

Russia Balance Sheet Speaker Series

*Emerging Russian Futures: Transformation, Evolution, or Stasis?***“Friends and Foes: Russian Views on Russia’s Relations with Other Countries”**

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Speaker:Dr. Lev Gudkov, *Director, Levada Analytical Center***Moderated by:**Dr. Andrew Kuchins, *Director and Senior Fellow, CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program*

Dr. Gudkov began his presentation by outlining the forces that have made foreign policy the least rational and least discussed aspect of Russian political life:

- The key aspect of the Russian political system that has produced this dearth of rational discussion on issues of foreign policy is the centralized control of content and opinion on government media sources. These media outlets, most importantly state-controlled television stations, are the primary channels of information for much of the Russian population, particularly outside of the major metropolitan areas.
- As approximately 93 percent of these media sources remain under strict government control, they exclusively broadcast the point of view of the regime. Furthermore, they do not provide independent experts or critics of the regime the media access that would allow them to disseminate their perspectives to the large majority of the Russian public.
- A related, and equally important factor, is that foreign policy is the focal point of attempts by the authoritarian regime to justify their continued dominance of the political system. This is due in large part to the fact that foreign policy is perhaps the only policy area on which diverse groups across the Russian political spectrum – including the opposition – can agree.
- The regime has successfully cultivated, through an extensive propaganda campaign, a narrative in which Putin has achieved great successes in the realm of foreign policy. The Russian population largely believes that Putin has succeeded in regaining Russia’s status as a global power, as he was able to create a conceptual link between the glory of the Soviet past and his vision for the Russian future following the crisis of the 1990s. The Russian population sees Putin as the engineer of a resurgence in foreign affairs for Russia that has forced other countries – most notably the West – to take note of Russia’s rise.
- This widespread perception was cultivated to divert attention away from the failures of the Putin regime in other policy areas, including increasing the standard of living across Russia or combating terrorism, both from internal and external sources.

The public opinion backdrop to the development of current attitudes:

- In the late 1980s, the Soviet population felt that the development trajectory of the Soviet economic and political system had reached a dead end. As a result, there was a distinct shift in attitudes towards the West and the United States in particular, as the population began to express a longing for economic and political integration with the West. This shift was driven by a widespread desire for Russia to become a “normal” country – an idea which incorporated the utopian ideals often ascribed to the West in Russian culture. The result was significant support for the reform-minded, Western-leaning governments of Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin during the late 1980s and early 1990s.
- However, the economic malaise of the 1990s, which grew out of the reforms championed by the populace, quickly eroded the public support for reform and integration with the West. The early part of this ‘lost decade’ saw indicators of wellbeing and the average standard of living decrease by about half. As a result, the legitimacy of reform-minded policies was discredited in the eyes of the Russian public and has remained so up to the present day.
- In the second half of the 1990s, the criticism of these reforms resulted in the development of pervasive anti-Western views, the majority of which have their roots in Soviet-era propaganda and remain alive today. These ideas, such as the belief held by 68 percent of the Russian population that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the result of a Western conspiracy, were actively utilized by Putin during his political rise.

Public perceptions of enemies and threats:

- Over the period from 1989 to 2011, there was a sharp increase in the percentage of the Russian populace that believed Russia has real enemies. When asked if Russia has any enemies in 1989, only 13 percent responded ‘Yes,’ while in 2011 approximately 70 percent responded in the affirmative.
- In 1989 almost 50 percent believed that Russia should look at internal issues, most notably deficiencies in economic development, as the true enemy of the state, rather than look outside the country for enemies.
- However, public sentiment on the issue of Russia’s enemies reversed course during the Yeltsin period. The government capitalized on growing animosity towards the West amongst the public by cultivating a narrative of Russia as a state surrounded by potential enemies. Able to galvanize support in this manner, the Yeltsin government also used this narrative as an explanation for the economic problems of the 1990s.
- The advent of the Putin era saw a marked increase in the public perception of Russia’s enemies fueled by rhetoric similar to that employed during the Yeltsin period. From 1994 onward, there was a growing sentiment amongst the public that there were enemies of Russia both from within and without. The primary drivers of this shift were perceptions of threats posed to Russia by the aspirations of the Baltic nations, Georgia, and Ukraine to integrate with NATO and the EU, as well as by the wave of Color Revolutions in the mid-2000s. These countries have routinely been seen as the most unfriendly nations to Russia, in large part as a result of state-sponsored propaganda in the television media.
- Significantly, this increase was accompanied by a concurrent decrease in the perception that the root of Russia’s woes could be found in its own system or policies.
- It is important to note that this increase occurred during an objectively peaceful period for Russia. Therefore, this shift in public perception of Russian foreign relations was the result of a

