

## Public Opinion Paradoxes? Russians Are Increasingly Dubious About the Costs of Putin's Foreign Policies

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Recent survey and focus group data indicate that Russians increasingly are questioning whether some of President Vladimir Putin's policies are worth the price in terms of threats to global peace and damage to Russia's economy. Rapid fluctuations in Russian public opinion suggest that some Kremlin projects and potential foreign initiatives, perhaps another "short victorious war," could undermine rather than enhance the regime's legitimacy. The Euro-Atlantic policy response should be to help promote awareness of these costs among a Russian populace that is expressing growing dissatisfaction with political leaders and government priorities when a wide range of domestic problems require attention.

### **Evolving Mass Consciousness**

In April 2019, Western media attention (limited as it was) focused on Russian troops massing at the Ukrainian border and on surveys [showing](#) 70 percent of Russians approved of Joseph Stalin. Yet Putin's declining approval ratings suggest that Russians have increasingly negative views of his foreign policies and do not long for a new strongarm leader (*vozhd*). Responses to the question "Would you vote for Putin again?" have consistently been less positive than overall approval ratings.

These conclusions come from some of Russia's most astute analysts of Russian society. President of the New Economic Growth Business Partnership Mikhail Dmitriev (who forecast the protests during the 2011-2012 election cycle) and sociologists Sergei Belanovsky and Anastasia Nikol'skaia have documented rapid shifts in Russian "mass consciousness." Their research appeared in two articles ([one](#) and [two](#)) in *Obshchestvennye nauki i sovremennost'* at the beginning of 2019. Both articles are condensed versions of more extensive reports written for Moscow think tanks: the [first](#) for Alexei Kudrin's Committee

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for Citizens' Initiative, based on focus groups in March-April 2018, and the [second](#) for the Liberal Mission Committee, from focus groups in October-November 2018. These data reveal that Putin's policies of increasing tensions on the Ukrainian-Russian border, waging war in Syria, and seeking to discredit the recent Ukrainian election do not enjoy broad popular support. Regional development projects in Chechnya, Tatarstan, and the Far East have been cut back to fund projects including Crimean development and the Kerch Bridge. In Yakutsk, to the continued disappointment of inhabitants, the crucial railroad link allowing delivery of supplies during the long winter terminates on the opposite side of the Lena River from the city. These are visible indications of what many people view as skewed governmental priorities.

### **2011-12: Demand for New Representation in the Duma**

Dmitriev and Belanovsky published a [report](#) in March 2011 predicting that Russia faced a political legitimacy crisis due to public mistrust of then-President Dmitry Medvedev, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, and the United Russia political party. These findings were confirmed by a Levada Center [survey](#) in August 2011 indicating that nearly two-thirds of Russians wanted to see total or at least overwhelming turnover of parliamentarians in the December 2011 elections. The authors appeared prescient when the election results produced the largest mass protests in Russia since 1991.

The protests were not limited to Moscow and St. Petersburg. At least 96 Russian cities had *Vkontakte* (social media) sites [posting](#) photos of demonstrations and discussions of the situation, with frequent sharing of information and cross-posting.<sup>2</sup> Belanovsky and Dmitriev concluded that the changes in public opinion were "massive and irreversible." Despite protest activity tapering off following Putin's election victory in March 2012 and subsequent repressions, dissatisfaction continued through 2013. This changed with the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Opinion has now shifted again.

### **2018-19: "The Anchor Chain Has Come Loose"**

In [focus groups](#) in spring 2018, participants mixed general support for Russia's foreign policy with critical comments about costs. Support declined in direct proportion to lower living standards. While concerned about economic conditions, Russians were not pessimistic. They did not expect rapid improvement, yet did not think things would get worse. Participants were increasingly dissatisfied with domestic politics, anxious for change, less willing to put their faith in a strong leader, and demanded redistributive justice.

