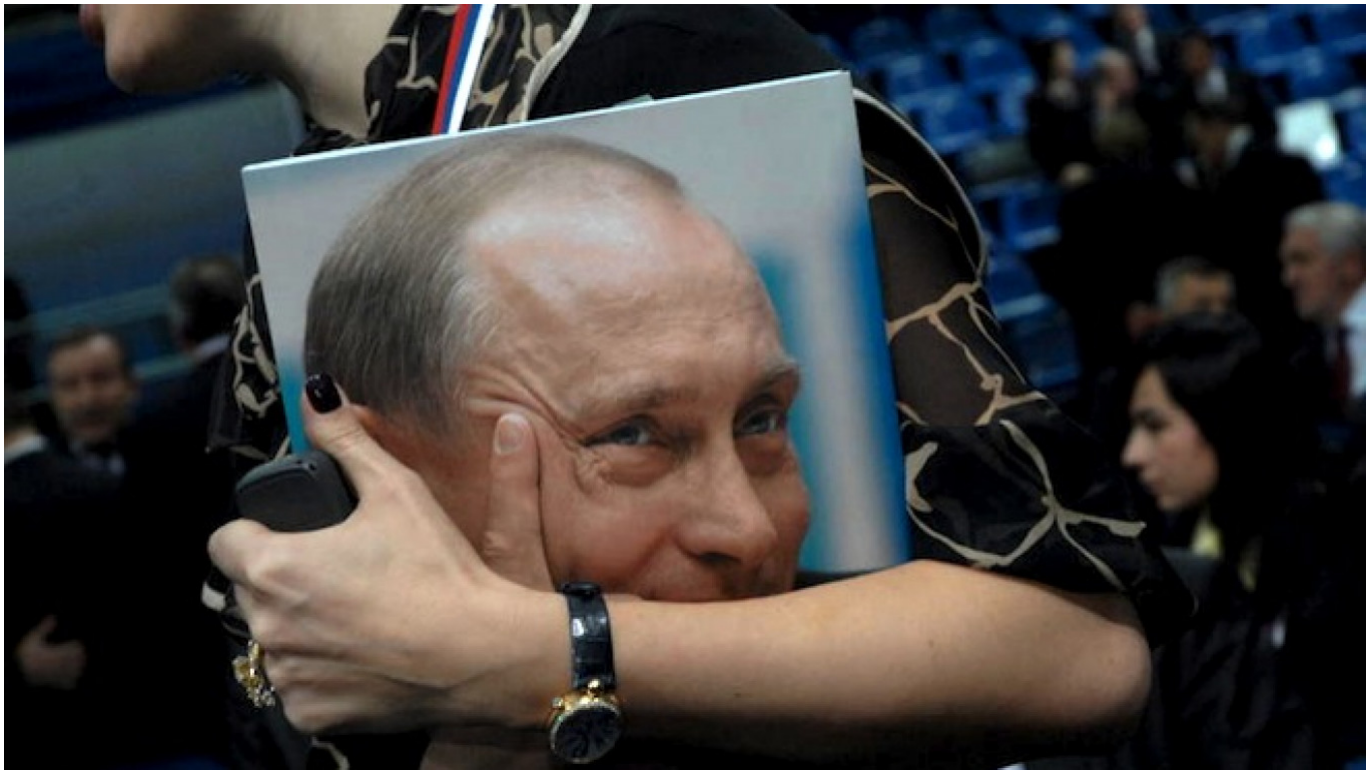
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Fewer Russians Think Country Is on the Right Track – Poll

By Anna Dolgov

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The number of Russians who think their country is on the right track has shrunk to 45 percent of the population — the lowest in more than a year — and President Vladimir Putin's approval ratings have dipped for the first time in many months, a poll released Wednesday by the independent Levada Center indicated.

As the ruble continues to bleed chunks of value and wages and living standards are in a downslide, Putin's approval rating dropped to 82 percent this month, compared to a record high of 89 percent in June 2015 and 85 percent in December 2015, Levada Center said in a report.

While the vast majority of Russians still claimed to approve of Putin's actions as president, the number of respondents who named him among the politicians they trust has been dropping — currently 58 percent. This compares to 64 percent in June 2015 and 60 percent in December 2015, according to the poll.

Russians' approval for their country's policies saw a much greater decline, the poll indicated.

The 45 percent who said this month the country was "moving in the right direction" compares to 64 percent who thought so in June 2015, and 56 percent in December 2015.

Throughout 2015, the number of Russians who approved of their country's course remained well above 50 percent, and the January result marks the first time in over a year the approval rating dropped to less than half of the population, polls conducted by Levada Center every month over the past year indicate.

About 34 percent of Russians said in January 2016 the country was on the "wrong route," compared to 22 percent in June 2015 and 27 percent in December 2015, Levada Center reported.

The domestic approval rating of Russia's Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev has also seen a decline, dropping to 56 percent this month, compared to 66 percent in June 2015 and 61 percent in December 2015, according to the report.

"The approval ratings of the country's political leaders have declined somewhat, but currently they still remain at a high 'post-Crimean' level, despite the population's increasing concerns about the economic situation in the country," Levada Center analyst Karina Pipiya was quoted by the Interfax news agency as saying Wednesday.

Putin's approval ratings soared after his administration annexed Crimea from Ukraine in 2014.

The latest poll was conducted Jan. 22-25 among 1,600 adult Russians in 137 cities and towns across 48 of the country's regions. It gave a margin of error of no more than 3.4 percentage points.

However, surveys in Russia — even those conducted by reputable pollsters such as Levada Center — might need to be taken with a pinch of salt. More than a quarter of Russians are reluctant to express their views on current affairs to pollsters, according to another poll released by Levada Center earlier this month.

A majority of respondents cited fear of retribution as the main reason for wishing to keep their political views to themselves.

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