Anti-American Attitudes from the Dual-process Motivational Perspective:

Evidence from Russia

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore the psychological motivations of anti-American attitudes from the dual-process model perspective that emphasizes two basic human motivational goals: preferences for security (driven by the perception of threat) and superiority (driven by the perception of competition). Among established measures in personality psychology, the former most closely corresponds to authoritarianism whereas the latter is captured by social dominance orientation (SDO). In this report, we analyze the case of Russia where grievances against the United States were featured prominently in the justification of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Using original survey data, we find that cultural and political grievances against the United States, as well as anti-American attitudes and readiness to engage in a conflict, are predicted by authoritarianism—but not by SDO. Therefore, even in a mid-power country context, anti-American attitudes are motivated by threat rather than competition.

Keywords: anti-American attitudes, authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, Russia

Anti-American attitudes have skyrocketed in Russia since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the invasion of Ukraine proper in 2022 accelerated this trend even more. Although the possibility of preference falsification is quite real, recent analyses of public opinion that try to account for this possibility still show majority support for the war in the Russian mass public (Chapkovski and Schaub 2022). So, what explains the embrace of an anti-American frame and associated foreign policy attitudes in the Russian population?

A televised address by Vladimir Putin aired on February 24, 2022, and aimed at justifying the invasion of Ukraine to the Russian public provides some clues.[1] In the address, Putin touched on several important themes in anti-American rhetoric. It was heavily focused on the idea that the United States and the West represented a threat to Russia's security and sovereignty. Putin's speech listed a number of political grievances against the United States, such as the eastward expansion of NATO despite Russian objections. He also mentioned cultural grievances: destruction of the traditional values "eroding" the Russian society from within. Unwittingly, the president's speech almost perfectly laid out a dual-process psychological model in which anti-American attitudes are shaped by two basic psychological motivations: security (as a response to threat) and superiority (as a response to competition).

The purpose of this paper is to assess whether this psychological model can explain why some Russians are receptive to Putin's claims about the U.S. and others are not. Using original survey data, we demonstrate that authoritarianism (an orientation driven by the security motivation) is a better predictor of anti-Western grievances, anti-American attitudes, and support for international confrontation than social dominance orientation (driven by the superiority motivation). We discuss the implications of our findings for public diplomacy in the current

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[1] https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-24/full-transcript-vladimir-putin-s-televised-address-to-russia-on-ukraine-feb-24

conflict—as well as for the broader research on personality psychology in international relations.

Threat, Competition, and Anti-American Attitudes

The literature on anti-American attitudes, in both psychology and political science, has been debating their political vs. cultural character. A number of studies have compared the impact of political and cultural grievances on support for anti-American violence, primarily in the Muslim world, and concluded that politics is more important than culture (Sidanius et al. 2004; Tessler and Robbins 2007; Zhirkov, Verkuyten, and Weesie 2014). However, anti-American grievances are rhetorical tools themselves: they are first articulated by the political elites and then spread to the mass public via the channels of political communication (Blaydes and Linzer 2012; Sokolov et al. 2019). Therefore, it is still necessary to understand what psychological motivations make someone receptive to these grievances.

Recently, such a hypothesis has been formulated within the anti-interventionism approach to anti-Americanism in the Arab world (Jamal et al. 2015). It postulates that anti-American attitudes stem from the perceived threat of intervention into a country's internal affairs by a powerful foreign actor. However, existing empirical support for the anti-intervention approach comes from Arab countries that do not compete with the United States in the international arena. Russia, in turn, is one of the few countries that see themselves as regional powers—and it has behaved this way at least since the Russo-Georgian War of 2008. As a result, competition can also motivate anti-American attitudes within the Russian public.

Anti-American attitudes can be seen as a form of prejudice: passing judgment on people—in this case, Americans—on the basis of their group membership and with limited first-hand experience (Allport 1954). The dual-process model of prejudice argues that negative group attitudes are driven by perceptions of threat and competition (Duckitt 2001). Some groups are

seen as threatening and prejudice toward them is explained by the desire for security, whereas groups perceived as competitors are most disliked by those who emphasize the goal of superiority. Prejudice toward threatening groups is best predicted by authoritarianism (an orientation emphasizing the desire for security; Stenner 2005), and prejudice toward competing groups follows social dominance orientation or SDO (emphasizing the desire for superiority; Sidanius and Pratto 1999).

