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ECONOMIC DETERMINATION OF PUBLIC MOOD OF THE RUSSIANS: MYTH OR REALITY?¹

***Abstract:** The paper deals with the research in the correlation between the parameters of the economic situation and the state of public mood. On the basis of the data presented in the paper, the author draws five important conclusions concerning the nature of the public mood as well as social and political activities of the Russians. Firstly, the economic situation is not a basic determinant for the mass mood as for the social and political activities of the Russian population. Secondly, non-economic factors have a decisive influence on the assessments of the overall situation in Russia. Thirdly, emotional and psychological conditions of the Russians significantly determine the economic assessments. Fourthly, changes in the country's economic situation are neither reflected in mass consciousness nor in the results of the sociological surveys. Fifthly, the Russian population very faintly links the development of the economic situation with the activities of the RF government.*

***Keywords:** assessment of the economy, economic crisis, economic assessment, Russian Federation, public opinion, public mood*

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The contemporary economic crisis has renewed the interest in research in identifying the correlation between the parameters of the economic situation and the state of public mood. A superficial glance at the problem makes one think that economic factors primarily determine the public mood, while the state of economy defines how the population assesses its own situation and activities of political institutions. Consequently, the state of economy affects the trend of political activity of the population.

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A detailed analysis of empirical data will enable us to prove or deny the above-mentioned hypothesis. The present article aims at studying the problem by the case of the Russian Federation on the basis of the data from the RF leading sociological agencies, among these are the Foundation “Public Opinion” (FOM), the All-Russian Centre for Studying Public Opinion (VTSIOM), Levada–Center. The chronological frames of the present study are limited by the recent decade while sometimes the use of some earlier data is justified.

The FOM sociological surveys of economic situation in the Russian Federation reflect the low level of positive assessments of the national economy given by the RF population. Thus, according to the results, only 10% of Russians gave positive assessments of the economy by the end of the year 2007 (the most successful, according to the opinion of the Russian population). This shows the increase to 7% within five recent years. Meanwhile, the level of negative assessments obtain 25%, that is twice lower comparing to the year 2002. Further analysis let us claim the decrease in criticism of assessments of the national economy in 2006–2007 and a gradual increase of those who gave a neutral assessment. The economic crisis significantly influenced the assessments and led to the increase in the negative ones as well as the decrease in positive indicators [6].

Table 1

**Assessments of the economy of the Russian Federation
given by the Russian population (2002–2008)
(FOM), (%)**

| | 10.2002 | 12.2004 | 07.2005 | 12.2006 | 12.2007 | 12.2008 |
|----------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Good | 3 | 4 | 3 | 5 | 10 | 4 |
| Satisfactory | 35 | 37 | 36 | 52 | 54 | 49 |
| Bad | 53 | 40 | 52 | 34 | 25 | 38 |
| Find it difficult to reply | 9 | 10 | 7 | 10 | 12 | 9 |

It is worthwhile mentioning that the decrease in the negative assessments of the RF economy fixed since 2005 does not go with the relevant increase of the positive assessments of the whole situation in Russia [7]. The level of negative assessments of the economy declined twice for the period of 2005 – 2007 and, at the same time, the level of positive assessments of the overall situation in general in the country increased from 28 % to 34 % for the same period. The last one is represented in Table 2. As we can see, negative assessments of the overall situation in Russia decreased from 17% to 8%. However, the amount of the respondents who estimate the state of the economy as satisfactory increased from 36% to 54% but with regard to the assessments of general results of the year it remains almost stable.

