates on the possible causes and implications of the patterns highlighted in Section 3. Section 5 offers concluding thoughts.

2 Survey Data

As stated earlier, our main data source is the National Identity module of the *International Social Survey Program* (NI ISSP), a cross-national collaboration of surveys on diverse topics relevant to the social sciences. More than other large, multi-country, multi-year surveys (e.g., the *European Social Survey*, the *World Values Survey*, the *Life in Transition Survey*), the NI ISSP focuses on identity and national attachment questions from a variety of angles. To check the robustness of our main findings and, relatedly, to expand the temporal and geographic scope of our analysis, we supplement these data with the Role of Government module of the ISSP (RG ISSP) and the *World Values Survey* (WVS).³ Data for all these surveys were collected from in-person interviews, and multi-stage sampling was used to select nationally representative samples.

2.1 Patriotism in the *International Social Survey Program*

We draw on the three waves – 1995, 2003, and 2013 – of the NI ISSP, restricting analysis to the fifteen countries that participated in all of them: the Czech Republic, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, Ireland, Japan, Latvia, Norway, Philippines, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and the United States, in addition to Russia.

In addition to standard demographic information, NI ISSP collected responses to the following questions related to national attachment:

³We supplement WVS data for 2017 with the *European Values Survey* that was conducted jointly with WVS and contains the same questions for additional countries and additional respondents in the same countries.

- How close do you feel to [your country]? (1-4 from “not close at all” to “very close”)

To what extent do you agree with the following? (1-5 from “disagree strongly” to “agree strongly”)

- I would rather be a citizen of [my country] than any other country in the world.
- Generally speaking, [my country] is a better country than most other countries.
- [My country] should follow its own interests, even if this leads to conflict with other nations.
- People should support their country even if the country is in the wrong.

The first three questions describe respondents’ simple love for and pride in their country without connection to any specific behavior. The other two reference specific behaviors and elicit the predilection to view the world in an antagonistic, us-versus-them manner. Indeed, they reference behaviors quite closely connected to the attributes described by [Schatz et al. \(1999\)](#) as defining the more malign strain of patriotism – i.e., one that both is “linked to aggressive militarism and hostility toward outgroups” and “demands blind and uncritical allegiance to country.”

We characterize the first group of three questions as representing *benign* patriotism and the latter group of two questions as representing a *blind* and *militant* patriotism. Besides being rooted in the literature on patriotism’s duality, this categorization also emerges from factor analysis. The first three and the last two questions, that is, can be reasonably combined into two distinct “principal components” or factors. These two factors – one representing *benign* patriotism and the other representing *blind* and *militant* patriotism – serve as our two primary dependent variables.⁴

We supplement our NI ISSP measure of *blind* and *militant* patriotism with a question from three waves – 1996, 2006, and 2016 – of the RG ISSP that asks about support for greater military and defense spending: “Listed below are various areas of government spending. Please show whether you would like to see more or less government spending in each area. Remember that if you say ‘much more,’ it might require a tax increase to pay for it.” In addition to “military and defense,” the expenditure categories listed include healthcare, law enforcement, and pensions. With each category scaled from 1 (“much more”) to 5 (“much less”), to capture a respondent’s willingness to trade “butter” for “guns,” we use the inverse of the response for “military and defense” as a second measure of *blind* and *militant* patriotism.⁵ In regressions in which this second measure of blind and militant patriotism serves as the dependent variable, we control for a weighted average of spending

⁴We use Stata’s *factor* command to create these variables, which have a mean of zero and standard deviation of one.

⁵We standardize this variable in order to make the estimates comparable to those for dependent variables in NI ISSP.

preferences on the three other categories.⁶ Summary statistics for the NI ISSP and RG ISSP are, respectively, in Tables 1 and 2.

2.2 Patriotism in the *World Values Survey*

We draw on multiple waves of the WVS to further supplement ISSP measures of patriotism with two variables, one to proxy for blind and militant patriotism, the other to proxy for benign patriotism. The WVS contains only one question whose answer can reasonably be associated with the former: “People sometimes talk about what the aims of this country should be for the next ten years. Would you please say which one of these you consider the most important?” There are four responses: “a high level of economic growth,” “strong defense forces,” “people have more say about how things are done,” and “trying to make our cities and countryside more beautiful.” The question is repeated, asking the respondent to provide for her first and second choices. We combined the responses, assigning the value of 1 to the “aims of the country” variable if “strong defense forces” was listed as the first choice, the value of 0.5 if it was relegated to the second choice, and the value of zero otherwise.

A second WVS question gives us a proxy for benign patriotism: “How proud are you to be [your country’s nationality]?” Responses range from 1 (“Very proud”) to 4 (“Not at all proud”). We use the inverse of this variable as a second measure of benign patriotism. Summary statistics for the WVS are in Table 3.

2.3 Other variables

We use the following demographic control variables describing the respondents: generational cohort, gender, marital status, self-perceived social status, education, and the type of the community in which the respondent lives. The first four variables are defined uniformly for all respondents, but the latter two may have slightly different definitions, depending on what data are available for a particular country in a particular wave.

We use six different generational cohorts: respondents born prior to 1946, and those born in 1946-1955, 1956-1965, 1966-1975, 1976-1985, and 1986-1995. We do not explicitly control for the age of a respondent, because the cohort and survey wave controls determine the respondent’s age up in 10 year intervals. For example, if the survey was conducted in 1995, then respondents from the 1956-1965 cohort must have been 30-39 years old during the interview. Similarly, this cohort included 40-49 year olds during the wave that took place in 2005, and so on.

The gender dummy variable is set to 1 for males and 0 for females. Marital status equals 1 for a

⁶The weights for combining these answers into a single variable are provided by factor analysis. We chose this particular subset of three from a longer list of government spending areas because factor analysis grouped them into the same principal component with military spending. Since healthcare, law enforcement, and retirement clearly represent domestically-focused spending, the residual weight of military spending would likely be directed outwards.

married person, and 0 otherwise. With respect to social status, we use respondents' placement of their household on a ten-step relative material well-being ladder.

We define the educational achievement in the ISSP data as the logarithm of the number of years of education. However, we replace the years of education with 22 if the number of years listed in the files is higher than 22. Also, when the code for the years of education indicates that the person is still in school or college, we calculate the number of years of education by subtracting seven from the person's age as long as the answer is not greater than 22. In the latter case, we use 22 years as the education achievement number, which results in a logarithm of approximately 3. We also set the educational achievement variable (i.e., the log of years of education) to a missing value if the number contained in the file is zero and we set this variable to zero if the code states that the respondent had no formal schooling. Using 22 as the maximum possible number of years of education is consistent with WVS coding which has only three levels of education (1-3): lower, middle, and upper.

