The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

In Ukraine, West's 'Terrorists' Are Russia's Heroes

By Alexey Eremenko

July 27, 2014



A Donetsk People's Republic fighter throwing a water bottle to colleagues as they arrive at gas station to refuel their tank in eastern Ukraine this month.

If President Vladimir Putin is facing the biggest international backlash of his 14-year reign, it is because he has — in the eyes of the West — violated the one great taboo of the post-9/11 world: supporting terrorism. The problem is, viewed from a Russian perspective, Putin has done nothing of the sort.

It would be impossible to understand the Kremlin's stance on Ukraine without first taking into account the fact that the pro-Russian rebels branded "terrorists" in Western discourse are widely seen in Russia as noble freedom fighters.

Parallels can easily be drawn to the way the Islamic terrorists vilified in the West have been revered by their many followers at home — think Hamas in the 1980s. But possibly a better analogy can be found in the legacy of Che Guevara, who, prior to reaching posthumous

superstardom, had been a communist icon loathed and hunted by the CIA as a public enemy.

In light of this global failure to see eye to eye, Putin is left without the option of abandoning the pro-Russian uprising even if he wanted to, as doing so would brand him a traitor, backstabbing the nation's heroes, experts and activists told The Moscow Times.

"It has already been said that the new Russian generation is not 'Putin's generation,' but '[rebel leader Igor] Strelkov's generation,'" Russian nationalist ideologue Egor Prosvirnin said Sunday.

'Soldiers of the Empire'

Prosvirnin, whose vehement but glossy website Sputnik & Pogrom arguably launched Russian nationalism into the mainstream, is an ardent acolyte of Strelkov's.

Sputnik & Pogrom compares the "legendary" rebel commander with Tyler Durden, the nonconformist rebel star of cult movie "Fight Club," and likens him and his "Steel Russians" to the 300 Spartans.

The website offers posters with heroic images of Strelkov, a self-proclaimed monarchist, historical re-enactor and alleged veteran of the FSB, whose diminutive mustache and retreating chin lend him an eerie resemblance to Syrian President Bashar Assad.

The site also raised funds for "the soldiers of the Russian Empire" in late May, collecting 870,000 rubles ($25,000) in one day.

They are far from alone: Russian social networks Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki teem with rebel support groups, many boasting tens of thousands of followers — though devotees often subscribe to more than one group.

Donation drives for the rebels have taken place across dozens of Russian cities, from Moscow and St. Petersburg to Tomsk in Siberia and Russia's Pacific outpost of Vladivostok.

Up to 200 tons of humanitarian aid meant for rebel-held territories passes through the coordination center in Russia's Rostov-on-Don each day, Prosvirnin said. The figure could not be independently verified.

Russian state media has also done its part to glorify the rebels, especially in the early stage of the insurrection in April and May, said political analyst Pavel Salin of the government-affiliated, Moscow-based Financial University.

Respect, Hope & Sympathy

Prosvirnin said in an interview with The Moscow Times that "rebels are heroes for the absolute majority of the Russian population."

But Salin warned that nationalists may be overly optimistic in this regard.

"People like Strelkov are known only to a politically active minority who get their news online," Salin said.

Still, the rebels do enjoy considerable backing among the Russian public, according to a recent poll by the state-run VTsIOM.

Respect, hope and sympathy were the dominant emotions Russians had toward the insurgents, named by 39, 22 and 19 percent of the respondents in the survey respectively. Only 4 percent denounced them, and 7 percent professed indifference.

The nationwide poll, which covered 1,600 respondents and had a margin of error of 3.4 percentage points, was conducted days before the destruction of a Malaysian jet over Ukraine's rebel-controlled east, which killed 298.

The incident was largely blamed in the West on the rebels and their alleged backer, Moscow, and has solidified the Western view of the insurgents as terrorists.

The impact of the crash on Russian public opinion remains to be seen. Russian media has toned down the glorification of the rebels since hopes for their blitzkrieg victory failed to pan out, but coverage remains highly complimentary, said Salin.

While individual rebel leaders may not be as popular as the nationalists believe, the insurgency in general is definitely embraced by the Russian masses, said Nikolai Petrov, a political analyst with the Higher School of Economics in Moscow.

"The people justify placing sympathies in the confrontation by glorifying 'our guys' while closing the eyes to the bad things they do," Petrov said.

Betraying the Heroes

The insurgency's popularity leaves Putin — whose approval rating has soared against the backdrop of his support of the rebellion — hostage to public opinion at home, Petrov said.

The president's approval rating currently stands at 83 percent, the highest showing since 2008, according to a survey by U.S. pollster Gallup held between April and early June. The study polled 2,000 Russians and had a margin of error of 2.7 percentage points.

But as the insurgency bogs down and Western pressure mounts, the Kremlin is looking for ways to disassociate itself from the rebels — without alienating a public that holds the insurgency in such high esteem, experts said.

Analysts interviewed for this story declined to elaborate on the extent of negative implications for Putin in case he "betrays" the nation's heroes.

But Petrov pointed out that a similar ideological U-turn in Ukraine triggered the string of protests that led in February to the ousting of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych, who abandoned a planned association agreement with the EU only days ahead of its signing last fall in favor of a snap alliance with Russia.

"Putin is definitely aware of how it worked out for Yanukovych," Petrov said.

Contact the author at a.eremenko@imedia.ru

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/07/27/in-ukraine-wests-terrorists-are-russias-heroes-a37717