

Anti-American Policy in Contemporary Russia: Examining Political Campaign on Dima Iakovlev Bill

Il'ia Anatol' evich Bykov

St. Petersburg State University, Universitetskaia naberezhnaia,
7-9, St. Petersburg, 199034, Russia

Abstract: The paper deals with the trend of increasing anti-American policy in contemporary Russia. As a basic example the author uses the case of enactment of so-called the Dima Iakovlev Bill by Russian authorities in December 2012. The deputies of the Russian Parliament (Gosudarstvennaia Duma) supported the act and the President Vladimir Putin signed it. On the other hand, the representatives of the so-called 'non-systemic opposition' objected. On 14 January 2013, about 20000 people marched against the Dima Iakovlev Bill in Moscow. The paper examines the impact of this political campaign on public opinion in Russia, taking into account the fact that there were very many contradicting survey results released by the Russian media at the beginning of 2012. The author collected and compared the survey results. He has concluded that the political campaign on Dima Iakovlev Bill splits public opinion in Russia on two parts. In order to verify this conclusion the author took an opinion poll in St. Petersburg. These results show that Anti-American campaign on Dima Iakovlev Bill not only splits public opinion but polarizes it: respondents either strongly approve or strongly disapprove of this act. Anti-Americanism in Russia has become a major political trend affecting not only domestic but also foreign policy. For example, Russian position on the Syria crisis mainly depends on domestic policy, in which anti-Americanism plays important role as a mechanism of political mobilization and a source of regime legitimization.

Key words: Political campaign • Anti-Americanism • Public opinion • Russian politics • International relations

INTRODUCTION

The Dima Iakovlev Bill, formally, is the Federal Act of Russian Federation ¹ 272-FZ "On Sanctions for Individuals Violating Fundamental Human Rights and Freedoms of the Citizens of the Russian Federation". The bill defines sanctions against U.S. citizens, involved in violations of the human rights and freedoms of Russian citizens. The bill includes several aspects, but the most known part deals with the total prohibition for U.S. citizens to adopt Russian orphans. The Bill was informally named by the officials in the Parliament and the official Russian Media after Dima Iakovlev, who was adopted by an American family. After three months of his adoption, Dima died, strapped into his adoptive father's car for nine hours.

The Parliament supported the Dima Iakovlev Bill by 400 votes out of 450 and the President V. Putin signed it in 28 December of 2012 [1]. The officials considered the bill as a response to the Magnitsky Act, passed by the Americans in December 2012. For the public relations purposes Russian authorities prefer to name the bill after Dima Iakovlev, who died in America, but not after Magnitsky, who died in Russia during preliminary investigation. The Anti-American campaign began from the personal approval by the President of Russia Vladimir Putin, who has expressed an opinion, that the Russian orphans should not be adopted by the parents abroad. This idea received a vigorous objection from the so-called non-systemic opposition. On 14 January 2013, about 20000 people marched against the Dima Iakovlev Bill in Moscow. The participants of the march named the

Corresponding Author: Il'ia Anatol' evich Bykov, St. Petersburg State University,
Universitetskaia naberezhnaia, 7-9, St. Petersburg, 199034, Russia.

performance as “March against scoundrels” supposing the Parliament Members and the President V. Putin to be “the scoundrels” [2].

The interesting part of the reaction on this bill included the objections from very high officials inside the Kremlin. For example, there were voices against the bill from such ministers as Mikhail Abyzov (The Open Government Ministry), Anton Siluanov (The Ministry of Finance), Dmitry Livanov (The Ministry of Education), Ilga Golodets (The Ministry of Social Affairs) and Sergei Lavrov (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs). In particular, Sergei Lavrov said: “It should be a vigorous reaction against the excesses of both boys and girls. But the ban adoption, as an institution, I think it is wrong” [3]. However, two months later in his official interview Lavrov disproved that he objected to Dima Iakovlev Bill [4].

But the fact is that this Bill splits the public opinion in Russia, although there were some contradictions in public opinion polls conducted by the three major public opinion research institutes in Russia: FOM (Fond of Public Opinion), VTsIOM (Russian Public Opinion Research Center) and Levada Center. All of them demonstrated that the Bill has high level of support. For example, VTsIOM reported that Dima Iakovlev Bill was supported by 76 % of Russians, while 24 % - wasn't [5]. More realistic figures were presented by the FOM: 56 % - “for”, 21 % - “against”, 23 % - “don't know” [6]. Levada Center reported: 51 % - “for”, 30 % - “against”, 19 % - “hard to tell” [7]. The VTsIOM results look really odd for the reason, that there is no information about the people, who have no opinion about this problem. According to J. Zaller, normally there is a significant share of population, which doesn't have an opinion on any important public question [8].

