The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

The Absurd World of Russian Public Opinion

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

February 25, 2015



Hurray! We are attacking! Thank God! Many are dead and wounded! Thank God!" Thus exclaimed "good soldier Svejk" from the eponymous immortal novel by Jaroslav Hasek. And Russian public opinion today is no less absurd.

The more casualties and destruction in southern and eastern Ukraine, the more blood is spilt there and the more coffins return for burial in Russia's boundless and snow-laden expanses, the greater grows the support for the authorities' actions in Ukraine and the higher the ratings for President Vladimir Putin.

Moreover, the sharp rise in prices and the sharp drop in incomes have not only failed to undermine confidence in the authorities, but have actually convinced more Russians than ever before that the country is on the right path.

We are witnessing an unprecedented triumph of Kremlin propaganda. The mass "anti-Maidan" demonstrations in Moscow and other Russian cities were staged in true Orwellian

spirit: Retired army officers and Afghan War veterans recruit volunteers to fight with pro-Russian separatists in the Donbass while journalists and politicians cultivate hatred every day for Ukraine and the West, stir up war hysteria by making public calls for the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk to "march on Kiev," brand Kiev's government a group of fascist warmongers, and demand immediate peace in Ukraine.

"Peace is war!" they effectively claim. "Truth is a lie!" "Your brother is your enemy!" "The victim is the aggressor!"

The overwhelming majority of Russians believe that the West attacked Russia in Ukraine and not that Russia seized part of Ukraine's territory and is now actively helping separatists in eastern Ukraine with regular army soldiers, volunteers and heavy weapons.

They believe not that the Ukrainian people ousted former President Viktor Yanukovych because of his unparalleled theft and lies, but that the United States and CIA agents overthrew him by using Maidan as a tool for replacing the pro-Russian regime in Kiev with an anti-Russian "junta."

Most Russians believe that this country's economic problems are not the fault of the Russian authorities, their corrupt and monopolistic policies, their seizures of private property and practice of corporate raids or their policy of high and ever-rising costs for business, but stem from the machinations of the West, which dreams only of how it can destroy Russia.

The great majority of Russians now share the paranoid view of the world foisted on it by rulers who began their careers as officers and generals in the Soviet Union's intelligence agencies.

An acquaintance of mine just returned from a visit of several months in Siberia where he helped some local residents purchase a few sacks of sugar and grain — enough to last them an entire year — after prices had recently doubled. Surprisingly, the people whom he assisted voiced their unqualified support for the policy of the Moscow authorities in Crimea and Ukraine and saw no connection whatsoever between Russia's foreign policy and the rising price of sugar.

When he asked their opinion about one of President Vladimir Putin's luxurious "summer cottages" in the nearby mountains, the locals looked at him as if he were an idiot. "You really think that is Putin's summer house?" they asked incredulously. "That is a command post for military missiles," they explained.

As in Soviet times, hatred of the United States and the West is forming the basis of national identity. Criticism of the authorities by the opposition and the activities of independent Russian nongovernmental organizations are increasingly portrayed as the subversive work of U.S. intelligence carried out using American money and serving American interests. It is becoming increasingly common to hear opposition members and civil activists labeled as fascists and members of the "fifth column."

In one kindergarten in the Moscow area, a teacher painted this picture of the world for her five-year-old wards. "The Ukrainians wanted to live with Russia, but the Americans wanted the Ukrainians to live with them. The Americans bomb Ukrainian cities. But don't be afraid. The Russian army is stronger than everyone and will save us from the Americans. Our

president is good. He stands for peace. He sends weapons to the separatists and we will win soon. After that, one little boy cried out, "Hurray! It's world war! We'll beat everybody!"

According to Levada Center data from January, the number of Russians who believe that U.S.-Russia relations are hostile has increased to 42 percent. Only 2 percent believe those relations are good. Fully 81 percent feel negatively or very negatively toward the United States, and 71 percent feel that way toward the European Union.

Those are unprecedented numbers for Russia's entire post-Soviet period. Almost 40 percent of respondents feel that Russia should distance itself from the West, while 80 percent feel positively or very positively about China — also unprecedented levels for Russia.

A record 85 percent of Russians approve of President Putin, while only 15 percent disapprove. A majority of 64 percent approves of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and 58 percent approve of the government. And contrary to all common sense, the measure of general satisfaction with life stands at an unprecedented 76 percent.

A record 68 percent of Russians believe that the country faces a military threat — as compared to 48 percent in 2000 — and 82 percent believe that the army can fend off that threat. Also, a record 55 percent of Russians are willing to send the men in their family to serve in the army.

At the same time, anxiety is growing in Russian society. This is primarily due to the increasing economic problems, but also because of rising international tensions. The Russian people primarily blame the United States and the West for rising prices and the falling ruble, and they are ready to rally around the authorities.

What's more, the Russian people do not ask for much. As my mother recently remarked to a friend and fellow pensioner, "We'll manage. After all, they [the authorities] won't let us starve to death!"

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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