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RALLY-AROUND-THE-FLAG AND THE MEDIA: CASE OF ECONOMIC SANCTIONS IN RUSSIA

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RALLY-AROUND-THE-FLAG AND THE MEDIA: CASE OF ECONOMIC SANCTIONS IN RUSSIA²

This article analyzes a paradoxical situation: against the background of a large-scale economic and political crisis in Russia, Vladimir Putin's support is increasing. In explanation, we propose the rally-around-the-flag effect. This effect reflects how and why a national leader's approval rating substantially increases during tragedies and international conflicts. However, the circumstances in Russia differ significantly from those described in the literature. For example, the rally effect in Russia is substantially more stable than in other countries. Because the rally-around-the-flag effect is closely linked with debates that are presented in the media, we search for explanations in this area. We assume that the use of deproblematization strategies in the media discussion on economic sanctions proves to people that the effects of the sanctions are not severe and generates images of Russia's external enemies and Vladimir Putin as a strong leader who resists these enemies. Such strategies and practices can contribute to the rally effect. The article analyzes the key strategies used to deproblematize the economic sanctions (and the Russian food embargo) that were used in four Russian newspapers from March 2014 to December 2014.

Keywords: rally-around-the-flag, approval ratings, president's popularity, economic sanctions, food embargo, media, Putin.

JEL Codes: Z.

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1. Introduction

Vladimir Putin is the most popular political figure in modern Russia history. According to opinion polls, Putin's approval rating increased from 61-65% in late 2013 to 80% in March 2014 (and 89% in the summer of 2015).³ In addition, these dramatic increases occurred during episodes of strife, e.g., the conflict in Ukraine, the deterioration of relations with the Western countries after the annexation of Crimea, the imposition of economic sanctions and the Russian food embargo. In fact, Russia is politically isolated and faces serious economic problems (e.g., the devaluation of the ruble, falling oil prices). Obviously, the situation in the country does not appear favorable with respect to the growth of the national leader's popularity. However, the latest research indicates that President Putin's approval rating is real and that the possible overstatement of his approval rating does not exceed a small number of percentage points [Frye et al., forthcoming]. Thus, public approval of government actions began to increase after the large-scale protests of the winter of 2011-2012, despite a difficult economic and political period when there is little to celebrate.

Is national leader's popularity growth in such circumstances absurd and unprecedented? In reality, no. History provides examples of more remarkable increases in the popularity of national leaders against the backdrop of crisis than that of Putin. For instance, according to Gallup opinion polls, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, George Bush's approval rating increased 35% in one week⁴ [Baum, 2002]. The attack on Pearl Harbor resulted in a 12% increase in Franklin Roosevelt's popularity [Ibid]. The Falklands War played an important role in the re-election of Margaret Thatcher [Ogden, 1992], and the Gulf War increased George H. W. Bush's approval rating from 58% to 89% for two months [Norrander, Wilcox, 1993]. This effect has also been observed for other heads of states. The phenomenon of increasing support for national leaders against the background of external threats and crises has been termed the rally-around-the-flag effect [Mueller, 1970]. Substantial effort has been expended on describing the conditions of this effect and on case studies on various countries when a people unite around a leader. In this study, we assume that the economic sanctions and the Russian food embargo, which occurred after the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, became the basis for a large-scale rally-around-the-flag effect in Russia and the increase in Putin's approval rating.

Public opinion and the rally effect do not form in a vacuum but under the influence of mass communications [e.g., Brody, 1991]. Previous research has demonstrated that a media discussion has a stronger impact on public views when people do not have personal experience

³ The results of independent research organization the Levada Center. URL: <http://www.levada.ru/indikatory/odobrenie-organov-vlasti/>.

⁴ Opinion polls: September 7–10 and 14–15.

of and thorough knowledge regarding the subject under discussion [McCombs et al., 1981] (i.e., certain economic and political decisions). Therefore, it is logical to start our search for answers in this area. In this article, we try to explain the paradox of Putin's popularity increase during the conflict with Western countries and the economic crisis by analyzing the debate on the sanctions in the Russian media.

2. Literature review

2.1. Rally-around-the-flag effect

Researchers have noted that the rally-around-the-flag effect can be observed in cases of international conflict, war and national tragedy. The effect occurs when an event displays certain characteristics. That is, citizens unite around the national leader after sudden events of an international scale that are relevant to the country as a whole [Mueller, 1973]. The personalized "other" is equally important. That is, the damage caused by natural disasters or industrial accidents does not contribute to the popularity of the authorities. On the contrary, such incidents are often perceived as the indicators of weakness.

Initially, events such as foreign military interventions, other major military operations, important diplomatic events and meetings of heads of conflicting states were considered to be triggers of the rally effect [Mueller, 1973]. Later, terrorist attacks were included in this list [Bennett, 2014; Perrin, Smolek, 2009]. In addition, although researchers initially primarily focused on the 9/11 events, they subsequently began to pay attention to other cases, such as the 3/11 terrorist attack in Madrid [Dinesen, Jæger, 2013]. Comparative studies on the subject have also been conducted [Chowanietz, 2011].