If the spring data seem to track with a global trend of anti-elite populism, [focus groups](#) in

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<sup>2</sup> If the event slides in the link have been disabled, I would be happy to share them with anyone who would like to see them.

the fall reported by Dmitriev and Nikol'skaia revealed more surprising results. The authors conclude that "the anchor chain has come loose" and the "post-Crimea period" is over. Findings included:

- Increasingly "negative views of authorities (*vlast'*) in general and its higher echelons in particular."
- A greater sense of personal responsibility, both locally and for the nation.
- Negative opinions of official media and a desire for changes in values.
- Survival values that dominated in 2015-6 (food, clothing, and housing) giving way to demands for distributive justice and procedural fairness.
- Populism being superseded by modernization and [postmaterialist](#) values.

Autumn focus groups indicated Russians have become more pessimistic since 2015-16. Two-thirds (68 percent) stated that in the next five years conditions will either remain the same or become worse. Yet when asked what they want in a future Russia, the most frequent responses were respect (80 percent), freedom (75 percent), peace, certainty about the future, humanized authority (*chelovechnaia vlast'*), and eliminating total control. Their preference is for a leader who does not concentrate power, but rather pushes the elite to appreciate the value of individuals' self-realization. Despite the pessimism, in the focus groups, 63 percent expressed willingness to invest in the country's future, pay higher taxes, participate in philanthropy, perform voluntary service, and engage in civic activity. Asked if they would tolerate disruptions resulting from reforms to alleviate the economic problems, 76 percent would accept conditions temporarily being worse to achieve the goal.

Perhaps more alarming for the regime, these focus groups revealed that **trust in official media** peaked at 70 percent in 2015, and declined to 47 percent in November 2018. Half of Russians now rely on social media and their friends for "real" news, even if they still watch state television. It has long been reported that Russians have lost faith in the authorities; Dmitriev's data indicate that people now believe "the authorities have lost faith in them."

Dissatisfaction with "the authorities" came through vividly in three Autumn Moscow focus groups composed of government employees: one with university faculty and Academy of Sciences researchers, another with traffic safety staff, and a third with theater personnel. All report receiving adequate salaries, but are infuriated by cuts in program funding, increased workloads due to staff reductions, and petty bureaucratic tutelage. Their complaints emphasize conditions that make it impossible to work effectively. Dmitriev et al. find these concerns legitimate, demonstrating "the general problem of state management: low quality, insufficient feedback in taking decisions, and incompetence when undertaking complex institutional reforms." The regime's increased emphasis on administrative control, [documented](#) by political analysts Nikolai Petrov and Kirill Rogov, exacerbates the problems.

While the shift in mass consciousness resembles the situation in 2011-2012, Dmitriev et al. perceive the 2018 changes as “more fundamental.” In the Medvedev era, modernization rhetoric stimulated the values shift. In 2018, the shift “happened not thanks to, but despite the position of official media.” One consequence is that Russian domestic propaganda is losing some of its effectiveness. The regime has not adequately calculated Russians’ declining willingness to pay for regaining international influence and territories. Seemingly transfixed by public approval for the return of Crimea, Russia’s leaders have ignored data indicating the limits of jingoism. [Polls](#) taken in 2015 indicated Russians overwhelmingly approved regaining Crimea, but less than 20 percent accepted paying to rebuild the region and fewer than 10 percent were willing to have their sons fight in Ukraine.

In Dmitriev’s October-November 2018 focus groups, 58 percent of participants responded affirmatively to a question asking if Russia’s foreign policy is “aggressive” (they were not asked if aggression is a “good” or “bad” policy).

Dmitriev and his colleagues offer three possible future scenarios based on their focus group data:

1. A return to “rally round the flag” in an atmosphere of growing international tensions, as after Crimea.
2. Retreat from anti-elite sentiments in the face of economic problems (although the authors note that populism inevitably fades because it fails to solve economic problems.)
3. A stable and growing shift to new values.

