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There's a Better Way To Measure How Much Russians Support Putin

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Every time new trust ratings for President Vladimir Putin are released. Some commentators point out that public support for Putin's course of continuing the war remains unchanged; others note that this support is on a slow downward trend. These arguments distract from the main point and, let us be honest, suit Putin's administration perfectly well.

It should be stressed from the outset that the methods used cannot be considered valid and cannot provide a snapshot of Russians' real attitudes on this question. Russian sociologists are unlikely to be unaware of this. Quite the opposite.

If, after four and a half years of the full-scale phase of the Russian-Ukrainian war, after hundreds of thousands of Russian deaths, after trillions of dollars in economic losses, after the country's expulsion from major global markets, all manner of restrictions and bans imposed on citizens, hours-long queues for gasoline and so on, around 70% of Russians say

they fully or mostly trust the Kremlin usurper, then his power is truly sacred: neither Western economic sanctions nor Ukraine's kinetic sanctions have shaken the people's love or their credit of trust.

However, the closed nature of the polling — choosing between a set selection of answers and the explicit question of whether they trust Putin —only measures the ability of Russians to work out what is the most acceptable answer.

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Of course, the decline of this indicator is also extremely important. In regimes that are moving from consolidated autocracy toward totalitarianism, support for the father of the nation must be maximal. Anything below 80% is acceptable but undesirable, while a figure below 55% is cause for panic. In such regimes, all procedures of real democracy are replaced by acclamation of the de facto sacredness of the head of state's power.

This, incidentally, is one of the main reasons why Lev Shlosberg was sentenced to 11 years and one month in prison. Speaking out in favor of peace and stopping the war is to commit heresy against what the usurper is carrying to the masses. Maintaining a totality of public support requires reminders of what is permitted and what is not, even for those who had previously seemed to be allowed to say such things.

What looks like an incredible success in Western democracies in terms of trust levels is, for the Russian regime and others like it, a failure and a reason to replace the head of the presidential administration at a minimum, or to start a small victorious war in the most extreme case. An even greater problem arises when the war has already been started, but is neither small nor victorious.

That is why Putin's trust ratings, obtained through closed questions, are still regularly published despite the authorities being well aware that they don't show the full picture. They allow the authorities to demonstrate a minimally acceptable level of what is passed off as trust. These indicators also allow attention to be diverted from the real level of trust in Putin.

And in the conditions of today's Russia, the real level of trust in the head of state can only be attempted through open-ended questions that give respondents room to maneuver and express their own opinion rather than repeat what they currently consider to be a socially acceptable answer.

This is precisely the approach chosen by the Institute for Conflict Studies and Analysis of Russia when conducting two sociological surveys in the Krasnodar and Rostov regions. Respondents were asked the same question: "Which Russian politician or statesman do you trust most of all?"

The question was not multiple choice, so respondents had to choose the first politician who came ot mind. In both regions, respondents' answers were quite similar: Putin was named by 39% in the Krasnodar region and 37% in the Rostov region, far below the 68-70% quoted by more prescriptive surveys.

This is precisely why we no longer see open-ended questions about trust in VTsIOM polls. When they tried, they recorded just 29.5% expressing trust in Putin in April 2026.

Of course, none of the other politicians or public figures received even a tenth of Vladimir Putin's rating in either region. Only Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov received more than 2% of mentions, reaching 4% in the Rostov region.

This hardly speaks in Putin's favor. Lavrov has held his post for almost as many years as Putin has ruled the Russian Federation and has essentially become his transmitter. This is the clearest indicator of the system created for Putin over the years, and of the sham character of both parliamentarism and the government's role in the Russian Federation.

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In addition, it is important to recall not only trust in Putin and the minuscule trust in all other political actors, but also the share of Russians in the regions who trust no one at all or cannot or do not want to answer this question. In both regions, this share exceeds Putin's trust rating: 44% in the Krasnodar region and 47% in the Rostov region, respectively. Crucially, different generations have different levels of trust in Putin. As surveys in both regions show, an entire generation has grown up in Russia whose attitudes differ significantly from the average levels of trust in him. Among young people under 30, mentions of the Russian president as the politician or statesman they trust most of all stand at only 16% in the Rostov region and 24% in the Krasnodar region.

The difference in trust becomes even more striking when comparing the answers of young people and the older generation. In the Krasnodar region, the gap is twofold: 24% versus 48% among citizens aged 55 and over. In the Rostov region, it is almost threefold: 16% versus 45%.

In addition, residents of large cities in both regions are substantially less likely to name Putin as the politician they trust most, as well as being more likely to say they do not trust any politicians at all. They are also exactly the people who would be targeted by another round of mobilization.

In a situation where the continuation of the war against Ukraine rests on the faith that Putin knows what he's doing, the lack of trust evident through this methodology could have serious implications. After all, passive support is not the same as a demand for active support in its most extreme form: going to the front and dying there. Kremlin political technologists surely know about the gap between formal and real trust in Putin. And, surely, they would like Russians themselves not to discuss this gap for as long as possible.

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