



HOUSE OF LORDS

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Sub-Committee C (External Affairs)

Inquiry on

THE EU AND RUSSIA

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Questions 191 - 199

THURSDAY 6 NOVEMBER 2014

9.30 am

Witness: Denis Volkov

Members present

Lord Tugendhat (Chairman)
Baroness Bonham-Carter of Yarnbury
Baroness Coussins
Lord Foulkes of Cumnock
Baroness Henig
Lord Jopling
Lord Lamont of Lerwick
Lord MacLennan of Rogart
Lord Radice
Earl of Sandwich
Lord Trimble
Baroness Young of Hornsey

Examination of Witness

Denis Volkov, Head of Development Department, Levada Center

Q191 The Chairman: Mr Volkov, first of all may I thank you very much for agreeing to appear before us and for the inconvenience you have undertaken in going to the embassy and all the rest of it? As I think you appreciate, this is a formal meeting of the Committee, which means that the evidence will be recorded and used as part of the report that we are preparing. We have a number of questions for you, of which I think we have given you notice, but I am sure that my colleagues will have a number of supplementaries as well. If you do wish to say something that is completely off the record, please indicate that, and we will abide by that, but the more that is on the record the better, and we will assume unless told otherwise that it is on the record.

If I may, I will ask the first question and you can then answer it in whatever way you choose. We are all familiar with opinion polls and polling data, and we follow them in this country, the United States and elsewhere, but there is some evidence to suggest that polling data may be less reliable in an authoritarian context such as Russia, where people might be more reluctant to express their true opinions than in a society such as this one. Could give us some guidance on how to interpret the meaning of the data you collect and how your audiences, particularly in the West, should interpret the meaning and reliability of Russian polling data in general?

Denis Volkov: Yes, there is some concern about the polling data, and we are thinking about them here as well. Our own data show, for example, that about 25% of the people who we survey think that there can be repercussions when people are answering questions. Still, our methodology is that we come to people and first ask the questions. Only then do we ask for personal data, and people are free to give or refuse to give their name, their surname and their telephone number so that we check that their interview was conducted. The absolute majority will give their name and telephone number. We think that at least the recent trends that we have been observing could not be explained by people just starting to refuse to answer our questions or to be sincere. We saw, for example, how the rating of Vladimir Putin and other ratings rose by more than 20 percentage points in one month. We would say that we should look for other explanations.

We have been using this technology for 15 or 20 years. It has not changed much. We see the trends. With this technology, we saw how the rating of President Putin went up at the very beginning in 1999, and in two months it went up again by almost three times. We always have to have a better interpretation of what is going on. You have to look at many figures and many trends and be able to compare not only over one year but over several years. If you have a considerable amount of data—I mean a considerable amount of surveys of the one issue—and if you can check them and put them in the broader context of many more figures and many more questions, you can come up with some understanding of what is going on. You should not look at the figures as the exact truth and the exact situation, because it is about opinions; it is about how people understand actions and what other people think. It is more about this mass attitude, so it is not the exact truth, but having this broader picture you can come up with an idea of what is going on.

Q192 Lord MacLennan of Rogart: Could give us any indication from the data, or the polls, as to the public support for President Putin's policy in Ukraine? Could you distinguish between the actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine? Could you perhaps indicate whether there has been change, and in what direction, since December 2013, and whether Russians have become more or less supportive of actions in eastern Ukraine?

Denis Volkov: Our polls show that, yes, we can distinguish between the cases of Crimea and eastern Ukraine. I would say that one of the major differences is that already at the end of the 1990s, well before Russia took Crimea from Ukraine, about 80% thought that Crimea should be with Russia and that Crimea going to Ukraine was considered unfair. It was not, though, on the political agenda; rather, it was on a kind of cultural agenda—this topic was present in some films and some songs. One song says, “Sebastopol will always be Russian and will come back one day”, and some films exploit this topic. Crimea was an issue, but it was not on the political agenda. Here, I think Putin and the Government acted on some existing expectations.

There were no such expectations about eastern Ukraine. There was some understanding that there were different opinions, but we never asked about it. At the very beginning, right after all these developments at the end of March and the beginning of April, more than 70% said that if Russia sent troops to eastern Ukraine they would support the Government. In August we had a survey that showed that support had dropped from around 70% to 40%. The question was, “Will you support the Government if they send troops?”. Now it is only 40%. What is also different is attitudes had not changed towards Crimea. About 88% say that it should be part of Russia and that is it. There are no changes there.

What has also changed slightly is the understanding that sanctions will affect the broader structure of society: that having Crimea has brought some problems and the problems are multiplying. The majority is still not much concerned about these problems, but we see that the understanding that the price can be rather high is growing slightly, step by step. At the very beginning, what also influenced the assessments about eastern Ukraine and Crimea was the fact that it did not cost anything. With growing understanding of the cost of the politics, we see this change towards eastern Ukraine. Fewer people now want it to become part of Russia, but I would still say that about 40% of people in Russia think that eastern Ukraine should be an independent entity.

