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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Poll Finds Stark Public Divide Over Putin

By The Moscow Times

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Vladimir Putin trying to judge an arm wrestling match while visiting the Lake Seliger youth camp in August 2011. **Mikhail Metzel**

The success and possible future undoing of President Vladimir Putin lies in the contrast between people like provincial housewife Yekaterina Arsentyeva and Moscow student Kirill Guskov.

In the southern city of Rostov-on-Don, Arsentyeva sees Putin as the only man who can ensure that her children have a decent future.

In the capital, Guskov can't hide his contempt for Putin and the culture of corruption he has overseen: "A fish rots from its head," he fumes.

An Associated Press-GfK poll released Monday reveals a stark divide between Moscow and the rest of Russia over the man who has ruled the country for the past 12 years.

A total of 60 percent of Russians maintain a favorable opinion of the president as he begins

his third term.

In contrast, only 38 percent in the capital, where tens of thousands have joined anti-Putin protests, have a favorable view of him.

The division extends to views on the fairness of elections and the state of the economy, while almost all agree that corruption is among the most serious problems facing Russia today.

The split promises to have profound, albeit still unknown, consequences for the future of the protest movement and of Putin himself.

The outcome depends in large part on the economy, which the poll shows is the primary concern of most Russians.

пWhile anger over the trampling of democratic rights has brought Muscovites out to protest in droves, any deterioration in living standards could prove the catalyst for protests in the provinces. Hikes this month in utilities prices have the potential to cause broad discontent.

The mood in the hinterlands may also change as more people gain access to the Internet and the social networks that have been crucial to the rise of the protest movement in Moscow and other large cities.

For now, people like Arsentyeva, 39, have no sympathy for the protest movement and the educated, urban professionals who have been its driving force.

"If they don't like our country, why do they live here? Let them go to Europe or America and express their dissatisfaction there," she said. Her hopes are pinned firmly on Putin.

"My husband works in a good company that is growing, we have a stable income, I can easily buy diapers, soap, anything my children need and I don't have to stand in line or run around in search of goods in short supply," said Arsentyeva, who is expecting her second child.

Her views reflect a deep-seated fear of social upheaval and a return to the turmoil of the 1990s.

Nikolai Petrov, who studies regional politics at the Carnegie Moscow Center, said Putin's popularity should be considered support for the existing order and not for Putin himself.

"The majority of Russians are still not ready to change the whole system," Petrov said.

Putin's rating on job performance hit a high of 81 percent as he wrapped up his second term in 2008, according to the Levada Center, which measures his current approval rating at 60 percent, about the same as the 58 percent registered in the AP-GfK poll. This differs from favorability rating, which seeks to measure overall impressions of a person.

After Putin won the March presidential election with 64 percent of the vote, protests prompted by disputed State Duma elections in December died away in much of the country, except in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

The AP-GfK poll indicates that Putin retains broad support, although only 18 percent

expressed a strongly favorable view of him.

The poll was conducted by GfK Roper from May 25 to June 10 and was based on in-person interviews with 1,675 randomly selected adults nationwide. The results have a margin of error of 2.9 percentage points.

At the other end of the spectrum, 14 percent expressed a somewhat or strongly unfavorable view. The majority falls in between, passively supportive but some increasingly cynical.

Magomed Abakarov, who works for the government in the Dagestani capital, Makhachkala, voted for Putin, but his support is tepid at best.

"I consider him a liar and a fake," Abakarov said. "Someday we'll know who the real Mr. Putin is, but under the current circumstances he is the best candidate for president. He can talk tough with the leader of any country."

The majority of Russians see their country as a stronger international power than it was before Putin became president in 2000, according to the poll.

Like many Russians, Abakarov said he voted for Putin because there was no viable alternative in a country where only Kremlin-approved candidates are allowed to run for president.

Putin has centralized control over the political system, preventing the emergence of independent political leaders and reducing parliament to a rubber stamp.

The presidency is now the only institution that at least half of Russians believe can be trusted to do what is right, according to the AP-GfK poll.

The military, still manned by conscripts, comes next, with the trust of 41 percent of respondents.

The parliament has the trust of only about a quarter of the people, and the same goes for the courts, which have been compromised by corrupt judges. Just 18 percent say they trust the police, who are notorious for shaking down motorists.

Corruption is among Russians' biggest concerns, with 91 percent of those surveyed in Moscow calling it a serious problem and almost as many, 85 percent, of those outside the capital saying the same.

Even though Putin has failed to deliver on repeated pledges to crack down on corrupt officials, most Russians don't hold him responsible.

Grigory Mikheyev, a 28-year-old systems administrator in Dalnegorsk, in the Far East's Primorye region, complained of a system of double standards.

"The laws seem fine, but they only apply to a select few," he said. "The simple people get punished, while the bureaucrats get rich."

Still, Mikheyev said he generally approves of Putin.

In keeping with the disparity between the capital and the rest of the country, Muscovites are

far more likely to see election fraud as a serious problem: 56 percent compared with 37 percent elsewhere.

Guskov, the 21-year-old Moscow student, expressed frustration over what he sees as Putin's one-man rule.

"He is still a tsar, and Russia is the kind of country where a lot depends on a single person," Guskov said. "But we as a people are trying to do something, so we go to protests and demonstrate our discontent."

A major factor behind the divergence between Moscow and the rest of Russia is that about half of those surveyed live in small towns and rural areas, where most people still get their news from the Kremlin-controlled national television networks.

Half of the respondents outside the capital said they do not use the Internet, compared with only 10 percent in Moscow.

Without access to the Internet, they have not seen the flood of videos purporting to show blatant vote rigging or read about alleged corruption in political and business circles close to Putin.

Without the Internet, many Russians are unlikely to know much about Alexei Navalny, a charismatic corruption fighter and blogger who is a leader of the anti-Putin protest movement.

In Moscow, only 15 percent said they had no opinion of Navalny, compared with 46 percent in the rest of the country.

This may change, however, as the number of Internet users rises steadily. The Public Opinion Foundation said 38 percent of Russians now use the Internet daily, up from 22 percent just two years ago.

Residents of Moscow also differ from the rest of their countrymen with their far more pessimistic view of Russia's oil-based economy, perhaps because they are more aware of the challenges ahead.

To consolidate his base ahead of the election, Putin promised higher wages and benefits to soldiers, police, doctors and teachers. He pledged to pump billions of dollars into ailing industrial plants and the military.

But economists warn that the additional spending is unsustainable if oil prices remain low. Russia is able to balance its budget if the Urals blend of oil stays above $115, but it is currently trading at closer to $90.

Sergei Mikheyev, an analyst at the Center for Political Technologies, said the economic troubles would have to be lasting and deep to drive people in the region out onto the streets.

"To make the regions rise up in a revolt, the oil price will need to take a dramatic toll on living standards, for example by making millions of people jobless," he said.

Petrov, the Carnegie scholar, is more pessimistic. He points to substantial hikes in the cost of heating and electricity that will begin to bite once the weather turns cold, coupled with unpopular new taxes and education reforms going into effect in September.

"We've witnessed a big wave of political protests, with Moscow as the leader, in big cities," Petrov said. "I don't think this political protest will go down to small towns, but in the fall there will be socioeconomic protests, and socioeconomic protests across the country combined with political protests in the big cities will create a deadly mix."

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