They conclude by suggesting that the values shift in the third scenario could put Russia at the forefront of reversing the populist trend. By de-archaizing (*dearkhaizatsiiu*) values,” Russia could outstrip “most of the developed countries in these changes.”

In an [interview](#) in May 2019, Dmitriev reported more recent data confirming the trends identified in the Autumn 2018 focus groups. He reinforced the point that the 2018-19 opinion shift is unique. Both perestroika and the 2011-12 protests came in response to initiatives from above. The current demand for leaders who listen comes from below.

### **Leadership Ratings & Foreign Conflicts**

While critics question drawing broad conclusions from focus groups, the Dmitriev et al. findings are reinforced by recent surveys indicating increased awareness of aggression’s costs.

Economist Paul Gregory in *Forbes* magazine [focused](#) on the domestic implications of Putin’s military adventures. When Putin became prime minister in August 1999, the

Levada Center found his approval rating at 31 percent, while 37 percent of Russians had never heard of him. Following the apartment bombings and second Chechen War (1999), Putin's approval reached 84 percent. The cost was tens of thousands killed and wounded, and 200,000 displaced persons.

The 2008 war with Georgia boosted Putin's approval rating to 88 percent, and it stayed in the high 70s despite an eight percent drop in GNP in 2009. The human price was the 800 casualties in five days of fighting.

In January 2014, Putin's approval rating was 61 percent, while 29 percent of Russians said that they would vote for him again. Annexing Crimea pushed his approval rating into the 80 percent range. If United Nations conservative estimates of casualties are correct, each one-point increase in Putin's rating cost 1,000 dead or wounded, and 20,000 people displaced.

Gregory wrote his analysis before the Syria intervention. The price there has been enormous. Most Russians do not know the exact numbers, but many do have a sense of the financial and human costs. Recent [polls](#) favor peaceful resolution of conflicts and reveal less concern for great power status.

Levada Center analyst Denis Volkov [found](#) that Russians attribute Russia's budgetary difficulties to excessive spending on the football World Cup, the Sochi Olympics, and the war in Syria. In September 2018, Volkov [reported](#) that the number dissatisfied with Russia's "aggressive stance" has been growing: 22 percent approved in March 2016, but just 16 percent in July 2018. He found: "People want the authorities to focus on domestic growth and spend money 'at home.' Foreign policy is increasingly being perceived as one of the main obstacles on the path to the desired development of the country."

Russians are increasingly concerned about conflict with the West. In May 2018, 56 percent [expressed](#) uneasiness about Russia's isolation in international affairs. The number stating that Putin is defending the country's interests is declining. Vokov reports that in focus [groups](#), some participants stated that "he focuses only on foreign policy," "he helps other countries too much," and "he spends too much on defence." Other comments included: "Russian authorities should have revised current budget spending, and taken other steps, before increasing the retirement age." They should "make do with less," "start living within their means," and "cut spending" on arms, on the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, on military operations in Syria, and even on Crimea. Respondents added that these steps could have made it unnecessary to raise the retirement age.

Levada [data](#) from mid-April 2019 showed 51 percent approving Russia's policy in Syria, while 35 percent disapproved. However, when asked if Russia should end its military operations in Syria, 55 percent said yes and just 30 percent said no. Levada Center [surveys](#) in May 2019 indicate that the economic impact of sanctions is having less influence on

public opinion than the broader shift in consciousness/values. Russians want an end to the aggressive foreign policy due to their values more than for economic relief.

These data point to a sharp change in social mood over the past year. The authors of [short articles](#) edited by Rogov state that while pension reform stimulated the shift, it goes much deeper. They write: “Continuing stagnation in the economy and lower incomes have undermined confidence in the regime, and foreign policy mobilization and propaganda no longer compensate for the ‘economic negative.’” Government reliance on repression and administrative measures to stave off organized resistance threatens the regime’s legitimacy, making it more difficult to solve the 2024 succession problem.

