
THE RUSSIAN ELITE 2016 РОССИЙСКАЯ ЭЛИТА 2016

PERSPECTIVES ON FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC POLICY

2016 Hamilton College Levitt Poll

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Sharon Werning Rivera, Associate Professor of Government
James Bryan '16
Brisa Camacho-Lovell '16
Carlos Fineman '17
Nora Klemmer '17
Emma Raynor '18

Questions and comments can be sent to Prof. Sharon Rivera at srivera@hamilton.edu.
Media inquiries can be directed to Vige Barrie at ebarrie@hamilton.edu.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Post-Soviet Russia's assertiveness in international affairs has reached new heights. Examples abound—its annexation of Crimea in March 2014, frequent incursions into NATO airspace, imposition of counter-sanctions on Western agricultural products, and military intervention in the Syrian civil war, among others. The relationship between Russia and the U.S. is now more confrontational than at any point since Mikhail Gorbachev assumed the leadership of the Soviet Union in 1985.

Survey data on whether Russian elites support the more muscular foreign policy that has been pursued during Vladimir Putin's third presidential term (2012-present) have been largely unavailable—until now. As one of the few surveys of Russian elites—and perhaps the only publicly available elite survey—conducted since Putin returned to the presidency in 2012, the 2016 Hamilton College Levitt Poll, entitled “The Russian Elite 2016,” represents a unique resource for the journalistic, policy, and academic communities. It is based on 243 face-to-face interviews conducted in February and March 2016 with high-ranking individuals working in Russia's federal bureaucracy, parliament, military and security agencies, private businesses, state-owned enterprises, academic research institutes, and media outlets.

Among other findings, our new survey shows that perceptions of the US as a threat to Russia's national security among Russian elites are the highest since 1993. In addition, although three previous survey waves showed an increasing percentage of elites claiming that Russia's national interests should be limited to its existing territory, the results in 2016 depart markedly from these results. Elites also respond that the Russian government is intervening in Syria to prevent the spread of terrorism to Russia, and that the US was primarily to blame for the 2013-14 crisis in Ukraine. Finally, elites state that the chances of someone other than Putin and the Kremlin-backed political party, United Russia, coming to power in the next ten years are unlikely.

The analysis of the survey results presented in this report was conducted by Hamilton students James Bryan '16, Brisa Camacho-Lovell '16, Carlos Fineman '17, Nora Klemmer '17, and Emma Raynor '18 under the supervision of Associate Professor of Government Sharon Werning Rivera.

The survey itself was directed by Sharon Werning Rivera of Hamilton College (Principal Investigator), William Zimmerman of the University of Michigan (Co-Principal Investigator), and Eduard Ponarin of the National Research University Higher School of Economics in St. Petersburg (Co-Principal Investigator). Funding for the survey was provided by the Arthur Levitt Public Affairs Center at Hamilton College.

2. PUTIN AND THE FUTURE

Key Finding: Russian elites predict that Vladimir Putin will be re-elected to the presidency for a fourth term.

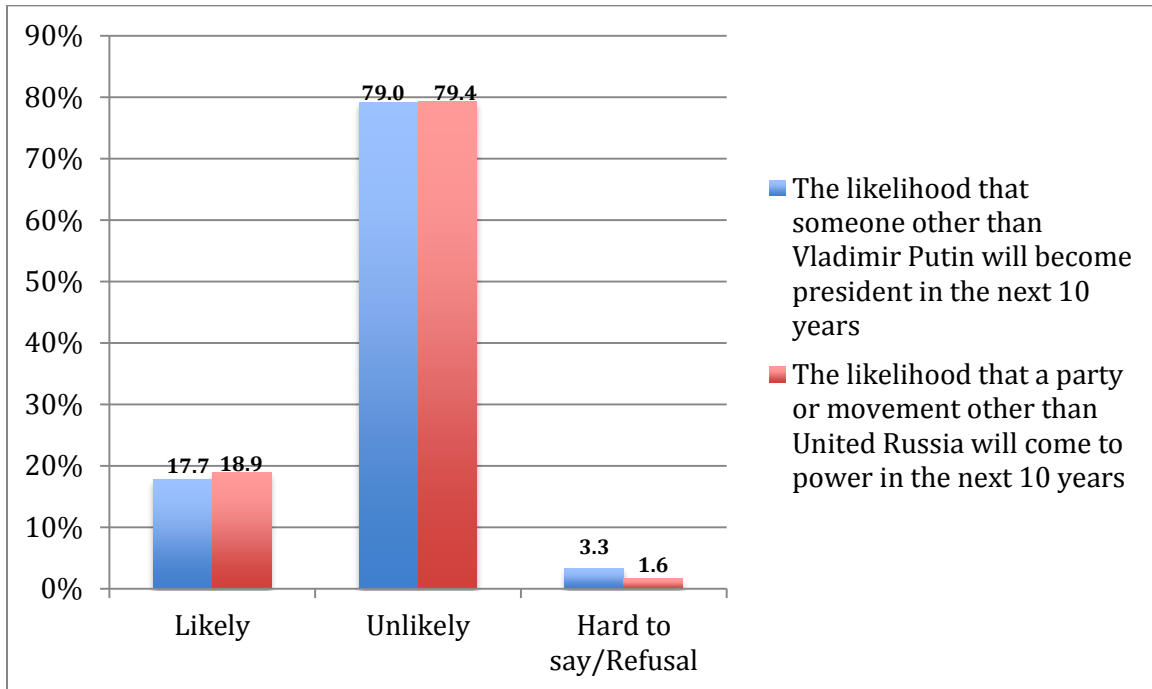
Vladimir Putin served as President of Russia from 2000 to 2008 and won a third presidential term in 2012. Although his approval ratings dropped during the protest movements of 2011-12, "...after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, those ratings soared to nearly 90% and have not come back to earth since."¹

Our data suggest that Russian elites do not see a realistic alternative to Putin emerging within the next ten years. Respondents were asked the following question: "In your opinion, which of the following situations is very likely, quite likely, unlikely, or completely unlikely in the next 10 years?...A party or movement other than United Russia will come to power...Someone other than Vladimir Putin will become president."

As Figure 2.1 shows, close to 80% (79.1%) of respondents replied that it was unlikely or completely unlikely that someone other than Putin would become president in the next decade. Given that the next presidential election is scheduled for 2018, this means that they envision him winning a fourth presidential term. The position of the Kremlin-backed political party, United Russia, is also projected to be robust over the foreseeable future. When queried about the likelihood of a party or movement other than United Russia coming to power in the next ten years, 79.4% of respondents said that it was either unlikely or completely unlikely.

¹ "Vladimir Putin's Unshakeable Popularity." *The Economist*. 4 February 2016.

Figure 2.1
Expectations Regarding Vladimir Putin and United Russia



Source: 2016 Hamilton College Levitt Poll – “The Russian Elite 2016.”

Note: The graph shows the combined percentages of responses for “very likely” and “quite likely” as well as for “unlikely” and “completely unlikely.”

Question wording: “In your opinion, which of the following situations is very likely, quite likely, unlikely, or completely unlikely in the next 10 years?... A party or movement other than United Russia will come to power... Someone other than Vladimir Putin will become president.”