Table 2

**Assessments of previous year
given by the Russian population (1996 – 2007)
(FOM), (%)**

| | De c 199 6 | De c 199 7 | De c 199 8 | De c 199 9 | De c 200 0 | De c 200 1 | De c 200 2 | De c20 03 | De c20 04 | De c 200 5 | De c 200 6 | De c20 07 |
|---|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| Previous year was, in general, better for Russia than the year before | 0 | 211 | 3 | 21 | 36 | 42 | 27 | 33 | 16 | 28 | 28 | 34 |
| Previous year was, in general, the same for Russia as the year before | 28 | 37 | 11 | 24 | 27 | 32 | 40 | 38 | 42 | 38 | 46 | 40 |
| Previous year was, in general, worse for Russia than the year before | 55 | 35 | 81 | 44 | 25 | 14 | 21 | 11 | 26 | 17 | 8 | 8 |
| Find it difficult to reply | 7 | 7 | 3 | 11 | 12 | 11 | 13 | 18 | 17 | 17 | 18 | 19 |

Thereby, we can observe a limited influence of the assessments of the economic situation in the country on the assessments of the overall situation in Russia. Surveys presented by different sociological agencies fix common tendencies. Thus, Levada–Center also marks the decrease of those who negatively assess the national economy during 2005–2007 and a significant increase of the respondents assessing the economy as satisfactory one [8].

Table 3

**Assessments of the economic situation in the Russian Federation
given by the Russian population
(Levada–Centre), (%)**

| | 1994 | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 |
|----------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Very good/ good | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 9 |
| Medium | 20 | 14 | 18 | 12 | 17 | 9 | 20 | 27 | 34 | 39 | 43 | 37 | 43 | 48 |
| Very bad/ bad | 66 | 77 | 70 | 79 | 71 | 85 | 70 | 61 | 49 | 48 | 40 | 47 | 39 | 31 |
| Find it difficult to reply | 13 | 8 | 11 | 8 | 11 | 5 | 8 | 10 | 13 | 9 | 12 | 11 | 13 | 12 |

It is reasonable to analyze the assessments of the economic situation given by the population from two perspectives. The first one includes the assessments of the

economy as a whole, and the second one includes the assessments of the personal economic situation (concerning a respondent's family).

The analysis of the respondents' opinion in comparison with other countries revealed a significant increase in positive assessments after the election of Vladimir Putin to the post of the RF President. The amount of those who consider that the Russian economy enters the list of the 50 most developed economies of the world doubled in January 2001 in comparison with January 2000 (FOM). We should underline that there is no reasonable objective basis for such dynamics [9].

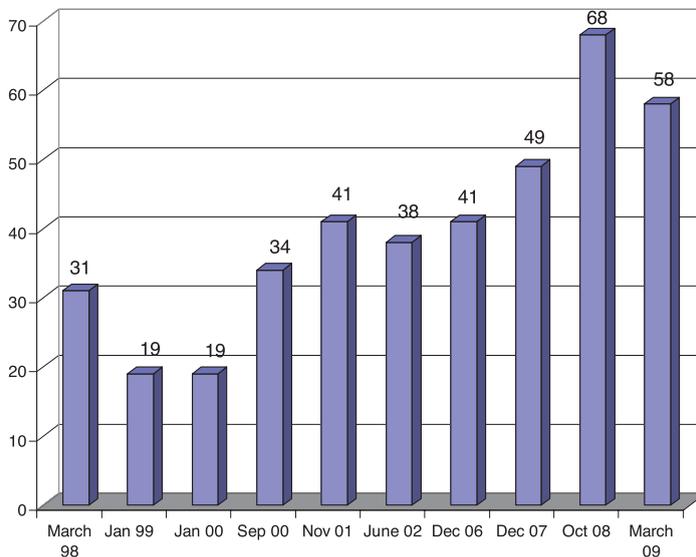
Table 4

Assessments of the economic situation of the Russian Federation in comparison with other countries as given by the population (FOM), (%)

| | 03. 1998 | 01. 1999 | 01. 2000 | 09. 2000 | 11. 2001 | 06. 2002 | 12. 2006 | 12. 2007 | 10. 2008 | 03. 2009 |
|----------------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Among the first 10 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 7 | 10 | 9 | 8 | 13 | 29 | 20 |
| Between 10 and 50 | 27 | 17 | 17 | 27 | 31 | 29 | 33 | 36 | 39 | 38 |
| Between 50 and 100 | 27 | 28 | 44 | 30 | 25 | 27 | 24 | 22 | 10 | 15 |
| Among the backward | 28 | 44 | 25 | 25 | 21 | 25 | 14 | 6 | 4 | 7 |
| Find it difficult to reply | 15 | 8 | 11 | 11 | 13 | 11 | 21 | 23 | 18 | 20 |