In this paper, we apply the dual-process motivational model by using authoritarianism and SDO to predict political and cultural grievances, anti-American attitudes, and support for confrontation in the Russian public. This will allow us to understand whether Russians see the United States as a threat (if authoritarianism is a better predictor) or a competitor (if SDO is a better predictor) and, respectively, whether anti-American attitudes are predominantly driven by security or superiority motivations.

Data and Method

In March 2020, we carried out an online survey on a sample of 806 Russian adults.[2] Respondents were recruited using a panel maintained by a Russian firm Anketolog. Sample characteristics were as follows. The mean age was 39.6 years and the gender ratio was 38.2% male to 61.8% female. Higher education was reported by 74.4% of respondents and approximately 71% of the sample lived in a city. Finally, 88.2% of respondents were ethnic Russians.

Respondents started by completing the batteries of questions on political and cultural grievances. A sample question on political grievances: "Russia's economic problems in the 1990s were caused by West's deliberate efforts, not missteps of the Russian leadership." A sample question on cultural grievances: "Propaganda of homosexuality in the modern West is a

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[2]   The survey was fielded in Russian, but in the paper, we provide English translations of the materials.

real problem that threatens Russian society." Responses were coded on a 4-point Likert-type scale from 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 4 = *Strongly agree*. After that, respondents were presented with the authoritarianism and SDO questions. As a measure of authoritarianism, we used the 4-item child-rearing battery (Feldman and Stenner 1997). SDO was measured using a shortened version of the scale (Ho et al. 2015). Next, respondents were asked two questions about their attitudes to the United States and Americans on a scale from 1 = *Very unfavorable* to 4 = *Very favorable*. Answers to these two questions with reversed responses were combined to obtain an index of anti-American attitudes. The following question asked respondents about their preference for conflict, with scores ranging from 0 = *Avoid direct confrontation* to 10 = *Openly challenge the United States*. Finally, respondents were asked about demographics. The English translations of questions and response options can be found in Online Appendix.

Results

We estimate a structural-equation model (SEM) that corresponds to the theoretical expectations, in which authoritarianism and SDO, first, predict political and cultural grievances that, in turn, lead to anti-American attitudes and, ultimately, support for confrontation. All variables are normalized to have a 0–1 range, so the coefficients can range from −1 (perfect negative relationship) to 1 (perfect positive relationship). The results are presented in Figure 1. They show that authoritarianism significantly and positively predicts both political and cultural grievances. SDO, in turn, is not related to cultural grievances, while its association with political grievances is negative. Political grievances, then, positively and significantly predict both anti-American attitudes and support for confrontation while cultural grievances are associated only with the former. Still, it is important to emphasize that, contrary to results from the Arab world, anti-American attitudes in Russia seems to have both political and cultural roots almost in equal
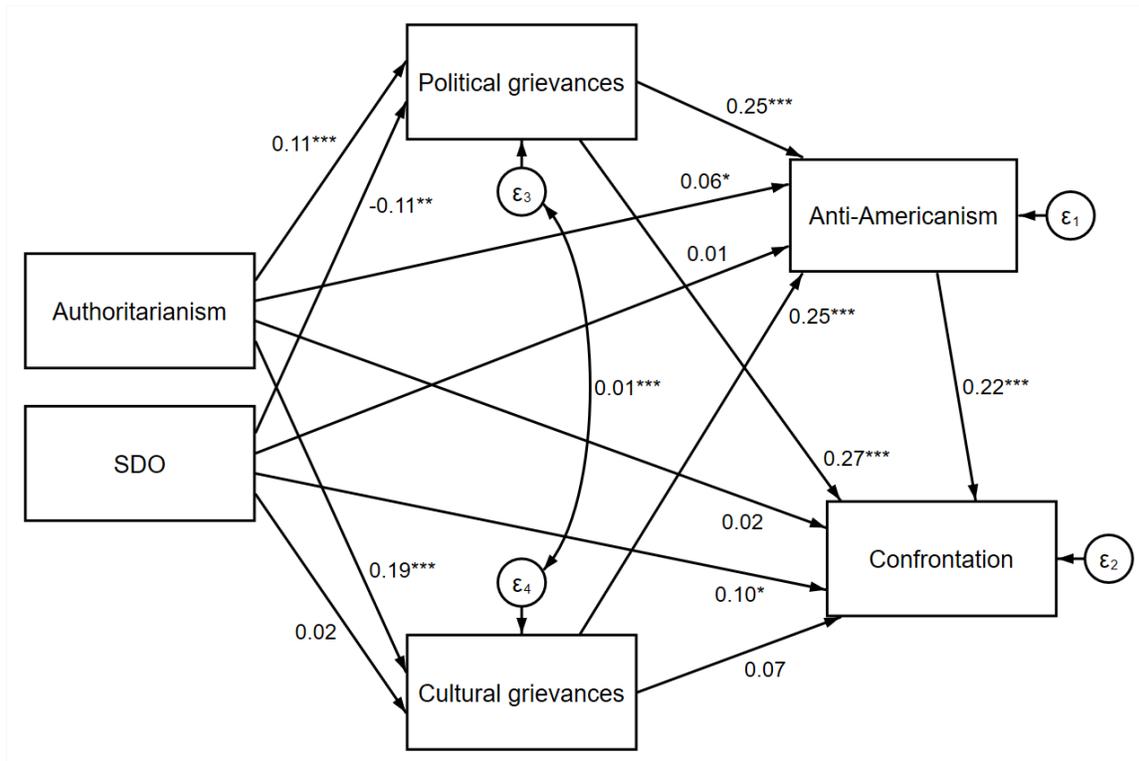
measure.

