



Russia: The rewards of patience

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Overview

Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote that all the Gulag's inmates were guilty - but not of the crimes for which they had been imprisoned. Guilt and innocence were anyway irrelevant to the inevitable result, which was banishment in a striped suit. Today's Russia, a political and economic work-in-progress, suffers similarly. Sins both real and merely reported condemn Russia to the striped suit, with the predictable reverberations through educated foreign public opinion and asset allocation. No civil rights, captive media and an insatiable state run by a KGB man and his lapdog successor are key features of the caricature we know as today's Russia.

The Russian public's view of its government is different. An analysis of that view from opinion poll data collected since the onset of the present economic slump reveals concerns and assumptions that do not tally with destabilisation scares.

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Core Case

Rome wasn't built in a day

Assumptions and Evidence

Opinion poll findings discussed in this note

Core Case

'Are we there yet?'

In 1903, British proto-sociologist Donald Mackenzie Wallace returned to Russia to update work first published in 1877. Having heard contradictory information about the country's economic progress in the decades following abolition of the economic system that for centuries had enslaved most Russians as serf labour, and expecting the worst, Mackenzie Wallace went to see for himself. He found that contrary to his fears, the dwellings and agricultural practices unequivocally spelled significant improvement in living standards. But this had taken rather longer than predicted:

"[Intelligent observers] had expected that the [1864] Emancipation would produce instantaneously a wonderful improvement in the life and character of the ... population, and that the peasant would become at once a sober, industrious, model agriculturist.

These expectations were not realised. One year passed, five years passed, ten years passed, and the expected transformation did not take place. On the contrary, there appeared certain very ugly phenomena which were not at all in the programme ... The natural consequence of all this was that those who had indulged in exaggerated expectations sank into a state of inordinate despondency, and imagined things to be much worse than they really were."

Post-Soviet progress has followed a similarly gradualist progression - and with strikingly identical disillusionment on the part of outside observers. "Inordinate despondency" and "imagining things to be much worse than they really are" have become institutionalised in how foreign policy circles and the international media understand Russia. Although Russia continually makes baby steps in the right directions as regards institution building (covered in numerous Trusted Sources research notes), what has been generally underestimated is the sheer length of its journey between polar opposites on the political-economic spectrum - from a Party dictatorship running a command economy (with corresponding social patterns and individual psychology) to a law-based state with democratic institutions and a free-market economy. As a result, its progress can easily be dismissed as negligible.

Why is Russia's leadership disdained abroad, popular at home?

Added to disillusion born of impatience is the perpetual misreading of top leaders. This is practically a tradition: George Bernard Shaw cheered the social achievements of indiscriminate mass-murderer Josef Stalin; "Time" magazine divined Jeffersonian tendencies in General Secretary Yury Andropov's fondness for jazz. Early in his rule as the last head of the Party dictatorship, Mikhail Gorbachev unwittingly uncorked popular forces while simply trying to build a new-and-improved Soviet socialism and was promptly handed a Nobel Prize. His more recent evolution into genuine senior statesman was welcomed with a 2007 Louis Vuitton modelling contract. The immensely courageous, truly democratic late Boris Yeltsin is sniffed at by US and European newspaper columnists as a drunken boor.

If one starts with negative conclusions about Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev, it requires no effort to devise reasoning to justify them (for example, Putin, the embittered KGB man, and, Medvedev, his powerless "mini-me").

A big mystery follows, however: why do these last-named leaders enjoy such high levels of popular support? (The BBC's Andrew Marr seemed unaccountably [pleasantly] surprised by his 29 March 2009 interview with Medvedev, which forces one to wonder what Marr was expecting.) As shown by his continuously poll-verified popular mandate, Putin has not forfeited public support on the many occasions during his presidential and prime ministerial tenure when he has acted decisively with the market-oriented and outward-looking modernisers in his team such as Alexey Kudrin and against the state corporatists like Yury Luzhkov or even his (Putin's) own close

associate Sergey Chemezov. As Putin told United Russia supporters in a stadium speech before the 2007 Duma election:

"The social stability, the economic expansion, peace on our territory and the albeit humble but nonetheless visible rise in living standards - all this didn't just fall from the sky ... It is the result of continual, sometimes very sharp and harsh political battles, both domestically and at the international level. We could not keep going in these battles without the support of the people."

