The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia Sanctions Don't Work and Won't Work

By Andrei Kolesnikov

April 06, 2015



The Western approach to Russia is predicated on the supposition that continued pressure on the country will cause President Vladimir Putin's regime to make concessions or even crumble. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The assumption underlying the efficacy of Western sanctions is that the sharp economic deterioration that results from them will turn the Russian public against the Kremlin. Putin will not be able to withstand mounting dissent from affluent urban areas and the country's burgeoning middle class.

Meanwhile, the thinking goes, military pressure — in the form of potential lethal aid to Ukraine — will similarly mobilize ordinary Russians against Putin. They will form an anti-war movement that will force him to rein in his territorial ambitions. Pressed at once from above and from below, the Kremlin will have to change its policies, and perhaps even begin to democratize.

What Western policymakers fail to understand is that such an approach is less likely to undermine the regime than to cause Russians to close ranks behind it. Opinion polls show that Russians perceive Western pressure and sanctions to be aimed not at Putin and his cronies, but at Russia and its citizens.

To be sure, Putin's support is not rock solid; indeed, there is widespread suspicion about corruption in his government. But Russians have a long tradition of defending their compatriots from outsiders. And in this case, the compatriots under attack are Putin and his government.

Russian propaganda taps a deep well of nationalism, artfully playing off sentiments and imagery from World War II. Known in the country as the Great Patriotic War, the effort to defend the country from German invasion remains sacred to many Russians. That is why the Kremlin has repackaged derogatory historical terms like "Nazis" to refer to Ukraine's current political elites.

Putin has been able to use Western pressure as a tool to regain the support of many Russians, who only a few years ago would have felt detached from, if not alienated by, his government. Presented with a real or imagined threat to the fatherland, the average Russian supports the country's leaders.

Nor is the Russian middle class likely to pose much of a threat to Putin. With many of its members owing their recent wealth to high oil prices and the economic recovery of the 2000s, loyalty to the Putin regime is one of the Russian middle class's abiding characteristics.

Russian opinion polling and sociological research tends to show that the higher one's position in society, the more likely one is to vote for the incumbents. The motives behind such voting patterns may vary — some voters made a fortune during the economic recovery, while others are simply satisfied with the status quo. But the bottom line is that such voters demonstrate a fundamental loyalty to the regime.

Indeed, only a small portion of the middle class attended the protests that gathered force in late 2011 and early 2012, most of them concentrated in Moscow.

And in any case, Putin's clampdown on dissent was predictably ruthless. He tightened legislation aimed at throttling civil society, pursued lawsuits against protesters, and blocked the activity of Alexei Navalny, a promising opposition politician. These efforts have had a lasting effect on the groups that were at the heart of the protest movement.

Russians of all walks of life have shown that they prefer passive adaptation over protest. In the face of growing economic pressures, Russia's middle class is steering clear of political involvement. The working class is no different. The more the West increases its pressure, the less likely it becomes that this will change.

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