The introductory information described above raises several questions. Firstly, why Dima Iakovlev Bill was approved despite the obvious damage for the Russian-American relations, which were not so good already? Even Sergei Lavrov and the other members of the Russian Cabinet objected, at least, in the early stages of the Bill procession. Therefore, there should be very serious reasons for insisting on such controversial political campaign. The obvious answer for the first question deals with the public opinion, which at the first glance supports the Dima Iakovlev Bill. But taking into account the theory of programming with the poll results publishing, very well explored by E. Noelle-Neumann, we should rely on such opinion polls very carefully [9]. Thus, a second question deals with the problem of regime

legitimization. But what about possible consequences for such open anti-Americanism, expressed by the Russian officials in terms of domestic and international politics? To answer these questions, we need to firstly discuss a theoretical framework of our study.

Theoretical Framework: This paper uses the approach of interdependency between foreign and internal politics, taking into account all complicity of linkages and sources of influence in practical aspect [10]. Our approach is really close to the ideas of several researchers, stressed out earlier in publications on the Russian foreign and domestic policy. For example, M. Freire argues that “the study of foreign policy should go beyond strictly positivist assumptions, as relations between the different actors and the foreign policy” [11]. Thus, the Russian foreign policy includes several dimensions, in which ideational or cultural factors such as anti-Americanism play very important role.

Although, it is rather difficult to give a formal description to the term of ‘anti-Americanism’ [12], there is a gnoseological reason to distinguish mass sentiments and state policy. Anti-Americanism, as a broad range of stereotypes and cultural criticism, is very common attitude all around the world. Russia has placed at the top of the list of anti-American countries with 50 % of population, having generally negative impression of the United States and the Americans [13]. But only in last few years there was a significant change in Russian politics, which now can be described as a trend of increasing anti-American policy in domestic and foreign affairs, inspired by top politicians and supported by majority of citizens. Obviously, the trend has had a deep basis of the Cold War and the current problems such as negotiations with WTO, Magnitski and Jackson-Vanik acts.

The other prominent researcher R. Sakwa points out, that “Russia acts as the bellwether, developing as a distinct and separate pole in the international system rather than joining the Western constellation, as was anticipated after the end of the Cold War. Russia's great power identity in the international system is accompanied by domestic systemic specificities, which reinforce differentiation at the structural level. Russia's neo-revisionism does not repudiate the present balance in international order, but seeks to create what it considers to be a more comprehensive and equal system” [14]. We suggest to consider the remark about “domestic systemic specificities” as highly important. The opportunity to join ‘Western constellation’, which was open in nineteenth, now is closed primarily by

the one-side efforts, fulfilled by the Russian authorities. Of course, the Western partners have a responsibility for missing an opportunity to engage Russia to the Western constellation. As A. Akturk put it in his article, the process of NATO Enlargement could be very well explained by the dynamics of domestic politics in Russia and the United States [15].

Speaking specifically about current international issue of Syria and the Russian role in this problem, A. Roy argues, that the reasons of solidarity between the Soviet Union/Russia and Syria has exerted little real influence, besides leaving some strategic nostalgia among Russian security policy-makers. Also he excludes the Russian material interests in Syria. A. Roy emphasizes the potential impact of the Syria crisis on the domestic political order of the Russian state. He writes: "Moscow rejects calls for the departure of Assad as another case of the western community imposing standards of political legitimacy on a 'sovereign state' to enforce regime change, with future implications for Russia or other authoritarian members of the Commonwealth of Independent States" [16]. This is very interesting, that Roy describes Russian foreign policy in terms of internal policy, pointing out the needs of Russian political regime in legitimacy.

Thus, our theoretical approach bases primarily on the assumption, that the Russian regime of electoral authoritarianism tends to suffer some internal problems. Basically, the problems showed up during the last election cycle, when there were a lot of protests against electoral frauds in Moscow, as well as in other major cities across the country [17, 18]. In the circumstances of declining legitimacy, the authoritarian regimes tend to use foreign policy and diplomacy to protect the system. Not surprisingly, the Russian authorities canceled unilaterally the agreement with the United States on adoptions, formalizing an accord, that was brokered after several reports of apparent abuse or maltreatment of Russian children, living with American parents. This agreement were signed by S. Lavrov and H. Clinton and ratified by Russian Parliament in the beginning of 2012 [19]. So, several months later after the ratification of special Russian-American agreement on adoptions, the same Russian Parliament accepted new Dima Iakovlev Bill, completely prohibiting adoptions by the Americans. Not surprisingly, Sergei Lavrov objected during the first stages of Dima Iakovlev Bill's processing. The unexpected turns of Russian foreign policy have become commonplace during the last few years.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

As 'the PR Bible' points out, the all political campaigns and PR-campaigns in business have the common standards, including four stages and the public opinion as a one of the most important marks for the evaluation of the given public campaign's effects [20]. In politics the public support is the key factor to achieve and to keep the power [21]. Today it does not matter in what kind of political regime the given leaders run a political campaign: they have a purpose to achieve and to keep the power as long as it is possible. Modern authoritarian regimes unlike democratic regimes only by the electoral procedures, but they find their legitimacy on the elections and, thus, on the public opinion.