The dominance of United Russia (UR) is also evident in the respondent’s reported party affiliations, displayed in Table 2.1. It is noteworthy that of the 243 Russian elites surveyed, only 42.0% responded that they were members of a certain party, while 58.0% responded that they did not belong to a political party or movement. Of the 42.0% who did align themselves with a party, the vast majority of them reported being a member of UR (for a total of 35.4% of all elites). Those who reported no party affiliation were asked a follow-up question concerning which party or movement best reflected their views. Again, of the 58.0% who did *not* align themselves with a party, UR was the party selected most often (representing 22.2% of the total sample). If UR members and sympathizers are combined, they constitute almost three-fifths (57.6%) of the elite sample. Although there is a sizeable segment of elites (25.1%) who report identifying with no party, no other party is mentioned with anything near the frequency of United Russia.

Table 2.1
Russian Elites' Party Affiliations

Political Party/Movement	Of which political party are you a member?	Which political party or movement best reflects your views?
United Russia	35.4% (86)	22.2% (54)
A Just Russia	1.2% (3)	1.6% (4)
Communist Party of the RF	2.5% (6)	0.8% (2)
LDPR	1.6% (4)	3.7% (9)
Young Russia	-	1.2% (3)
Patriots of Russia	0.4% (1)	0.8% (2)
Yabloko	0.4% (1)	1.2% (3)
Parnas	-	0.8% (2)
Party of Peace and Unity	-	0.4% (1)
Hard to Say/Refusal	0.4% (1)	25.1% (61)
Total % (n)	42% (102)	58% (141)

Source: 2016 Hamilton College Levitt Poll – “The Russian Elite 2016.”

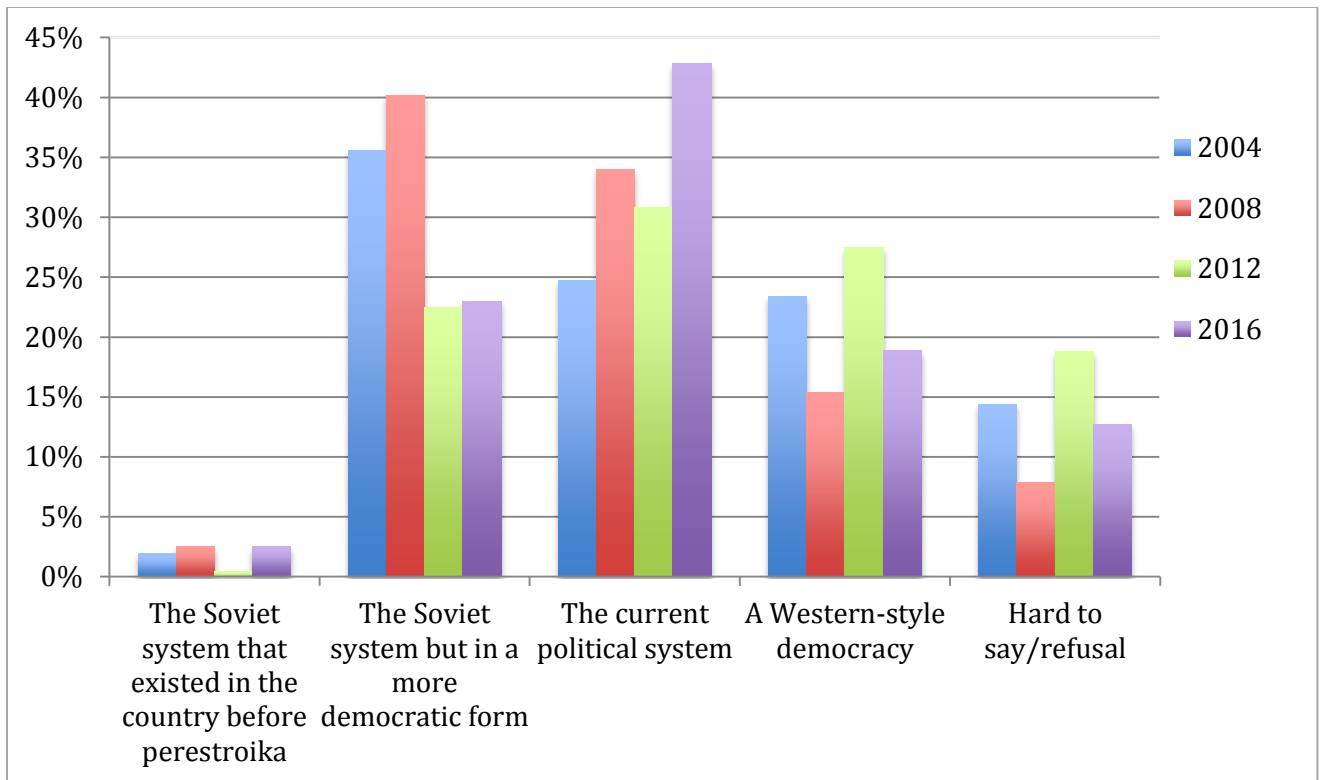
Note: The figures represent the percentage of total respondents.

Question wording: “Are you a member of any political party or movement? 1. Yes, 2. No; [If yes] Of which party are you a member?; [If no] Which party or movement best reflects your views?” The latter two are open-ended questions.

Key Finding: A preference for “the current political system” has been increasing over time.

In another question, respondents were asked, “Which political system, in your opinion, fits Russia best?,” followed by a list of four options. Since 2004, the percentage answering “Russia’s current political system” has been on the rise (see Figure 2.2). In both 2004 and 2008, the response selected most often was “the Soviet system but in a more democratic form,” with 35.6% and 40.2% of respondents, respectively, choosing this option. In 2012, for the first time, “the current political system” was selected by a plurality of elites (30.8%). In 2016, this percentage increased even more—to 42.8% of elites—while the preference for a more democratic Soviet system remained largely where it was in 2012, favored by less than one-quarter of the sample.

Figure 2.2
Elites' Preferred Political System



Sources: 2016 Hamilton College Levitt Poll – “The Russian Elite 2016”; “Survey of Russian Elites: 1993-2012,” ICPSR, University of Michigan.

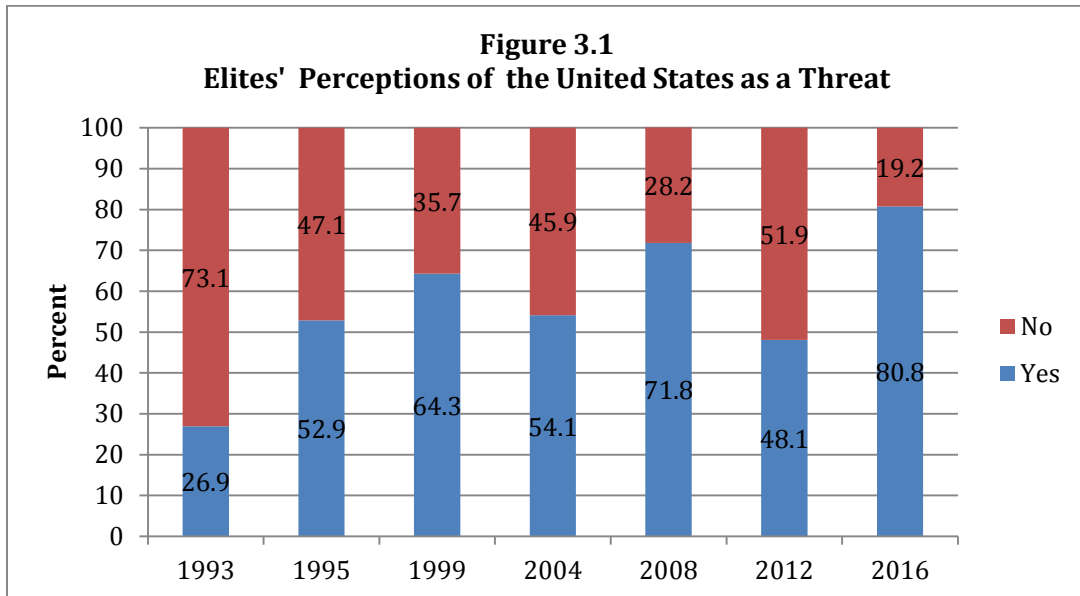
Question wording: “Which political system, in your opinion, fits Russia best? 1. The Soviet system that existed in the country before *perestroika*, 2. The Soviet system but in a more democratic form, 3. The current political system, 4. A Western-style democracy, 5. Hard to Say, 6. Refusal”

