

Russians Divided on Whether to Blame Sanctions, Oil or Crimea for Economic Hardship

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November 28, 2014



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Russians are split on whether to blame price rises, deteriorating quality of life and a worsening of Russia's economic health on Moscow's annexation of Crimea or on Western sanctions, a poll found, in a sign that economic woes could undermine support for President Vladimir Putin's policies.

Russia's economy is being roiled by shocks: The ruble plunged to historic lows against the U.S. dollar on Friday as the price of oil, Russia's key export, fell to \$70 per barrel — its cheapest in four years.

Western sanctions on Moscow over the Ukraine crisis have helped push Russia's economy to the edge of recession, and inflation, prodded by the ruble's devaluation, has soared to nearly 9 percent.

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But Russians are divided on what to blame. Forty-five of respondents said they were a result of falling oil prices; 33 percent said Western sanctions were to blame; while another 30 percent pinned responsibility on the cost of Russia's annexation of Crimea.

Moscow has pledged over 600 billion rubles (\$13 billion) from the federal budget to the Black Sea peninsula to rebuild decaying infrastructure and integrate the region into the greater Russian economy by 2020 — spending it can ill afford.

Twenty-six percent of respondents said corruption in government and problems such as failure to reform the backward Soviet industrial base were behind the economy's sorry state.

President Vladimir Putin's rating has risen above 80 percent on the back of Russia's interventions in Ukraine. But while Russians may applaud their country's successes in great-power politics, Putin's key achievement has been to preside over a period of rapidly increasing national wealth.

Such growth will now be difficult to achieve, as sanctions drain the economy of money and cheaper oil deprives it of revenue. In August, real wages in Russia fell for the first time since the crisis of 2009.

On the topic of Western sanctions and their impact on daily life, 50 percent of respondents said they had not caused them any trouble; 31 percent said that they had not experienced “serious difficulties,” and only 16 percent reported having major problems.

The survey was conducted on Nov. 14 to 17. It polled 1,600 people in 134 cities across Russia.

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Original url:

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