Figure 1. The relationships among authoritarianism, SDO, political and cultural grievances, anti-American attitudes, and support for confrontation
Note. $N = 764$. Control variables (not presented due to space considerations): age, gender, education, urbanization, ethnicity. See Table A1 in Online Appendix for full results.

Importantly, a direct effect in the SEM framework may only partially reflects the true relationship between two variables. For instance, according to the model presented in Figure 1 SDO affects support for confrontation both directly and indirectly via political grievances. Therefore, to properly summarize the effects of authoritarianism and SDO on anti-American attitudes and support for confrontation, we also estimate indirect and total effects.[3] The estimates presented in Table 1 show that authoritarianism has positive and significant indirect and total

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[3] Within the SEM and path modeling framework, an indirect (or mediation) effect is the pathway from the explanatory variable to the outcome through a mediator. The direct effect, in turn, is the pathway from the explanatory variable to the outcome while controlling for mediators. The total effect is the sum of the direct effect and any indirect effects.

effects on both anti-American attitudes and support for confrontation whereas SDO does not.

Table 1. Direct, indirect, and total effects of authoritarianism and SDO on anti-American attitudes and support for confrontation

	Anti-American attitudes	Support for confrontation
Authoritarianism		
Direct	0.06*	0.02
	(0.03)	(0.03)
Indirect	0.07***	0.07***
	(0.01)	(0.01)
Total	0.13***	0.09*
	(0.03)	(0.03)
SDO		
Direct	0.01	0.10*
	(0.04)	(0.04)
Indirect	-0.02	-0.03
	(0.02)	(0.02)
Total	-0.01	0.07
	(0.04)	(0.05)

Note. Results are based on the same model as presented in Figure 1. Standard errors in parentheses.
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Overall, authoritarianism is significantly and positively related to all outcomes of interest—political and cultural grievances, anti-American attitudes, and support for confrontation—whereas SDO is not. It means that anti-American attitudes in the Russian public are motivated by perceived threat from the United States rather than by perceived competition.

Conclusion

Our goal in this paper has been to understand the psychological motivations of anti-American attitudes in Russia. We have followed the dual-process model postulating that anti-American attitudes, as any other form of prejudice, can be motivated by the desire for security and perception of threat (authoritarian orientation) or by superiority and the perception of competition (social dominance orientation or SDO). Using an original survey, we have demonstrated that political and cultural grievances, anti-American attitudes, and support for confrontation are all predicted by authoritarianism—but not by SDO. Therefore, anti-American attitudes in Russia are motivated by threat rather than by competition.

