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Report Shows Plunging Support for Putin – and Protest Leaders

By Alexander Bratersky

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Respondents largely agreed that mass rallies would become bigger when serious opposition challengers would emerge.

Russians view the ruling elite as aggressive and predatory and believe that revolution is one of the only realistic ways to change the government, according to a report released Wednesday by an influential think tank.

The report, ordered by the Committee of Civic Initiatives, a group of political and economic experts led by former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin, also describes the apparent paradox of falling approval ratings for President Vladimir Putin and a drop in support for the anti-Kremlin protest movement that emerged 11 months ago.

Experts called the study biased, however, noting that it presents Kudrin himself as a trusted public leader and appears to overemphasize opposition views.

The 122-page report, titled "Changes in Russians' Political Sentiments After the Presidential Election," was prepared by the respected Center for Strategic Research, chaired by liberal economist Mikhail Dmitriyev.

The report based its findings on interviews with people of various ages and education levels in focus groups held in Moscow and regional cities including Vladimir, Samara and Novokuibyshevsk, a city of 100,000 people in the Samara region.

An overwhelming majority of those surveyed said they thought a political revolution was possible and even desirable. The study said this represented a shift from the spring, when a report by the same organization found that people harbored greater fears regarding the possible "excesses" of a popular uprising.

"A change of leadership through voting, against the will of the authorities, is not considered a realistic option by respondents. This opinion can be considered almost unanimous," the report said.

It said the protest movement has become more legitimate in the public's view, making mass demonstrations more likely in the case of a trigger such as a large-scale economic crisis.

Few respondents said they viewed change by way of succession as likely, as in the case of Putin's taking power in 2000 after the resignation of President Boris Yeltsin.

"If neither of those plays out, the most realistic scenario will be national extinction," said an op-ed describing the report published in Vedomosti on Wednesday written by Dmitriyev and his colleague Sergei Belanovsky.

"[And] that is the path the current Russian authorities are leading the country down," it said.

Alexei Mukhin, head of the Center for Political Information think tank, said that he thinks people want stability but that the current political discontent could be exploited to cause upheaval.

"People want political stability and economic well-being, but there are groups who are interested in disturbing the current situation," Mukhin said.

The report said that Putin's approval rating of 44 percent is nearly the lowest since his return to the presidency in March, when it stood at 55 percent, which it said represents the fast drop in his approval numbers since the early 2000s. It also said the majority of Russians are tired of Putin's PR efforts, such as his flight with migratory cranes last month.

Respondents likewise showed little enthusiasm for the current protest leaders and said the anti-government movement was hurt by their deficiencies.

"People are not ready to take part in protests organized by people whom they don't understand and who formulate discontent not in the way people feel it," said a 32-year-old man cited in the report.

In a clear attempt to present an alternative to Putin, the report asked respondents to give their opinion of three prominent political figures as potential leaders: First Deputy Prime Minister

Igor Shuvalov, considered a Kremlin liberal, hawkish Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, and Kudrin, a former member of Putin's inner circle who has attended opposition rallies since resigning as finance minister last September.

The report found that while Rogozin was mostly viewed negatively by respondents and Shuvalov was largely unknown, Kudrin was seen as a financial guru and among the few respected personalities in the ranks of Putin's elite. But many people said the soft-spoken Kudrin lacks leadership qualities.

Analysts said the fact that the report featured Kudrin so prominently showed that it was biased.

"It is embarrassing when a report is written to please the person who ordered it," said Oleg Matveichev, a conservative-leaning former presidential administration official and current professor at the Higher School of Economics.

Matveichev said people in the regions mostly support the current political course, even in the regions run by unpopular governors.

Mukhin, of the Center for Political Information, called the report "highly emotional" and said it had been influenced by an anti-Kremlin agenda prominent on the Internet.

Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, called the report's findings "apocalyptic" and said the authors' conclusions regarding public opinion were "wrong," Interfax reported Wednesday.

Regarding their views on government, a majority of respondents said the ideal authority would act as a "shepherd" who would combine the semi-socialist Belarussian economic model with qualities of a welfare state like Norway or Sweden.

The most vivid expression of people's feelings toward government was their response to a request to draw an animal they thought would best symbolize the authorities: 88 percent depicted a beast of prey or other aggressive animal, such as a wolf, lion or wild boar.

"The public is a dog that collects crumbs left by the boar-authorities from the table, and the boar knows that it [the dog] will eat them all up," one respondent said.

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