

The Economy and Popularity: the Roots of Putin's Rating

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As the Kremlin's political technicians apply their talents to getting Dmitri Medvedev elected, new research suggests some surprising conclusions about the sources of President Vladimir Putin's popularity.

To recall the history, in the summer of 1999 shortly after Yeltsin introduced his sixth prime minister barely 31 percent of Russians told pollsters they approved of Putin's performance. By November 1999, this had jumped to 78 percent. Since then, Putin's approval rating has never dropped below 60 percent.

The reasons for this have been fiercely debated. The story most experts tell has to do with the shocking events of late 1999. Shamil Basayev's guerrillas crossed the border into Dagestan. Explosions destroyed apartment buildings in Buynaksk, Moscow, and Volgodonsk, killing around 300 people. Putin's calm but forceful responses to these attacks turned him into a national icon. He ordered troops into Dagestan and Chechnya, uttered the line about “*v sortire ikh zamochim*”, and—so runs the conventional thinking—that was that.

Even most of Putin's critics essentially accept this account. To explain how the president has remained extremely popular even as polls showed support for the war in Chechnya dwindling, they point to the increasing control by the Kremlin over national television stations and much of the print media. Some refer to a historically rooted culture of deference to authority that supposedly leads Russians to admire "strong" leaders even when they disagree with them.

But is this the correct explanation? Suppose there had been no second Chechen War, no apartment bombings, no tightening of restrictions on the press? Would Putin's approval rating then have remained around its starting point of 31 percent, or slipped even lower like that of his predecessor?

Of course, we cannot know for sure. But statistics make it possible to explore the counterfactual. Using simple techniques, one can show that Yeltsin's popularity throughout his tenure was closely linked to public perceptions of economic conditions. In their regular opinion polls, VCIOM, and now the Levada Center, ask respondents to assess "Russia's current economic situation," their "family's current material condition," and to say what they think "awaits Russia in coming months in the economic sphere." Using just answers to these three questions over the preceding six months and a measure of how long the president had been in office, one can explain most of the variation in respondents' average rating of Yeltsin's performance on a 10-point scale.

But the startling finding is what economic perceptions predict about the early Putin period. The graph below shows what happens if one runs the tape forward. I have used just answers to the three questions about economic perceptions from the VCIOM and Levada Center surveys, along with the president's time in office, to form predictions about the path of Putin's rating on the 10 point scale. The predictions assume that economic perceptions affected support for the incumbent president in the same way under Putin as under Yeltsin.

Economic Perceptions and Presidential Popularity, Russia 1991-2007



Source: Author's calculations using VCIOM and Levada Center poll data.

Based on just perceived economic conditions and the fact that a new president had taken over, the incumbent's popularity could be expected to surge upward in the first months of 2000. Indeed, the path predicted for the initial months of Putin's term looks remarkably

similar to what actually occurred. Between August 1999 and June 2000, real wages unexpectedly rose by about 20 percent. Simultaneously, real wage arrears and unemployment both fell. This was enough to prompt a sudden rebirth of economic optimism that would have sent support shooting upwards for anyone who happened to be in the Kremlin.

This is not to say the war in Chechnya and the response to the terrorist bombings had no effect. On the contrary, they almost certainly help to explain why Putin's rating as prime minister rose in late 1999. But they merely hastened by a few months a jump in approval that would have occurred anyway.

A few months can be a long time in politics. And these were not just any months. A presidential election loomed in June 2000, and, after Yeltsin resigned prematurely, in March. Still, the estimates suggest that even without a war in Chechnya, terrorist bombings, or promises to "*mochit v sortire*," Putin—or Stepashin, for that matter—would have been comfortably elected, possibly not in the first round, but definitely in the second. By March 2000, the predictions put Putin's rating at 5.0 out of 10, considerably higher than Yeltsin's 3.9 in July 1996.

Of course, this was not so clear at the time. But in hindsight it is evident Putin could have ridden the wave of economic recovery to victory both in 2000 and 2004. The irony is that, if the goal was just to make Putin the most popular president in Russian history, the

Kremlin's pressures on the media, electoral manipulations, and intimidation of political opponents were almost certainly unnecessary.

While the war in Chechnya did increase Putin's popularity initially, this only remained true to the extent Russians agreed with the president's policy. As the percentage in favor of continuing the military operation dwindled, so did the boost Chechnya gave to Putin's rating. It was the surging economy that picked up the slack.

All this has obvious implications for Medvedev's candidacy. It is dangerous to forget the first maxim of Russian politics: always expect the unexpected. Still, assuming public approval of Putin transfers to his aide, the statistics suggest Medvedev would be virtually unbeatable even if the Kremlin were to allow a completely fair contest.

During his term, Putin's popularity remained tied to economic performance, although the relationships changed a little from those under Yeltsin. Because the lag between economic change and presidential popularity is long—it takes months, if not years, for the full effect to filter through—it would require a true catastrophe to undermine support for the incumbent Kremlin team. Even were perceptions of economic and political conditions to collapse tomorrow to their levels during the 1998 financial crisis, simulations suggest this would still lower Putin's rating by only a point or two in the short run.

The long run is another story. If, as everyone expects, Medvedev wins in a landslide, observers will no doubt attribute this to the heavy hand of the Kremlin. Medvedev will have thrown away the legitimacy he could have earned by prevailing in an honest election—legitimacy that would come in handy if the economy weakens. Sustaining popularity once people are used to steady improvement is harder than when all expect the worst. In seeking to eliminate uncertainty now, the ruling team may be setting itself up for future crises.

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