

After 10 Years as President, Putin's Ratings Surge Thanks To Ukraine

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President Putin and Swiss President Didier Burkhalter attending a news conference Wednesday in Moscow.

Intelligent, competent, experienced, decisive and attractive — that is how Russians view Vladimir Putin, who celebrated a decade as president on Wednesday amid high tension with the West over Ukraine, and slowing economic growth.

In spite of Western anger at what Washington and Brussels say is Moscow's active role in fomenting Ukraine's unrest, opinion polls show Putin has successfully used the crisis in the ex-Soviet state to rally support at home.

A late April survey by the independent Levada pollster put support for the former KGB spy at 82 percent, its highest since late 2010.

The state-funded VTsIOM last month found that 61 to 66 percent said they trusted Putin, the highest since at least January 2006. Just 3 percent mistrusted Putin, the lowest since November 2010.

VTsIOM said Russians appreciated Putin for his decisiveness, intelligence, competence and experience, among other factors.

It also said 8 percent were positively influenced by the physique of the 61-year-old Putin, shown on state television in recent years hunting, swimming and riding, sometimes bare-chested.

Putin returned to the Kremlin for a third term as president in 2012 following mass street protests against his rule in a country he has dominated as head of state or prime minister since the final day of 1999.

Protests Stifled

Since then, the Kremlin has gradually stifled the protest movement, and VTsIOM said less than a fifth of those polled expected more popular protests, a steep decline from late 2013.

But the polls show that it is the Ukraine crisis that has boosted Putin's popularity close to the record highs of his first two terms in the Kremlin in 2000 to 2008, when he presided over an economic boom.

In annexing Crimea — handed to Ukraine in 1954 by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev — Putin has tapped into Russians' national pride and a widespread feeling that the Black Sea peninsula was Russian anyway.

"Until now, Russians had hailed Putin as an experienced guarantor of stability. Now he has managed to harness the feelings surrounding Crimea as a second engine of support," said political analyst Pavel Salin.

Moscow seized Crimea from Ukraine, arguing that it had to protect ethnic Russians, after Kiev's pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich, was overthrown by protesters in February.

Data from Levada and VTsIOM indicates broad support among Russians for Putin's policy on Ukraine, including the formal annexation of Crimea on March 21, and Putin's drive to re-establish Moscow's influence over some of its ex-Soviet neighbors.

Levada's figures indicated that a vast majority of Russians thought that taking back Crimea proved Russia was "returning to its traditional role of a major global power." Respondents reported feeling pride, joy and a sense of justice.

"Right To Intervene"

Most of those polled by Levada accepted Moscow's line that it had the right to intervene in former Soviet states to protect Russians and Russian speakers, more than two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Thirty-four percent did not think Russia had such a right — but still thought it had acted worthily in Crimea and within international law.

Only 4 percent agreed with the statement that what happened in Crimea was an illegal annexation and intervention in a sovereign country, and 15 percent thought annexing Crimea

was evidence of Putin's "increasing adventurism."

Russia has pledged to spend billions on reviving Crimea's underdeveloped economy, and Levada said only a third of Russians were "absolutely not ready" to bear this cost.

With the Kremlin using its tight control over mainstream media to push its take on Ukraine, there is little space for dissenting opinions to be aired widely.

Still, Salin said a drop in Putin's ratings was inevitable at some point, as Russia's once-booming economy hovers on the brink of recession, with a prospect of further Western sanctions over Ukraine.

"The Crimean euphoria will end in six months — maybe with state propaganda and the Kremlin's 'information war' it will go on for a year — but then his ratings will have to fall."

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