Russian Public Opinion of NATO

Introduction

The social, economic and political transformations taking place in Russia and in the rest of the world, triggered by mutually reinforcing global problems, are causing major changes in the systems of values and preferences of ordinary citizens.

An analysis of public opinion data shows that individuals face a complex environment. For example: On one hand, they are preoccupied with survival: the Soviet way of life has been disrupted, while the new era remains uncertain, nebulous and unstable. New developments are more often seen as threats, not opportunities. This causes stress and distrust...

On the other hand, in certain areas, mass media outlets and their owners have set out to shape a new image and new beliefs piecemeal, doing so subjectively, chaotically, contradictorily, inconsistently, and often superficially, capitalizing on specific feelings and interests of the public, without understanding and accounting for the deeply seated and enduring forces behind the public psyche. They define and sustain emotional stereotypes, which make it difficult to gain an objective understanding of the real state of public opinion.

The Russian Government (its information infrastructure), which often fails to communicate its own national development and cooperation goals in a coherent and accessible manner, is finding it difficult to convey what is happening in an appropriate, informative and accessible fashion.

For its part, the Russian public, long patronized by the State, is reluctantly (warily) expanding its world view in terms of its ability to independently react to and assess the events around them, in other countries and in other unions. In response to this variety of views, the majority of the public (especially the rural population) is increasingly turning to tried and true stereotypes. Inert emotional overtones, 'ghosts of years past', are resurfacing (appearing) in the public consciousness.

A review of mass media outlets reveals contradictions in the way people learn about, develop and perceive the relationship between Russia and NATO. For many Russians, in contrast with numerous other economic, social and political problems, the nature of this relationship remains a mystery.

In order to obtain a more complete picture of the public opinion in our survey, in addition to using the standard demographic participant profile, all participants were conditionally divided into two groups: 'Optimists' and 'Pessimists'.

Participants who, for the most part, are pursuing personal goals, opportunities and resources as a function of present conditions, are the so-called 'Optimists'.

Participants who, for the most part, are waiting for the State to solve their problems, and expect state paternalism, are the so-called 'Pessimists'.

These two categories of citizens are thought to differ greatly from one another with regard to their objectives and views. They may also favor opposing interpretations of events and trends. This is why separating them into these conditional groups will help understand the reasons for the various views and forces driving public opinion. This could help develop a suitable information policy in the future.
CONCLUSIONS

As suspected, participants found the topic of the survey of the Russian Public Opinion of NATO challenging, but not to the extent imagined when the survey was being designed.

In practice, 15 to 20 minutes are needed to complete the questionnaire. Yet, the survey participants worked on the questionnaire for at least 30 minutes and careful monitoring found no violations of survey procedures. Participants and interviewers completed the task, but it is evident from the survey results that their views and perceptions of the relationship between Russia and NATO were conflicted and difficult to express.

According to the survey results, the ratio of Optimists (51.9%) to Pessimists (43.3%) surveyed was nearly even.

This table shows that, conceptually, public opinion in Russia is tentatively split in two and that the two groups have different expectations.

In their answers, participants indicated the extent to which Russia was protected against external threats: 46.8% believed it was protected, while 38.9% believed that it was not protected. Most importantly, many more Optimists (56.1%) thought they were protected than Pessimists (36.1%).

Blue: Negative responses (“Completely unsatisfied”, “More unsatisfied than satisfied”)
Red: Positive responses (“More satisfied than unsatisfied”, “Completely satisfied”)
Yellow: Unsure
Terrorism was seen as the main external threat. Although the directly-worded question specifically asked about external threats, a fairly large number of participants listed aspects of Russia's internal security (weak army, corruption).

Living at a remove from the 'hot spots' lowered the relevance of the threat by 20 points.

From a demographics standpoint, more men reported feeling protected (52.6%), as compared to women (42.5%).

Rural residents reported feeling more protected, giving positive responses in 64.5% of cases and negative ones in 28.2% of cases.

Participants were of the view that good relations with neighboring countries certainly contribute to Russia's security (85.6%). Russian citizens are sending a rather strong message of peace. At the same time, 64.4% of participants believe that Russia has enemies and most count the former republics of the USSR among them.