Finally, we define the community type variable as 0 if it is classified as rural in the survey and 1 if it is referred to as urban, suburb, city, town, or county seat. However, in cases in which this classification variable is missing, we either use one of the country-specific variables measuring community size (ISSP) or the settlement size variables common for the entire file (WVS). In these cases, we set the community type to 0 if its population is up to 20,000 (or up to 50,000 if the only available range that includes 20,000 is from 10,000 to 50,000).

3 Methodology and Results

3.1 Estimates based on ISSP data

The simplest way to demonstrate the unusual nature of Russian patriotism is to look at the ranking of countries with respect to the ISSP-based measures we discussed in the previous section. As Table 4 shows, the Russian respondents have the highest averages for the NI ISSP measure of blind and militant patriotism in all three waves while, as Table 5 shows, they are in or close to the bottom third of the countries with respect to benign patriotism. The divergence between Russia's rankings in the two measures suggests that the Russians are not simply unusually patriotic in all respects, but they are particularly blind and militant in their expression of patriotism.

The RG ISSP data in Table 6 present a somewhat different picture. Although the Russian respondents are also at the top of the list for spending on defense in the first two waves and in the third place behind Israel and Hungary in the third wave. As we see in Table 7 Russia also exceeds other countries in the first two waves with respect to the propensity of respondents to favor increased non-defense spending. This suggests that the Russian respondents in the first two waves might have wanted more government spending in general rather than specifically spending on the military.

The simple rankings described above can be misleading due to potentially different demographic

composition of the samples. Also, the fact that the Russians tended to favor more government spending overall suggests that it might be necessary to control for this propensity when evaluating the attitudes towards defense spending. In order to account for these factors, we include a set of demographic controls and thus estimate the following regression equations based on the NI ISSP data on benign and militant patriotism:

$$y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 R_i + \alpha_1 Sex_i + \alpha_2 Edu_i + \alpha_3 Mar_i + \alpha_4 Inc_i + \alpha_5 Urb_i + \sum_k \mu_k H_k + \sum_j \gamma_j \tau_j + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where y_i denotes a measure of respondent i 's patriotism of either the benign or blind and militant variety, R_i is a dummy variable for Russia, Sex_i is dummy variable for the respondent's gender, Edu_i reflects educational achievement, Mar_i shows marital status, Inc_i denotes self-assessed income status, Urb_i is a dummy variable for urban community type, k stands for the index of a cohort, H_k 's are dummy variables for the cohorts, j is the index of the survey's wave, and τ_j 's are dummy variables for the waves. Our main focus is on β_1 – the coefficient of R_i which reflects the difference between the attitudes of the Russian respondents and those of other countries. Since our dependent variables have a unitary standard deviation, the point estimates of β_1 measure this difference in units of standard deviation. We also note that wave dummy variables account for the effect of age within a 10-year interval, given the cohort. That is, the age difference among the respondents within the same wave and cohort cannot exceed ten years, and thus, in our view, a wave dummy reasonably well accounts for the age of respondents from the same cohort. In addition, the coefficients of wave dummies reflect differences in the economic and social environment common to all countries and cohorts at the time the wave was administered.

We note that the inclusion of the demographic controls other than the respondent's gender might result in reverse causality with the dependent variable. For example, a person who is blindly and militantly patriotic may choose to acquire less education, perhaps because the person enrolls in the military. Patriotic attitudes can also influence one's income, marital status, and even where one lives. However, the results below remain virtually the same if we use only the gender as a demographic control. To save space, we will not present most of the regressions with a gender control only.

For RG ISSP data, we estimate a similar equation for the “guns vs. butter” question in which the dependent variable is the willingness to spend on defense. However, because for Russia, the willingness to spend on defense and on other spending categories are relatively highly positively correlated, in this equation we control for the general propensity to favor government spending.⁷ In addition, to make the coefficients comparable with the NI ISSP regressions, we standardize the values of the willingness to spend on defense, so that it has a mean of zero and standard deviation

⁷Without controlling for other types of government spending, the coefficient of the Russia dummy is greater than with this control although the difference is not statistically significant.

of 1.

The estimates of equation (1) for NI ISSP and RG ISSP with a full set of demographic controls and with gender control only are shown in Table 8.⁸ The coefficient of the Russia dummy variable is positive and highly statistically significant (at 0.0001 level) in the blind and militant patriotism regressions and it is negative and significant at 0.01 level in the benign patriotism ones. It is also positive and highly significant in the defense spending regression. These results imply that even accounting for demographic characteristics of the samples, the Russians are generally more blindly and militantly patriotic than respondents from other countries while not showing more benign patriotism.

Across countries, males exhibit more blind and militant patriotism than females, although males do not favor defense spending more than females. Being married, and having more education and income leads to less blind and militant patriotic attitudes. Education also reduces benign patriotism but having higher income and being married tend to increase it. With respect to military and defense spending, these demographic variables do not exhibit any statistically significant effects.

The negative coefficients of the cohort dummies in almost all regressions indicate that the younger generations are less patriotic in all respects than the respondents born prior to 1946. Somewhat surprisingly, however, the coefficient of the dummy for the respondents born in 1986-1995 in the RG ISSP regression is small and insignificant, implying that this cohort's willingness to spend on defense is essentially the same as that of the oldest cohort.⁹ Also, in the NI ISSP data, almost all cohorts born between 1946 and 1995 do not exhibit statistically significant differences with respect to blind and militant patriotism. The only exception is that the 1986-95 cohort is slightly less blindly and militantly patriotic than the 1946-55 cohort, but the difference is significant only at 6% level. In the RG ISSP data, the 1956-75 cohorts are less likely to favor defense spending than the 1946-55 and 1976-85 cohorts.

Finally, the positive coefficients of the wave dummies suggest that the respondents' attitudes become more blindly and militantly patriotic and pro-defense with age, although the validity of this interpretation is confounded by the dual role of wave dummies as indicators of both age and common environmental factors.¹⁰ In addition, the positive coefficients of wave dummies are either not

⁸In this as well as in all other regressions, the within-country errors are likely to be correlated. Therefore, to avoid misleadingly high statistical significance of the estimates, we cluster errors by country. This makes our statistical significance levels quite conservative.

⁹We note, however, that the results for this cohort are less reliable as it has the fewest number of observations and it participated only in the last two waves of the survey.