I would describe it this way: there is a completely different understanding of what is going on in Ukraine and what the policy of Russia in Ukraine is. I can go into details later, but to the majority it is a kind of humanitarian mission, with Russia saving the Russian-speaking population. They see it as a problem that in eastern Ukraine people are under threat, and they are willing to help these people. I would even say that the majority welcomes the refugees from eastern Ukraine in Russia, maybe in not the regions that are accepting them, but overall the attitude is that people are welcoming these refugees. But they do not want to make eastern Ukraine part of the Russian Federation—I would put it that way.

Q193 Lord Trimble: A recent poll indicates that 84% of respondents believe that Russia has enemies. What I find interesting about that is that we also have data going back to March 1999, and the percentage who think that Russia has enemies never gets below the mid-60s. It has peaks in the high 70s and now has a particular peak at 84%. I find it interesting that there is this settled view of at least two-thirds, maybe 80%, of people that Russia has enemies, so it is not just a result of the last few months. How do you interpret that figure? Why do we have this settled view of threat?

Denis Volkov: We can trace this question—not this very question but a similar one—to the beginning of the 1990s. Right up until the Soviet Union collapsed, the majority said there were no enemies and the main problem was in Russians themselves. Again, I am elaborating on the work of our team and it is my interpretation, but still there is the work of the entire

team of the Levada Center behind what I am trying to present. Our understanding is that in maybe already the late Yeltsin years but certainly with Putin coming to power the Government began to exploit the situation if not of conflict then of controversy between Russia and the West. It was one of the tools of initiating, or provoking, the conflict, or at least describing the situation as Russia trying to re-establish some credit that the Soviet Union had. I would say that it was part of official policy to place Russia in contradiction with other countries and to exploit the idea of Russia as a kind of besieged castle, so it was on the agenda and it was exploited by the Government. We saw these numbers go up in the recent crisis, but you are right that they were high already.

It is also interesting to understand who Russians see as their main enemies. Well before this crisis, at the top of the list was the United States, second was Chechen terrorists, and third was NATO. For many years these top three were the same. For example, in October 2012, 56% considered the United States to be the main enemy, 39% Chechen terrorists, and 35% NATO. Almost the same was true, for example, in 2008. In July 2008, before the Georgian war, 51% considered the United States to be a large enemy, 45% considered Chechen terrorists to be an enemy, and 39% NATO. In all these years, 27% or 28% considered some circles in the West to be enemies of Russia. You see that although we saw this considerable change in attitudes towards the United States and the European Union quite recently under these developments and under the influence of state-run television, there has still for many years been some underlying distrust of the United States and NATO and this kind of western structure. The Government are trying to highlight and exploit this topic in explaining the conflict that is going on.

Lord Lamont of Lerwick: I wonder if you could just enlarge on what you were saying about the EU and how far the EU itself was seen as a threat. Was enlargement of the EU seen particularly as a threat? Coming to NATO, which you mentioned 35% in October 2012 thought was a threat, did they see enlargement particularly as a threat? Did your polls—the questioning—go down that deep?

Denis Volkov: I would say that Germany in particular was considered one of the allies of Russia until at least now. Now, for example, Angela Merkel is seen in a negative light—not as negative as Obama, but still. General attitudes towards the EU were rather positive. They were always much more positive than attitudes towards the United States. I would say that the average Russian does not go much into what the European Union is; it is more about a general understanding of Europe—not even the European Community—because not many are interested in politics. It was a rather general, positive view, but the attitudes have changed during crises like the war with Georgia and Crimea, with western leaders criticising Russian politics. It was always broadly televised, I would say rather one-sidedly, because the official point of view dominates all the TV channels—all four main stations of state-influenced TV channels.

There are definitely differences between the EU and NATO. NATO was always considered a threat. Not only that, but since 2004/2005 we have also seen a change in how people see co-operation with NATO. Until 2004—we have been asking these questions for several years—about half the population said that co-operating with NATO on security issues in the world was in our interest. After 2004, we saw that about 50% were against co-operation and only about a third were for co-operation. Overall, attitudes were negative. The enlargement of the EU is perceived negatively, although I do not have exact figures right now. NATO is a military bloc and still the European Union was seen more in terms of cultural

and economic co-operation, so it was not on the agenda as an enemy. There was a clear distinction between these two bodies.

Q194 Baroness Coussins: Good morning. You have mentioned the difference between Russian public opinion towards the EU and towards NATO. Could you also say whether there are any trend data that show a difference between attitudes to the EU and to Europe more broadly? Within that, are there any distinctions between people's attitudes towards Europe and the UK specifically? Finally, just to push that a little further, when the term "the West" is used, do Russians, according to the evidence of your polls, distinguish between the United States and Europe? If they do, can you characterise those differences in attitudes?

