

Russians Support Putin's Re-Nationalization of Oil, Control of Media, But See Democratic Future

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Americans Endorse Russia's G-8 Membership, Are Optimistic about Democracy in Russia



Russian President Vladimir Putin plays host to the Group of Eight major industrial powers this week despite a chorus of criticism in both Europe and the United States about Kremlin initiatives that seem to be rolling back democratic and economic reforms.

A new WPO/Levada Center poll suggests, however, that neither the Russian nor the American publics are convinced Russia is headed in an anti-democratic direction. Both Russians and Americans believe that Russia will become more democratic and that it should be part of the G-8 summit. Russians, however, generally support Putin's concentration of political power and strongly support the re-nationalization of Russia's oil and gas industry.

Russian President Vladimir Putin (NATO photo)

These results are among the findings of new joint polls conducted by the Levada Center in Russia, June 9-14, and by WorldPublicOpinion.org in the United States, June 26-July2.

Stephen J. Weber, associate director of WorldPublicOpinion.org, said the results indicated that Putin was "reading his public well."

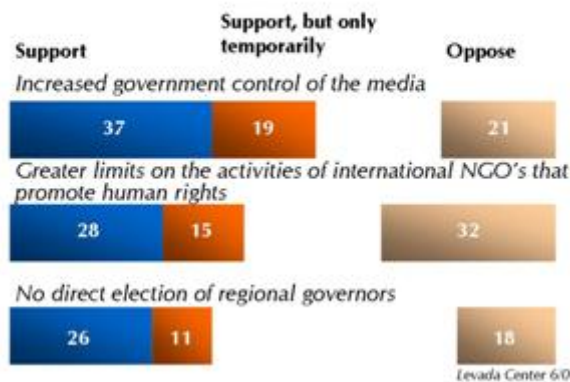
"Russians are more attracted to order and a strong center than to press freedom and political pluralism, at least for now," he said. "A liberal democracy, often bringing in tow messiness and inequalities, is not the majority goal."

Re-nationalization of Industries

Under President Putin, the Kremlin has re-established its control over Russia's energy industry. Despite the outcry such measures have generated abroad, Russian public support for them is very strong. His re-nationalization of the oil and gas companies is especially popular: 85 percent of Russians favor the policy (56% "definitely"). Only seven percent oppose it. Moreover, most Russians (65%) say they would definitely (34%) or probably (31%) favor the "nationalization of other industries that are presently in private hands." Only a quarter (23%) say they would oppose such measures.

Restrictions on Media, NGOs

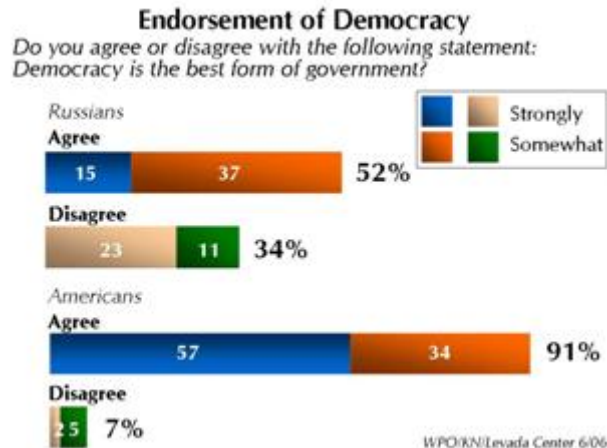
Russians on Recent Measures by Putin's Government



Majorities or pluralities of Russians express support for measures that international and domestic critics cite as evidence that President Putin is rolling back democratic reforms. Since Putin's election in 2000, the Kremlin has brought national television broadcasters under state control while state-owned or state-controlled companies have bought up some of the country's most influential newspapers and magazines. A majority (56%) of Russians, however, support "increased government control of the media" either generally (37%) or "only as a temporary measure" (19%). Twenty-one percent oppose such control and 22 percent say they are neutral or don't know.