In addition, there are numerous examples of increases in the approval ratings of national leaders during times of crisis that are not reflected in the scientific discourse. For example, the popularity of François Hollande has increased by 21% since the attack on the editorial office of the newspaper Charlie Hebdo on 7 January 2015.⁵ However, the level of the French president's support quickly began to decrease, and in February 2015, it did not exceed 30%.⁶ The effect of a series of attacks in Paris in November 2015 proved to be even more significant: for the first time since he was elected, Hollande's approval level reached 50%.⁷

⁵ Sharkov D. French President's Popularity Rating Doubles Following Paris Attacks. - *Newsweek*. 19.01.2015. URL:<http://europe.newsweek.com/french-presidents-popularity-rating-doubles-following-charlie-hebdo-attacks-300518?rm=eu>

⁶ Wojazer P. Hollande, Valls approval ratings drop – poll. - *Reuters*. 09.02.2015. URL: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-france-poll-hollande-idUKKBN0LD2CH20150209>

⁷ Kireev D. Person of the Week: Francois Hollande.- *Euromag*. 04.12.2015. URL:http://www.euromag.ru/man_of_week/45746.html

2.2. Media as creator of the rally effect

Researchers have noted the substantial influence of the media in triggering the rally-around-the-flag effect [e.g., Kernell, 1978; Lian, Oneal, 1993; Newman, Forcehimes, 2010]. The knowledge of individuals regarding consolidating events is mediated by discussion in the media because only a small part of the population is directly involved in such events. Thus, it is difficult to deny the impact of mass communications on the rally-around-the-flag effect. After all, individuals perceive not the problem itself but its media image [Cacciatore et al., 2016]. In addition, in explaining the impact of the media on the rally effect, researchers note that during crises events occur suddenly and quickly replace one another [Brody, 1991]. Under such difficult circumstances, the authorities have a monopoly on information, whereas opposition leaders who suffer from a deficit of reliable information prefer to refrain from commenting [Ibid]. Therefore, criticism of government action is virtually absent from public discussion. It is logical that the media audience believes that its government's actions are correct and that the national leader will contribute to overcoming the crisis.

An interesting example of media influence on the appearance of the rally-around-the-flag effect is the case of the Gulf War. According to estimates by researchers on mass communications, the media were highly important during this war. Perhaps the war was one of the first events whose image was purposefully constructed at the global level. After the lesson of the Vietnam War, when television footage of victims of the conflict created a negative public opinion, the media constructed the image of the Gulf War differently, focusing on the use of "bloodless" high technology [Bolz, 2007: 73-74].

The media coverage of the events in the Middle East was not completely objective. Thus, directly prior to the outbreak of hostilities, the number of supporters and opponents of US policy regarding the war was similar [Mueller, 1993]. However, television news outlets ignored the opposition to the president's administration, which did not approve military aggression. Supporters of this position received less than 1% of screen time [Ruffini, 1992]. Thus, public opinion regarding the Gulf War significantly changed directly after the start of the Desert Storm military operation. The number of Americans who supported such actions increased by more than 16%, and the number of opponents of military action in the Middle East fell by 26% [Mueller, 1993: 209]. Subsequently, this gap continued to increase [Allen et al., 1994].

Such dramatic changes in public opinion can be explained by a rally-around-the-flag effect that partly involves the specifics of the media coverage of an event. However, we can assume that the unequal representation of different positions in the media not only influences the public to perceive a president's decision as correct but also encourages dissenters to conceal their opinions. Thus, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann noted that due to the fear of being isolated

individuals are less likely to voice their opinions if they assume that they are in the minority [Noelle-Neumann, 1984]. This theory was subsequently developed, and the idea of the spiral of silence was transformed into a theory of preference falsification [Kuran, 1995], according to which a person's private and public opinion are not the same things. That is, individuals falsify the opinions that they believe to differ from majority views because they fear the disapproval of society or state sanctions. Therefore, the media debate affects the perception of an issue and the estimation of a situation and can encourage individuals who disagree with the policy of the authorities to falsify their preferences. One should not underestimate the role of the media in constructing the rally-around-the-flag effect.

2.3. Media-constructed problems and «non-problems»

In this study, we assume that the assessment of certain issues as important and relevant is largely connected with their media discussion. This idea was first presented a long time ago, and it means that the media to a certain extent construct public opinion. This theoretical approach has gained substantial popularity. For example, the book "Construction of social problems" by M. Spector and G. Kitsuse has been cited more than 350 times in the 25 years since its publication [Best, 2003]. The background of this theory is a paper by P. Fuller and P. Myers [Fuller, Myers, 1941], who noted that the existence a negative fact does not necessarily make it a problem. For example, discrimination against the black population was observed in the southern and northern states in the US. However, this discrimination was not defined as problematic at all times and in all places. Guided by this logic, the proponents of this approach believe that when we study poverty we must seek to understand what makes poverty a social problem and why individuals define it as such. However, this statement should not imply that the numerous researchers who have studied poverty or its causes have been counterproductive [Best, 2003].

A significant role in the process of constructing problems is played by the representatives of various interest groups, which try to change a situation [Blumer, 1971; Spector, Kitsuse, 1987]. In addition, the lack of effective action to solve a problem could result in increased media attention on the problem. However, government action to address a problem can attract even more public attention [Wolfe et al., 2013]. Thus, a problem in the process of being formulated in the public space becomes a form of leverage, which requires specific action by the authorities. Thus, there is a need to develop strategies to deproblematize a situation (i.e., counter-rhetorical strategies), i.e., to construct "non-problems".