¹⁰Our data do not constitute a panel and so survey waves are not collinear with the respondents' age. However, the respondents in each generational cohort become older, on average, with each wave. For example, the age of respondents born in 1966-1975 would range between 20 and 29 in the 1995 wave while in the 2003 wave, the age range for this cohort would become 28-37.

significant or barely statistically significant in the NI ISSP regressions.¹¹

Equation (1) forces the coefficients of the Russia dummy and all other variables to be the same for all cohorts and waves. Therefore, it does not allow for distinguishing the potentially important attitudinal differences between Russia and other countries across generations and over time. In order to evaluate the inter-generational differences, we estimate regression (1) separately for each wave and for each 10-year cohort. (Of course, in this case, we take out the corresponding dummy variables from the right-hand side of the equation.) The results for different waves are shown in the form of a plot of the coefficients of the Russia dummy variable in Figure 1, while the estimates by cohorts are presented in Figures 2 and 3.¹²

The estimates in Figure 1 demonstrate that the attitudes of Russian respondents have been considerably more blindly and militantly patriotic than those of the respondents from other countries during the entire 1995-2016 period, i.e., starting well before Putin era. The NI ISSP data do not reveal any significant trend over time. However, the RG ISSP numbers exhibit a downward trend in the preference for military and defense spending between waves 1 and 2 and, especially, between waves 2 and 3. The latter finding is unsurprising, given the long period of military buildup after which, the other government spending categories started to play a more important role.

As can be seen in Figures 2 and 3, the patriotism of Russian respondents is consistently more blind and militant across all generational cohorts in both NI and RG ISSP data. It is true that the two youngest Russian cohorts may be a bit less supportive of defense spending when compared to their elders. But relative to their generational peers in other countries, their willingness to trade off butter for guns is significantly higher.

3.2 Estimates based on WVS data

The ISSP survey is our primary data set because it has the best variables closely related to what we call blind and militant patriotism. However, there is another dataset – World Values Survey (WVS) – that has questions allowing for constructing a measure somewhat similar to the defense spending priority in RG ISSP. Specifically, WVS asks respondents to choose among several goals of government, including the goal of a strong defense. As we explain in the Data section, the WVS measure is not quite the same as the RG ISSP variable, but it does elicit respondents' attitudes

¹¹We note that the data on education, income, and urban-rural status are missing in some of the countries in the first wave. This makes the results less comparable across waves.

¹²Because our main focus is on the coefficient of Russia dummy variable, we will present coefficient plots instead of regression tables. These plots help show whether the confidence intervals for these coefficients in different regressions intersect with each other. Also, since we focus on blind and militant patriotism and to save space, we do not present the regressions for benign patriotism for each cohort. As Figure 1 shows, the estimates of the coefficient for the Russia dummy in the benign patriotism regressions are almost identical in each of the three waves. In the regressions by cohort, the point estimates range between -0.229 and -0.289 without a particular trend across cohorts. These regressions are available upon request.

towards the same guns vs. butter trade-off.¹³ Given that the WVS has a different set of countries, we use it as a robustness check on our ISSP-based findings contained in Table 8 and Figure 3.

Figure 4 contains the results for all cohorts and waves as well as separate regressions by wave while Figure 5 presents regression results by age cohort.¹⁴ To make the results comparable with those for the ISSP data, we limit these regressions to WVS waves starting in Wave 3 which was conducted in the mid-1990s.¹⁵ As in the RG ISSP regressions, the Russian respondents, across all waves and cohorts, exhibit greater relative preference for strong defense over other possible social priorities, which include economic growth, influencing politics, and improving the urban and rural environments.¹⁶

4 Potential explanations for the nature of patriotism in Russia

Why does Russian patriotism appear to be significantly more blind and militant than that of other countries? The data from the ISSP and WVS imply that top-down, Putin-era indoctrination efforts are unlikely to have been the main culprit because, as shown in Tables 4, 5, and 6, and Figures 1 and 4, the nature of Russian patriotism remained remarkably stable between the mid-1990s and the mid-2010s. Another popular explanation points to the loss of empire and the superpower status associated with it – i.e., the so-called “post-imperial syndrome” (Gaidar, 2010; Kasamara and Sorokina, 2012; Kailitz and Umland, 2019). This literature, however, does not provide any hard evidence to back up this conjecture. Below, we use WVS data, including the 1990 wave, to present two pieces of evidence plausibly consistent with such an explanation.

First, we demonstrate that the priority Russians assigned to military strength increased drastically between 1990 and 1995, whereas the intensity of benign patriotic sentiment remained relatively stable. The former finding, in particular, is noteworthy because it coincides with the collapse of the Soviet Union and Russia’s corresponding decline in global status. It may thus reflect something akin to a “post-imperial syndrome.” On the other hand, it is not implausible that 1990 was the exceptional year and that what we observe in 1995 reflects reversion to an earlier, historically-rooted predisposition toward militarism (Carleton, 2017).

Whatever the explanation, the difference between attitudes in 1990 and 1995 is stark. To demon-

¹³The WVS also has a measure of benign patriotism which does not differ significantly between the Russian respondents and those from other countries.

¹⁴As before, we do not show the results for benign patriotism by age cohort. In those regressions, the dummy variable for Russia is negative but close to zero and statistically insignificant. The results in Figures 4 and 5 are based on the countries that participated in all four waves that were conducted in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. We include the full set of demographic controls. The regressions that include only the respondent’s gender as a control variable produce qualitatively similar results.

¹⁵Russia also participated in Wave 2 in 1990. We will use this fact to show that the patriotic attitudes in Russia changed significantly between 1990 and 1995. These results are discussed below.

¹⁶We stress that this is a relative preference. The unconditional top choice by far for both Russian and non-Russian respondents is economic growth.

strate this, we run our standard regressions for waves 2 and 3 of the WVS.¹⁷ The first two plot lines in Figure 6 reflect estimates for the priority Russian respondents assigned to a strong defense relative to the citizens of other countries. In wave 2, Russians’ prioritization mirrored the average in other countries. In wave 3, however, Russians on average exhibited a significantly stronger preference than non-Russians for military strength. This re-prioritization is particularly striking given the country’s dire economic situation in the early-to-mid 1990s. Despite substantial declines in household incomes and public goods’ provision, Russians dramatically increased the importance they placed upon a strong military.

The remaining plot lines of Figure 6 show estimates of the Russia dummy coefficient for the two waves for each age cohort. These results are even more stark. For all but the oldest cohort, the wave 2 coefficients are negative. By contrast, the coefficients in the wave 3 regressions are consistently positive and highly statistically significant. For the oldest cohort, the coefficient is positive but it is less than half as large as the one for wave 3. Figure 7 presents the same kind of regressions for the benign patriotism measure. Here, all the coefficients are negative, significant, and, more important, relatively stable between waves 2 and 3.

As a second piece of evidence consistent with the “post-imperial syndrome,” we draw a comparison between respondents in Russia and Ukraine, the post-Soviet country arguably closest to Russia in terms of history, culture, and post-communist economic challenges. Since Ukrainians presumably do not share the same attachment to the “imperial idea,” treating them as a control of sorts can shed light on the presence or absence among Russians of a “post-imperial syndrome.”