Previously in the introduction, we founded that the political campaign on Dima Iakovlev Bill splits public opinion in Russia on two parts. In order to verify our assumption, we collected and compared survey results presented by leading Russian public opinion research institutions. Additionally, we conducted an opinion poll in St. Petersburg, with the general purpose to verify the results from the surveys mentioned above. We anticipated, that our results should not differ significantly. Thus, the first hypothesis insists on the fact, that the public opinion splits in Russia about the Dima Iakovlev Bill. The second purpose of the survey was to understand the level of support to the Dima Iakovlev Bill in St. Petersburg. Thus, the second hypothesis was to verify the level of the public opinion disruption about anti-Americanism in particularly and Anti-Westernization and democratization in general. We anticipated, that there is to be a high level of polarization in the Russian public opinion on that matters.

Speaking on the practical aspects of the research, we used very usual approach of empirical polling technique, described in such classical works as "Social Research Methods" by D. Dooley or "Empirical Political Analysis: Research Methods in Political Science" by J. Manheim, R. Rich and L. Willnat [22, 23]. We conducted a survey, that reaches 252 respondents. The sample was designed by 'snowball' method, which includes interviewing respondents of the respondents. But in order to increase the sample representativeness, we also used quoting technique to select interviewers by different ages and sex. In result, the average age of respondents in the sample was 34 years, whereas in the general population of St. Petersburg this figure is 38 years. Thus, the average age shows some bias from the general population. The sex ratio in the sample looks normal or

very close to normal distribution for general population: 55 % of female, 45 % of male. The number of respondents is not so high. There were 252 respondents. Comparing the amount of sample and the fact of younger age in our sample, we would estimate statistical error as 10 % in 95 % confidence interval. Unfortunately, we must admit that our results have had limited amount of representativity and the sample N should be at least 400, but in this case we could not expand our sample, due to the lack of recourses.

RESULTS

Our results look really familiar to the other surveys only in the part of the “hard-to-tell” answers, but the majority of respondents in our survey do not support the Dima Iakovlev Bill (see the figure 1 below). It can be explained by the specific political culture of St. Petersburg, which is more democratic and Western oriented then Russia in general.

Comparison of surveys on Dima Iakovlev Bill is represented in table 1 (see below). This table indirectly supports the representativeness of our research in St. Petersburg, for the share of respondents, who does not have an opinion, is really close to the other results. 18 % of respondents in St. Petersburg has no an opinion about Dima Iakovlev Bill. At the same time, FOM has 23 % who say “Hard to tell”, Levada Center – 19 %. In this part, our survey looks normal. But unlike the other studies, we founded the St. Petersburg inhabitants tend to disapprove the Dima Iakovlev Bill.

To test a polarization of public opinion on the Dima Iakovlev Bill, we asked the respondents to evaluate the level of their approval or disapproval of the Bill. The results of approving and disapproving are presented in Figure 2 and Figure 3.

Our research showed, that the Anti-American campaign on the Dima Iakovlev Bill not only divided the public opinion in Russia, but polarized it. We founded, that respondents either strongly approve or strongly disapprove this Bill. The consequences of that fact is to discuss in the concluding part of the article.

Table 1: Comparison of Public Opinion Surveys on the Dima Iakovlev Bill (in %)

Researcher	“For”	“Against”	“Hard to tell”
FOM	56	21	23
Levada Center	51	30	19
VTsIOM	76	24	-
Bykov, St. Petersburg	34	48	18

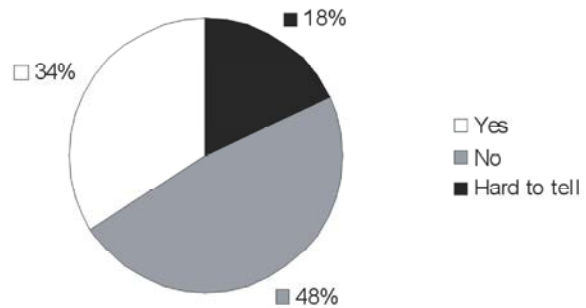


Fig 1: Do you approve the Dima Iakovlev Bill?