Of course, the simplest way to divert attention from a problem is to eliminate it from the information agenda, for example, by a ban on media discussion of an issue [Edelman, 1988]. However, the implementation this strategy requires many resources (e.g., power, administrative

resources) [Koltsova, 2000]. In addition, in today's society, opportunities to control mass communications are limited because of the emergence of new communication channels and the increasing importance of the Internet. In this context, more complex mechanisms for decreasing public attention on issues have partly replaced bans and taboos. One strategy with which to perform deproblematization resembles a rethinking of priorities. It is possible to focus on issues that are more convenient for the government and not to pay attention to other, negative facts. This strategy was clearly illustrated in an article by Yasaveev. The paper demonstrated that federal TV channels paid particular attention to the problems of terrorism, crime and drug abuse and ignored the problems of alcoholism and corruption [Yasaveev, 2006a]. The possible explanation of this effect is governmental media policy.

However, the range of strategies used to deproblematize various issues is substantially wider [Ibarra, Kitsuse, 2003]. Counterrhetoric strategies can deny the importance and urgency of a problem as such (unsympathetic counterrhetoric) or refute suggested ways to solve it (sympathetic counterrhetoric). In the first case, it is possible to present counterexamples, or a situation can be represented as a series of unrelated incidents. Additionally, attempts can be made to discredit the participants in a discussion. When sympathetic counterrhetoric is used in a discussion, a problem may be described as inevitable and ways of solving it as no less dangerous than the problem itself [Ibarra, Kitsuse, 2003].

Empirical research on deproblematization strategies in Russian mass media focus on a variety of issues, from the excess of glamor in the public space [Nim, 2010] to Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) [Kazun, 2015]. Generally, all of the strategies proposed by Ibarra and Kitsuse are used in Russian public debate [Yasaveev, 2006b]. In this article, we focus on the deproblematization strategies that were used in the discussion on economic sanctions. We assume that the characteristics of the media discussion influenced the rally-around-the flag effect in modern Russia.

2.4. Economic sanctions as a basis for the rally effect

The aggravation of relations between Russia and Western countries commenced after the annexation of Crimea to Russia. On 17 March 2014, after a referendum, Crimea declared its independence from Ukraine and applied for «reunion» with the Russian Federation. President Putin granted this request and the Crimean peninsula became a new region of the Russian Federation. This event had a significant impact on the world situation. First, to a certain extent, the annexation of Crimea provoked the War in Eastern Ukraine (i.e., the Donetsk and Luhansk area), which was associated with attempts by the Russian-speaking population in these areas to similarly exercise their right to self-determination and join Russia. The accordance of such acts

with international law has become a significant theme and been actively discussed by politicians and researchers [Driest, 2015].

Public discussion on the annexation of Crimea was largely ideological. Countries have adopted various positions on the issue and defended them in various ways, including through the media. It is possible to accuse the Russian [Teper, 2015; Laruelle, 2016] and the Western media [Boyd-Barrett, 2015] of promoting a politically desirable public opinion on this issue. Western countries have supported Ukraine in the conflict and described Russia as the aggressor. Thus, the declared purpose of the economic sanctions is the return of Crimea to Ukraine and the revision of Russian foreign policy.

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

International sanctions against Russian individuals, businesses and officials became an iconic topic of 2014. The possible consequences of the sanctions were actively discussed in the media. In 2014, the central and regional press published 92155 articles on this issue.⁸ The sanctions also attracted substantial public attention. According to surveys by the Levada-Center, the issue was repeatedly named as the most memorable event of the month prior to the survey (21-28% of respondents)⁹. However, unexpectedly, the economic sanctions were not recognized by the population as a problem. Opinion polls revealed that a large proportion of Russians did not perceive negative effects from the sanctions for the country as a whole (62%) and for themselves personally (92%)¹⁰. Additionally, the Russian food embargo was positively evaluated. We assume that this perception of the circumstances is due to the purposeful construction of the image of the economic sanctions in the media, including an effort to sustain the rally effect.

Although the public has observed the price increases connected with the sanctions, it believes that the sanctions and, in particular, the food embargo will benefit domestic

⁸ In comparison, 54 964 articles were published on the Olympic Games, whereas Crimea was mentioned in 97 678 articles.

⁹ For example, the research of the Levada Center. URL: <http://www.levada.ru/28-08-2014/sanktsii-otsenki-i-ozhidaniya>.

¹⁰ For example, the WCIOM press release "Anti-Russian sanctions: Causes and Consequences", 14.08.2014. URL: <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=114934>.

manufacturers and therefore the country as a whole. Of course, the fate of domestic producers is routinely discussed in the media and represents a topic that is approved and supported by the public. Specifically, during the discussion on Russia's accession to the WTO two years earlier, this argument was the most prevalent among the supporters of this decision in the media and on the people's "list of hopes" [Kazun, 2014]. However, such optimism with respect to the economic sanctions is surprising. Thus, the measures, which initially had a negative intention and were applied as a "punishment" for Russian foreign-policy decisions, were received with unexpected enthusiasm in the citizenry, which was reflected in the increase in President Putin's approval rating.

Previous studies have demonstrated that economic sanctions may contribute to the consolidation of the public around the national leader. A recent example is the case of the UN sanctions against Eritrea [Hirt, 2015]. In 2009, an arms embargo was imposed on Eritrea, the country's bank assets were frozen, and a ban on the entry of Eritrean leaders into United Nations countries entered into force. Under these circumstances, representatives of the government and the opposition attempted to exploit the sanctions for their own purposes. For the authorities, such measures have become a way to create a rally-around-the-flag effect and attract resources (including taxes) to reduce the negative effects of sanctions. This strategy has been successfully implemented and enabled government not only to maintain but also to strengthen their position.