Those achievements did indeed not "simply fall from the sky". To drill down to Russia's starting point, conjure a US taken over by a Teamsters dictatorship in the 1930s. Imagine a brutal "Sopranification" of the entire country and its public space, its economy, its politics, the schools, the arts, the press and so forth. One can hardly imagine how little acquainted with basic practices of rational economics or self-government Russia was in the wake of the Soviet state's demise. By 2000, state authority had dissipated extensively to regional warlords and shady exponents of *biznes* operating via hit-men, hand-grenades and the occasional radioactive nugget. Scores of assassinations since the early 1990s resulted from the lawlessness born of moral annihilation and socio-economic upheaval.

Memory of the USSR's negatives may be receding and succumbing even to nostalgia, but that dark preface is inseparable from Russia's ongoing challenges. Vladimir Putin did not arrive, as do leaders of developed nations today, to sit in the driver's seat of a system that runs reasonably well on cruise-control (cf. long-time government-free Belgium). At his 2000 inauguration, Putin's explicit acceptance of Yeltsin's poignant entreaty "Take care of Russia!" against huge odds looked pitiful. The reality was that Kremlin authority extended not much further than the Kremlin's crenellated walls. This, in fact, is the departure point for measuring Russia's progress to date.

One might contend that controlling the domestic media allows Putin and Medvedev to control public perceptions of their performance. State influence over television content has unarguably increased over the past nine years (at the same time poll data indicate that Russians are well aware they get a partial and biased picture of reality from domestic television). Ineffective law-enforcement has left a horrifying number of journalists vulnerable to often deadly attacks by those whose misdeeds they uncover. But the Russian media (print, radio and online) are by no means devoid of objective and critical perspectives. Moreover, the international media (if Russians want criticism of the regime) are available, in Russian, over the internet.

Other recent poll data speak to this point. A Foundation for Public Opinion (FOM) poll of 19 March 2009 asked respondents if they thought Medvedev and Putin were handling well or poorly the problems facing the nation. Overall, 54 per cent of respondents judged Medvedev positively, and the 18-30 age cohort was most positive (60 per cent) and least negative (20 per cent, against an overall total of 25 per cent). Likewise, Putin rated a 70 per cent positive score - and once again the largest positive (78 per cent) and smallest negative (12 per cent against a 17 per cent overall total) contingents were in the 18-30 group. Bear in mind that these most positive assessments are from the cohort most likely to use non-controlled sources of information.

A February 2009 FOM poll about the performance of the government overall asked people to agree with one of the following positions: "The government wants to, and can, protect the population from negative fallout from the economic crisis"; "The government wants to, but cannot, protect the population"; "The government can but does not want to protect the population"; and "The government neither can nor wants to protect the population". The most popular answer across all age groups (39 per cent) was "wants to, but cannot". Moreover, this answer was most common among the highest paid (44 per cent) and most educated (43 per cent) respondents, a sophisticated group and hardly one to be duped by Potemkin television.

The Russian people's true concerns and preferences

The public's conclusion that the government may want to shield them from harm but is unable to do so contradicts the stereotype of overweening Russian federal power. Frequently Russia's top

leadership faces criticism for being power-hungry when it is actually trying to compensate for poor intermediary institutions that leave the public vulnerable. The Kremlin's 2004 decision to appoint rather than elect regional governors was such an occasion. Putin's logic was to make governors answerable to the Kremlin, since they were answerable to no one else (least of all the electorate). This was criticised outside (and inside) Russia, but the public saw the point of it. A September 2006 poll showed 45 per cent of respondents favoured the policy, with 27 per cent against; almost two years later, in June 2008, that figure had fallen just slightly to 42 per cent favouring appointments over elections, with 32 per cent against. Medvedev has since introduced a new procedure whereby the majority party in regional assemblies has the exclusive right to submit a slate of two or three candidates to the President, who then chooses one of those nominees as governor.