Both Russia and Ukraine participated in WVS waves 3, 5, 6, and 7. Figures 8 and 9 present estimates of the Russia dummy coefficient reflecting the preference for a strong defense and the intensity of benign patriotism for all respondents, for each of the four waves, and for each of the age cohorts. The Russia dummy coefficient is positive and highly statistically significant in all “strong defense” and “benign patriotism” regressions. However, the standardized values in most are significantly larger with respect to the former. Russian respondents, that is, exhibited somewhat more benign patriotism and significantly more blind and militant patriotism than their Ukrainian counterparts. These findings are consistent with the loss of superpower status having a differential effect on the two countries. But as suggested above, they are also consistent with a difference that pre-dated 1995, or even 1990.

5 Conclusion

The diverse literature on post-Soviet Russian patriotism includes frequent references to public opinion data but rarely, if ever, from a comparative perspective. Without the citizens of other countries

¹⁷Figures 6 and 7 show regression results without controlling for education level and urban status, because the data on both of these measures for the Russian respondents are unavailable for wave 2 of WVS.

as reference points, however, responses from Russians alone can leave a reader feeling unmoored, uncertain as to the meaning or significance of a particular polling result. Here, we carry out straightforward statistical exercises to benchmark Russians to non-Russians in middle and high income countries along multiple dimensions of patriotic sentiment and over time. We reach three primary conclusions. One, though Russians are not particularly unusual with respect to their degree of benign attachment to country, their patriotism betrays a starkly blind and militant character. Two, these findings pre-date Putin’s assumption of the Presidency, making us skeptical of claims that top-down efforts of his administration have revived or re-fashioned Russian patriotism. Three, blind and militant patriotism is not exclusive to the older generations. Though the younger generations in Russia are less so than their co-national elders, relative to their peers by age in other countries, their patriotism is just as blind and patriotic as older cohorts’.

Our results are consistent with those of surveys that the Levada Center has been conducting each month for the past quarter century, asking a representative sample of the Russian population whether their country is headed in the right direction. Since Putin first became President, the two biggest month-to-month jumps in this indicator occurred between February and March in 2014 and between the same two months in 2022. That these two instances coincided with Russian forces invading Ukraine is hard to read as coincidence. Nothing seems to give a jolt to Russians’ sense of their country’s trajectory as much as military aggression in the “near abroad.” As an avid consumer of polling data (Rogov and Ananyev, 2018; Efimova and Strebkov, 2020; Frye, 2021), the Kremlin must certainly understand this, particularly as Putin benefits personally: the Levada Centre’s poll of his approval also spiked up dramatically over precisely the same two periods.

Another important issue is whether our findings have any bearing on the conduct of Russian foreign policy. A scholarly consensus long held that mass opinion mattered little in this respect even in well-established democracies (Baum and Potter, 2008). But as described by Holsti (1992), beginning roughly in the late 1980s, this perspective began to change. Greater attention began to be given to public opinion even if it was understood that large segments of the public were ignorant of foreign policy details. Zimmerman (2002), for instance, uses surveys of elite and mass public opinion from Yeltsin’s Russia to argue that “mass publics played a modest but real role in foreign policy decision making.” In their recent book, *Putin v People*, Greene and Robertson (2019) write that “[I]n prioritizing an aggressive foreign policy, Putin is responding to – and seeking the support of – a large constituency within Russia itself.” Our findings comport with this perspective, and we thus concur when they conclude: “We need to think not of Putin’s Russia, but of Russia’s Putin. We need to understand that Putin is not above the country; he is *of* the country, of its politics, its society and its history.” A primary point of ours, after all, is that Putin did not so much create as inherit a population with an unusually blind and militant attachment to country.

It is true that we present no evidence here that public opinion has driven Russia’s recent foreign policy adventurism. Nevertheless, our analysis leads us to conclude that the nature of Russian

patriotism has lowered the cost to the Russian leadership of initiating and sustaining hostilities abroad. A society that consistently betrays an unusual willingness (a) to support their country's policies even if wrong, (b) to regard international conflict as a necessary outcome of the pursuit of national interest, and (c) to endorse greater military spending even in the leanest of economic times, is one that is easy, at least in a relative sense, to take to war.

To the surprise of many, Vladimir Putin decided that Russian forces would invade a peaceful Ukraine in February. The suffering and death that we have been witness to in the months since are down to his decision. They are his responsibility. Nothing that we have written here should distract from that fundamental fact. Nor should anything we have written distract from the fact that many Russians do not support the war in Ukraine. Tens of thousands have risked arrest and social ostracism to speak out against it. But Russia is a country of tens of millions. Mounting casualties and economic pain will no doubt test their tolerance for war, but we should be clear-eyed about the nature of that tolerance.

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Table 1: NI ISSP summary statistics

	N	mean	sd	min	max
blind and militant patriotism	48,318	0	1	-2.47	2.82
benign patriotism	48,318	0	1	-3.96	1.83
support country even if wrong	48,318	2.84	1.22	1	5
pursue national interests even if leads to conflict	48,318	3.16	1.16	1	5
strong connection to country	48,318	3.24	0.76	1	4
best to be citizen of country	48,318	4.01	1.04	1	5
country better than others	48,318	3.34	1.12	1	5
male	48,302	0.47	0.5	0	1
married	48,318	0.57	0.49	0	1
relative income	45,208	5.29	1.94	1	10
urban	45,903	0.68	0.47	0	1
education (log years)	46,884	2.45	0.36	0	3.09
Russia	48,318	0.08	0.28	0	1
Wave 1 (1995)	48,318	0.32	0.47	0	1
Wave 2 (2003)	48,318	0.33	0.47	0	1
Wave 3 (2013)	48,318	0.35	0.48	0	1
born before 1946	48,235	0.26	0.44	0	1
born 1946 - 1955	48,235	0.18	0.39	0	1
born 1956 - 1965	48,235	0.2	0.4	0	1
born 1966 - 1975	48,235	0.19	0.39	0	1
born 1976 - 1985	48,235	0.13	0.33	0	1

Notes: ISSP data from 1995, 2003, and 2013 waves.

Table 2: RG ISSP summary statistics

	N	mean	sd	min	max
defense spending	71,895	2.88	1.11	1	5
non-defense spending	65,424	-0.13	0.95	-4.85	2.26
male	71,763	0.48	0.5	0	1
married	63,983	0.62	0.48	0	1
relative income	63,437	5.42	1.82	1	10
urban	68,532	0.69	0.46	0	1
education (log years)	65,498	2.48	0.32	0	3.09
Russia	71,895	0.07	0.26	0	1
Wave 1 (1996)	71,895	0.36	0.48	0	1
Wave 2 (2006)	71,895	0.34	0.47	0	1
Wave 3 (2016)	71,895	0.3	0.46	0	1
born before 1946	71,554	0.31	0.46	0	1
born 1946-1955	71,554	0.19	0.39	0	1
born 1956-1965	71,554	0.19	0.39	0	1
born 1966-1975	71,554	0.17	0.38	0	1
born 1976-1985	71,554	0.11	0.31	0	1

Notes: ISSP data from 1996, 2006, and 2016 waves.

