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How Putin Managed to Dodge the Blame for Russia's Recession

By Ivan Nechepurenko

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People walk past a board showing currency exchange rates in Moscow, Jan 26.

The economy may be in serious trouble, but Russians continue to trust and support President Vladimir Putin, and analysts say this is because he represents the focal point of the "symbolic unity" of the Russian nation.

Putin is associated with Russia's overall pride as a nation rather than anything immediately connected with everyday life, such as inflation, recession or the ruble exchange rate, they said.

According to the most recent survey by the independent pollster Levada Center, Putin's support rating has remained at 85 percent during the last three months.

The poll, released last week, was conducted among 1,600 respondents with a margin of error not exceeding 3.4 percent.

Throughout his 15 years at the center of Russian political life, Putin's rating has never dropped below an enviable 60 percent, according to Levada.

"There is no other country whose leader has had an approval rating of above 60 percent for more than 15 years, and these figures are not manipulated," said Alexei Levinson, senior researcher at the Levada Center.

At the same time, 2014 was the first year since 2000 — when Putin first became president — that Russians' real incomes shrank. The annual drop was estimated by Rosstat, the state statistics service, at 1 percent, while in December alone real incomes fell 7.3 percent compared with the same month in 2013.

Putin's steady popularity has always been almost universally attributed by experts to economic stability and fast-rising living standards under his rule. So why is he still popular now when this is no longer the case?

Embodiment of Russia

Russian people have always seen Putin as being responsible for nonmaterial aspects of life, for the state itself as a concept that unites the country and forms people's identities as being part of a larger group, Levinson said in a phone interview.

"In this sense, Putin's approval rating is a direct reflection of people's need for symbolic unity and integration in one large community," he said.

This phenomenon was only reinforced by the annexation of Crimea last year, and by international condemnation of that and the ongoing Ukraine crisis.

The feelings of euphoria that greeted Crimea's annexation in Russia last March may be giving way to the grim sense of being in a besieged fortress, but this means that sanctions have actually had the opposite result to that intended: Russians have become more consolidated around Putin, experts agreed.

"Russian society has begun to position itself in opposition to the outside world. This situation, in which people feel they are surrounded by enemies, has only strengthened people's thirst for symbolic solidarity," said Levinson.

The same people who tell sociologists that they support him also say that there is no personality cult around the president. As a figurehead, sociologists say, he only personifies the Russian nation in terms of a single entity. When people say that they support Putin, for them it simply means that they support Russia.

"Russians are attempting to boost their self-esteem right now," Lev Gudkov, head of the Levada Center, told the Noviye Izvestia newspaper last week.

The pro-Kremlin media only reinforces this connection between Putin and people's self-esteem, according to Levinson.

Lucky Charm

While people don't see Putin's power as divine or supernatural, they do believe he is lucky for the country, said Alexei Makarkin, deputy director of the Moscow-based Center for Political Technologies think tank.

During the last 15 years, Russians have begun to believe that Putin is lucky because many crises have been resolved, he said.

"[Annexing] Crimea has only strengthened the element of hope in people's attitudes toward Putin," Makarkin said.

"People think: Wise men said he would trip up over the war in Chechnya, or over the 2008-09 financial crisis, that everything would just fall apart — but this hasn't happened. So they think and hope, 'perhaps he knows some kind of secret?'" he said.

Putin himself once admitted that he is lucky. During his annual call-in show back in 2010, the president was asked if he was "just plain lucky."

"Yes," he answered, before adding: "But, to be serious, luck comes to those who work hard," he said.

How Long Will It Last?

Many Russians cannot imagine Russia without Putin, while in a time of falling real incomes, people see him as a protector, someone they can rely on, Makarkin added.

Analysts were divided about how long this situation will last. Makarkin said that Putin's own rating will remain steady in coming years, with other bodies such as the State Duma and Cabinet taking a hit from economic pain this year.

Yevgeny Minchenko, head of the International Institute for Political Expertise, believes that Putin's approval rating will go back to the 60s by the end of 2015.

"I don't think the present situation will last long, people will feel the full extent of economic hardship by the end of the year and this will inevitably make them feel disillusioned about Putin," he said.

Levinson said that Russian society has a natural need for a figure like Putin now.

This need will go away as people become more independent, he said, but it requires society to change, which is inevitably a long-term process.

"Our society was caught midway between the Soviet sense of the unity of big factories and Western market economies in which people are responsible for themselves. This circumstance is what makes people yearn for someone like Putin," he said.

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