The Chairman: There are a lot of questions there.

Denis Volkov: There are several broader issues here. For example, only about a quarter of the population consider themselves Europeans and feel European. Right now, even fewer—about 15%—feel themselves a person who has strong connections to European culture. At the same time, western countries were considered very wealthy countries with high standards of living and a goal for Russia in raising standards of living, because many would like to live as in western countries. At the same time, we saw this distrust in the West generally and, I would say, a prevailing attitude of mistrust towards the West. For example, when asked about democracy in Russia, the majority are sure that there should be democracy but not a western kind of democracy. Again, it is only some general attitudes, because not many people know what the West is, how it operates, what laws it has or how government works there. There is no broad understanding. Here it is only about general perception.

Speaking about Great Britain, we have a list of friendly countries and not friendly countries, I would say—enemies or adversaries. Every year, or every two years, we ask people to name the friends and adversaries. Great Britain does not come high on either list. It comes only at number 15 or something. Our top friends were always Belarus, Kazakhstan, Germany, quite recently China, and so on. Our adversaries were the United States, and after that it depended on the current crisis. One year it was Estonia when there was this bronze-soldier not conflict but scandal. Another time it is another Baltic state, another year Georgia—when there is a war with Georgia. Then it is Ukraine. The number is changing, but it is still about the United States and the independent former Soviet republics that somehow betrayed the cause, in the eyes of the majority, of the Soviet Union.

We had one recent poll about western leaders, and there we compared Obama, Merkel, Hollande and Cameron. About one-quarter of the population had never heard of David Cameron or had heard his name but did not know who he was. The overall attitude was a little more negative than neutral. Negative attitudes were about 35%. That is less than negative attitudes towards Merkel, for example. Fifty per cent of Russians felt negative about her, and 76% expressed negative feelings towards Obama, for example. Although David Cameron also proposed rather harsh measures, I would say he was not the focus in the Russian media; the main focus was the United States and now Germany.

The framework in describing attitudes towards the West—towards what is going on—is that people are not very much interested and they do not quite understand what is going on. For example, at the very time the majority—it might be 70%, more or less—are following the news about what is going on in Ukraine, an absolute majority think that the Russian media is

objective but at the same time the majority confess they do not understand much about what is going on. They have only vague negative feelings towards the West, with not much distinction between the countries and between different entities within the West.

Q195 Baroness Bonham-Carter of Yarnbury: I am interested that you have now mentioned twice how Germany has fallen from grace in the eyes of the Russian people. Why has the media, which is, after all, state controlled, targeted Germany within the European Union to the degree that you seem to be suggesting?

Denis Volkov: I can only speculate here. Although I do not have any figures here, she is one of the top figures on Russian TV who is responsible for the European Union. It is always about talks between Vladimir Putin and Merkel, Merkel talking to Putin, Merkel asking whether he is “still in touch with reality”, and so on. It is more about how the media, not only state-run media but independent media, covers the conflict. There is much more information about what Angela Merkel and Germany are doing and proposing and so on than about other countries. I do not know how negative the effect will be on the overall attitudes towards Germany, but I think Germany will also suffer some losses in this way in our polls that will come.

Q196 Earl of Sandwich: Mr Volkov, thank you for this fascinating information. Going back to your 15% who are sympathetic to the European Union—I think you said 15% or so—can this be explained very simply by levels of education and awareness, or do you think it is more socioeconomic: that it is the people who are able to be in touch with Europe?

Denis Volkov: It is more about direct contacts—the direct experience of going to the West or the ability to speak a foreign language, which is usually English in Russia. To give you a sense of the figures, about 20% of Russians overall have had the experience of going abroad, and almost 60% of those living in Moscow travel to the West, usually to have holidays. At least in our recent poll about the extent to which people feel themselves Europeans and welcome a western type of democracy, the figures were twice as high for those who had had this direct experience of communication and of going abroad and seeing for themselves what life in the West is and who are more familiar not only with the life but maybe with how western countries operate. But I would say that again it is more about having only a general impression about life, because not many people are interested in politics: only several per cent have a deep interest in politics. Only maybe 15%, or even less, follow different international news closely, are engaged in what is going on and are trying to understand what is going on. The absolute majority I would say are passive consumers of what is being broadcast and televised.

Q197 Lord MacLennan of Rogart: Do you have any polling evidence to suggest Russian attitudes towards the Eurasian Economic Union? Given what you have said about the lack of identification with Europe among most of the population, is there any polling evidence to suggest that there is a turn towards Eurasia in general?

