

Doctored Public Opinion Shapes Kremlin's Ukraine Policy

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Russians and Westerners have diametrically opposed interpretations of the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, recent polls demonstrate, and that determines the decisions taken by policy-makers on both sides, analysts told The Moscow Times on Tuesday.

According to a poll released by the independent Levada Center on Tuesday, 64 percent of Russians blame the West for stirring up conflict in eastern Ukraine, while 27 percent think it is the result of local protests against the central authorities in Kiev, or of its nationalist policies. Only 3 percent of Russians believe that the conflict is due to Russian interference in Ukraine's affairs. The poll was conducted among 1,600 respondents with a margin of error not surpassing 3.4 percent.

Another poll released by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs last week revealed that

international public opinion of Russia has fallen to levels not seen since the Cold War, which is likely "a result of the Ukraine crisis." Only 36 percent of Americans view Russia favorably, the lowest number since 1986, while three in 10 Americans favor sending troops to Ukraine in case Russia invades it. The survey was conducted among 2,108 people with the margin of error not exceeding 2.1 percent.

These results have extensive policy implications: The different sides in the conflict have become hostages to the public opinion that they agitated in order to take a belligerent position against each other when the crisis had just started, according to Gleb Pavlovsky, head of the Effective Politics Foundation and former political advisor to President Vladimir Putin's administration.

"The media machine is working under its own momentum now and nobody knows how to control it," Pavlovsky said in a phone interview.

Propaganda Works

More than 29 percent of Russians get their news from the Internet, according to a survey conducted by the state-run Public Opinion Foundation and released late May. The poll was conducted among 1,500 respondents with the margin of error not exceeding 3.6 percent. At the same time, only 1 percent of Russians following news about Ukraine told Gallup that they do not use state media to get information on what is happening there. The Gallup poll was released Friday and was conducted among 2,000 people with a margin of error of 2.7 percent.

Despite the Internet's divergence of news sources and opinions, the Russian government has succeeded in making its own position on the Ukraine crisis central in the public discourse, according to Alexander Morozov, head of the Moscow Media Research Center.

"The Kremlin has built its propaganda around the idea that supporting its policy is the right thing to do, morally, and nobody wants to be immoral. Every human being wants to be on the side of good, not evil: The trick is convincing them what the good side is," Morozov told The Moscow Times in a phone interview.

In the mainstream Russian media's portrayal of the Ukraine conflict, the pro-Russian insurgents are portrayed as heroes fighting the forces of evil personified by the Ukrainian government. As a consequence, it is difficult to know what people really think themselves, as "they live in an imaginary world, where events in Ukraine are like a movie where you are led to take one side over the other," Morozov said.

Vasily Gatov, an independent media researcher, said that the mass media outlets offer a template that defines people's "comfort zones" in respect to attitudes to developments in Ukraine.

"As a consequence, for most people, there is no need to turn on critical thinking, or, as psychologists say, assert their own consciousness," Gatov told The Moscow Times.

For many Russians the picture presented by the state media offers psychological comfort. By supporting that position, people do not feel like they ought to act, and it calms them down,

according to Fyodor Krashenninikov, president of the Institute of Development and Modernization of Social Connections.

"The government stimulates conformism in society, while federal media outlets act as fast food delivered to people's homes. You do not have to do much to access it," Krashenninikov said in a phone interview.

Control of the Mainstream

Krashenninikov argued that the "party of the Internet" that was largely behind the wave of mass protests in Russia in 2011 to 2012 no longer exists. According to Morozov, this is due to the government's ability to shape the mainstream.

"During the course of the Ukraine crisis, the state has been able to put what was marginal before into the center and make it mainstream. Look at all the authors and ideas of Eurasianism and radical nationalism that were rejected as eccentric before and are now accepted as standard in the media," he said.

Many of the Internet media outlets and public figures that were critical of the Kremlin in 2011 to 2012 — both liberal and nationalist-leaning — switched sides as the crisis over Ukraine and Crimea unfolded, offering the government another degree of legitimacy.

See also:

[19 Civilians Killed as Fighting Rages in Eastern Ukraine](#)

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