Table 3: WVS summary statistics

	N	mean	sd	min	max
aim of strong defense	104,396	0.25	0.36	0	1
benign patriotism	97,353	0.76	0.26	0	1
male	104,291	0.47	0.5	0	1
married	104,361	0.65	0.48	0	1
relative income	101,864	4.66	2.28	1	10
urban	104,396	0.78	0.41	0	1
education	102,089	2.07	0.72	1	3
Russia	104,396	0.08	0.27	0	1
Wave 3 (1994-1998)	104,396	0.24	0.43	0	1
Wave 5 (2005-2009)	104,396	0.23	0.42	0	1
Wave 6 (2010-2014)	104,396	0.26	0.44	0	1
Wave 7 (2017-2020)	104,396	0.26	0.44	0	1
born 1946-1955	104,176	0.15	0.36	0	1
born 1956-1965	104,176	0.18	0.38	0	1
born 1966-1975	104,176	0.18	0.38	0	1
born 1976-1985	104,176	0.14	0.35	0	1

Notes: WVS data from waves 3, 5, 6, and 7.

Table 4: Blind and militant patriotism

	1995		2003		2013
Russia	0.610	Russia	0.781	Russia	0.765
Spain	0.299	Hungary	0.378	Hungary	0.381
Hungary	0.236	Czech R.	0.201	Czech R.	0.375
Great Britain	0.152	United States	0.152	Slovenia	0.292
United States	0.135	Spain	0.145	Slovakia	0.255
Ireland	0.109	Great Britain	0.038	Latvia	0.221
Philippines	0.046	Slovakia	0.027	Spain	0.195
Sweden	-0.067	Ireland	-0.100	Great Britain	0.112
Latvia	-0.116	Slovenia	-0.109	United States	0.032
Slovenia	-0.121	Germany	-0.142	Philippines	-0.003
Norway	-0.193	Philippines	-0.164	Germany	-0.232
Czech R.	-0.293	Latvia	-0.212	Ireland	-0.235
Germany	-0.542	Sweden	-0.271	Sweden	-0.290
Slovakia	-0.560	Norway	-0.359	Norway	-0.441
Japan	-0.672	Japan	-0.460	Japan	-0.527

Notes: ISSP data from 1995, 2003, and 2013 waves.

Table 5: Benign patriotism

	1995		2003		2013
Japan	0.862	United States	0.641	Japan	0.832
United States	0.448	Japan	0.561	United States	0.385
Ireland	0.347	Hungary	0.313	Norway	0.378
Norway	0.341	Ireland	0.194	Philippines	0.271
Hungary	0.318	Philippines	0.179	Sweden	-0.072
Slovenia	0.045	Norway	0.098	Czech R.	-0.077
Czech R.	-0.046	Slovenia	-0.051	Hungary	-0.087
Sweden	-0.103	Spain	-0.060	Germany	-0.145
Philippines	-0.111	Great Britain	-0.092	Slovakia	-0.166
Russia	-0.112	Sweden	-0.105	Great Britain	-0.184
Latvia	-0.134	Czech R.	-0.196	Ireland	-0.191
Slovakia	-0.162	Russia	-0.294	Spain	-0.250
Great Britain	-0.220	Slovakia	-0.375	Russia	-0.306
Spain	-0.252	Germany	-0.456	Slovenia	-0.590
Germany	-0.315	Latvia	-0.624	Latvia	-0.665

Notes: ISSP data from 1995, 2003, and 2013 waves.

Table 6: Priority for defense spending

	1996		2006		2016
Russia	1.010	Russia	0.960	Hungary	0.627
Israel	0.708	Israel	0.679	Israel	0.481
Latvia	0.324	United States	0.242	Russia	0.455
Australia	0.153	Australia	0.129	Norway	0.402
Hungary	0.105	New Zealand	0.127	Great Britain	0.381
United States	-0.032	Latvia	0.099	United States	0.381
Slovenia	-0.072	Hungary	0.071	Sweden	0.380
Great Britain	-0.079	Great Britain	0.045	Latvia	0.229
New Zealand	-0.205	Japan	-0.123	Slovenia	0.213
Czech R.	-0.340	Spain	-0.202	Slovakia	0.206
Sweden	-0.358	Norway	-0.214	Czech R.	0.195
Spain	-0.382	Czech R.	-0.304	Australia	0.146
Norway	-0.385	Slovakia	-0.311	Japan	0.134
Japan	-0.445	Sweden	-0.351	Germany	0.052
Slovakia	-0.698	Slovenia	-0.438	New Zealand	0.033
Germany	-0.723	Germany	-0.439	Spain	-0.184
Switzerland	-0.914	Switzerland	-0.572	Switzerland	-0.432

Notes: ISSP data from 1996, 2006, and 2016 waves.

Table 7: Priority for non-defense spending

	1996		2006		2016
Russia	1.011	Russia	0.736	Israel	0.528
Latvia	0.686	Israel	0.700	Spain	0.463
Israel	0.567	Spain	0.559	Hungary	0.407
Hungary	0.393	Hungary	0.386	Germany	0.266
Slovenia	0.361	Latvia	0.334	Latvia	0.194
Spain	0.261	Slovenia	0.099	Slovenia	0.188
Japan	0.049	United States	0.097	Slovakia	0.125
Great Britain	0.023	Slovakia	-0.003	Sweden	-0.019
Czech R.	-0.085	Great Britain	-0.065	Russia	-0.177
Sweden	-0.218	Australia	-0.108	United States	-0.221
New Zealand	-0.219	Germany	-0.206	New Zealand	-0.226
Germany	-0.227	Norway	-0.264	Great Britain	-0.267
Australia	-0.281	Sweden	-0.264	Australia	-0.303
United States	-0.334	Japan	-0.302	Czech R.	-0.352
Norway	-0.417	Switzerland	-0.336	Switzerland	-0.371
Slovakia	-0.667	Czech R.	-0.343	Norway	-0.475
Switzerland	-0.821	New Zealand	-0.376	Japan	-0.482