The power-of-government question is touched upon by yet another enlightening poll (see "Assumptions and Evidence" section below) - a time series, including January 2009 data, which asks what Russians are most worried about. Even in 2006, 15 per cent of respondents worried not about too strong a government - limits on their civil rights was the suggested response that concerned them least - but about the *weakness* of the government. Officialdom's inability to restrain bribe-seeking in their own ranks was feared by a steady 23 per cent or so.

Looking forward, polls that reveal preferences among young people, like the leadership support mentioned above, may help shed light on the future of political engagement. A youth-oriented project by FOM (see below) shows interest in politics among 16-25 year-olds to be growing steadily and lack of political interest falling:

A measurable characteristic of younger Russians is their relative openness towards market liberalism and globalism. Another major national pollster, VTsIOM, conducted an attitude survey in February 2009 showing clearly that a market-related packet of values grows larger the younger the cohort, while a socialist, anti-globalist perspective was most evident among the older age groups. Also, market liberals outnumbered socialist-antiglobalists in the 18-24 and 25-34 groups but were themselves outnumbered in the over-35 groups.

Investment conclusion: Political risk moderated by a quiet revolution

The point of this exercise - my last for Trusted Sources - is not to whitewash or ignore what still goes terribly wrong in Russian political and economic life. One would like a state to be able to stop, or convincingly stand in the way of, economic predation. And one would like a state to monopolise, though not use, deadly force.

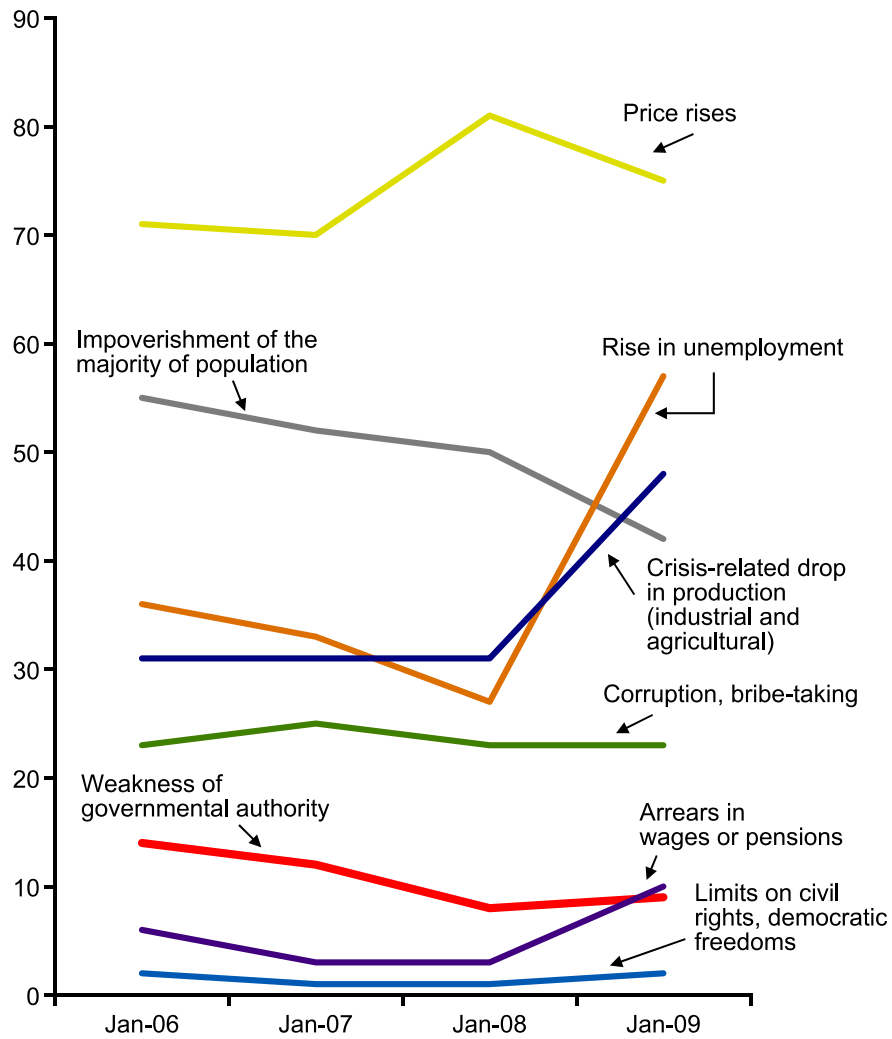
Rather, the intention here is instead to offer evidence of the essential falseness of prevailing stereotypes and some context (big fights, high stakes and weak institutions including the presidency and the prime minister) for understanding the reality. Russians are sympathetic not towards all who aspire to or hold positions of leadership but towards those who show some commitment to promoting an orderly and prosperous society. Much Western opinion, however, seems stubbornly committed to simplistic disdain or worse. Journalist and former Yeltsin speech-writer Andrey Vavra has commented simply: "Westerners are baffled by our problems because they have no such problems."