Researchers note that sanctions imposed on a country with an undemocratic regime often do not achieve their original objectives [Grauvogel, von Soest, 2014]. In certain cases, they result in an increase in support for the national leader. However, this outcome is only possible under certain conditions [Ibid]. First, it is important that public approval of a government be high prior to the sanctions. The choice of the rhetorical strategies that will be used to justify the circumstances is also significant. In addition, the sanction should not be applied by the key partners of the country or should only apply to certain aspects of the economic relations between countries. Under these conditions, economic sanctions cause the rally effect and increase the level of support for government.

Obviously, these conditions are fulfilled in modern Russia. For example, the economic sanctions and the food embargo only apply to certain groups of goods and services, and Putin's popularity before the annexation of Crimea exceeded 60%. Thus, the level of support for the president was high at the time that the sanctions were implemented. Accordingly, it is appropriate to speak of a rally-around-the-flag effect in this context.

In addition, the strategies used by the Russian mass media to deproblematize the economic sanctions contributed to the creation of a rally effect and its establishment. Because the positive impact of internal and external shocks on the popularity of national leaders is typically

short-lived, the media discussion can support this effect and ensure its increased stability. We assume that one factor that influenced the impulse to rally-around-the-flag could be the deproblematization strategy of the media. The rally effect has not been previously considered in the context of counterrhetoric strategies in the mass media.

3. Method

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

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

After the sampling, we performed a search for the articles in these newspapers that use the keyword "sanctions" using the resource Integrum¹¹. Additionally, articles that were not relevant to our study focus were excluded from analysis. Articles that expressed opinions on the potential and / or actual impact of the sanctions (and the introduction of the Russian food embargo, i.e., "anti-sanctions") on the Russian economy were considered to be relevant. The analysis did not include articles that mentioned sanctions that did not refer to the economic sanctions implemented against Russia (i.e., the word was used in another sense or in relation to another country) and articles that occasionally mentioned the sanctions as a challenge for the domestic economy.

¹¹ The base "Integrum" contains materials of print media: approximately 500 Russian magazines, more than 250 central and 1000 regional newspapers.

This research relates public opinion and the debate as expressed in the print media. We do not analyze the position of business representatives (whose attitude toward Putin nevertheless interesting [Yakovlev et. al, 2015]) because this topic is suitable for a separate study. Another limitation of this study is the relatively low level of media freedom in Russia. The Press Freedom Index characterizes the circumstances in Russia as unfavorable. During the period covered by the study, Russia was ranked 148th (of 180 countries).¹² Many researchers have examined the pressure experienced by the media in Russia [e.g., Vartanova, 2000; Koltsova, 2006]. However, several factors make our research reliable possible and correct. First, we do not analyze the views of interest groups regarding the economic sanctions but focus on the construction of a rally-around-the-flag atmosphere in Russia. Newspapers that are loyal to the government may play a substantial role in the creation of the rally effect. Therefore, the significant number of such newspapers does not constitute an obstacle for research on this process. In addition, the sample of newspapers and magazines used in this study includes the opposition press (e.g., Novaya Gazeta), which should enable us to analyze the features of the coverage of the sanctions in print media with an alternative ideological orientation. Therefore, although television has a larger audience, for the purposes of this study, it is preferable to analyze print media. Russian television engages in propaganda more than the press. Television limits the possibilities of the government's opponents to participate in discussions. The print media are more independent and enable us to analyze the discussion in detail, including the statements of the opposition. In addition, according to certain theories, the press constructs a hierarchy of the issues that receive media coverage and structures the discussion on topical issues, whereas television only "highlights" certain aspects of such issues [Dyakova, 2003].

4. Empirical results

4.1. Institutional context: Putin's popularity ranking

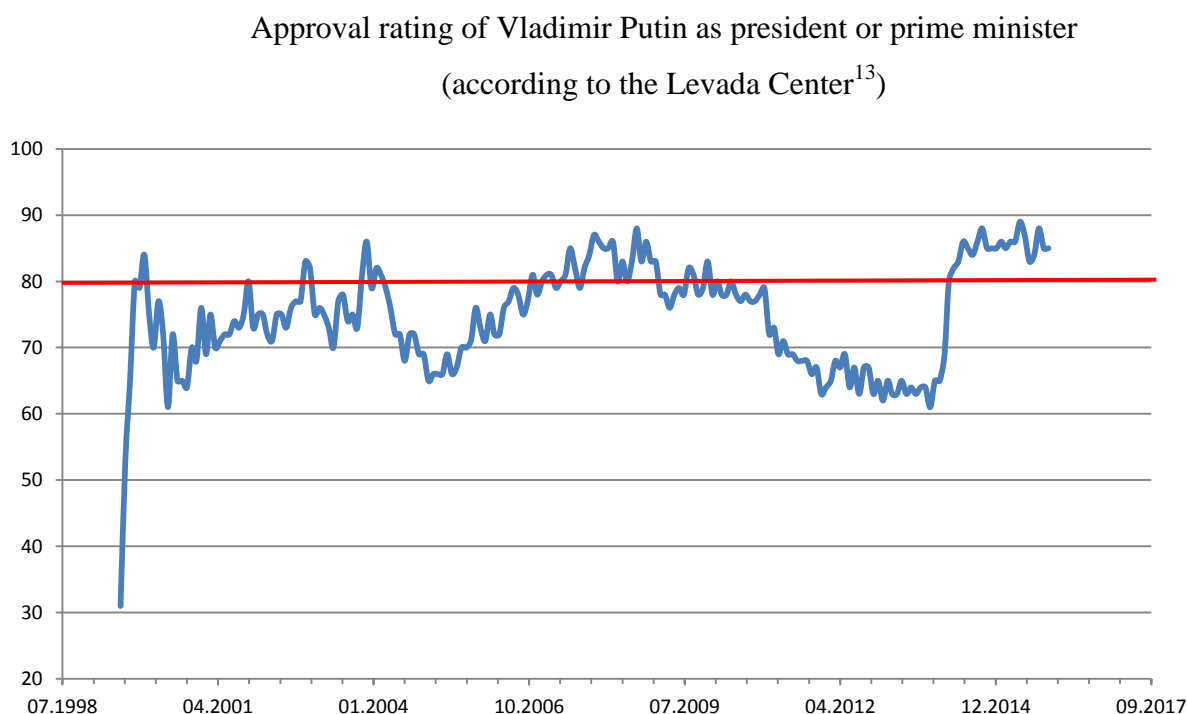
Conclusions on the impact of the international crisis on the popularity of the head of state can also be made regarding Vladimir Putin (Figure 1). Thus, the president's high approval rating at the turn of 1999-2000 can be attributed to Putin's participation in resolving the conflict in Chechnya (The Second Chechen War). In addition, a "honeymoon effect", whereby immediately after an election victory a president receives considerable support from the public [Beckmann, Godfrey, 2007; Gronke, Brehm, 2002], was also significant. Putin became acting president after the early departure of Boris Yeltsin, who resigned on December 31, 1999. As a result of the honeymoon effect, Putin's approval rating was 84% in January 2000. The Moscow theater hostage crisis (also known as the Nord-Ost siege) also resulted in a short-term increase in Putin's support in 2002. The next time the President's popularity was significantly higher than 80%