Denis Volkov: We do not have specific questions about economic union; it is more about Europe and the European Union as a whole. If we ask about, for example, a proposal to choose between this or another economic integration project, it is more about integration itself, not about economics; it is a symbolic understanding of broader integration within the former Soviet Union. The majority prefer this variant, but it is not about the economy; it is about symbolic issues, not trying to re-establish the Soviet Union itself but the greatness, of

which there is a lack. When Putin says that the collapse of the Soviet Union was one of the major catastrophes of the 20th century, the majority of Russians would agree with him. I would suggest that he said that exactly because he knew this and because he was trying to be more engaged with what the public think and trying to be the representative of common people. Yes, it is about only general understandings; average people do not go into that much detail because they pretty much just do not understand and they are not interested in it.

Q198 Lord Radice: Were President Putin's approval ratings falling before the crisis? Following on from that, how durable is the present surge of support for Putin? Is it just rallying-round-the-flag support that will die down? What are your views on that?

Denis Volkov: Between September/October 2008, when there was another rally around the flag during the war with Georgia, and at the end of 2013, Putin lost one-third of his supporters, but still we must understand that there are several pillars of Putin's support. One major driver of his support and of the legitimacy of any regime is the economy. What we saw in the long run was that when the economy was going down, the approval rating went down. When it stagnated, the rating stagnated.

Another source of boosting popularity was international conflicts. In the very first year, 1999, the Chechen war happened, which provided legitimacy to him just from that couple of months. Then there were the major conflicts—Georgia, then Ukraine and Crimea—but also many more smaller conflicts that were exploited in the Russian media to boost popularity.

Another pillar and a very important mechanism of manufacturing support around Putin is that there is no alternative. There is no informational alternative, because there is almost no alternative to state-run TV channels. The independent media have an audience of maybe 15%—no more—when the state-run TV channels maybe influence 90% of the public, and to half of the public they are the only source of information. There is almost no alternative economically, when the majority depend on state spending—state budgets. There is also no alternative politically when alternatives do not emerge within the system and alternatives in opposition are marginalised; they are not allowed to run for election. Before Crimea we asked, "Would you like some new person to become President or Putin?". Half the population said they would like to have somebody new, and only 20% said they would prefer Putin. But as the very next question we asked, "If the election takes place next Sunday, who will you vote for?", as an open question. Putin came first and he was four or even five times more popular than any alternative. It is more about creating this no-alternatives situation.

Speaking about the future, I would say that it will last for some time, but this negative mobilisation has usually not lasted that long, and the economy has been the main driver. Again, the Putin regime has so many other safeguards—the main ones I have tried to name—so even if there are more economic troubles the decrease in popularity will not be dramatic; it will be more gradual, I would say.

Q199 Lord Jopling: Mr Volkov, you have explained very clearly how the sponsored operations in Ukraine and Crimea have been popular both among the public and in the support for Putin himself. Could you tell us to what extent you think the Russian population would welcome more of these sponsored operations in the northern Baltic states in particular: in Georgia, where Russia already has a toehold in Abkhazia and South Ossetia; and in Moldova, where, again, you already have a toehold in Transnistria? To what extent

do you think the public would welcome and encourage further operations like the one that we have seen in Ukraine and Crimea?

Denis Volkov: I can only say here that for every such kind of operation, such as taking over Crimea and the Georgian war, public attitudes were ready. For example, attitudes towards Georgia were already more negative than positive several years before the war. Again, 80% were welcoming Crimea back to Russia. I would say here that what we have seen from what has already happened is that the Kremlin was somehow exploiting existing conditions inside the country as well as outside the country. That is my understanding of how the situation happened in Ukraine but also, for example, in Iraq and some other countries: they were trying to exploit a crisis that had already been created, so exploiting existing conditions.

I could not tell you whether there are any intentions to go into the Baltic states, but, again, what we have from our polls is that the Baltic states are somewhere at the top of the not enemies but at least adversaries of Russia. Again, it is also important that in this crisis as well as other crises it is the West that is seen as responsible, and predominantly the United States, which, according to mass attitudes, were responsible for the Georgian war and are responsible now for what is going on in Ukraine. It is the ability to put the blame on to their adversary and the ability to convince the public that they somehow are the victims, as the majority see themselves. It is the state's ability to present it this way that enables the support of the operations of the Government within Ukraine and within Georgia. I do not know whether there are any ideas or plans to go into the Baltic states, but at least some pre-requisites are already in place, I would say, if we just compare the data that we had before the war with Georgia and before the conflict about Crimea—not about Ukraine generally but about Crimea. But I do not know what will happen.

The Chairman: Mr Volkov, thank you very much. We have now reached the limit of our time, but you have really given us a very clear set of answers and you have helped to clarify our thinking. I am very grateful to you for taking the time to give this evidence and for the frankness with which you have given it. Thank you.

Denis Volkov: You are welcome. Thank you.