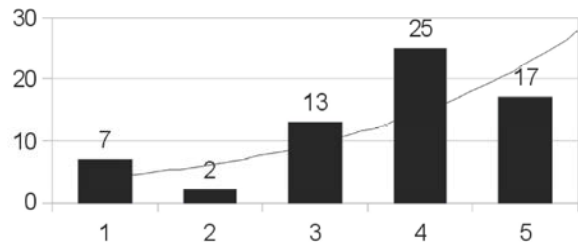


Fig 2: If you approve Dima Iakovlev Bill, mark the degree of your approval in scale from 1 to 5, assuming 1 is the minimum disapproving, 5 is the maximum disapproving (total marks)

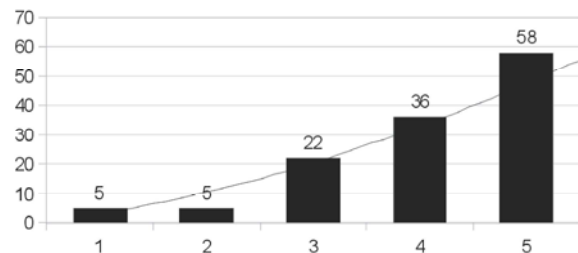


Fig 3: If you are disapproving the Dima Iakovlev Bill, mark the degree of your disapproval in scale from 1 to 5, assuming 1 is the minimum disapproving, 5 is the maximum disapproving (total marks)

CONCLUSION

There are several reasons for Russian authorities to choose anti-Americanism as a one of the main objects for internal political campaigns. The first reason deals with the relatively weak economical relations between Russia and the United States. Independent researchers can easily find out, that the Russian authorities tended to avoid significant conflicts with the major economical partners such as Germany or France.

The second reason includes the needs of political regime legitimization, by using ‘good old’ Cold War stereotypes. Several researchers claim, that the politics in Russia has a long time inertia, which is rooted in

political culture formed basically during the period of the Soviet Union [24]. It affects all parts of domestic and foreign policy of Russia.

The third reason includes the thought, that the Americans is a very good explanation for any foreign policy change. Appealing to the United States as a last world super-power, which tries to dominate in every part of the Earth, helps Russian politicians explain any kind of internal and foreign problems.

The forth and the main reason is that the anti-Americanism distracts attention from the other internal problems. Frightened by some signs of the internal politics destabilizations, the Russian politicians led by Vladimir Putin himself, played the card of foreign threat to legitimize the system and to keep themselves in power. We believe, there were several examples of the political campaigns, using the same techniques as the case of the campaign on Dima Iakovlev Bill: along with the other political campaigns, we can mention “the Case of ‘Puzzy Riot’”, the ‘Gay Propaganda Bill’, the ‘Arctic Sunrise’ imprisonment, etc. All of these campaigns consolidate a pro-Putin’s electorate in the expense of some kind of minority like the ecologists or the human rights activists. The Crimea peninsula annexation is a culmination of this trend.

The Anti-American rhetoric helps Vladimir Putin to maintain the system of personal power, but from the point of view, centered on the public opinion as a social phenomenon, there are at least two significant side effects. We believe these side effects have a very dramatic consequences for the development of Russia as a state and as a society.

The first side effect deals primarily with the internal affairs. The anti-Americanism stimulates conflicts with ethnic and minority groups inside Russia. The Americans are too far away, but the work migrants from Central Asia and Caucasus are supposed to be the real danger here in the central, so called Slavonic, parts of Russia. This effect is very well considered in the report “New electoral balance: medium-term trend or ‘temporary lull’?” of Michail Dmitriev’s Center for Strategic Research [25]. In the middle of 2013 the report predicted the conflicts on the base of ethnic prejudices. The most famous conflict happened in the Moscow district Biryulyovo, where the residents stage the riots in response to the murder of a young man by immigrants in October 2013. Here we can see a very simple mechanism of psychological transferring the aggression from the

Americans to the immigrants. Thus, the negative political campaigns put the domestic policy at risks of imbalance, destabilization and disintegration.

The second side effect includes the unpleasant consequences in foreign affairs such as unpredictability and isolation. In this part our point of view is really close to the ideas of L. Murch, who suggests that the Russian authorities tried to be nationalistic, but moderate, without extremism. However, L. Murch writes, that “the effect is less benign because the Kremlin both mobilizes extreme nationalism for regime goals and suppresses it when it becomes destabilizing... This approach prevents nationalism either of extreme or moderate orientation becoming an influential, independent force in Russian politics. Such conflicting imperatives make Russia a more unpredictable international partner than if its policies were founded on a consistent ideological nationalism” [26]. Under these conditions the international community has to be very careful in relationships with Russia, considering Russian foreign policy as too unpredictable and aggressive. This side effect makes it really hard to modernize Russia, for the technologies and the know-hows belong to the Western democracies, which are criticized by the official Russian politicians. The example of Dima Iakovlev Bill illustrates this paradox very well.

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