The negative bias in standard political-risk assessments of Russia may seem plausible during the present economic crisis but is potentially quite misleading. According to this view, Russians accept Kremlin authoritarianism in exchange for rising incomes, and declining incomes therefore spell discontent and chaos. But why must the bargain be a Faustian one? Rather, evidence suggests that a straightforward social contract between the Russian public and the head of state was accepted at Putin's first inauguration: the Russian public offers its support in exchange for Putin's best effort and best intentions, and this support will not evaporate during the occasional shocks and setbacks that he cautioned would inevitably occur. As a measure of progress towards a stable nation state, this may be reckoned a revolutionary change.

Assumptions and Evidence

Following are opinion poll findings discussed in this note.

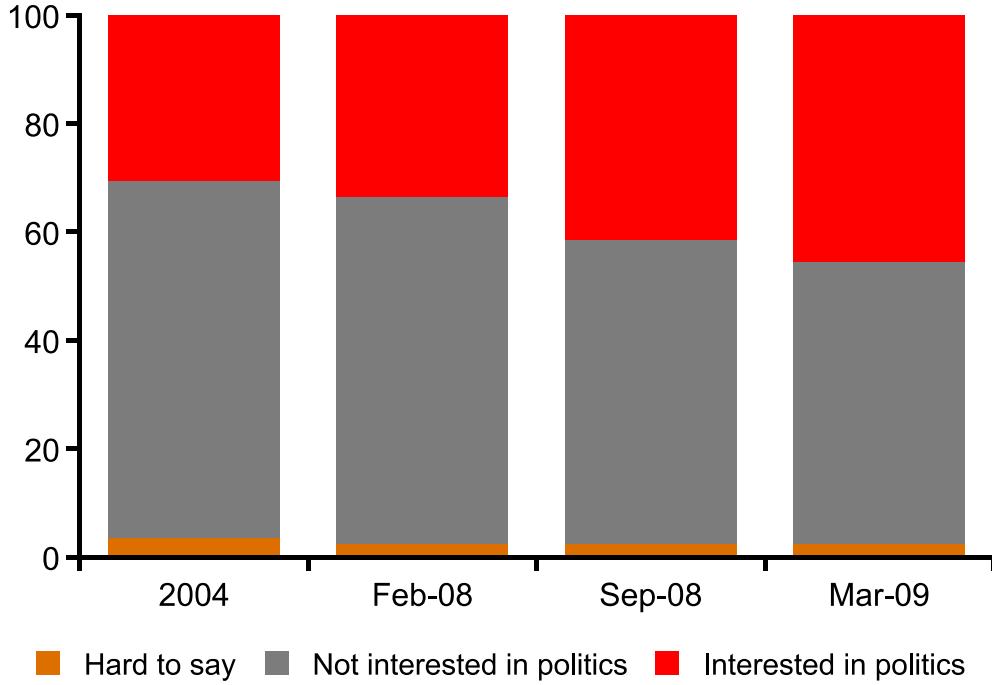
Which of the problems facing Russia worries you most?



Source: Levada Centre.

Note: Several answers possible, totals rendered in per cent.

Political engagement rising among the 16-25 year olds (per cent)



Source: FOM.

Contact us

If you would like to discuss any of the points made in this note, or ask further questions, please feel free to contact the authors:

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