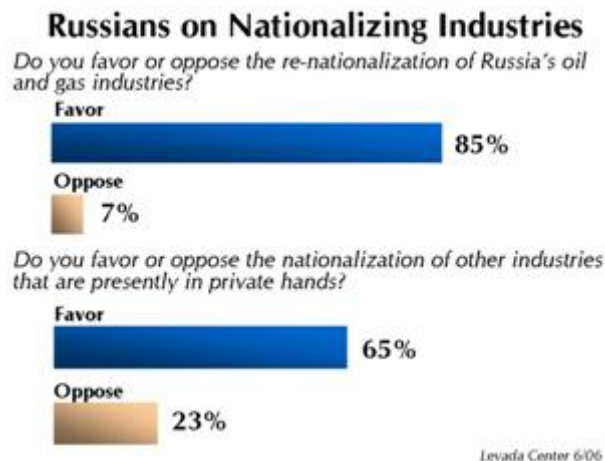
President Putin's government has also come under criticism for passing legislation that tightens regulations governing the activities of internationally-funded human rights groups. But Russians themselves lean toward support for these measures. Nearly half (43%) support restrictions imposed on international NGO's promoting human rights, saying they either support them outright (28%) or as a temporary measure (15%). Thirty-two percent of Russians oppose such limits.

More than a third (37%) of Russians also supports Putin's decision in December 2004 to end the direct election of governors, including 11 percent who support it as a temporary measure. Only 18 percent of Russians oppose this change and 44 percent say they are neutral or don't know. President Putin himself now appoints Russia's 89 regional leaders.



Although Russians support policies that are concentrating political power in the Kremlin, at least as temporary measures, they still tend to believe their country is on a democratic course. Half of the Russian public (50%) feels that in ten years Russia will be either much more (16%) or somewhat more democratic (34%). The other half feel that their country will be less democratic (21%) or say they don't know (28%).

Most Americans (71%) also feel that Russia will become more democratic over the next ten years, despite negative coverage of Putin's initiatives in the U.S. media and outspoken criticism of his actions by lawmakers from both parties in Congress. Only one in four (25%) says it will become less democratic. This optimism about democratic trends in Russia echoes other recent findings by Levada and WorldPublicOpinion.org, released in May 2006, showing that both Russians and Americans felt Russia was becoming more democratic and responsive to its people.

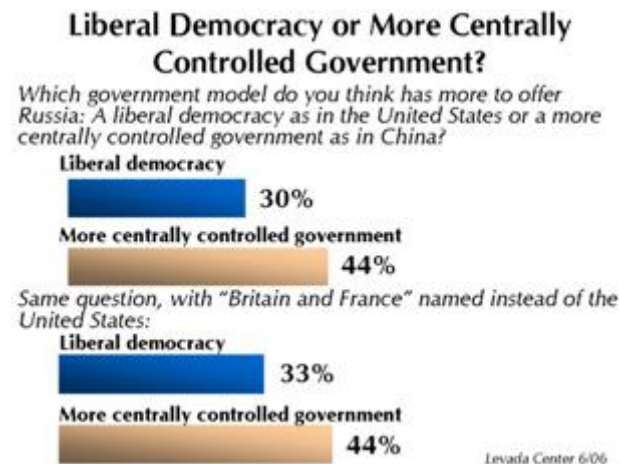


Majorities of both Americans and Russians endorse democracy as "the best form of government," though the Russian endorsement appears far more fragile. An overwhelming majority of Americans (91%) agree with this statement and only seven percent disagree. Russians agree by a slim 52 percent majority while more than a third (34%) disagree and 15 percent express no opinion.

Liberal Democracy vs. Central Control

Russians look favorably on China's combination of strong central government controls with rapid economic growth. When asked to choose which government model had "more to offer

Russia," a plurality (44%) preferred "a centrally controlled government such as China's," with less than a third (30%) selecting "a liberal democracy as in the United States." To control for any bias against the United States, half of the Russian sample was asked to choose between the Chinese model and liberal democracy "as in Great Britain or France." It made little difference which countries were used to exemplify liberal democracy, however. Again, only a third (33%) favored liberal democracy while a plurality (44%) chose the centrally-controlled Chinese model.