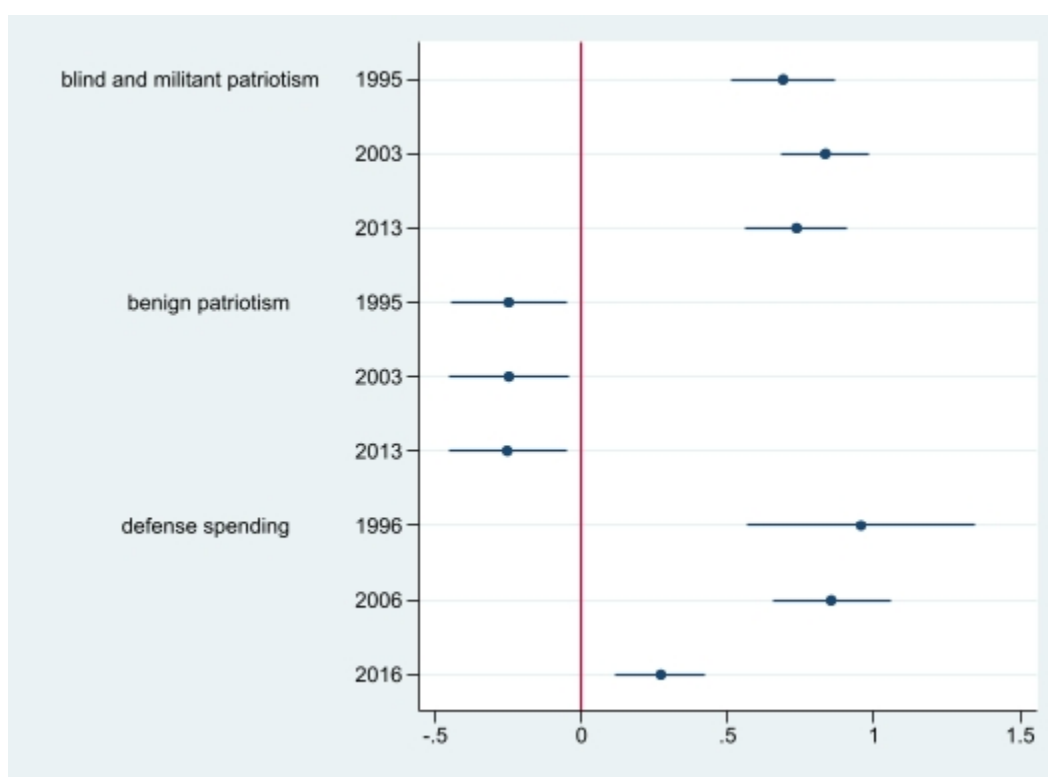
Notes: ISSP data from 1996, 2006, and 2016 waves.

Table 8: Varieties of patriotism

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Blind and militant		Benign		Military and defense	
Russia	0.795*** (0.0648)	0.756*** (0.0602)	-0.274*** (0.0868)	-0.254*** (0.0822)	0.746*** (0.0870)	0.736*** (0.100)
male	0.0303** (0.0130)	0.0367*** (0.0118)	-0.0138 (0.0158)	-0.0220 (0.0166)	-0.0142 (0.0174)	-0.00316 (0.0175)
education (log years)		-0.334*** (0.0803)		-0.128*** (0.0408)		-0.0700 (0.0633)
married		-0.0523** (0.0212)		0.0551* (0.0272)		0.0319 (0.0212)
relative income		-0.0322*** (0.00821)		0.0414*** (0.00927)		-0.00378 (0.0135)
urban		-0.0112 (0.0274)		-0.00973 (0.0502)		0.0790 (0.0576)
born 1946-1955	-0.178*** (0.0312)	-0.0992*** (0.0320)	-0.246*** (0.0243)	-0.218*** (0.0239)	-0.131*** (0.0224)	-0.113*** (0.0234)
born 1956-1965	-0.216*** (0.0262)	-0.115*** (0.0184)	-0.402*** (0.0433)	-0.356*** (0.0413)	-0.195*** (0.0340)	-0.155*** (0.0297)
born 1966-1975	-0.205*** (0.0294)	-0.107** (0.0365)	-0.522*** (0.0496)	-0.475*** (0.0517)	-0.191*** (0.0513)	-0.127*** (0.0419)
born 1976-1985	-0.225*** (0.0345)	-0.126*** (0.0378)	-0.617*** (0.0518)	-0.563*** (0.0583)	-0.145** (0.0554)	-0.0317 (0.0546)
born 1986-1995	-0.256*** (0.0382)	-0.182*** (0.0423)	-0.645*** (0.0555)	-0.582*** (0.0636)	-0.0607 (0.0599)	0.101 (0.0876)
wave2	0.104 (0.0733)	0.0812 (0.0705)	0.00242 (0.0533)	-0.0695 (0.0696)	0.176** (0.0638)	0.179* (0.0897)
wave3	0.195* (0.0941)	0.193* (0.0963)	0.0485 (0.0629)	-0.0337 (0.0658)	0.400*** (0.0952)	0.460*** (0.117)
non-defense govt spending					0.219*** (0.0478)	0.244*** (0.0484)
Constant	-0.0283 (0.0863)	0.943*** (0.202)	0.345*** (0.100)	0.464*** (0.123)	-0.113 (0.116)	-0.0577 (0.231)
Observations	48,223	42,469	48,223	42,469	65,095	48,104
R-squared	0.060	0.083	0.056	0.065	0.131	0.158

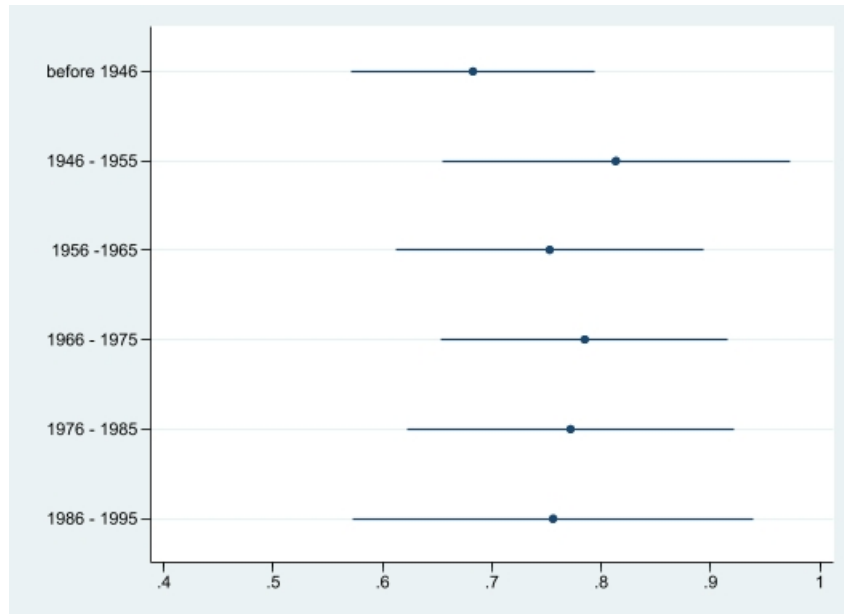
Notes: Equation (1). Robust standard errors reported in parentheses. * p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01.

