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Russians Feel That Great Power High – Again

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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President Vladimir Putin's ratings first peaked in the mid-2000s, hit a low during the mass protests of 2011 to 2012, and have now reached record highs.

But will the rising price of utilities and foodstuffs burst this bubble of enthusiasm over the annexation of Crimea and bring Putin's popularity ratings plummeting back down to 60 percent or so by fall? Or is Putin formulating a new "social contract" with the Russian people?

The "nation of consumers" that arose in the boom years of the 2000s has shifted its focus. It is now elated that the country has extended its influence and strength onto the global arena.

His first social contract in the early and mid-2000s was based on the principle that most Russians would accept the government's restrictions on personal freedoms and democracy as long as they received higher standards of living. Now, judging by the results of a recent Levada Center poll, most Russians have shifted their focus to another value: returning Russia to its great-power status. It seems that the ruling regime has found its political "second wind," and if this wind continues to blow for the next couple of years, Putin's re-election in the 2018 presidential race is all but a given.

According to a Levada Center poll from April 24 to 29 among 1,602 Russians, Putin's approval ratings soared to 83 percent following the annexation of Crimea. And as Putin's popularity rocketed, so did the ratings of a host of related government institutions as well. Sixty-two percent of respondents expressed approval for Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, and 60 percent approved of the Cabinet.

According to the poll, if the presidential election was held today, Putin would easily win at least 70 percent of the vote, while United Russia — the ruling party that not long ago seemed to have exhausted its popularity — could count on 60 percent, four times more than its closest rival, the Communist Party. The new State Duma would include only one more party in addition to those two, the Liberal Democratic Party, and United Russia would once again secure a constitutional majority — this time without any need to falsify election results.

Why did the annexation of Crimea have such a powerful mobilizing effect and strengthen the position of the Kremlin so much at a time when economic growth has stopped, capital flight has reached record levels, the ruble is falling and prices are rising?

The reason, it would seem, is simple: The "nation of consumers" that arose in the boom years of the 2000s, which followed the chaotic and lean years of the 1990s, wants to see the country extend its influence and strength onto the global arena.

The triumphant annexation of Crimea enabled Russians to once again feel that they live in a country that is a great global power. The authorities further fueled that long-forgotten sense of greatness with extensive television coverage of military exercises, the May 9 military parade in Moscow and a demonstration of the new missile defense system near Moscow that officials claim can repel a nuclear attack against the capital.

According to the April Levada Center poll, the overwhelming majority of respondents — 90 percent — welcomed the decision to annex Crimea with feelings of joy, approval, national pride and the sense that a historical injustice had been corrected. Only 3 percent of those polled experienced feelings of fear and anxiety, and only 0.6 percent felt shame, despair and outrage over the move.

At the same time, it is safe to assume that Russians are aware that the annexation of Crimea comes at a high political and economic cost. But judging by how Russians answered the poll questions, it doesn't seem that they are particularly worried about the high cost of linking the Crimean peninsula to Russia, nor are they concerned about the negative consequences that the West's economic sanctions will have on the country's economy.

There also seems to be support for new territorial acquisitions under the pretext of protecting Russian-speaking populations in former Soviet republics. For example, 46 percent

of Russians favor annexing the self-proclaimed Transdnestr republic, according to the April poll.

Finally, 60 percent of respondents believe that if the people of Donetsk and Luhansk vote in referendums to secede from Ukraine and join Russia just as Crimea did, Russia should comply with their wishes. Putin will surely keep this statistic in mind as he considers his next moves in eastern and southern Ukraine.

According to the new social contract that has emerged after the Crimean annexation, the majority of Russians support Putin's pursuit of Russia's great-power status. By extension, that means most Russians have given their consent to the creation of the Eurasian Union, the formulation of a new corporatist state ideology, a rejection of political and economic reforms, increased military spending, greater isolation from the West and a shift toward China in an attempt to form a political, economic — and perhaps eventually even military — Moscow-Beijing coalition against the West.

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