The level of security once offered by the Soviet Union, from the point of view of the participants, significantly exceeds that offered by Russia (60.3% vs. 26.3%).
"Do you believe that Russia's level of security is greater now than it was during the days of the Soviet Union?"

![Pie chart showing responses to the question.](image)

Red: Positive responses (“Russia is definitely more secure now than during the days of the Soviet Union”, “Russia's security is probably greater now than during the days of the Soviet Union”)

Blue: Negative responses (“The Soviet Union was probably more secure than Russia is now”, “The Soviet Union was definitely more secure than Russia is now”)

Yellow: Unsure

Here, Optimists were more likely than Pessimists to say that modern-day Russia offered better security (55.7% vs. 29.8%)

The Warsaw Pact played an important role in the security of the USSR, but half of the participants (50.5%) already do not know what it is. At the same time, one-third of those surveyed (32.3%) said that they (mostly the Pessimists) regretted the dissolution of the Pact.

The USA was ranked as Russia’s top enemy.
Aleksandr Zhukovsky, sociologist, author of the report

"Does Russia have enemies?"

Two-thirds of the participants (66.0%) do not think NATO is Russia's partner. Optimists are more likely to consider NATO a partner.

Men were 10.2% more critical of NATO than women, and yet also more open to cooperation with it.

Participants with high incomes expressed greater distrust of NATO. At this stage of the survey, the reason for this could not be established.

The level of trust was evaluated by participants at 1.76 on a five-point scale. Russia and NATO are seen, however, as facing common threats.
"Would you agree with the statement that NATO is Russia's partner?"

![Pie chart showing responses to the question.](image)

Red: Positive responses (“Definitely yes”, “Probably yes”)  
Blue: Negative responses (“Probably not”, “Definitely not”)  
Yellow: Unsure

High values were assigned to all proposed fields of cooperation with NATO, but the following priorities became apparent:

- combating terrorism (88.1%);

- combating piracy (83.9%), where the concept of "piracy" is not uniformly understood by the younger participants. They think of it as counterfeit tapes and discs. Older generations think of piracy as terrorism on the open seas.

- destruction of obsolete weapons (71.3%).

Participants demonstrated a low level of awareness of Russia-NATO relations. The average score was 2.7 on a five-point scale.

The level of awareness about the efforts of joint bodies is important. A higher level of awareness would result in more positive assessments of cooperation between Russia and NATO.

Mass media outlets are the main source of information about NATO (91.6%). In terms of significance, Internet was another important source of information (3.52 on a five-point scale).

The low level of awareness among participants made it difficult to give an objective assessment of NATO's image. The existing stereotypes, assessments and confusion are not only due to past inertia, but to a great extent reflect NATO's activities and how they are covered by the mass
media. Information is one of the key components necessary for developing effective Russia-NATO relations.

Judging from the survey results, the perception of Russia-NATO relations is problematic and cannot be corrected quickly.

1. Given the information overload facing the Russian public in the emotional sphere and the absence of systematic political education, relations with NATO will remain on the back burner (being too global and abstract for the majority of the population).

2. The Russian public has a positive view of joint activities involving: combating terrorism (88.1%), combating piracy (83.9%) and the destruction of obsolete weapons (71.3%). Good relations with neighboring countries are also assigned a high degree of importance (85.0%). These are fertile starting points for dialogue.

3. According to the survey findings, the main social groups that can "see" the benefits of Russia-NATO cooperation are young people and the Optimists. Women are the most ambivalent about NATO (up to 50% are unsure in their responses to specific questions. It is possible that the information available in the mass media on the topic is both abstract and too harsh).

4. Three information policy plans should be developed for a more effective dialogue on Russia-NATO cooperation: The first should focus on the so-called 'Optimists'. In this case this could be a rational forward-looking dialogue (most likely, using Internet technologies). The second should focus on the so-called 'Pessimists', to neutralize legacy scenarios and views held by the Russian public as a result of inertia (official traditional mass media outlets). A third plan should target women.