¹² Press Freedom Index 2014. <http://rsf.org/index2014/en-index2014.php>

occurred in 2003 due to the confrontation with the US over Iraq. Although in this case the conflict was diplomatic, not armed, the image of an external enemy was successfully formed, which resulted in an increase in support for the national leader. Later, an increase in Putin's popularity occurred against the background of the conflict with Georgia in 2008. Thus, the rally-around-the-flag effect has been observed in Russia after acts of terrorism and armed conflicts.

However, President Putin's rating was closely linked not only with international crises but also with Russia's economic situation. This effect was significant after the president's assumption of office in 2000 and before the start of mass protests in 2011-2012. It was assumed that Putin's decreasing level of support during this period, when a deterioration of the economic situation was not observed, would be short-lived and the economy would remain a significant factor [Treisman, 2014]. Additionally, national turmoil, nationalism and anti-Americanism would not significantly affect Putin's popularity. However, this forecast was inaccurate. The most significant and steady increase in Putin's approval rating was recorded after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. This effect persists despite the economic sanctions and the food embargo, the ruble's devaluation and the deterioration of relations with many countries (including Turkey at the end of 2015). Accordingly, the economic situation has ceased to be decisive in determining the national leader's approval rating.

Figure 1



However, this situation was not fully unexpected. Researchers note that the rally-around-the-flag effect against the background of a crisis can distract attention from economic problems

¹³ Independent Russian Research Center. URL: <http://www.levada.ru/indikatory/odobrenie-organov-vlasti/>

[Tir, Singh, 2013]. The effect's stability is more surprising. Generally, the rally effect is maintained for a relatively short period. According to estimates, the president's popularity typically returns to the original level within 6 months [Norrander, Wilcox, 1993]. Other researchers have noted that the decrease in popularity after the rally event is 5-6% per month on average [Mueller, 1970] (however, considering the scope of the effect, these estimates are similar). In Russia, Putin's approval rating has been above 80% for two years. In part, this all-time high stability of the rally effect can be explained by Russian cultural characteristics. Researchers have noted that the increase in the national leader's rating after a tragedy lasts longer in certain countries than in others [Dinesen, Jæger, 2013]. However, Russian cultural characteristics cannot fully explain such large differences in rally-effect longevity compared with other countries. Typically, the cultural factor can explain differences of a few months but not a year and a half.

Another possible explanation for Putin's unusually stable popularity is that several rally events have affected the president's approval rating. Thus, initially, the consolidation of society occurred against the background of the annexation of Crimea, followed by a rally effect fueled by the economic sanctions, the imposed food embargo, the destruction of sanctioned products during live broadcasts, the conflict with Turkey, and so on. Thus, we have been observing a series of conflicts that could generate rally effects. However, the question arises: "Why aren't people disappointed in the government, which is unable to solve the problem but only provokes more conflict?" Studies on terrorist attacks reveal that repeated attacks typically result in a decrease in the popularity of the authorities rather than additional increases [Chowanietz, 2011]. Thus, this explanation is also questionable. Therefore, we propose another interpretation of the stability of rally effect: the media coverage of the problems and conflicts in contemporary Russia.

