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Seven reasons to explain Vladimir Putin's popularity cult

Slated abroad, Russia's leader is sky-high in domestic approval ratings. Tom Parfitt in Moscow asks why



The Telegraph

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Approval rating for Russia's President Vladimir Putin at 85 per cent Photo: AFP/Getty Images



By **Tom Parfitt, Moscow**
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A punishing war abroad that sends men home to their families in coffins. Enduring corruption. A currency crisis and a stuttering economy. Pariah status at global summits.

Surely enough to erode any president's popularity?

Not **Vladimir Putin's**. New poll results published on Wednesday show the approval rating for Russia's leader at 85 per cent, just down on last month's 88 per cent, which equalled the record high of 2008.

So just why is Mr Putin so highly-regarded at home, a full 14 years after he first took control of the Kremlin?

Here are seven reasons.

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War, what is it good for?

Survey results published by the Levada Centre, one of the few polling agencies in Moscow with a degree of separation from Russia's authorities, indicate that Mr Putin's popularity spikes at moments when he takes decisive, forceful action.

Before last month, his approval rating hit its highest point at 88 per cent in September 2008, shortly after Russia effected a swift victory in its five-day war

Vladimir Putin

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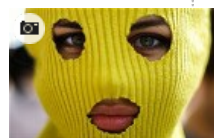
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with Georgia. Mr Putin was not president then – his protégé Dmitry Medvedev had taken over for a seat-warming four-year stint – but he was universally seen as the power behind the throne.



(Getty)

A previous high for Mr Putin was in January 2000, his first month as acting president, when 84 per cent of respondents approved of his leadership as he sent Russian troops back in to separatist Chechnya.

By the end of last year, after a steady decline since the Georgia war, the figure had fallen to an all-time low of 61 per cent. But that began to rise through the patriotic surge of the Sochi Olympics in February, hitting the 80s again in the spring as Russia annexed Crimea and rising yet further as Mr Putin threw his weight behind pro-Moscow rebels in eastern Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk's "people's republics" over the summer and autumn.

"Crimea is Ours"

Crimea deserves special notice. In Russia's popular imagination, this is a place of national pride and glory. Tsarist troops battled British, French and Turkish forces here in the 19th century and Soviet soldiers held off the Germans for 250 days during the Siege of Sevastopol in 1941 and 1942.

Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet general secretary, removed Crimea from Russia and added it to Ukraine in 1954, in what was then a territorial rearrangement inside the USSR.



(AFP/Getty)

Russian nationalists have yearned for Crimea's return ever since. In March their moment came. Mr Putin sent soldiers to the peninsula after pro-western demonstrators toppled Viktor Yanukovich, the Russian-leaning president of Ukraine. A dubious referendum followed in which Crimea's population voted to leave Ukraine and join Russia. Mr Putin approved the transfer, to international opprobrium.

Inside Russia, the decision was extremely popular. A poll by Levada last month suggested 86 per cent of the population was in favour of the takeover. The Kremlin portrays it as a response to years of US unilateralism, foreign snubs, hypocrisy and interference in Russia's sphere; more simply, a giant yah-boo-sucks to the West. Now "Krym



In pictures: Russia's man of action

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nash" (Crimea is Ours) is a popular slogan, and Mr Putin's talk of a greater "Novorossiya" that stretches deep into Ukraine has puffed chests across Russia and pumped his status.

Fortress Putin

That the Kremlin portrays Russia as a fortress besieged by pernicious foreigners has long been an axiom. Western sanctions against Russia over the Ukraine crisis provide ammo for this posture.

Mr Putin's genius is to increasingly identify the state with himself.

Last month, his deputy chief of staff told a group of political analysts that "there is no Russia today if there is no Putin" and "any attack on Putin is an attack on Russia."



(Reuters)

The president was coy about that idea, but earlier this week he told an interviewer: "I've already said that I feel like I'm part of Russia. It's not just love that I feel for it. Anyone can say he loves his Motherland. We all love it but I really feel being part of our people and I can't imagine even for a second living outside Russia."

Those words echoed a comment the leader made in April, when he said that death "may be beautiful if it serves the people: death for one's friends, one's people or for the homeland, to use a modern word".

