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## Russia and the West: Russians Happy With Putin and His Anti-U.S. Policies

Damien Sharkov

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A majority of Russians are happy for Vladimir Putin to continue to lead Russia after the 2018 elections and support his aggressive stance towards the West, a new poll has found. In fact, a third of Russian citizens don't think their president is anti-Western enough.

Russia's relationship with the West has deteriorated since Moscow's annexed Crimea in 2014 and its economy is only now showing signs of recovery from recession. But despite economic hardship, political tensions and renewed crackdown on opposition groups, Russians are mostly content with the status quo.

A total of 66 percent of those polled want Putin to continue ruling the country after next year's presidential election and a third (34 percent) want to see an even harsher crackdown on political dissent, according to data from Russia's independent Levada Center polling company. The results are a far cry from 2013, when a majority of Russians wanted a different candidate to take over from Putin.

Just 12 percent of Russians want the next president to have a more liberal approach to domestic issues and only 13 percent want Putin or whoever else takes charge of Russia in 2018 to reduce the "confrontation with the West."

The majority were happy to see the current tensions—the highest since the end of the Cold War—to continue and almost a fifth (19 percent) felt the Kremlin should step up its confrontation with the West, although they did not specify how.

Ex-Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin's research center presented a liberal program for Putin last week, hoping he would choose to improve relations with the West in his next term. Kudrin was chosen by Putin to devise an economic strategy for Russia after 2018.

But Russian political expert at Moscow's Carnegie Center, Andrei Kolesnikov, told business newspaper *Vedomosti* that a change in policy was unlikely.

"The collective mood has not changed for many years, during which time there has been a demand for strictness and assertiveness and this has sharpened since March 2014," he said, referring to the annexation of Crimea.

With Crimea, Kolesnikov argued, the "dormant" demand for a defensive policy "awoke" in Russian society and now the Kremlin enjoys "a degree of isolation from the world." As such, aggressive foreign policy is the only way for Putin to retain popularity.