4.2. Discussion of economic sanctions: Their intensity and related topics

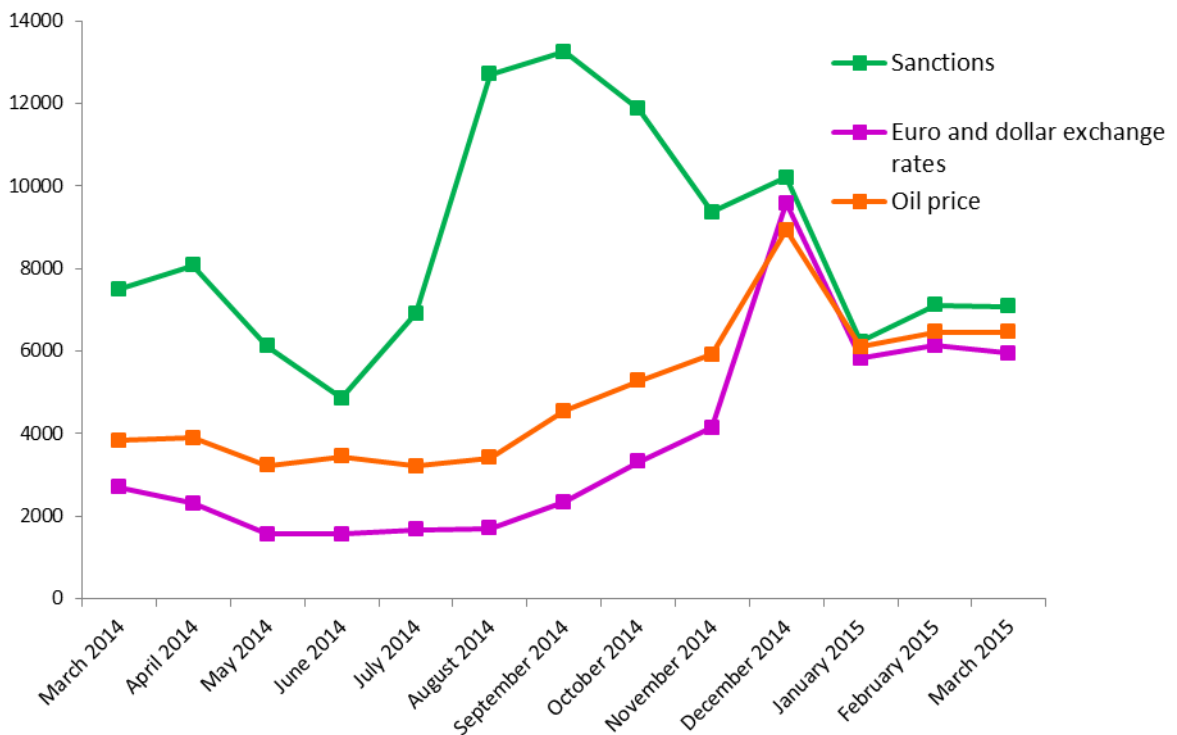
The debate regarding the economic sanctions originated immediately after the publication of the first sanctions list in March 2014. However, the issue only began to attract widespread attention in August-September 2014, when in response to the actions of the US and the EU the Russian food embargo was introduced (Figure 2). This decision by the Russian government limited the import of products from the countries that joined in the sanctions. Thus, during that autumn, the issue remained prominent in the information agenda for several reasons. First, this period was the most difficult for businesses because of the need to adapt to the new conditions. As an interest group, businesspeople can be divided into two opposing teams. One team (primarily food businesses that operate in the domestic market) benefited from the food embargo. The other (importers) suffered significant losses. However, each of the parties actively

participated in the public debate, seeking to protect and promote its interests. In addition, the food embargo provided the authorities a favorable opportunity to demonstrate their attention to the needs of domestic manufacturers. If economic sanctions could be perceived as an indicator of government weakness, the response from the Russian side had to demonstrate a willingness to confront the "external enemies". Accordingly, the representatives of this interest group have also been interested in participating in the media debate.

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

Figure 2

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



However, by the end of the year, the intensity of the debate on the economic sanctions began to decrease amid increasing interest in the ruble exchange rate and oil prices. Because media "throughput" is limited [Hilgartner, Bosk, 1988], to a certain extent, more pressing economic issues replaced this topic in the newspapers. However, in several cases, different economic problems did not compete. Instead, they formed "bunches" that attracted increasing

attention to each of the bunch's components [Hall et al., 1978]. In this regard, it is logical to analyze not only the articles on economic sanctions but also the articles on topics related to such articles.

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

Table 1

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

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

Note: Calculated using the Integrum database.

However, subsequently, the percentage of articles on the sanctions that also referred to the accession of Crimea began to decrease and by November 2014 did not exceed 12%. Simultaneously, the number of articles that referred to the ruble exchange-rate fluctuations and changes in oil prices increased. Thus, the discussion began to focus more on the implications of the sanctions, and media attention on the reasons for imposing the measures decreased. The discourse of "why?" was replaced by the discourse of "what now?" The sanctions had become a familiar situation, and the public was no longer interested in the reasons for them. Questions regarding the consequences of the deterioration of relations with Western countries and ways to

adapt to the new conditions became more relevant for Russians than information about reasons for sanctions implementation.

As is well known, the effectiveness of economic sanctions is low. In few cases have sanctions resulted in changes in the sanctioned country's policies [Pape, 1997]. It is logical to assume that one reason for this effect is the shift in the public debate from an analysis of the causes of the sanctions to a discussion on how to adapt to the sanctions. As researchers note, media freedom decreases in a country on which economic sanctions have been imposed [Peksen, 2010]. Therefore, in this case, we can expect the public debate to be influenced by external actors who seek to create a certain image of the problems [Dreier, 1982; Koltsova, 2000].