Our findings have important implications for public diplomacy during the current conflict. They show how authoritarian regimes can take advantage of real or imagined U.S. intervention threats in order to mobilize domestic support in favor of an aggressive foreign policy. In the case of Russia, our results indicate that those highest in authoritarianism will probably be receptive to anti-American messaging while Russians with anti-authoritarian predispositions are likely to remain positive toward the United States. At the same time, U.S. efforts to minimize the perception of threat may win over those Russians who are in the middle of the authoritarianism scale.

This emphasis on the importance of the perception of threat instead of competition also would seem to challenge scholarship about how concerns about status affect Russia's relationship with the West. According to this perspective, Russia has had a status conflict with the West after the Cold War (Forsberg 2014). As its status declined, perceived humiliation produced an emotional response in Russia that resulted in a more assertive, anti-Western foreign policy (Larson and Shevchenko 2014). Although our results suggest that status competition is less important in Russians' foreign policy opinions, we do not investigate the emotional substrates of anti-American and broader anti-Western attitudes.

Our analysis linking authoritarianism and anti-American attitudes is limited to a single country, and future research may attempt to replicate it in other contexts such as China, Iran, or Turkey. It may also be interesting to see whether the dual-process model applies to attitudes toward international actors other than the United States: for instance, how authoritarianism and SDO predict opinions about Russia in Ukraine or opinions about Turkey in Syria. Similarly, it is worth investigating whether this model works equally well in the Russian elite sector, where professional backgrounds and political messaging have been shown to be linked with anti-

American attitudes (Rivera and Bryan 2019).

Overall, our paper once again highlights the importance of studying the psychological antecedents of foreign policy opinions, including in nondemocratic countries. And the authoritarian predisposition, which drives both sensitivity to real or imagined threats and submission to authorities, may prove particularly promising in this regard.

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Online Appendix

Survey was fielded in Russian. This is an English translation.

Political grievances
"Below are several statements concerning the relationships between Russia and the West after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Please tell us how strongly you agree or disagree with each."
    (1) Spread of the West's influence on East European countries followed desire to hurt Russian interests, not wishes of those countries' populations
    (2) Spread of the West's influence on East European countries followed wishes of those countries' populations, not desire to hurt Russian interests
    (3) NATO's military operation against Serbia in 1999 was launched to spread West's political influence, not stop ethnic cleansing in Kosovo
    (4) NATO's military operation against Serbia in 1999 was launched to stop ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, not spread West's political influence
    (5) Russia's economic problems in the 1990s were caused by West's deliberate efforts, not missteps of the Russian leadership
    (6) Russia's economic problems in the 1990s were caused by missteps of the Russian leadership, not West's deliberate efforts
    (7) Current hostility between Russian and Ukraine are caused by West's intrigues, not Russian leadership mistakes
    (8) Current hostility between Russian and Ukraine are caused by Russian leadership mistakes, not West's intrigues
Question order randomized.
Respondents are randomly presented with four statements, one from each following pair: (1) and (2), (3) and (4), (5) and (6), (7) and (8).
Answers coded from 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 4 = *Strongly agree*.

Cultural grievances
"Below are several statements concerning the relationships between Russia and the West after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Please tell us how strongly you agree or disagree with each."
    (1) Emphasis on individualism in modern Western culture leads to social degradation
    (2) Emphasis on individualism in modern Western culture leads to social progress
    (3) Propaganda of homosexuality in the modern West is a real problem that threatens Russian society
    (4) The problem of homosexuality propaganda in the modern West is fabricated by the Russian government for political reasons
    (5) Western feminism has gone too far and is unacceptable in Russian society
    (6) Russian society can learn a lot from Western feminism in terms of gender equality
    (7) Modern West abandoned its own cultural heritage
    (8) Russia and the West have a lot of common cultural heritage
Question order randomized.
Respondents are randomly presented with four statements, one from each following pair: (1) and (2), (3) and (4), (5) and (6), (7) and (8).
Answers coded from 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 4 = *Strongly agree*.