The Levada Center/WorldPublicOpinion.org

survey released last May produced complementary results. While Russians said they believed the United States was much more democratic than China, they rated the systems of governments in both countries equally favorably. They also gave both economic systems similarly favorable evaluations. Across these studies, Russians show considerable respect for the Chinese model, although they recognize it as clearly less democratic than Western systems.

Importance of the G-8 Summit

More Russians are aware of the upcoming G-8 summit than Americans. Sixty-four percent of Russians indicated that they had heard about the summit when surveyed in June, but only 39 percent were able to identify St. Petersburg as the site. Only 27 percent of Americans said that they had heard about the summit. Because of these differences, questions about the G-8 were sometimes worded differently for the two populations (see questionnaire). In this and other studies, Russians are more likely to decline to give an opinion than are Americans.

A large majority of all Russians (77%) say that Russia's participation in the G-8 summit is important for Russia and its future and a majority (66%) also believes that Russia's participation is important for the world community. Americans broadly agree: 88 percent say that it is important for Russia to be a G-8 participant. Both Russians and Americans feel that Russia should take part, and Americans seem to endorse Russian participation even more strongly than Russians do.

Some Western critics of Russian policies have argued that Russia should be excluded from the G-8 because it is neither a democracy nor one of the world's largest economies. The Russian public seems to have heard these criticisms. Only half (49%) think that Russia is definitely (12%) or probably (37%) perceived as a full member of the G-8 by other countries. Thirty-nine percent say it is definitely not (6%) or probably not (33%) considered a full member and 12 percent

don't know. Most Americans (56%), however, say they do think of Russia as a full member. Only 31 percent think of Russia as "something less than a full member." Twelve percent don't know.

Nearly half of Russians (46%) feel that their country's relationship with the United States will improve as a result of the summit, 39 percent think it will stay the same and 2 percent say it will get worse. Among Americans, 29 percent feel Russian-U.S. relations will improve; 58 percent see no change; and 7 percent predict deterioration.

Issues for Discussion at the Summit

In both Russia and the United States, pollsters presented respondents with an identical list of topics and asked them to choose which should be discussed by world leaders in St. Petersburg. However, as noted above, survey procedures were different so the absolute percentages favoring each topic may not be comparable. Nevertheless, the question highlights the differences between Russian and American priorities.

For both Russians and Americans the "struggle against terrorism" was the most popular topic. More than half of Russians (57%) and an overwhelming majority of Americans (84%) said terrorism was an important subject for discussion. The second most popular topic among Russians (46%) was "poverty." Among Americans, in contrast, poverty was seventh among the eight topics given. For Americans "democracy and human rights" was the second most popular topic (74%), while for Russians this was the least popular of the eight topics (14%).

Prevention of infectious diseases stood third in popularity for each country, chosen by 36% of Russians and 73% of Americans. The other agenda topics stood lower in both countries: energy security was fifth among Russians and sixth among Americans, and education was sixth among Russians and eighth among Americans.

The topics put on the summit agenda by President Putin himself--energy security, prevention of infectious disease and education--were not among the most popular among the publics of either country.

Russia-NATO Relations

NATO was a Cold War creation designed to protect Europe from the Soviet Union. Fifteen years since the end of the Soviet Union, do Russians and Americans still believe NATO and Russia have reason to fear each other?

Most Russians (60%) disagree with the statement that NATO members have reason to fear Russia. Only a third (30%) believes that NATO countries have reason to fear Russia. Americans are divided: 45 percent agree with the statement and 46 percent disagree.

The Russian public, however, does believe that Russia has reason to fear NATO: 61 percent agree with this proposition and 29 percent disagree. Americans, again have a somewhat divided

view, though a plurality (49%) disagrees with the notion that Russians should fear NATO, 40 percent think Russia has reason to be afraid.

In Russia, Levada Center polled 1,600 respondents (margin of error +/-2.5%) June 9-14, 2006. In the United States, Knowledge Networks polled 1,059 respondents (margin of error +/- 3.1) from June 27-July 2, using its nationwide panel, which is randomly selected from the entire adult population and subsequently provided internet access. For more information about this methodology, go to [Knowledge Networks](#).