Chart 1

Dissemination of respondents who think that the Russian economy enters the list of the 50 most developed economies of the world 1998–2009 (FOM), (%)



Despite the economic changes, during the whole period of Vladimir Putin's presidency surveys fix stable level of the assessments (data of the surveys for the period from September 2000 to December 2007). Consequently, we can raise a question about the basis for the assessment of the Russian economy and the reasons that make the population assess it namely that way. One can observe the same tendency as in the analysis of the assessments given by the Russian population of the economic circumstances of the Russians in comparison with other countries.

Table 5

Assessments of the economic situation in Russia on the basis of the economic circumstances of the Russians, comparing to the list of other countries (FOM), (%)

| | 03. 1998 | 01. 1999 | 01. 2000 | 09. 2000 | 11. 2001 | 06. 2002 | 12. 2006 | 12. 2007 | 07. 2008 | 03. 2009 |
|----------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Among the first 10 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 6 | 7 |
| Between 10 and 50 | 20 | 10 | 11 | 15 | 19 | 20 | 22 | 26 | 32 | 31 |
| Between 50 and 100 | 28 | 31 | 37 | 29 | 32 | 30 | 30 | 31 | 26 | 25 |
| Among the backward | 35 | 51 | 40 | 44 | 35 | 35 | 26 | 20 | 16 | 18 |
| Find it difficult to reply | 16 | 7 | 10 | 9 | 12 | 11 | 19 | 20 | 20 | 19 |

As in the case with the assessments of the overall economic situation of Russia comparing with other countries, we can observe the significant increase of positive assessments in January 2001. However, the indicators themselves are considerably lower. This, probably, could be explained with the activities of different actors and, primarily, mass media, influencing these indicators. We would like to note that there is a correlation between the assessments of the Russian economy and the assessments of the economic situation of the Russian population in comparison with other countries.

During 2000–2007 the stable level of the assessments of the economic situation in Russia was accompanied by the stable level of the population's expectations in regard to the development of the national economy in a medium-term period. Since 2001, the Levada–Center has been surveying the opinion of the Russians about possible changes of the economic situation in Russia for the next six months. The results are represented in Table 6 [10]. The poll took place four times a year. To simplify the analysis of respondents' assessments, the table includes the results of the first poll taken each year. The only exception is July 2001, which was the first poll in the survey.

**Assessments of the changes in economic situation in Russia
given by the Russian population
(Levada–Center), (%)**

| | 07. | 01. | 01. | 01. | 01. | 02. | 01. | 02. |
|--|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 |
| Economic situation in Russia will be better | 12 | 8 | 10 | 12 | 10 | 11 | 14 | 12 |
| Economic situation in Russia will not change | 57 | 59 | 62 | 67 | 56 | 65 | 69 | 65 |
| Economic situation in Russia will be worse | 24 | 23 | 23 | 14 | 30 | 20 | 10 | 13 |
| Find it difficult to reply | 7 | 10 | 5 | 7 | 4 | 4 | 7 | 10 |

We divide the period of study into two parts, namely January 2003 and January 2005. Earlier, when we analyzed the results of sociological surveys about the assessments of changes of the overall situation in the country (FOM), we established the significant decrease in positive assessments and the increase in negative expectations by the end of 2002 and 2004. The data of the surveys aimed at finding out economic assessments prove the absence or, to be precise, limited influence of economic determinants of such situation. In January 2005 significant degradation of the assessments may be explained by the beginning of the reform of social services (when a great amount of services were replaced by disbursements in cash). But in January 2003 economic expectations did not represent negative dynamics as do the assessments of the perspectives of the development of the situation in the country in general. This fact enables us to focus again on the limited influence of economic factors on the assessments of the overall situation and, consequently, the presence of other factors determining it. We can suggest that the public mood was significantly influenced by the acts of terrorism that took place in 2002 (androlepsy in theatre centre at Dubrovka in Moscow during the performance), and in 2004 (occupation of a school and androlepsy of children, their parents and school staff in Beslan, Northern Osetia).