Social dominance orientation
"Below are several statements concerning the relationships between Russia and the West after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Please tell us how strongly you agree or disagree with each."
    (1) An ideal society requires some groups to be on top and others to be on the bottom
    (2) Some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups
    (3) No one group should dominate in society
    (4) Groups at the bottom are just as deserving as groups at the top
    (5) Group equality should not be our primary goal
    (6) It is unjust to try to make groups equal
    (7) We should do what we can to equalize conditions for different groups
    (8) We should work to give all groups an equal chance to succeed
Question order randomized.
Respondents are randomly presented with four statements, one from each following pair: (1) and (2), (3) and (4), (5) and (6), (7) and (8).
Answers coded from 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 4 = *Strongly agree*.

Authoritarianism
"Although there are a number of qualities that people feel children should have, every person thinks that some qualities are more important than others. Below are pairs of desirable qualities. For each pair please indicate which quality you think is more important for a child to have."
    • Independence or respect for elders
    • Be considerate or well-behaved
    • Have obedience or self-reliance
    • Have curiosity or good manners
Question order randomized.
Answers coded 1 when a pro-authoritarian trait is chosen (respect for elders, well-behaved, obedience, good manners) and 0 otherwise.

Anti-American attitudes
    • What is your opinion of the United States?
    • What is your opinion of Americans?
Question order randomized.
Answers coded from 1 = *Very unfavorable* to 4 = *Very favorable*.

Support for confrontation
"The degree of confrontation between Russia and the U.S. is currently on the rise. There are different views on how Russia should act in this situation. What is your position?
        For your response, please use the scale from 0 to 10 below. If you think that Russia should avoid direct confrontation with the U.S., choose answers close to 0. If you think that Russia should openly challenge the U.S., choose answers close to 10. If your position is somewhere in between, choose answers close to 5."

Table A1. Full results of the structural equation model

	Estimate
Political grievances ←	
Authoritarianism	0.11***
	(0.03)
SDO	-0.11**
	(0.04)
Age	0.20***
	(0.04)
Gender (female)	-0.04*
	(0.01)
Education (higher)	0.01
	(0.02)
Urbanization (city)	-0.01
	(0.02)
Ethnicity (Russian)	0.01
	(0.02)
Intercept	0.49***
	(0.03)
Cultural grievances ←	
Authoritarianism	0.19***
	(0.02)
SDO	0.02
	(0.04)
Age	0.18***
	(0.04)
Gender (female)	-0.04**
	(0.01)
Education (higher)	-0.00
	(0.02)
Urbanization (city)	-0.05**
	(0.01)
Ethnicity (Russian)	0.03
	(0.02)
Intercept	0.46***
	(0.03)
Anti-American attitudes ←	
Political grievances	0.25***
	(0.04)
Cultural grievances	0.25***
	(0.04)
Authoritarianism	0.06*
	(0.03)
SDO	0.01
	(0.04)
Age	0.10*
	(0.04)
Gender (female)	-0.03*
	(0.01)
Education (higher)	0.01
	(0.01)
Urbanization (city)	-0.01
	(0.01)
Ethnicity (Russian)	0.01
	(0.02)
Intercept	0.12**

	(0.04)
Support for confrontation ←	
Political grievances	0.27***
	(0.05)
Cultural grievances	0.07
	(0.05)
Anti-American attitudes	0.22***
	(0.04)
Authoritarianism	0.02
	(0.03)
SDO	0.10*
	(0.04)
Age	0.02
	(0.05)
Gender (female)	-0.10***
	(0.02)
Education (higher)	-0.01
	(0.02)
Urbanization (city)	0.02
	(0.02)
Ethnicity (Russian)	-0.04
	(0.02)
Intercept	0.14**
	(0.05)
Error variances	
Political grievances	0.04***
	(0.00)
Cultural grievances	0.03***
	(0.00)
Anti-American attitudes	0.03***
	(0.00)
Support for confrontation	0.05***
	(0.00)
Error covariances	
Political grievances, Cultural grievances	0.01***
	(0.00)

Note. $N = 764$. Standard errors in parentheses.
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$