Thus, we observe that the media gradually ceased to mention the causes of the economic sanctions against Russia. Accordingly, these measures began to be perceived more as a hostile act by individual countries than as a result of Russian foreign policy. In this situation, a clear division between "us" (as a country against which hostilities were committed) and "them" (the aggressor country) develops. The media rhetoric significantly changes and encourages citizens to unite to oppose the temporary difficulties caused by the aggressive acts of certain countries. However, it was also noted that in the long term, sanctions should result in the development of domestic producers and import substitution. Such rhetoric contributes to the rally-around-the-flag effect.

4.3. *Deproblematization strategies*

Even if the losses caused by economic sanctions are assessed as significant,¹⁴ unsympathetic counterrhetoric [Ibarra, Kitsuse, 2003] prevails in the public discourse (Table 2). That is, generally, the media stress that the situation is not a problem. Thus, immediately after the implementation of the first sanctions package, the *antipatterning strategy* gained popularity. This strategy drew attention to the fact that the measures had not significantly damaged the Russian economy or its financial markets. Thus, the economic sanctions appeared to the newspaper reader as a series of separate negative episodes primarily related to officials and legal entities.

Generally, the popularity of this strategy during the initial period of the sanctions can be explained by the details of the issue's development. In fact, during the first stage, the sanctions affected the country's image more than its economy. Subsequently, the first package of sanctions against Russian companies (defense and raw materials) was adopted in July 2014. Until that moment, the sanctions only restricted entry to certain countries for individual Russian citizens. Thus, the sanctions did not directly influence the economy. However, an indirect impact of the

¹⁴ For example, «Putin praised the losses from the sanctions of \$ 160 billion» // Forbes, 27.04.2015. Access: <http://www.forbes.ru/news/287237-putin-otsenil-poteri-ot-sanktsii-v-160-mlrd>

first sanctions list on the business climate occurred because of Russia's decreasing attractiveness as a business partner. However, the media wrote little about the problem in these terms.

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

Table 2

Matrix of counterrhetoric strategies used in the media discussion regarding economic sanctions (according to Ibarra and Kitsuse's classification)

<i>Sympathetic counterrhetoric</i>	<i>Unsympathetic counterrhetoric</i>
<p><u>Naturalizing</u> "Of course, sanctions are unpleasant for every country except perhaps the US. However, at the same time, in some sectors, they are essential to us. In the agricultural sector for sure. <...> It is clear that it is easier to accept a rollback and to import Moroccan apples than to grow your own. However, we are obliged to provide ourselves with agricultural products! And in this regard, the sanctions are necessary for us to shake ourselves and wake up." [AiF, 03/12/2014]</p>	<p><u>Telling anecdote</u> "Twenty-five years ago, the US imposed sanctions against China because they condemned the crackdown in Tiananmen Square. The sanctions were very similar to those that are now operating against Russia. <...> So what? Now, the economy of the West has greatly weakened, but China is the second-largest economy in the world, and the United States is China's debtor. In fact, the sanctions are a chance for the Russians to make the country rich and cease to look back at the US." [AiF, 05/11/2014]</p>
<p><u>Tactical criticism</u> "The British foreign secretary vividly described for the newspaper "Daily Telegraph", whose sanctions will be applied to Moscow in response to her desire to restore historical justice and <u>to avoid bloodshed in Crimea.</u>" [Rossiyskaya Gazeta, 24/03/2014]</p>	<p><u>Antipatterning</u> "In 2008 and now, the sanctions of Washington were more symbolic. What has Russia (the country, rather than a number of officials, businessmen and banks) really lost this time?" [AiF, 03/26/2014]</p>
	<p><u>Counterrhetoric of insincerity</u> "Banks and oil companies form a queue for government support as if they have suffered from the sanctions." [AiF, 05/11/2014] "A special role in this war (of sanctions) will be played by the "natsional-predateli" (national traitors), who under the guise of fighting for the purity of Russian corporate companies will try to undermine the position of the flagships of the national economy." [Rossiyskaya Gazeta, 04/07/2014]</p>
	<p><u>Counterrhetoric of hysteria</u> "Sanctions against individuals who are not related to Ukraine but were mentioned in the delirious essays of Nemtsov and Navalny (Do you remember these former politicians?) are completely inadequate." [Rossiyskaya Gazeta, 26/03/2014]</p>

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

In unison with the optimistic reference to the experience of other countries, representatives of the Russian regions noted increasing opportunities to develop domestic producers following the restriction of competition that resulted from the Russian food embargo. Interestingly, several years ago, free competition connected with Russia's accession to the WTO was described in the media as the way to develop the Russian economy [Barsukova, Korobkova, 2014]. However, later, a switch occurred in the public debate, and protectionism began to be perceived as the best condition for the development of domestic production rather than free-trade policies. However, the high assessment of the importance of domestic production remained constant. "Importozameshenie" (import substitution) became a magical incantation that not only evoked the view that the sanctions were a "non-problem" but also the desirability of the current form of relations with Western countries (particularly the food embargo).

Another group of unsympathetic strategies is not limited to a discussion of the different measures and the precedents of their application. These strategies describe the characteristics of the public debate's participants in contrast to previously described strategies that explained why the sanctions should not harm the economy. Two other strategies, which will be described in the following, emphasize the reasons to distrust the interest groups that problematize the issue. Thus, the *counterrhetoric of insincerity* stresses that the groups who emphasize the negative impact of the sanctions on Russia are not concerned about the public good but about promoting their own interests.

