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DP Gov - Putin

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TELEGRAM

January 29, 2001

To: SECSTATE WASHDC - IMMEDIATE
Action: SNIS
From: AMEMBASSY MOSCOW (MOSCOW 1163 - IMMEDIATE)
TAGS: PGOV, SOCI, KPAO, RS
Captions: None
Subject: RUSSIANS STILL RALLYING AROUND PUTIN --
Ref: None

RELEASED IN PART
B6, B1, 1.4(D)

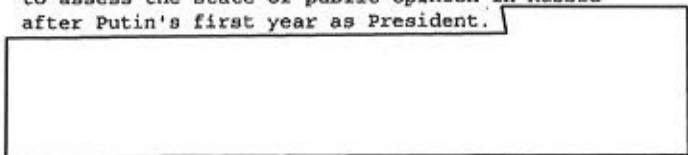
BUT HOW DEEP IS THEIR LOVE?
(U) Classified by Minister-Counselor for Political
Affairs George Krol. Reason: 1.5 (B) and (D).

Summary

1. (C) One year after assuming Russia's Presidency, Vladimir Putin remains king of his country's public opinion charts. The latest polls put Putin's job approval rating in the 75-85 percent range, and his personal approval/trust rating at around 70 percent. Our contacts generally agree that this phenomenon is neither a fiction nor a fluke, and that it reflects in part a very weak field of political challengers.

[redacted] among others, argues that this degree of support stems in large part from Putin's ability to connect with regular people who view him as being "just like us." While many of our contacts question just how much Putin's popularity rests on substance, they agree that he has adroitly focused on the bread-and-butter issue of paying pensions and salaries, as well as restoring the strength of and respect for Russia's leadership. Looking ahead, some experts see possible economic problems as the most likely trigger for a dropoff in support. At the same time, some think that Putin's backing is strong enough to weather such travails. Putin's popular standing is a key element of the Kremlin's strategy, but it is unclear how much heed the GOR will give to public opinion on specific issues. End Summary

2. (C) In recent weeks, Poloffs have met with leading public polling experts as part of an effort to assess the state of public opinion in Russia after Putin's first year as President.



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 The "Putin Phenomenon" Proceeds Apace

3. (SBU) Over one year after assuming Russia's top job initially as Acting President, Vladimir Putin continues to draw public opinion numbers that would make any head of state proud. The most recent measure of Putin's standing comes from a VTsIOM nationwide poll of 1,600 Russians on January 19-January 22. According to VTsIOM, 76 percent of respondents approved of Putin's job performance as President. 85 percent of respondents to a FOM nationwide poll on January 13-14 gave Putin an excellent, good, or satisfactory job rating. A ROMIR nationwide poll of 2,000 Russians in December produced lower, but still impressive, numbers -- 71.8 percent of respondents fully or generally approved of Putin's work.

4. (SBU) Embassy contacts emphasize that Putin's personal approval/trust ratings stand out even more than his job ratings. In part, Putin's "trust" ratings are especially noteworthy for them because they provide a stark contrast to the rock-bottom personal ratings that Boris Yeltsin drew during his second presidential term. Indeed, Russian public opinion data indicate that Putin's personal popularity has stayed between 60 and 70 percent throughout the past year. In the most recent measure on this front, 69 percent of respondents to FOM's January 13-14 poll expressed positive feelings toward Putin. On a similar note, 72.2 percent of respondents to ROMIR's December poll expressed full or general trust in Putin.

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 A Colossus in a Land of Midgets

5. (C) While Putin's impressive poll numbers have inspired incredulity and some skepticism, Embassy contacts generally agree that the phenomenon is real. Even contacts from some of the most Kremlin-critical quarters, [redacted]

[redacted] say that Putin truly is popular among Russians. [redacted] told Poloff on January 19 that this point was reinforced for [redacted] while working on a story that draws upon recent VTsIOM polling data. [redacted] drew a simple conclusion from the data -- "people are saying that everything is bad, but Putin is perfect."

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6. (C) The Russian public opinion experts who spoke with us said that Putin's popularity reflects, in part, a very weak crop of contenders on the national political scene. [redacted] told Poloffs on January 18 that Putin's only real competitor is KPRF leader Gennadiy Zyuganov, [redacted]

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[redacted] noted that Zyuganov's support comes mainly from old people who are set in their ways -- a slice of the Russian electorate that is declining. (Note: Zyuganov seems to be helping to keep his own numbers low by maintaining a relatively low media profile and not publicly attacking Putin. End Note)

Still Big Down in the Boondocks

7. (C) Our contacts generally agreed that, based on their reading of polling data, Putin's popularity is based largely on his direct rapport with average Russians. [redacted] attributed this rapport to Putin's image among Russians as a simple man -- "just like us." [redacted] said that this impression came across not only in FOM's research, but in Putin's autobiography. [redacted] differed with our suggestion that Yeltsin had once been widely considered to be "just like us." [redacted] view, Putin has support among groups of "simple people" who never fully identified with Yeltsin -- doctors, teachers, and workers. He judged that Putin could draw some degree of support from up to 85 percent of Russians -- he said that 40 percent are "regular people" who need state help, while the other 45 percent are "regular people" who are more capable of fending for themselves.