The Kremlin is also having more difficulty controlling the information media space. Trust in TV news has declined since the Crimean annexation, and especially since the pension reform. According to government pollster VTsIOM, in 2015 a majority of Russians [stated](#) that they did not trust official media. When [asked](#) which information sources people trusted most, in April 2015 some 63 percent said television; in January 2019 only 36 percent trusted television. The number expressing trust in the Internet and social media increased from 19 percent to 31 percent. Among Russians under 30, 57 percent said that they rely on Internet news sites. While 48 percent said they watched TV news, a majority do not trust it. Another indication of the shifting media landscape is that Aleksandr Gorbunov, the wheelchair blogger whose sardonic satire critiques Russian authorities, has 1.1 million [followers](#) on Twitter, about double the number of RT chief Margarita Simonyan.

Russia’s leaders likely receive but downplay data indicating that their energetic foreign policies are becoming less popular. They might again try a “short victorious war” – a [case made](#) by Leon Aron, Director of Russian Studies at the American Enterprise Institute. Russia’s first “short victorious wars” took place when Interior Minister Vyacheslav Plehve decided to provoke Japan in 1904. This produced the first modern instance of a European power losing a war to an Asian country. For Putin, embarking on a new foreign military campaign (or escalating a current one) is the most risky option, but nevertheless remains an option. The good news is that Russian elites are talking frankly about the risks. The bad news is that the decision most likely will be made by one individual.

Carnegie Moscow Center Director Dmitri Trenin [captured](#) some of the growing demand for more public discussion about foreign policy, calling for a “rethinking.” His emphasis on China, while meshing with Putin’s current priorities, ignores the data on Russians’ “modern” values, which are far closer to Europe than to Xi’s China.

Witnessing the peaceful transition of power in Ukraine has had an impact in Russia. Still, Volkov finds that most Russians view Russia’s role in Ukraine and Syria as helping to restore order, not as military intervention. However, with declining real incomes and the raised pension age, people are hesitant about foreign campaigns, especially when they appear open-ended. Carnegie Moscow Center analyst Andrei Kolesnikov’s early 2019

data [reinforce](#) this finding: Most Russians regard Russia's military operations as less important than the nation's internal needs.

### Glimpsing a Post-Putin World

Recent surveys, reports, and articles describe changing social attitudes and values, encouraging analysts to ponder an eventual post-Putin world. Recent election results in Ukraine and Slovakia raise the [question](#) of why transitions of power in Russia are not based on genuine electoral mandates.

These data provide a useful counterpoint to the recent media headlines proclaiming 70 percent of Russians are supportive of Stalin. The April 2019 Levada Center [poll](#) set off a backlash. On April 16, RT [summarized](#) the Levada findings, noting: "As many as 70 percent consider Stalin's role in Russia's history 'rather positive.'" Three days later, as if to compensate, RT followed up with VTsIOM [data](#) indicating that while a majority of Russians respect Stalin, just five percent would like to live in the 1930s era of industrialization and repression. In contrast, 40 percent would prefer contemporary Russia, and 37 percent would like to return to the Brezhnev era.

A growing number of Russians would prefer an alternative to Putin. Levada [surveys](#) in March 2019 reported 41 percent of respondents asked to name who they would vote for if a presidential election were held that week named Putin. The same number said that they trust Putin, slightly better than 39 percent in September 2018 but well below the 59 percent in September 2017. How Russians might get accountable leadership remains vague. As with public opinion in the final years of the Soviet Union, broad agreement regarding the need for change and shared dissatisfaction with the current regime mask stark differences in views of Russia's future.

How should policymakers respond to the rapid shifts in Russian public opinion? Recent data suggest it would be beneficial to maximize the costs of any additional "aggressive" Kremlin actions. Sanctions are effective if applied consistently, especially considering that the [most serious impact](#) of Western sanctions will come in the next decade. This should be accompanied by every possible means, particularly social media, to help Russians receive detailed information about their country's foreign policies and the economic costs these policies impose on them.