concerted effort by the government to create a national identity founded on this perception and thereby galvanize public support.

- The shift in perception regarding Russia's enemies was accompanied by a parallel shift in public perception of potential external military threats. Beginning in 1994, there was a growing feeling of an enemy threat, both from inside and outside the country—inner implicit ones and external enemy threats—that has persisted throughout the Putin era. This perception of a military threat from other countries has remained fairly steady throughout the Putin era, at levels of approximately 14 to 18 percent. The source of this stability can be explained by a generic fear of war in the public sphere, but it has also been actively cultivated by the regime, as it allows for the consolidation and centralization of power.
- Over the past five years, approximately 30 percent of the population believed that the threat from the West, most notably the United States and NATO, was real, though many did not believe it to be imminent. Furthermore, other main enemies included states that have sought to integrate with Euro-Atlantic structures, including the Baltic States, Georgia, and Ukraine. Thus, while the U.S. has been seen as less and less an enemy of Russia, there has been a sharp increase in the view that former Soviet republics and internal threats—such as Chechens and Islamic extremists—pose a greater threat to Russia. This perception has allowed the regime to bypass many of their other policy failings through a focus on the buildup of the security apparatus and Russian military capability.
- During the Putin era, the regime has adopted a view of foreign policy in which geopolitics, *realpolitik* calculations, survival of the fittest, and the perception of a zero-sum international system govern decision-making. This perception of foreign relations has come into conflict with the ideas of the rule of law, democratic reform and integration with the West – and, in large part, the *realpolitik* perception has held conceptual primacy.

Public perception of friends and allies:

- In data from the year 2005 through 2012, the Russian population routinely nominated Belarus and Kazakhstan as the top two allies of Russia, garnering them percentages of 34 percent and 28 percent respectively in recent data. This indicates that these countries are almost universally viewed as the last remaining allies of post-Soviet Russia.
- Germany (17 percent), China (15 percent), the Ukraine (13 percent), Armenia (11 percent), Azerbaijan, France, and India (all 9 percent) also found themselves amongst the top nine countries considered most friendly to Russia by the Russian population.

Public attitudes towards the United States and European Union, 1990-2011:

- Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the attitude of the Russian public towards the United States has largely been ambivalent in character. This is due to the presence of dual perception of the United States amongst the Russian population: On the one hand, the United States represents a sort of utopia, the embodiment of everything that the Russian people want—wealth, social and civil protections, sustainable economic development, and technological advancement. On the other, the United States is seen through the lens of the Cold War, as a military enemy, a country with geopolitical hegemony and the last remaining global superpower.
- The bifurcated perception of the United States has allowed the regime's propaganda machine to play off both perceptions, as dictated by political, cultural, and economic circumstances.