In this case, business representatives can be accused of trying to lobby on behalf of their industries to obtain preferential treatment (e.g., state subsidies, loans) under the pretext of the losses incurred as a result of the sanctions. Thus, these entrepreneurs only pretended to suffer from complications in relations with Western countries. The representatives of other groups can also be accused of insincerity. Thus, politicians can use discussion on economic sanctions to attract popular support. Even members of the expert community, who should provide objective comments, may use the sanctions to pursue personal goals, for example, self-promotion [Koltsova, 2000]. Occasionally, this practice can influence the argumentation.

However, this strategy does not necessarily enable one to identify interest groups with transparent motives. For example, the media mentioned a group whose purpose according to an article in Rossiyskaya Gazeta was to "undermine the position of the flagships of the national (Russian) economy" (Table 2). In the public discussion, this group was labeled as "national traitors". Based on the articles in the press, the group's goals are not clear. It appears that the group's representatives seek only to destroy the existing order. We can assume that reality is not so simple. Most likely, the label "national traitors" hides political opponents of the government, who (as well as the government) may attempt to use the crisis to obtain public support [Hirt,

2015]. Labels are used for their emotional impact on the audience and to persuade readers that the alternative viewpoint is destructive and dangerous. This practice creates a basis for the rally-around-the-flag effect. As previously noted, this effect may occur in cases in which the media did not provide an alternative position or when the opposition's statements are discredited and discord with the general mood [Brody, 1991; Miller, 2010].

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

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

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

After consideration of the main strategies used in the press to deproblematize the economic sanctions, we can explain the prevalence in the discussion of unsympathetic

counterrhetoric by noting that in terms of propaganda this group of strategies was more effective. The public was insufficiently aware of the actual and potential consequences of the economic sanctions. Thus, it was possible to attempt to convince the public that negative effects of the sanctions were virtually absent. In contrast, sympathetic counterrhetoric is useful in those cases in which a problematic situation is obvious to the audience. In such circumstances, it is easier to convince the reader that the alternatives are less favorable than trying to make the reader believe that the difficulties that he or she senses do not exist.

4.4. Which media were most important to the rally-around-the-flag effect?

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

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

This distribution of roles among newspapers is not surprising. It is related to their editorial policies. Thus, considering that the government was most interested in deproblematizing the sanctions, it is logical that counterrhetoric strategies prevailed in the newspapers, which are a platform for statements by this interest group and to a certain extent loyal to the government. These newspapers play a significant role in the creation and stabilization of the rally-around-the-flag effect. *Novaya Gazeta* can be grouped among the

oppositional media outlets, which explains why this newspaper covered the difficulties connected with the sanctions. The ideological neutrality of *Kommersant* may be related to the characteristics of its readership. In part, the magazine is oriented toward the businessmen, who to a certain extent are aware of the consequences of the sanctions. Accordingly, *Kommersant* tried to maintain the discussion at the expert level and based primarily on rational arguments while avoiding emotional assessments and statements.

5. Conclusions

Currently, Russia faces a severe economic crisis (e.g., the devaluation of the ruble, increasing inflation and decreasing oil prices, which are important for the Russian economy). Additionally, Russia's relations with many countries have deteriorated since the annexation of Crimea. The national leader's popularity should decrease under such circumstances, particularly because Putin's approval rating has long been closely associated with assessments of the country's economic situation [Treisman, 2014]. However, the decrease in his approval rating has not occurred. On the contrary, the president's popularity has substantially increased. This phenomenon can be explained by the rally-around-the-flag effect, which causes the popularity of national leaders to increase during international conflicts and crises. Generally, the rally effect is the result of discussions in the media, which contribute to a consolidation of society as it confronts external threats. In the case of economic sanctions, strategies to deproblematize this issue played an important role in structuring the public understanding of the problem and creating the rally-around-the-flag effect.

The media discussion may also explain why the consolidation of Russian society around the national leader in a situation of external threat is more stable than usual. The deproblematization of the economic sanctions has several objectives. First, the counterrhetoric strategies convince readers that the consequences of the imposed restrictions are not serious and can be overcome by uniting the population and implementing import substitution policies. Previously, researchers have noted that the consolidation of society around the national leader as a result of sanctions is only possible when the sanctions do not cause catastrophic damage to the economy [Grauvogel, von Soest, 2014]. The Russian media that are loyal to the government tried to convince the population of precisely this absence of negative effects of the sanctions. The construction in the media of Vladimir Putin's image as a strong leader who can withstand external threats was no less important. Thus, the annexation of Crimea was described as a necessary measure related to the situation in Ukraine (i.e., mass protests, nationalists coming to power). The introduction of the Russian food embargo (anti-sanctions) was similarly explained.

These measures are described as a reaction to the aggressive actions of the West with the aim of protecting Russia against an expansion of the sanctions.

A historical incident offers another example of a leader profiting from the rally-around-the-flag effect. In June 1993, President Clinton ordered a missile strike on Iraqi intelligence headquarters in Baghdad. This act was a response to a plot to kill former US president George H. W. Bush during his visit to Kuwait [Edwards, Swenson, 1997]. Clinton's decision resulted in an increase in support for the national leader. In the public's view, President Clinton acquired the image of the hero who defends his country and its citizens against external enemies. Thus, the actions of the head of state, which are described in terms of defending the country against aggressors, can serve as a basis for the rally effect.

In addition, deproblematization strategies enable maintaining public attention on an issue without provoking public anxiety. Thus, considerable attention by citizens to an event is essential to the creation of the rally-around-the-flag effect. In addition, to sustain the effect, the public's attention must not weaken, and the public must not problematize the issue and associate it with incompetence by the authorities. All of these problems can be solved using counterrhetoric strategies; examples of which have been provided in the article.

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