Figure 1: Varieties of patriotism by ISSP wave



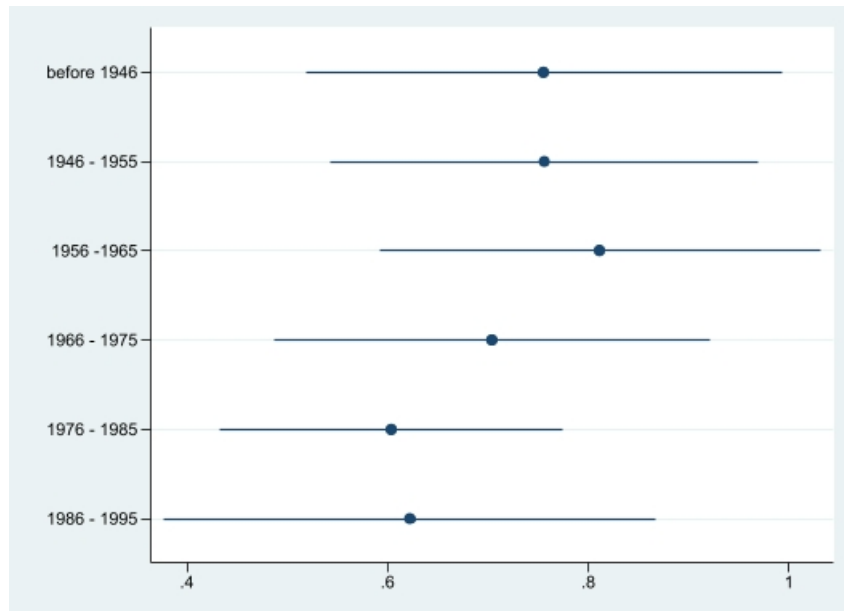
Data from NI ISSP. The point estimates in the figure show the difference in standard deviations (along with 95% confidence intervals) between the average attitudes in Russia and comparison countries.

Figure 2: Blind and militant patriotism by birth cohorts



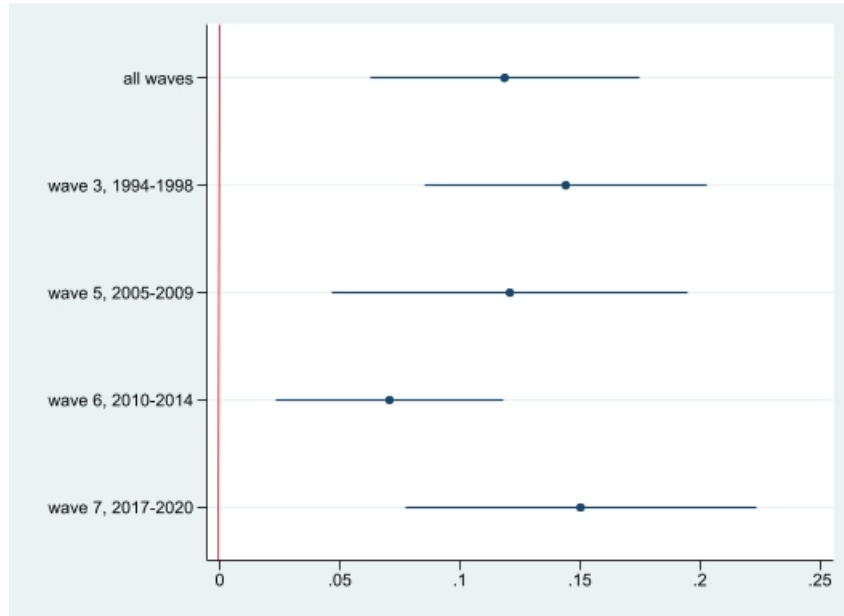
Data from NI ISSP. The point estimates in the figure show the difference in standard deviations (along with 95% confidence intervals) between the average attitudes in Russia and comparison countries.

Figure 3: Defense spending as priority by birth cohorts



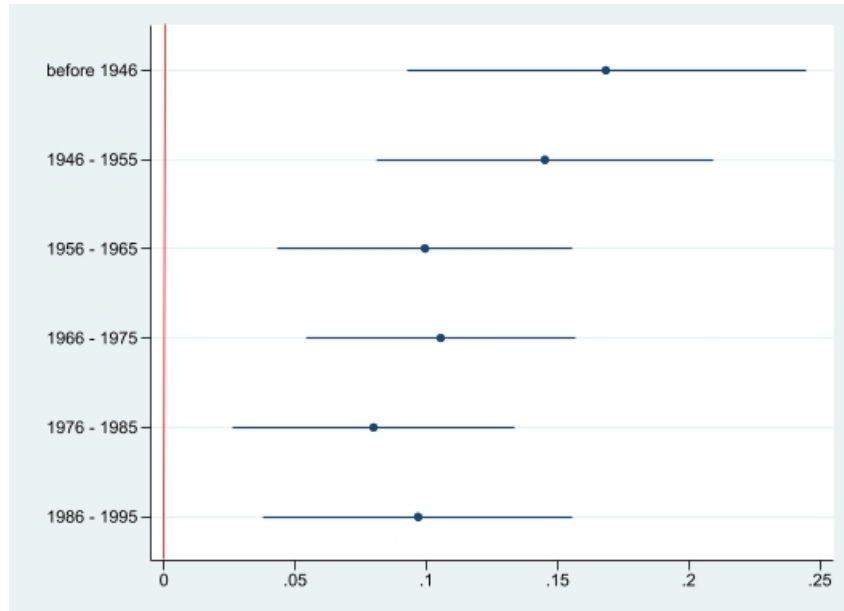
Data from RG ISSP. The point estimates in the figure show the difference in standard deviations (along with 95% confidence intervals) between the average attitudes in Russia and comparison countries.

Figure 4: Strong defense as priority by survey waves



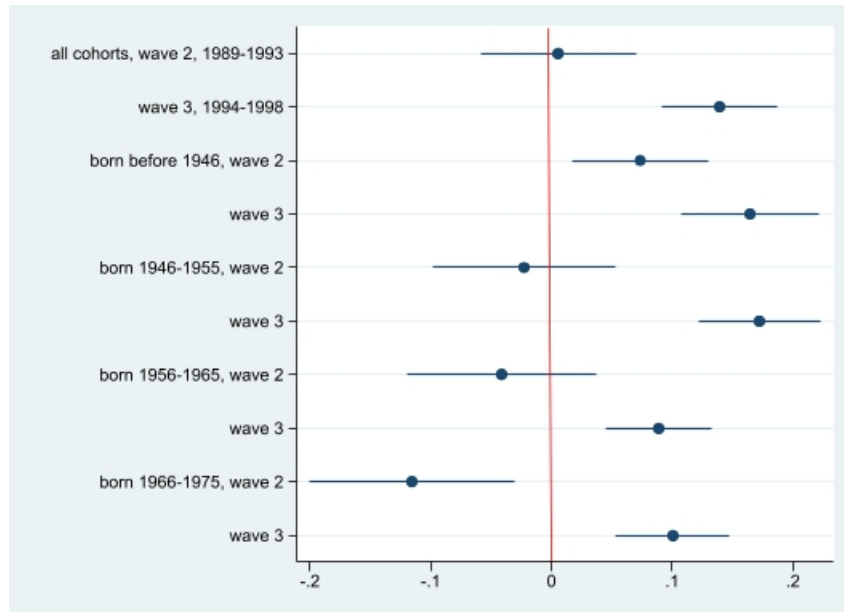
Data from WVS. The point estimates in the figure show the difference in standard deviations (along with 95% confidence intervals) between the average attitudes in Russia and comparison countries.