- Throughout the early- and mid-1990s, reform-minded politicians galvanized support for their policies by emphasizing the positive, almost utopian perception of the United States. However, the appointment of Yevgeny Primakov as Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1996 brought with it a shift towards propaganda that emphasized a negative portrayal of American unilateralism.
- While attitudes towards the United States have remained relatively stable over time, three major dips in the public's perception occurred as the result of aggressive propaganda campaigns on the part of the regime in response to U.S. foreign policy:
 - The first came in response to the NATO bombing campaign in Serbia in the spring of 1999. The government-controlled media presented it as an attempt by the West to assert dominance in a region within the Russian sphere of influence.
 - The second resulted from the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003. The government-controlled media did not present any of the moral or ideological rationales for the invasion, instead exclusively advancing the position that the invasion was an attempt by the United States to shift the geopolitical balance of power in its favor. This rationale was seen by the Russian population as fundamentally unacceptable, resulting in widespread disapproval of the United States.
 - The final dip came during the 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia. The regime's propaganda presented this conflict as a proxy war orchestrated by the United States. On all major government-controlled news sources, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili was portrayed as a puppet being controlled by the United States in order to push Russia out of its traditional sphere of influence. During this dip, over 45 percent of the Russian population believed this narrative of events.
- These propaganda campaigns, while successful in the short-term, were never successful at fundamentally changing the attitude of the Russian population towards the United States. None of the three dips in favorability ratings persisted; rather, the persistent perception of the United States as a "guiding light" in terms of politics and economic development has resulted in the maintenance of a stable, yet ambivalent, perception.
- Public attitudes towards the European Union have been remarkably positive during this same period, since the Russian population does not see the European Union as potential superpower or military threat.

Why does the regime actively promote the perception of enemies?

- The Putin regime desperately needs the public to believe in the reality of foreign enemies as it has no other avenue, in terms of policy or rhetoric, through which it can assert its legitimacy. The perception of enemies and threats allows the government to consolidate support around itself while also resolving many of the other issues facing the government – such as the current opposition protests – through appeals to a sense of national identity and national security in the face of threat.
- Russian society accepts such an aggressive stance on foreign relations taken by the Putin government because they perceive the external threats to be real. Consequently, they accept policies including increased spending for the security services and the military because they recognize and accept the need for centralization of power around a strong leader.
- In this context, opposition groups are seen as having been supported or inspired by external enemies, particularly the United States. Thus, the idea that outside forces are conspiring against Russia persists and this allows for continued support of Putin.

Discussion

The discussion opened with an outline of the two rhetorical pillars of Putin's campaign: first, the focus on stability and continuity, both politically and economically, as well as his portrayal of the protest movements as revolutionaries trying to upset this stability and second, his intense focus on anti-American and anti-Western rhetoric. Dr. Gudkov assessed the impact of these two pillars of the campaign and whether or not either was responsible for Putin's victory.

- Anti-American or anti-Western rhetoric did not play a large role in Putin's victory. This is in large part due to the persistent perception of the United States as a political and economic guiding light in the minds of the Russian public.
- Rather, Putin's focus on stability and continuity – described by Dr. Gudkov as a policy of “nothing will change” – was critical to his electoral success. This conservative policy stance resonated with “industrial Russia,” those that populate the small- and medium-sized towns that make up Putin's primary political base. As the majority of these industries still retain the Soviet industrial structure, the fact that Putin's government sees them as strategic remains very important to the voters, who want the government to continue funneling surplus energy revenues to their industries. These industrial policies, central to the Putin platform, marks a revival of old economic policies based on redistribution and state support that resonate strongly with the remaining enclaves of socialism in Russian industry.
- In the large cities, however, the situation remains quite different. Higher average incomes and levels of educational attainment, modern infrastructure, and large populations of private sector workers contribute to a political milieu that is much less receptive to Putin's conservative policies. On the contrary, these populations make up the majority of the base for the recent opposition movements that have been demanding reform. They are characterized by a strong desire to integrate with the West and to be guided by the political experience of the many Eastern European countries that have transitioned to democratic systems following the breakup of the Soviet Union. As a result, both pillars of Putin's rhetoric fail to resonate in these populations.

Dr. Gudkov was then asked to speak about the place of China in Russian perspectives on foreign affairs. The social milieu—“industrial Russia”—that makes up Putin's electoral base see China as a model of how to achieve significant economic development while maintaining a one-party governmental system. This is due to the fact that government-controlled media sources portray China as a country that has been able to avoid the catastrophic economic mistakes that Russia has made in the post-Soviet era. The public also sees China as the growing counterweight to the United States in the geopolitical system, a development that is widely perceived as positive by the population. These perceptions only persist because the vast majority of the Russian public is not well-informed on the issue of China, due to their heavy reliance of government-controlled sources of information.

