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Poll Shows Russians Divided on Democracy's Meaning, Importance

By Allison Quinn

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A boy looking out of a voting booth at a polling station in the Crimean port of Sevastopol earlier this month.

Democracy is important to most Russians, but they can't seem to agree on what exactly it is, according to a survey published Monday.

In the survey, conducted by the state-run pollster Public Opinion Foundation and published by the Kommersant newspaper Monday, 63 percent of respondents said it was important for Russia to have democracy, while another 16 percent said it made no difference to them personally whether Russia was ruled by a democratic system or not.

Twenty-seven percent of respondents said Russia's most democratic period was the current one, under President Vladimir Putin, while another 12 percent said Putin's previous two terms were more democratic.

Putin has faced harsh criticism from the West in recent months over ongoing events in Ukraine. Russia's annexation of Crimea in March and accusations of Russian support for separatists in eastern Ukraine have prompted some Western leaders to compare Putin to a tyrant.

But many respondents to the poll seemed to disagree, with one-third saying Russia currently had "as much democracy as is necessary."

Twenty-two percent said there was not much democracy in the country and that transparency and free speech were lacking. Another 11 percent said there is too much democracy, lamenting the fact that "everything is permitted, and everyone does what they want," Kommersant reported.

The poll's results also revealed that there was no common consensus on what exactly democracy entailed, with 43 percent of respondents saying democracy meant "transparency, free speech and free elections" as well as "upholding human rights," while another 12 percent described it as ordinary citizens taking part in the country's management.

Another third of respondents said they could not define democracy.

Analyst Grigory Kertman expressed skepticism about the survey's results in comments to Kommersant, saying most respondents were just giving the "socially acceptable response."

"For all the predictability and manageability of the elections, people value the right to vote," Kertman said, adding, however, that for most people elections were nothing more than a "form of dialogue with the authorities."

Contact the author at a.quinn@imedia.ru

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