Taken together, these data indicate that: elites expect the dominance of Putin and United Russia to continue over the next decade; there is no alternative political party that rivals United Russia in party membership among Russian elites; and more and more elites are choosing “the current political system” as the political system that fits Russia best, at least when compared to three alternatives (an unreconstructed Soviet system, a more democratic Soviet system, and a Western-style democracy).

3. THREAT PERCEPTIONS

Key Finding: Perceptions of the United States as a threat are the highest since 1993.

Since the first survey in this series was launched in 1993, respondents have been asked whether they regard the United States as a threat to Russian security. The data show a steady rise over time in Russian elites stating that the United States is a threat; in 2016, those threat perceptions reached new heights.



Sources: 2016 Hamilton College Levitt Poll—“The Russian Elite 2016”; “Survey of Russian Elites: 1993-2012,” ICPSR, University of Michigan.

Note: “Don’t know” responses and refusals are excluded from the analysis.

Question wording: “Do you think that the USA represents a threat to Russia’s national security?”

Figure 3.1 displays these findings. The blue bars represent the percentage of respondents who agree that the United States poses a threat to Russia, while the red bars represent respondents who do not regard the United States as a threat.

In 1993, threat perceptions were at an all-time low; 73.1% of the sample responded that the US did *not* pose a threat to the security of Russia. Over the course of the next four surveys, the United States was perceived as posing an ever-greater threat to Russia. A noticeable decline was observed in 2012, after Obama’s “reset” of US-Russian relations, when for the first time since 1993, less than 50% of elites (48.1%) viewed the United States as threatening. By 2016, this downward dip had reversed course: 80.8% of Russian elites now express agreement with the statement that the United States is a threat to Russian national security.

Key Finding: More elites regard the inability to solve domestic problems as the “utmost threat” to Russia’s security than any other threat, including the growth of the US military.

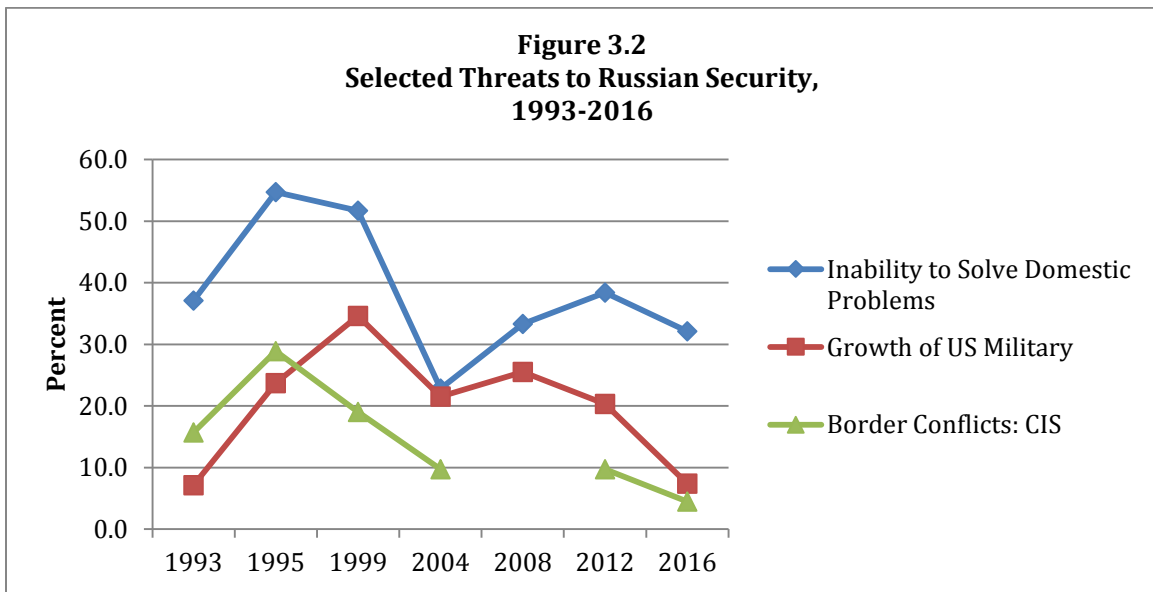
Over the years, respondents have been asked about the gravity of many different types of threats to Russian security. They were asked to rate each threat on a five-point scale, where 1 denotes the absence of threat and 5 the utmost threat. In this analysis, we identify three threats that Russian elites have been asked to rate since the first survey in 1993: the inability of the Russian government to solve domestic problems, the growth of the US military, and the possibility of border conflicts with other states in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

Figure 3.2 displays the results. In 2016, the inability of the Russian government to solve domestic problems received a five rating by 32.1% of respondents, which is more than any other threat. This result has been fairly consistent over time: although concern over internal problems reached a peak in the turbulent mid-1990s—when 54.7% of elites in 1995 assessed this threat as the “utmost”—it regularly receives more five ratings than any other single threat. (The year 2004 represents a partial exception; however, that threat was virtually tied for the highest.)

In contrast, elites consistently rate the growth of US military power as less threatening than Russia’s inability to solve its domestic problems. In 1993, only 7.1% of respondents rated the growth of US military might as a five. This perceived danger reached its peak in 1999, when 34.6% of elites indicated that the growth of America’s military might was the “utmost threat” to Russian security. By 2016, however, only 7.4% agreed with this point of view.

Similarly, threats to Russian security posed by conflicts with the states of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) that border Russia have become less salient over time. (CIS states bordering Russia are Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, and Belarus.) This threat reached a peak in 1995 with 28.9% of respondents rating border conflicts with the CIS as a five. Since 1995, threat perceptions in this area have declined and reached an all-time low in 2016, with only 4.5% of Russian elites stating that a border conflict with a CIS state was the “utmost threat” to Russia’s security. It is interesting to note that these results were obtained against the backdrop of the continuing military conflict between Russia and Ukraine over eastern Ukraine, as well as Ukraine’s continued claims to ownership of the Crimean peninsula. Russia’s military superiority over Ukraine, combined with Russia’s denial of official military involvement in eastern Ukraine, might explain why elites may not view conflict in this region as threatening to the security of Russia.²

² Although Russian elites rate terrorism as a high security threat, questions about terrorism only appear beginning in the 2004 survey. Since our analysis focuses on historical trends, we exclude it from Figure 3.2.



Sources: 2016 Hamilton College Levitt Poll—“The Russian Elite 2016”; “Survey of Russian Elites: 1993-2012,” ICPSR, University of Michigan.