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8. (C) Conversely, the general consensus in Moscow is that Putin's popularity is softest among Russian elites. [redacted] for example, judged that Putin is culturally alien to the 15 percent of the Russian population that he labeled as "doers." [redacted]

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[redacted] noted that Putin's poll numbers tend to be weakest in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and other major Russian urban centers. At the same time, even Embassy contacts who are members of this elite sense that the Kremlin has simply bypassed them. [redacted] said that people from the liberal intelligentsia -- educated, sophisticated, generally Muscovites -- already are disillusioned by Putin. At the same time, [redacted] added that [redacted] and others from the Putin camp have sent a clear message to people like her -- "you are not our constituency."

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Separating Image From Action

9. (C) Our contacts judge that Putin's popularity still rests in large part on symbolism; views differ as to how much this rests on the Kremlin's PR efforts. [redacted] For one, told Poloff on January 18 that Putin has gained much political mileage out of taking on a select set of

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"easy" political issues. In particular, [redacted] judged that it was "brilliant" for Putin to take on Media-Most's Gusinskiy and Logovaz chairman Boris Berezovskiy -- opponents who spark public loathing and mixed feelings even among the intelligentsia.

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[redacted] told Poloff on January 22 that

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Putin has scored points among the public by creating the impression that he is imposing order at home, while displaying his health and competence through a whirlwind of foreign visits.

10. (C) At the same time, Russian public opinion experts agree that Putin has focused rightly on one concrete issue involving political stability and economic security -- pensions and state salaries.

[redacted] recounted how, in the run-up to the December 1999 State Duma elections, he was in direct contact with then-Prime Minister Putin on public opinion issues. [redacted] noted how Putin himself quickly focused on the bread-and-butter issue that stood out most in the polling data -- non-payment of pensions and state salaries. [redacted] added that, to this day, Putin maintains direct control over pensions and salaries. [redacted]

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[redacted] agreed that Putin's actions on this issue continue to be a cornerstone of his popularity among average Russians.

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Support Remains Untested

11. (C) Views vary widely within the Russian public opinion community about how durable Putin's high popularity is or how long it can last. In particular, some contacts noted that this Kremlin has not yet faced a truly big crisis. [redacted] judged that none of the problems of the past year -- Chechnya, the "Kursk" sinking, or power outages in Primorskiy Kray -- rise to that level. Looking ahead, some of our contacts viewed economic problems, and the difficult policy decisions that they might force, as the most likely drag on Putin's popularity. [redacted] expressed the view commonly heard here that Putin's popularity stems largely from an economic cushion created by high world oil prices. "If the oil prices fall, so will Putin's popularity." (Comment: Even if such new problems do not actually emerge, it remains unclear how the Russian public would respond to the fallout from tough structural economic reforms, such as price hikes stemming from the restructuring of natural monopolies. End Comment.)

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12. (C) At the same time, even some who see economic travails ahead think that Putin's popularity has staying power. [redacted] assessed that Russians will show some patience toward their president. [redacted] judged that while Putin's poll numbers will inevitably fall, he will benefit from the widespread view that he inherited a difficult legacy from Yeltsin. [redacted] predicted that Putin's high ratings are likely to hold for at least another year -- even in the face of new economic problems. He judged that, at this point, Russians are not

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ready to "divorce" their president -- "it's an unpleasant business." In his view, people who have been disappointed so many times over the past decade still want to believe in someone. Taking the long view, [] postulated that Putin is successfully creating his own cult of personality -- "this could go on for a long time."

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 Comment

13. (C) Putin's high popularity has an important place in the Kremlin's political strategy. Not least, the specter of this popular support is a powerful weapon that the GOR has wielded in its battles over the past year. At the same time, the Kremlin is acutely aware of how fleeting popularity can be.

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[] This desire to husband Putin's popularity is reflected in two key policy areas -- efforts to gain more control over the media and a clear preference for paying pensions and salaries over difficult structural reforms that will cause pain before producing tangible results.

14. (C) One key point that remains unclear is the degree to which public opinion will influence

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Putin's policy course. It is clear, both from polling data and anecdotal evidence, that many Russians want a break after 15 years of turmoil under Gorbachev and Yeltsin. In that light, they understandably place a high premium on political stability and economic security. On that count, Putin and Co. are ready and willing to deliver. The big question that remains is what place political freedoms and economic reform have in this picture. Some recent polls indicate that Russians still support democratic freedoms in the abstract. Recent polling data also indicates weak support for further economic reforms -- providing an additional edge to internal GOR debates over what should be done. The GOR's subsequent course on the latter will reveal just how committed it is to economic liberalization, especially if it threatens to trigger a slide in Putin's popularity. On both these sets of issues, the course the Kremlin chooses may clarify whether its regards polling feedback as an important factor in its political decisionmaking.

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Additional Addressees:

None

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