Verification of the hypothesis about the influence of the assessment of the activities by the Russian governing bodies on the assessment of the economic situation in Russia let us claim a moderate correlation between these two indicators. In other words, the situation is not about the fact that, according to the Levada–Center’s surveys, the overwhelming majority of the Russians are not satisfied with the economic policy of the Russian governing bodies. Besides, their dissatisfaction has become stable.

Table 7

Assessments of the economic policy of the Russian governing bodies given by the Russian population (Levada–Center), (%)

| | 07.01 | 01.02 | 07.02 | 01.03 | 07.03 | 01.04 | 07.04 | 01.05 | 07.05 | 02.06 | 07.06 | 01.07 |
|--|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Rather satisfied/ mainly satisfied | 28 | 23 | 27 | 19 | 25 | 27 | 28 | 23 | 22 | 25 | 33 | 37 |
| Not entirely satisfied/ not satisfied | 64 | 71 | 65 | 77 | 72 | 69 | 69 | 73 | 74 | 70 | 61 | 57 |
| Find it difficult to reply | 8 | 7 | 7 | 4 | 3 | 5 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 4 | 6 | 6 |

It is interesting to see a significant gap between the expectations of improvement in the country’s economic situation and the assessments of the economic policy of the Russian governing bodies. The level of positive assessment of the government activities in the field of economy is considerably higher than the level of positive expectations in the national economy [11]. We can observe the same tendency when comparing relevant negative assessments.

Expectations and assessment of their realization become the factor of an individual’s political behaviour when they appear as part of people’s mood. In this context, the latter performs as a result of assessing existing practices by people and referring them to their expectations. That means that social mood is a specific reaction to misalignment or vice versa, the coincidence of what people have and what they would like to have. Thus, when the first ones coincide with the second ones, the public mood is of a neutral character. If the realities are better than expectations, mass mood is positive; otherwise it has a negative character [4]. The task of the government is therefore rests in determining the objects of the population’s expectations and demonstrating the ability to realize them. The assessment of the reality in the light of earlier expectations determines the way of assessing the reality. One of the founders of such approach was A. Tocqueville, who examined the history of the French Revolution and came to the conclusion that people’s behaviour was motivated not only by the existing problems but also by their comprehension of an ideal state represented in literature. He admitted that not only aggravation of life conditions led to revolutions. It often happens when people being tolerant to the heaviest laws for a long time, as they seem not to notice them at all, once get rid of their burden shortly as its heaviness decreases to some degree [5]. This approach became very popular in contemporary European and American scientific schools [2] due to specific attention of researchers to political and social transformation

processes and to expectations as a factor of large-scale changes.

During 2001–2007 the assessments of the activities of the government in the economic field were stable. Obviously, the development of the economic situation in the country is moderately linked to the government’s activities, according to the population’s opinion. This conclusion is a very important one. It allows us suggesting that the basic factor of the assessments of the economic situation given by the Russian population is personal emotional and physiological conditions of citizens and their ability to embed themselves into the present system of economic relations. This factor is a crucial one rather than the level of income or the activities of the government.

Such a detailed data analysis of the sociological surveys studying the assessments of the personal economic situation or the one in the country given by the Russian population reveals the slight interdependence between the assessments of the economy and its perspectives on the assessments of the overall situation. The statement about the slight economic determinant of the physiological condition of the Russian citizens may be proved by empirical data, in particular those belonging to the period of the economic crisis. Sociological surveys show the following results.

