

Putin's Supposedly Overwhelming Popular Support Could Disappear Overnight, Gudkov Says

Opinion

Posted by:

Posted on : 2017/5/8 1:14:18

Gudkov: "Russia is a soft authoritarian regime … not a democracy. And all regimes love to soothe themselves by various investigations about the love of the people for their leader." Thus, "there was a Brezhnev majority" 40 years ago, and today "there is a Putin majority." There were even majorities for Stalin and Nicholas II.

By Paul Goble for "Window on Eurasia": The Foundation for the Development of Civil Society says in a 26-page report that "a Putin majority" exists and consists "not only of the traditionally supportive employees of the state, villagers and pensioners but also the restless youth." But Gennady Gudkov says this majority is deceptive and could disappear almost instantly. The opposition politician tells *Moskovsky komsomolets* that "no phenomenon of support for Putin exists." Instead, what is in evidence is "typical for any non-democratic country" (

mk.ru/politics/2017/05/04/kult-lichnosti-putina-pochemu-rejting-vvp-dognal-aziatskikh-diktatorov.html a copy is available at

newsland.com/community/4109/content/pochemu-rejting-vvp-dognal-aziatskikh-diktatorov/5815108).

"The majority of the media have been transformed into weapons of propaganda that from morning to night celebrate the first person and no competitor to the ruler exists," Gudkov says. "Russia today from the point of view of the monopoly of the authorities is exactly as were Iraq or Libya at one time. And even almost where North Korea now is." The big difference between Russia and these states is that the country is more powerful than they and consequently the regime cannot be overthrown from the outside. Thus, "from this point of view, Putin is secure." "But his entourage must understand that this historic maximum of support of the ruler in the course of one hour can be transformed into nothing if the pot of dissatisfaction begins to boil inside the country. In today's world, Putin is ruler most beloved by his people after the North Korean despot who counts among his supporters many who are already dead. Russia is "a soft authoritarian regime … not a democracy. And all regimes love to soothe themselves by various investigations about the love of the people for their leader." Thus, "there was a Brezhnev majority" 40 years ago, and today "there is a Putin majority." There were even majorities for Stalin and Nicholas II. These "majorities" exist because people want to be part of a majority and not attract the unwanted attentions of the powers that be to themselves as dissidents or opposition figures. The pollsters who do these surveys are "mostly honest," but "sociology cannot show anything in a situation when the respondents are organically fearful of responding to questions honestly." "The level of authoritarianism defines the level of sociological support of the leader," Gudkov suggests. "If this is a harsh regime, support will be above 100 percent." In places like Turkmenistan and Chechnya, this "support" approaches that figure even though Chechens are among the leaders of people seeking asylum in Europe. "Saddam Hussein had 99 percent support, but the [Iraqi] people did not form a human shield

to defend him. And Qaddafi's 99 percent didn't help him. That pattern is typical because regime change in countries with harsh regimes occurs in way completely unexpected for the dictators themselves. Putin 'of course' isn't as extreme a case as Hussein or Qaddafi, and that's why some 20 percent of the Russian people can say they don't support him without looking over their shoulders. But the Kremlin leader has 'gone sufficiently far that the remaining 80 percent are afraid to do that.' Indeed, the thinness of this number is one of the reasons why the Putin regime is so insistent on repeating it. 'Our powers that be are not stupid. They understand that their position is shaky and that all this support can disappear in an instant.' And when it does, the new majority will support the new dictator and condemn the one — Putin — he replaced. That has been true throughout modern Russian history because 'the distance between popular love and popular hatred is a single step' as shown by what happened to Nicholas II, Stalin and Lenin, Gudkov says.

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The commentary above is from Paul Goble's 'Window on Eurasia' series and appears here with the author's permission. Contact Goble at: paul.goble@gmail.com