Note: Results show percentage of respondents rating this threat as a 5, meaning “the utmost threat” to Russian security. “Don’t know” responses and refusals are excluded from the analysis. The question about “Border conflicts between Russia and countries of the CIS” was not asked in 2008.

Question wording: “Which on the list below are most likely to represent the utmost threat to the security of Russia and which do not constitute any threat at all? Evaluate the level of threat, using a five-point scale, where 1 denotes the absence of threat and 5 the utmost threat.

1. The growth of America’s military might vis-à-vis Russia’s
2. The inability of Russia to resolve its internal problems
3. Terrorism
4. Border conflicts between Russia and countries of the CIS
5. Growth of ethnic tensions in Russia between Russians and other nationalities
6. A ‘color’ revolution
7. An information war against Russia conducted by the West”

Finally, Table 3.1 displays *all* the threats evaluated by the respondents in 2016, along with the percentage of respondents who rated the threat a five (i.e., the “utmost threat”) on a five-point scale. Again, the inability to solve domestic problems is at the top of the list (with 32.1%).³

Table 3.1 Threats Perceived as the “Utmost” in 2016 % (n)						
Inability to Solve Domestic Problems	Terrorism	Growth of US Military	Border Conflicts: CIS	Ethnic Tensions	Information War Conducted by the West	“Color” Revolution
32.1% (78)	22.2% (54)	7.4% (18)	4.5% (11)	3.3% (8)	2.5% (6)	2.2% (5)

Sources: 2016 Hamilton College Levitt Poll—“The Russian Elite 2016”; “Survey of Russian Elites: 1993-2012,” ICPSR, University of Michigan.

Note: Results show percentage of respondents rating this threat as a 5, meaning “the utmost threat” to Russian security. “Don’t know” responses and refusals are excluded from the analysis.

Question wording: “Which on the list below are most likely to represent the utmost threat to the security of Russia and which do not constitute any threat at all? Evaluate the level of threat, using a five-point scale, where 1 denotes the absence of threat and 5 the utmost threat.

1. The growth of America’s military might vis-à-vis Russia’s
2. The inability of Russia to resolve its internal problems
3. Terrorism
4. Border conflicts between Russia and countries of the CIS
5. Growth of ethnic tensions in Russia between Russians and other nationalities
6. A ‘color’ revolution
7. An information war against Russia conducted by the West”

Terrorism is ranked second on the list, with 22.2% in our sample rating it as a five. Concerns about a “color” revolution and an information war conducted by the West are expressed frequently by Putin and other Kremlin officials. Interestingly, however, when Russian elites are asked about these potential threats, responses from the broader elite do not reflect this concern. In 2016, a “color” revolution was rated as the “utmost threat” by only 2.2% of Russian elites. An information war conducted by the West was rated as a five by only 2.5% of respondents.

³ Putin himself stresses the imperative of solving Russia’s domestic problems. During his annual call-in show held on April 14, first-grader Alina Akhmatova asked Putin whether a woman could ever become president of Russia. “Papa says,” she continued, “that only Putin is able to deal with (*spravit’sia*) America.” Putin replied, “Dear Alina, we need to think not about how to deal with America; we need to think about how to deal with our internal issues and problems.” *Vesti v subbotu*, 16 April 2016.

4. US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

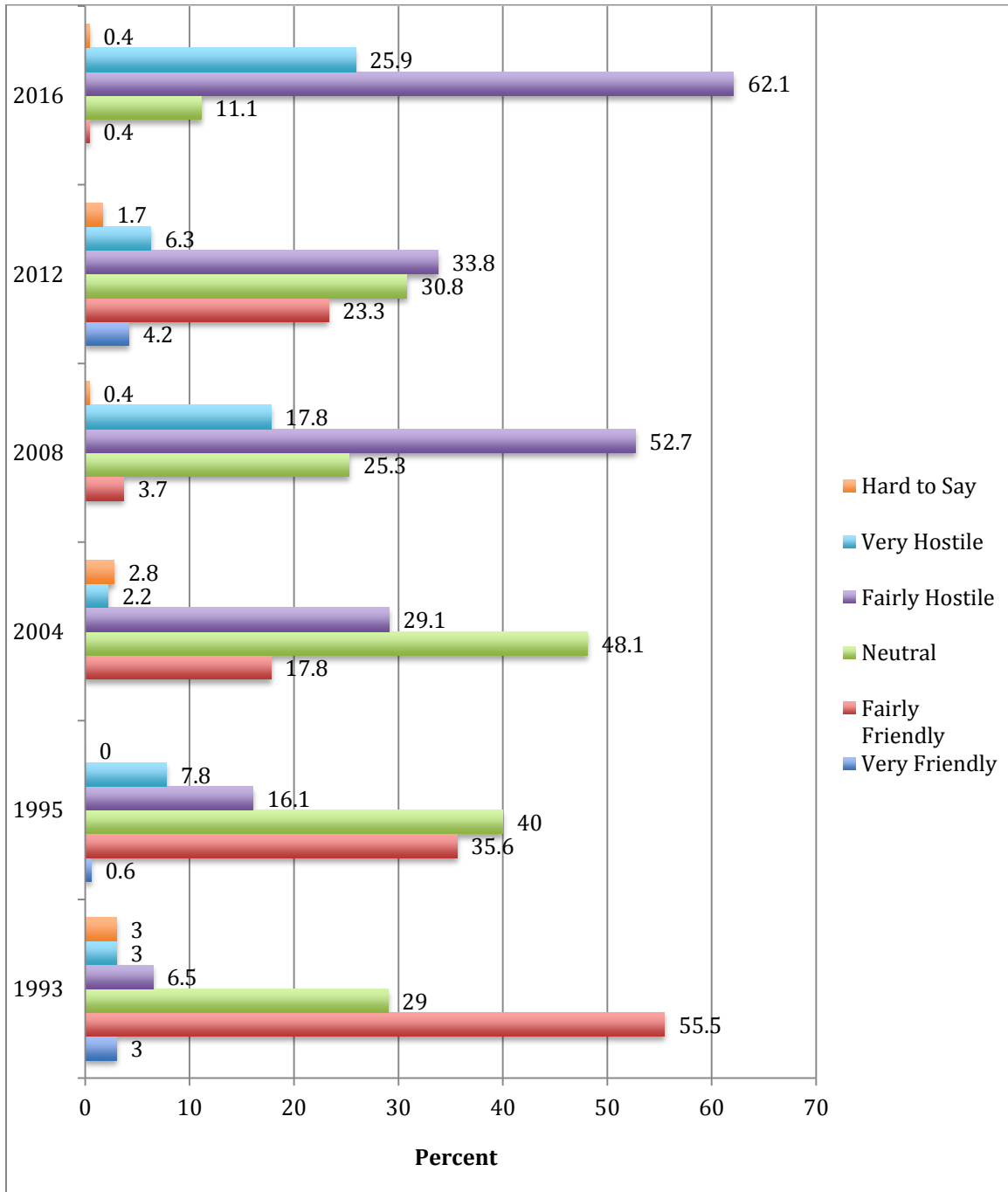
Key Finding: The perceived hostility of the US is at an all-time high.