Mr Putin's heroic "l'etat, c'est moi" pose clearly goes down well.

When he was roundly snubbed at the G20 summit in Brisbane even some of his critics felt it was an insult to Russia itself.

No alternative

Painting yourself as a paternalistic keeper of the nation's future is a little easier, of course, when you have scrubbed out every potential rival.

Asked why they support Mr Putin, many Russians answer, "Who else?"

Ever since he came to power in 2000, Mr Putin's lieutenants have worked diligently to sideline, prosecute, discredit, co-opt or otherwise neutralise political opponents.

In 2011 and 2012, mass street protests shot Alexei Navalny, an anti-corruption campaigner, onto the Moscow stage as a credible rival.



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during his visit to Sevastopol (EPA)

He was soon faced with a flurry of dubious criminal cases against him and has struggled to maintain momentum beyond a hardcore of younger, liberal supporters in the capital and other big cities despite a strong showing in mayoral elections.

Mr Navalny stood apart from seasoned but marginal opposition figures because of his nationalist streak. That appeal was blunted when Mr Putin seized Crimea and marched into eastern Ukraine this year. Mr Navalny admits that although he would not have launched the takeover, he would not give Crimea back to Ukraine if he came to power.

Other more radical opponents of Mr Putin's rule like the veteran Eduard Limonov are now vocal supporters of the war in Donetsk and Luhansk, organising volunteer militia to go and fight there.

Press unfreedom

One of Mr Putin's greatest tools is his ability to manipulate public sentiment through a stranglehold on Russia's most influential media.

A Levada survey in May found that 94 per cent of those polled depended on domestic television networks – which are state-dominated – to follow news from Crimea and Ukraine.

The Kremlin may have a point that Western reporting has its own slant, but Russian state media is a tide of Putin-worship, nationalist diatribe and outright falsehoods.

Alternative voices are increasingly scarce. Last month, Mr Putin signed off on new legislation that will limit foreign ownership in Russian media assets to 20 per cent. The law will likely see two of the country's biggest independent outlets, Vedomosti and Forbes Russia, ushered toward Kremlin-friendly control.

Surveying the pollsters

The polls say Putin is adored, but can they be trusted?

The Levada Centre has struggled to maintain its independence and last year prosecutors threatened it with inclusion on a government list of "foreign agents" – NGOs that receive foreign funding and are therefore seen as potential fifth columnists for western states.

Political surveys conducted by telephone in a country where people fear retribution for criticising the authorities may not be the best test of sentiment. Saying you love the leader is the safest thing, just in case someone is listening in or noting down your name.

Interestingly, the state-linked WCIOM polling agency puts Mr Putin's popularity lower than Levada. It found his personal approval rating down from 85.9 per cent in May to 62.5 per cent in October.



Vladimir Putin, left, and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev attend the Victory Day parade in Moscow (AP)

The economy, stupid

Like him or not, Mr Putin has presided over a rise in prosperity since he came to power in 2000. Poverty levels dropped, the middle class expanded, spending power increased. Russians are seen more and

more often on holiday resorts all over the world.

But, according to the World Bank, Russia is entering a period of "near stagnation". This year, the rouble lost more than a quarter of its value; western sanctions are preventing Russian banks from accessing financial markets abroad; business and consumer confidence is low.

The price of oil which so longed buoyed Russia's economy " it is the third biggest producer in the world " has slumped, falling from \$115 in June to about \$80 now.

On Monday, Anton Siluanov, Russia's finance minister, said sanctions and lower oil prices would cost Russia around \$130-140bn a year – equivalent to around 7 per cent of its economy. Under Mr Putin's leadership, Russia has done little to diversify the economy and reduce reliance on hydrocarbon revenues.

Patriotic pride in the Ukraine adventure will likely outweigh discontent over rising costs for food and utilities – for a while.

If wages and pensions are hit and jobs are lost? Then Mr Putin's Teflon may begin to flake.

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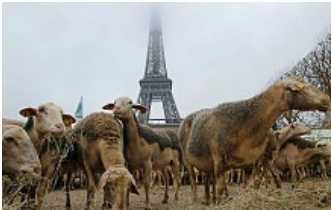
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