Table 8

**Assessments of the condition of the national economy
given by the Russian population (average month indicators)
(FOM), (%) [12]**

| | 10. 2008 | 11. 2008 | 12. 2008 | 01. 2009 | 02. 2009 | 03. 2009 | 04. 2009 | 05. 2009 | 06. 2009 | 07. 2009 |
|-------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Good | 7 | 5 | 4.5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 3 |
| Satisfact- ory | 58.5 | 57 | 51 | 46 | 41 | 42 | 43 | 45.5 | 47 | 44.5 |
| Bad | 24.5 | 29.5 | 34 | 39 | 46 | 47.5 | 45.5 | 40 | 39 | 43 |

Table 9

**Assessments of the perspectives of changes in economic situation in the nearest months
given by the Russian population
(average monthly indicators) (FOM), (%) [12]**

| | 10. 2008 | 11. 2008 | 12. 2008 | 01. 2009 | 02. 2009 | 03. 2009 | 04. 2009 | 05. 2009 | 06. 2009 | 07. 2009 |
|--------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Will be better | 14.5 | 12 | 8.5 | 10 | 12 | 9.5 | 10.5 | 15 | 16 | 17.5 |
| Will be worse | 26.5 | 33.5 | 41.5 | 41.5 | 40 | 42.5 | 31.5 | 21.5 | 20.5 | 21.5 |
| Will not change | 39.5 | 37 | 31.5 | 26.5 | 30 | 31.5 | 38.5 | 45 | 43 | 44.5 |

Table 10

**Assessments of the possibilities of the personal participation
in protest actions
given by the Russian population (FOM), (%) [13]**

| | 07.02 2009 | 28.02 2009 | 28.03 2009 | 11.04 2009 | 25.04 2009 | 24.05 2009 | 28.06 2009 |
|-----------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| Admit | 27 | 25 | 24 | 30 | 22 | 20 | 25 |
| Do not admit | 60 | 66 | 71 | 62 | 74 | 72 | 68 |

Table 11

**Assessments of the problems which can cause the desire to
participate in protest actions
given by the Russian population (FOM), (%) [14]**

| | 07.02 2009 | 28.02 2009 | 28.03 2009 | 11.04 2009 | 25.04 2009 | 24.05 2009 | 28.06 2009 |
|------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| Often | 28 | 27 | 27 | 25 | 25 | 20 | 20 |
| Seldom | 11 | 20 | 23 | 15 | 15 | 13 | 14 |
| Do not face with | 53 | 41 | 41 | 54 | 53 | 59 | 56 |

Analysis of the data represented in the tables above provides us with the assumption about the slight influence of the assessments of the economic situation in the country on the protest mood of its population. Despite the significant increase in the criticism of assessments of the economy in the period of the economic crisis, the readiness of the population to take part in the protest actions is decreasing. Moreover, there is an objective basis for identifying the interdependence between economic assessments and the character of the public mood (probable activity in the future). According to the FOM data, nearly 80% of respondents claim that they feel the impact of the economic crisis, “more than one third of the Russians try to spend less on the clothes and food, or breed some poultry and livestock at their dachas” [1]. All the data represented in the paper let us draw some important conclusions to understand the nature of the public mood as well as social and political activities of the Russians. Firstly, the economic situation is not a basic determinant for the mass mood as for the social and political activities of the Russian population. The low level of positive assessments of the national economy does not determine the assessments of the overall situation in the country. Secondly, non-economic factors have a decisive influence on the assessments of the overall situation in Russia. This tendency could be evidently seen in 2002–2003. Thirdly, emotional and psychological conditions of the Russians significantly determine the economic assessments. This contributes to explaining the data of sociological surveys in regard to the period of

the first years of Vladimir Putin's presidency. Fourthly, changes in the economic situation in the country are not reflected in mass consciousness and, as follows, in the results of the sociological surveys. Fifthly, the Russian population very faintly links the development of the economic situation with the activities of the RF government.

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- [11] <http://www.levada.ru/economic.html>.
- [12] <http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/projects/dominant/dom0932/d093210>.
- [13] <http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/d092712>.
- [14] <http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/d092712>. The respondents were asked a question: "At present, do you face problems or situations which cause the desire to take part in the protest actions? If yes, then often or seldom?"