The next question pertained to Dr. Gudkov's assertion that the negative perception of the West, the United States, and NATO has decreased since 2009. The participant asked whether or not this shift should be attributed to the influence of Medvedev and his softer policies and rhetoric towards the West and whether or not we should expect an increase in negative perceptions with Putin's return. The shift was not the result of the influence of Medvedev, but the financial crisis, which caused anti-American and anti-Western rhetoric to be shelved by the government. While Putin did initially attempt to portray the crisis as the result of actions by foreign actors, the public at large refused to accept his narrative.

Rather, they quickly realized that it was the result of internal economic issues and policies enacted by the Putin regime. However, Putin will likely try to increase the anti-American rhetoric once again, as the regime has no other alternative through which it can divert attention from a future crisis that they may be unable to solve.

The next participant asked why China is not perceived as a potential threat by the Russian public and how, without reconciling Russian and Chinese interests, a joint agenda can be advanced in the international system. Dr. Gudkov stated that Putin hopes to establish Russia as a world superpower. Putin's approach to achieve this is to espouse a rhetoric of confrontation, portraying the U.S. as an enemy. Thus, Putin is drawn to the idea of multipolarity in geopolitics, in which Russia and China could create a multipolar alliance and cooperate outside of Euro-Atlantic structures.

The next question asked Dr. Gudkov to comment on whether or not there was a significant gap between the statements given by officials and their own personal views, given the disconnect between Russian propaganda and policy.

- The top echelon of the Russian leadership is not ideologically homogenous, and can be divided into two distinct groups:
 - The first group, comprised of those figures closest to Putin, contains remnants of old Soviet power structures – including the KGB – and the majority of these figures rose to prominence during the Brezhnev era, a fact that is critical to understanding their mindset. This group shares the policy of the President and his views on foreign policy issues.
 - The second group is comprised of technocrats who do not agree with the President's confrontational approach to foreign policy. However, these technocrats have little ability to substantively influence political decision making, due to the centralization of power in the hands of Putin and his cadre.
- Nevertheless, while the views of these two sides differ, they remain shades of the same color. Even the most liberal officials in the central government share a geopolitical mindset that is somewhat similar to that of Putin. These figures remain guided by the desire to rebuild a strong Russian state, not a desire to build a state founded on the protection of human and civil rights and the rule of law.
- As long as the institutional framework in the Russian political system remains the same, any talk of substantive shifts in attitudes or the development of a distinct diversity of opinion amongst the leadership should be tinged with a heavy dose of caution.

The next participant noted that Dr. Gudkov's data did not include breakdowns in terms of age group, and asked him to speak about the foreign policy attitudes and attitudes towards the West that prevail amongst both the youth and the generation that includes Prime Minister Medvedev. Perceptions and attitudes amongst the youth are largely based on where they live, though the fact that the youth was raised almost exclusively during the Putin era remains extraordinarily important. For youth in the provinces, where poor education is commonplace and a distinct lack of social mobility abounds, Putin is universally seen as a role model and a successful leader, especially in terms of his foreign policy. These populations find Putin's aggressive, conservative rhetoric attractive, a fact which contributes to his high standing amongst them. Alternatively, urban youth in larger cities, 52 percent of whom are college graduates, are able to reap the benefits of significantly improved economic activity and exposure to alternative sources of information and a more diverse set of role models. This has led to the development of a strong anti-Putin, pro-Western sentiment among urban youth. Higher education has resulted in

distinctly liberal mindsets and political opinions, while higher incomes have allowed these populations to experience life in the West independently of the propaganda put forth by the government. These factors played a large role; the first opposition protests were started by the urban youth.

The summary was prepared by Sung In Marshall and Oliver Backes, Research Interns at the CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program.