As one means of assessing their attitudes toward the US, we evaluated elites' responses over time to a question regarding how hostile they believe the US is toward Russia. The data displayed in Figure 4.1 reveal that 88.0% of respondents in 2016 answered that the US is either “fairly” or “very” hostile to Russia. This is the highest percentage since the first survey was conducted in 1993,⁴ when 9.5% of the sample rated the US as hostile. It even surpasses a previous high point of concern that appeared in 2008 – the year of the Russian-Georgian war – when 70.5% of respondents agreed that the US was either “fairly” or “very” hostile to Russia.

Although few elites have ever replied that the US is “very” friendly, the percentage selecting “fairly” friendly has followed a steep downward trajectory over the years (with a one-time deviation upward in 2012). The high point was in the initial post-communist period when 55.5% of elites in 1993 selected this option. The low point emerged this year—in the 2016 data—with only 0.4% of respondents indicating that the US is “fairly” friendly to Russia.

⁴ Data from the 1999 survey were not included in this analysis.

Figure 4.1
Perceived Hostility of the US, 1993-2016



Sources: 2016 Hamilton College Levitt Poll – “The Russian Elite 2016”; “Survey of Russian Elites: 1993-2012,” ICPSR, University of Michigan.

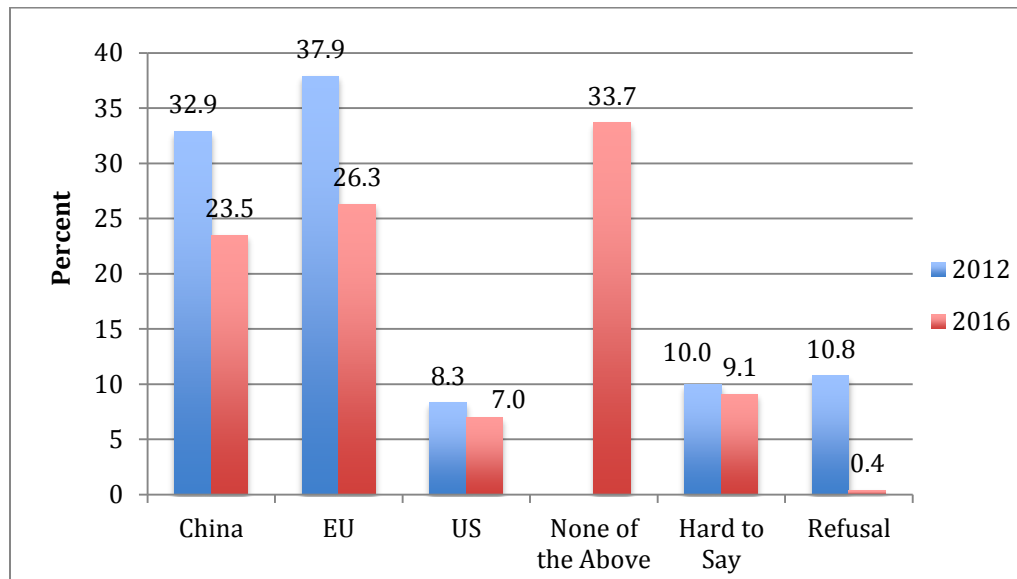
Note: Data from 1999 are not included in the figure.

Question wording: “For each country or international organization that I will name, please tell me how friendly or hostile, in your opinion, it is toward Russia today: very friendly, fairly friendly, neutral, fairly hostile, or very hostile? 1. China, 2. Ukraine, 3. US, 4. Estonia, 5. Poland, 6. Germany, 7. EU, 8. Japan, 9. Georgia, 10. UK?” (Results presented for the US only)

Key Finding: Less than 10% of elites would choose the US as a coalition partner.

Another survey question we used to evaluate attitudes toward the US is the following: “Russia, being one of the most powerful actors in international politics, develops relationships with all other actors in world politics. However, if you had to choose, with which of these would you prefer to form a coalition?” Options included China, the European Union (EU), and the US, and in the 2016 survey, “none of the above” (Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.2
Russia’s Potential Coalition Partners



Sources: 2016 Hamilton College Levitt Poll – “The Russian Elite 2016”; “Survey of Russian Elites: 1993-2012,” ICPSR, University of Michigan.

Note: In the 2012 survey, “None of the above” was not an option.

Question wording: “Russia, being one of the most powerful actors in international politics, develops relationships with all other actors in world politics. However, if you had to choose, with which of these would you prefer to form a coalition?” “1. China 2. EU 3. US 4. None of the Above 5. Hard to Say 6. Refusal.”

In the 2016 survey, 33.7% of those surveyed answered that none of the options would be a suitable coalition partner. This was followed by the EU (26.3%) and China (23.5%), which were chosen by 37.9% and 32.9%, respectively, in 2012. (These drops can be partially explained by the addition of the “none of the above” category in 2016.)

Responses reflecting the unsuitability of the US as a coalition partner, however, have barely budged. Only 8.3% preferred the US as a potential coalition partner in 2012, dropping to a mere 7.0% in 2016. Although anti-Western sentiment as a whole pervades the elite sector,⁵ anti-US feelings are the most pronounced. Even in the face of EU economic sanctions against Russia, over a quarter of Russian elites still selected Europe as the actor in international politics with which they would prefer to form a coalition.

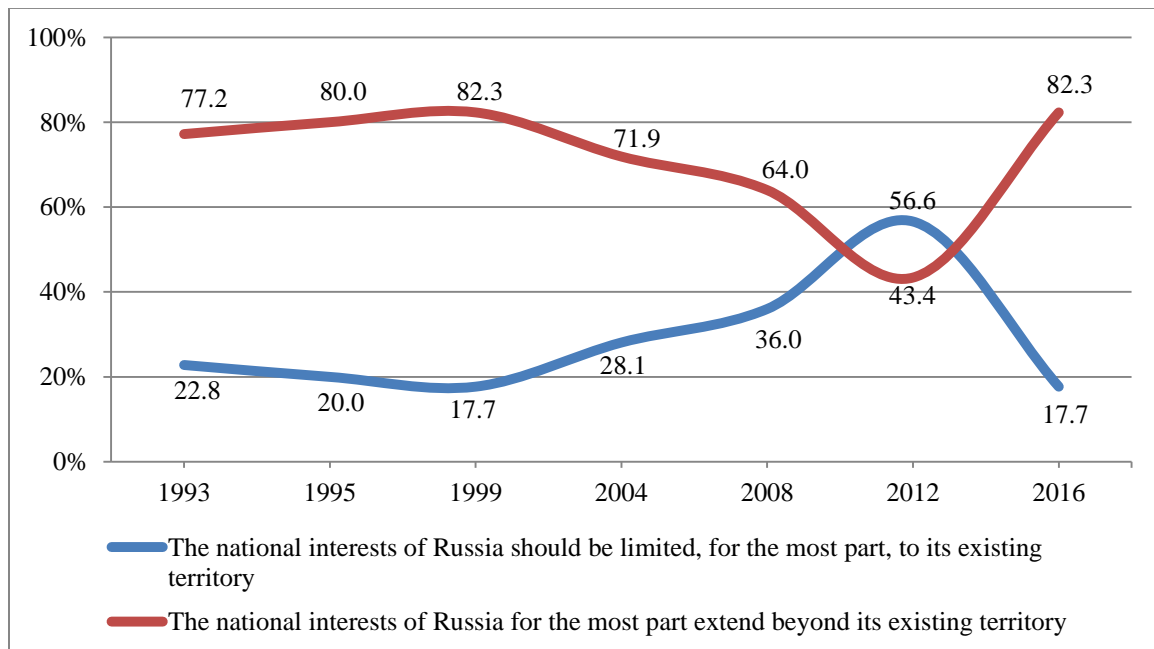
⁵ See the section entitled “Antizapadnye nastroeniia elit” [Anti-Western Elite Sentiments], in Denis Volkov, “Nastroeniia rossiiskikh elit posle Kryma” [Russian Elite Opinion after Crimea], Carnegie Moscow Center, 11 November 2015.