Figure 5: Strong defense as priority by birth cohorts



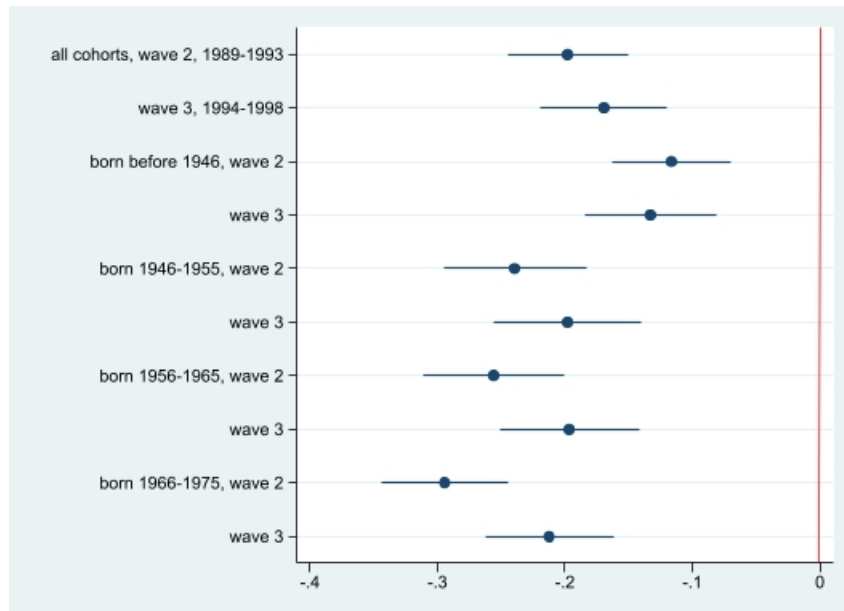
Data from WVS. The point estimates in the figure show the difference in standard deviations (along with 95% confidence intervals) between the average attitudes in Russia and comparison countries.

Figure 6: Strong defense as priority, waves 2 and 3 of WVS



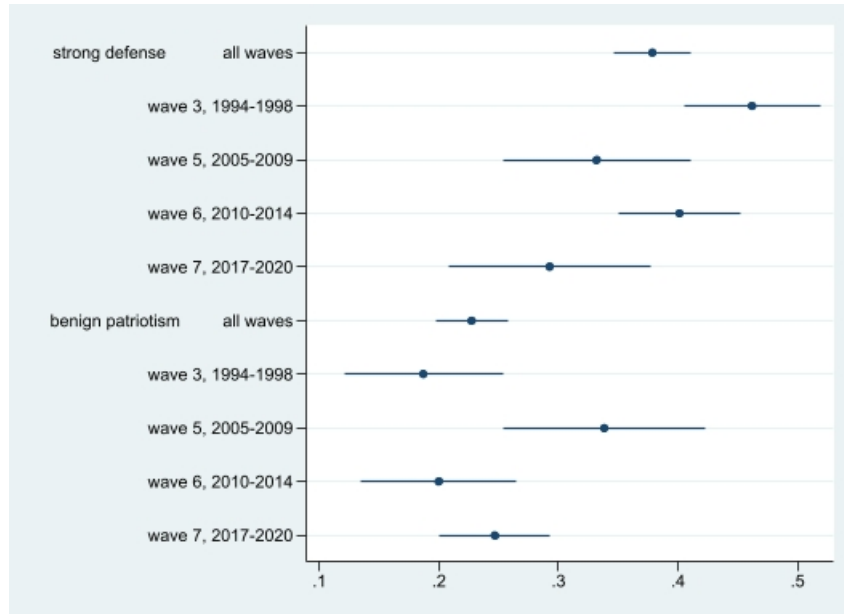
The point estimates in the figure show the difference in standard deviations (along with 95% confidence intervals) between the average attitudes in Russia and comparison countries.

Figure 7: Benign patriotism, waves 2 and 3 of WVS



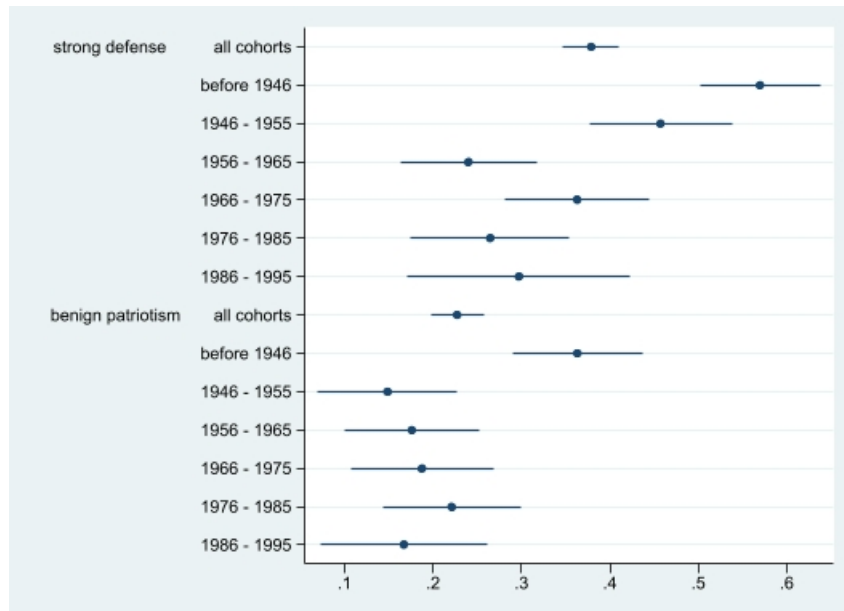
The point estimates in the figure show the difference in standard deviations (along with 95% confidence intervals) between the average attitudes in Russia and comparison countries.

Figure 8: Russia-Ukraine comparison by survey wave



Data from WVS. The point estimates in the figure show the difference in standard deviations (along with 95% confidence intervals) between the average attitudes in Russia and comparison countries.

Figure 9: Russia-Ukraine comparison by WVS birth cohorts



The point estimates in the figure show the difference in standard deviations (along with 95% confidence intervals) between the average attitudes in Russia and comparison countries.