

Can Putin's Popularity Last?

By [Samuel Greene](#)

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The confusion surrounding so much of Russia's involvement in Crimea and eastern Ukraine as well as the ensuing descent into confrontation with the West gives way to crystalline clarity in only one area: President Vladimir Putin is once again genuinely popular in Russia.

A survey conducted by the independent Levada Center pollster in August put Putin's current approval rating at 85.5 percent, a number that would cause suspicion in just about any other political context.

Nevertheless, despite questions about how honest Russians are willing to be in expressing their political affinities to pollsters, there is little reason to doubt the shift in public opinion.

Russians have rallied around the flag. It is a common occurrence in countries that find themselves at war or something akin to it, and so it is far from surprising that international conflict should have a galvanizing effect on Russian political sentiment, too.

But a closer look at the data reveals the magnitude of both Putin's achievement and the risks he may soon face.

Since September 2013, the University of North Carolina, in collaboration with the Russia Institute at King's College London, has been studying the evolution of political, economic and social sentiment among those Russians most likely to oppose Putin's rule: educated and at least moderately prosperous city-dwellers.

The key finding from our most recent survey, conducted in July of this year, is the extent to which even these Russians — Putin's toughest audience — have flocked to his side.

While only 48 percent of our sample supported Putin in October 2013, 75 percent did in July 2014.

The proportion who said Russia's leaders made them feel hopeful about the future doubled in the same period, reaching 44 percent, while the number who said they were angry at Russia's leaders halved, to 18 percent.

The annexation of Crimea and ensuing conflict with the West — backed by a hefty dose of propaganda through state-controlled media — have accomplished what the Kremlin's earlier attempts at restoring Putin's popularity could not: They have invigorated and increased Putin's support base.

In the aftermath of the controversial 2011 parliamentary elections and the protest movements that followed, the Kremlin and United Russia sought to stop the bleeding by turning to an agenda of values.

Talking loudly about restricting gay rights, the importance of the role of the Orthodox Church and other "traditional values," Putin's political team successfully marginalized the opposition and ensured the support of a core, conservative electorate.

But those who had fled the Kremlin's camp in 2011 to 2012 were largely written off: They would never, it was assumed, come back to the fold. The conflict over Ukraine has changed that, as our data illustrate. Some 39 percent of those respondents who said they did not vote for Putin in 2012 now told us they would.

Some 60 percent of a sample containing two groups — those who voted for liberal Mikhail Prokhorov and communist Gennady Zyuganov in 2012, as well as those who did not vote at all in 2013 — had a more favorable opinion of Putin in July 2014 than in October 2013.

But while more people now think the country is on the right track than before, our respondents' evaluations of how the country is governed, of personal and national prosperity, and of prospects for the Russian economy have not improved appreciably.

This suggests a troubling conclusion for Putin: While he would win an election in a landslide were it held next Sunday, the actual election is in 2018, and voters' patriotic euphoria over Crimea will eventually subside.

Republicans in the United States learned this lesson about public opinion the hard way. U.S. President George W. Bush's approval ratings hit 90 percent in the weeks after Sept. 11, 2001, but began receding almost immediately thereafter, struggling to remain above 50 percent by 2004, according to polls by Gallup.

Putin is thus not doing himself any favors by forcing ordinary Russian citizens to share in the pain that Western sanctions have imposed on the country's political and economic elite.

Sanctions were relatively easy to shrug off when they hurt mostly the super-rich, affecting most average citizens only through a moderate increase in the cost of capital.

But the Russian government's retaliatory measures — banning the import of European and American food — will quickly bring the cost of confrontation home to Russians.

Notwithstanding snide comments about the hardships of life without prosciutto and Parmesan cheese, the rapid removal of significant supplies of imported produce and processed food has already caused prices to soar even for staples, including milk, potatoes and bread — hitting hardest, ironically, pensioners and the rural poor, who are among Putin's staunchest supporters.

The middle-class has been hit by the government's confiscation of three years of pension-fund assets to pay for the absorption of Crimea and cover the widening fiscal deficit.

Returning Crimea to the Russian Federation has undoubtedly given a second lease on life to Putin's goal of being a truly national leader, rescuing his popularity from slow but inexorable decline.

But if this is to be anything more than a blip on the charts, he will now have to find a way to return food to the shelves and money to people's pockets.

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