5. MILITARY ASSERTIVENESS

Key Finding: More elites state that Russia has expansive national interests than in previous years.

When asked whether the national interests of Russia should be limited to its existing territory or extend beyond its existing territory, the responses of Russian elites between 1999 and 2012 reveal increasing support for a more limited delineation of Russia’s national interests. The 2016 survey, however, shows a departure from results obtained in the last three survey waves.

Figure 5.1
Scope of Russia’s National Interests



Sources: 2016 Hamilton College Levitt Poll—“The Russian Elite 2016”; “Survey of Russian Elites: 1993-2012,” ICPSR, University of Michigan.

Note: “Don’t know” responses and refusals are excluded from the analysis.

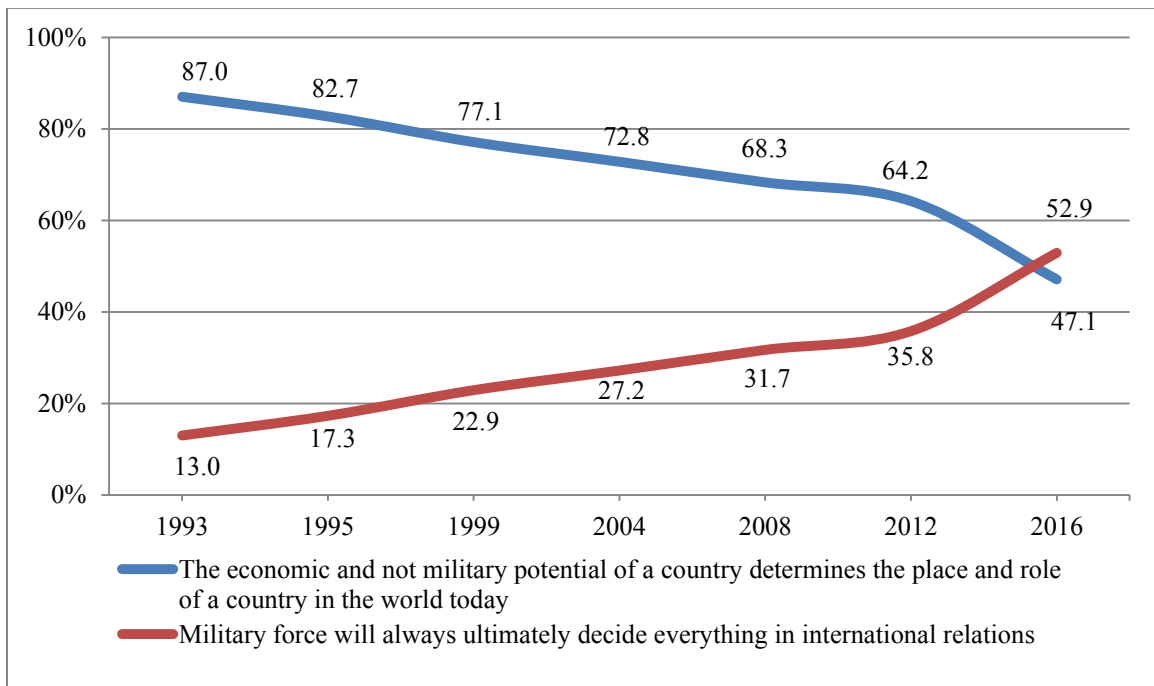
Question wording: “There are various opinions about the national interests of Russia. Which of the two assertions below are closer to your point of view? 1. The national interests of Russia should be limited, for the most part, to its existing territory; 2. The national interests of Russia for the most part extend beyond its existing territory.”

As Figure 5.1 reveals, in 1999, 82.3% of elites agreed that Russia's national interests for the most part extend beyond its existing territory. This percentage declined in 2004 (to 71.9%) and again in both 2008 and 2012. In fact, 2012 was the first year in which this viewpoint was expressed by a minority (43.4%) of Russian elites. Yet in 2016, this percentage returned to the high point previously reached in 1999: 82.3% of Russian elites agreed that Russia has expansive national interests.

Key Finding: For the first time since 1993, more elites say that a country’s military, and not economic, potential is decisive in international relations.

In all previous waves of this survey, a majority of Russian elites expressed agreement that the economic, and not military, potential of a country determines its place and role in the world. Although since 1993, confidence in the potential of military force has grown steadily, this is the first time that a *majority* of elites (52.9%) has agreed with the statement that “military force will always ultimately decide everything in international relations” (see Figure 5.2).

What Determines a State’s Role in the World?



Sources: 2016 Hamilton College Levitt Poll—“The Russian Elite 2016”; “Survey of Russian Elites: 1993-2012,” ICPSR, University of Michigan.

Note: “Don’t know” responses and refusals are excluded from the analysis.

Question wording: “I will read you two statements about the role of military force in international relations. Which of these is closer to your opinion? 1. Military force will always ultimately decide everything in international relations; 2. The economic and not military potential of a country determines the place and role of a country in the world today.”

By examining this question through a generational lens, we found that only among respondents born in 1971 or later did a majority agree that a country’s economic potential determines its role in international relations (see Table 5.1). Specifically, slightly over half (52.6%) of respondents born in 1971 or later agreed that a country’s economic potential is the decisive factor, compared to 45.5% of those born between 1961 and 1970, 45.3% born between 1951 and 1960, and 23.1% of those born in 1950 or earlier. These results could be evidence of a younger generation of Russian elites that is less inclined to rely on military force.⁶

Table 5.1
What Determines a State’s Role in the World?
Generational Differences

Year of Birth	Military Force % (n)	Economic Potential % (n)
≤1950	76.9 (10)	23.1 (3)
1951-1960	52.8 (28)	45.3 (24)
1961-1970	54.5 (54)	45.5 (45)
≥1971	44.7 (34)	52.6 (40)

Source: 2016 Hamilton College Levitt Poll—“The Russian Elite 2016.”

Question wording: “I will read you two statements about the role of military force in international relations. Which of these is closer to your opinion? 1. Military force will always ultimately decide everything in international relations; 2. The economic and not military potential of a country determines the place and role of a country in the world today.”

⁶ Similar generational trends were noted in the 2012 data. See William Zimmerman et al., *Russian Elite—2020: Valdai Discussion Club Grantees Analytical Report* (Moscow, July 2013), p. 21.

6. UKRAINE AND SYRIA

Key Finding: Elites regard Russia's actions in Ukraine and Syria as justified.

The past few years have seen a rise in Russian aggression and interventionism, as embodied by Russia's annexation of Crimea in March of 2014 and its more recent military involvement in the Syrian conflict. This section examines Russian elites' attitudes toward the recent military operations in Crimea and Syria, primarily using survey questions developed by the Levada Center for its opinion polls of the Russian mass public.

The data reveal a consensus among elites that Russia has been largely justified in its actions in both Syria and Ukraine. Elites also express the view that the Syrian intervention is a matter of national security, rather than an action taken primarily to influence the internal affairs of a foreign state or distract the public from a troubled economy at home. Finally, three-quarters of elites state that US actions led to the 2013-14 crisis in Ukraine.

Ukraine

Russian elites overwhelmingly say that the annexation of Crimea did not violate international law. As is evident in Table 6.1, 88.4% of respondents state that Russia definitely or probably did not violate international law and post-war and post-Soviet international agreements when annexing Crimea, compared to only 10.7% who state that it probably or definitely did. It should be noted that the views expressed in our survey are largely in line with those of mass surveys conducted in Russia, which reveal similar support for the annexation of Crimea.⁷

Table 6.1
Was the Annexation of Crimea in Violation
of International Law?

Response	%
Definitely yes	3.3
Probably yes	7.4
Probably no	26.7
Definitely no	61.7
Hard to say/refusal	0.8

Source: 2016 Hamilton College Levitt Poll – “The Russian Elite 2016.”

Question wording: “Do you agree that in annexing Crimea, Russia violated post-war and post-Soviet international agreements and international law?”

⁷ "Ukraine." Levada Center. 17 December 2015. Available at: <http://www.levada.ru/eng/ukraine-5>.

According to Table 6.2, 75.7% of Russian elites say that the conflict in Ukraine was brought about by the United States attempting to foment another “color” revolution in Ukraine. In contrast, many fewer respondents state that the roots can be found in Ukraine itself—whether because the Ukrainian opposition organized armed protests (35.4%) or because regular Ukrainians desired an association agreement with the European Union (28.0%).

Table 6.2
What Led to the Conflict in Ukraine?
Selected Responses

Response	%
Attempts by the USA to foment another “color” revolution in Ukraine	75.7
The Ukrainian opposition, having resorted to armed methods of protests on the streets	35.4
The hopes of regular Ukrainians that association with the European Union would solve fundamental problems in the country	28.0

Source: 2016 Hamilton College Levitt Poll – “The Russian Elite 2016.”

Note: Respondents could select all responses that apply. Only the responses most relevant to this analysis are displayed.

Question wording: “In your opinion, what led to the crisis in Ukraine?”

1. Attempts by the USA to foment another ‘color’ revolution in Ukraine.
2. The corrupt regime of former Ukrainian president Yanukovich.
3. The hopes of regular Ukrainians that association with the European Union would solve fundamental problems in the country.
4. The persistent actions of the European Union to bring Ukraine into its sphere of influence.
5. The Ukrainian opposition, having resorted to armed methods of protest on the streets.
6. Attempts by Yanukovich to straddle Russia and the European Union.
7. Attempts by Russia to ‘buy’ Yanukovich’s loyalty.”

Syria

With regard to the Syrian conflict, elites respond that the international military intervention is justified on humanitarian grounds when asked to choose between the two options listed in Table 6.3. Sixty-three percent regard the operations as “a necessary step to stop the violence and human rights violations,” as opposed to only 27.6% who state that it is “an intervention in the internal affairs of the state.”

Table 6.3
Perspectives on the Syrian Conflict

Response	%
It's an intervention in the internal affairs of the state	27.6
It's a necessary step to stop the violence and human rights violations	63.0
Hard to say/refusal	9.5

Source: 2016 Hamilton College Levitt Poll – “The Russian Elite 2016.”

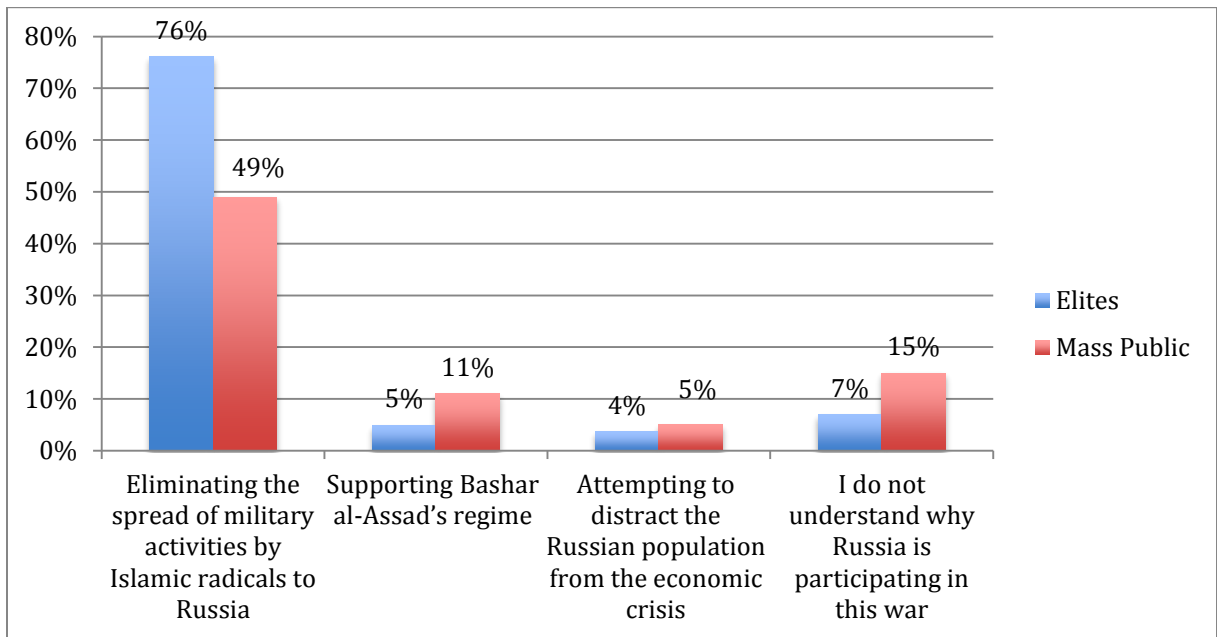
Question wording: “Which of the following statements are closest to your position on the international military operations in Syria?”

In addition, it can be seen in Figure 6.1 that 76% of Russian elites respond that their government is engaged in the Syrian conflict in order to neutralize and eliminate the spread of military activities by Islamic radicals and terrorists to Russia. By contrast, two views of Russia’s involvement in Syria that are commonly held in the West—i.e., that its primary goal is to support Bashar al-Assad against the Syrian opposition or to distract the Russian public from economic hardships at home—were selected by only 5% and 4% of the elite respondents, respectively.

When compared to the elite sample, the Russian mass public seems more tentative in its support of Russia’s military engagement in the Syrian civil war, as twice the number of mass respondents as elite respondents (i.e., 15% v. 7%) “do not understand why Russia is participating in this war.” However, a plurality of respondents (49%) still agree with Russian elites that the government’s goal is to stop the spread of violence by Islamic radicals and terrorists to Russia. Although this percentage is far lower than what is reflected in the elite sample (i.e., 76%), it is still higher than any other response.⁸

⁸ For more, see "Syria and the Plane Crash in Egypt." Levada Center. 23 November 2015. Available at: <http://www.levada.ru/eng/syria-plane-crash-egypt>.

Figure 6.1
Russian Government's Goals for Participating in the Syrian Conflict



Sources: 2016 Hamilton College Levitt Poll – “The Russian Elite 2016”; "Syria and the Plane Crash in Egypt." Levada Center. 23 November 2015. Available at: <http://www.levada.ru/eng/syria-plane-crash-egypt>.

Note: Respondents could select all responses that apply. Only four are displayed in the figure.

Question wording: “In your opinion, what are the Russian government’s goals for participating in the Syrian conflict?”

1. Attempting to neutralize and eliminate the spread of military activities by Islamic radicals and terrorists to Russia.
2. Protecting the government of Bashar al-Assad in order to prevent a series of US-inspired ‘color revolutions’ around the world.
3. Defending the economic interests of Russian companies in the Middle East.
4. Supporting Bashar al-Assad’s regime and his struggle against the opposition, insofar as he is worried about massive anti-government protests.
5. Attempting to break up the coalition of Western countries in order to eliminate the threat of the complete isolation of Russia and the further tightening of sanctions.
6. Attempting to distract the Russian population from the economic crisis and the authorities’ inability to deal with the declining quality of life, corruption, and governmental incompetence.
7. I do not understand why Russia is participating in this war.”

7. SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The results are from a 2016 survey of 243 Moscow-based foreign policy elites funded by the Arthur Levitt Public Affairs Center at Hamilton College. It is the seventh wave in an existing series of interviews that is currently deposited with the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) at the University of Michigan. ICPSR (Study #3724).⁹

The sampling frame consists of high-ranking individuals employed in a broad range of institutions in the Russian Federation, i.e., in the media, state-owned enterprises and private businesses, academic institutes with strong international connections, the executive branch of the government, the legislature, and the armed forces and security agencies.

The survey was directed by Sharon Werning Rivera, Associate Professor of Government at Hamilton College (Principal Investigator), William Zimmerman, Emeritus Professor of Political Science and Emeritus Research Professor, Center for Political Studies, at the University of Michigan, (Co-Principal Investigator), and Eduard Ponarin, Director of the Laboratory for Comparative Social Research and Professor of Sociology at the National Research University Higher School of Economics in St. Petersburg (Co-Principal Investigator). Additional funding for incorporating the 2016 data into the existing codebook was provided by the Weiser Center for Europe and Eurasia at the University of Michigan.¹⁰

The 2016 survey was conducted by Bashkirova and Partners (<http://www.bashkirova-partners.ru/en/>), a widely-respected polling firm located in Moscow. Principal Elena Bashkirova also carried out all of the previous elite surveys that form the basis of this series; those six surveys were conducted in 1993, 1995, 1999, 2004, 2008, and 2012 under the direction of William Zimmerman at the University of Michigan. With the addition of the 2016 survey, the series spans 23 years and includes individuals holding high-ranking positions during the presidencies of Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin. The replication of most survey questions and the consistency of the survey methodology across all seven surveys facilitate comparisons across time. This series is the only repeated cross-sectional survey data of Russian elites available in the world and as such, it constitutes a unique resource for the scholarly and policy communities.

In all seven waves of the survey, respondents were selected on the basis of positional criteria using a quota sample. Those surveyed would be considered to be “influential” anywhere and are engaged in occupations that have a *prima facie* expectation that they

⁹ Total sample sizes for the previous waves are the following: 200 (1993), 180 (1995), 240 (1999), 320 (2004), 241 (2008), and 240 (2012).

¹⁰ See William Zimmerman and Kirill Kalinin, *Codebook: Russian Foreign Policy Elite Perspectives: 1993-2012*, Center for Political Studies, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, March 2013.

would have substantial potential to affect foreign policy: 1) ministers, deputy ministers, and heads of departments in the federal bureaucracy, and high-ranking figures in the Presidential Administration; 2) members of foreign policy-related committees in the State Duma and Federation Council; 3) owners and CEOs of major firms; 4) directors and deputy directors of state-owned enterprises; 5) editors and deputy editors of major media outlets; 6) directors and deputy directors of large academic research institutes; and 7) officers in the armed forces and security agencies holding the rank of colonel or higher.

All respondents are Moscow residents. However, restricting the sample to Moscow and thereby excluding powerful regional elites is unlikely to produce a distorted portrait, given Moscow's disproportionate impact on national political decision-making. Moscow is the financial, political, and intellectual hub of Russia, where the principal decisionmaking centers and individuals occupying key positions in different spheres of public life are concentrated.

The seven sub-groups interviewed in the 2016 survey consisted of the following numbers of respondents:

- 1) **Executive Branch** (ministers, deputy ministers, and heads of agencies in the federal bureaucracy, as well as members of the Presidential Administration employed at the rank of advisor or higher) - 35
- 2) **Legislative Branch** (deputies in the State Duma and Federation Council who are members of the committees on defense, security, relations with the CIS, and foreign affairs) – 30
- 3) **Private Business** (owners and CEOs of major private firms in the oil and gas, electricity, banking, hotel, restaurant, furniture, pharmacological, medicine, and retail industries) – 35
- 4) **State-Owned Enterprises** (directors and deputy directors of state corporations and industrial, defense, and petrochemical enterprises that are at least 50% state-owned) – 36
- 5) **Media** (editors and deputy editors of major media outlets) – 36
- 6) **Science and Education** (chancellors, vice-chancellors, directors, and deputy directors of universities and large academic research institutes with strong international connections) – 35
- 7) **Military and Security Forces** (officers serving in the armed forces, Federal Security Service, Federal Protective Service, and Ministry for Emergency Situations holding the rank of colonel or higher) - 36

Demographic characteristics of the sample are the following:

<i>Gender:</i>	Male	75.3%
	Female	24.7%
<i>Age:</i> ¹¹	18-29	0.8%
	30-39	11.1%
	40-49	42.0%
	50-59	32.1%
	60+	13.2%

The survey was completed between February 8, 2016, and March 20, 2016, using face-to-face interviews that lasted an average of 60 minutes. The interviews were conducted by experienced and highly-educated interviewers trained by Bashkirova and other members of her firm. Quality control was enhanced by careful interviewer monitoring: the firm contacted 10% of the respondents by phone to check that they had actually been interviewed and assessed 100% of the questionnaires for completion throughout the data collection phase.

Of the initial pool of 323 respondents, 80 refused to participate in the survey, most often citing a lack of time as the reason. The interviewers reported that on the whole, the survey was viewed “favorably” (*blagozhelatel’no*) by the respondents and that the majority of respondents expressed a desire to learn the results of the survey research.¹²

The project was approved by the Hamilton College Institutional Review Board on February 1, 2016. All respondents were assured of the confidentiality of the data and were informed, in a manner that is consistent with the Hamilton College Institutional Review Board guidelines, that their participation was voluntary and that their responses would be used only in generalized form.

The following Hamilton students participated in the preparation of the 2016 questionnaire: James Bryan, Brisa Camacho-Lovell, Audrey Darnis, Carlos Fineman, Nora Klemmer, Erin McCullough, Emma Raynor, Margaret Sanderson, Christian Stellakis, Sam Sweet, and Erick Wong. The analyses presented in this report were conducted by the following undergraduate students in Government 333: Topics in Survey Research, taught by Associate Professor of Government Sharon Werning Rivera: James Bryan, Brisa Camacho-Lovell, Carlos Fineman, Nora Klemmer, and Emma Raynor.

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¹¹ Two respondents refused to provide their year of birth.

¹² Bashkirova i partnery, “Otchet po proektu ‘Otsenka vneshnei politiki Rossii’” [Evaluating Russian Foreign Policy: Methodological Report], 2016, p. 6. Available upon request.