



Russians Want Crimea; Prefer Luhansk and Donetsk Independent

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The conflict between Russia and Ukraine remains unresolved and—after five years—it does not appear to be reaching a resolution any time soon. The ongoing crisis in eastern Ukraine between the Ukrainian government and rebel forces supported by Moscow not only degrades the relationship between Kiev and Moscow but also contributes to the deteriorating relations between Russia and the West.¹ This particular regional conflict has become an important destabilizing factor for international security. Findings from a new binational survey, conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and the Levada Analytical Center, show that a plurality of Russians believe these eastern areas of Ukraine should be independent states.² And a majority of Russians continue to say that Russia’s annexation of Crimea has brought the country more good than harm.

Key Findings

- A majority of Russians (62%) continue to support Russia’s annexation of Crimea, but only three in ten (29%) would like the same for Donetsk and Luhansk. A plurality think these self-declared republics should be independent states (46%).
- Majorities of Russians say Moscow’s recent international actions have worsened the economy (58%), standards of living (64%), and relations with the United States (78%). Yet, majorities also see improvements in Russia’s defense forces (83%) and international influence (62%).
- Despite the negative consequences of Russia’s recent foreign policy, seven in ten Russians (70%) think that playing an active role in world affairs is better for their country.

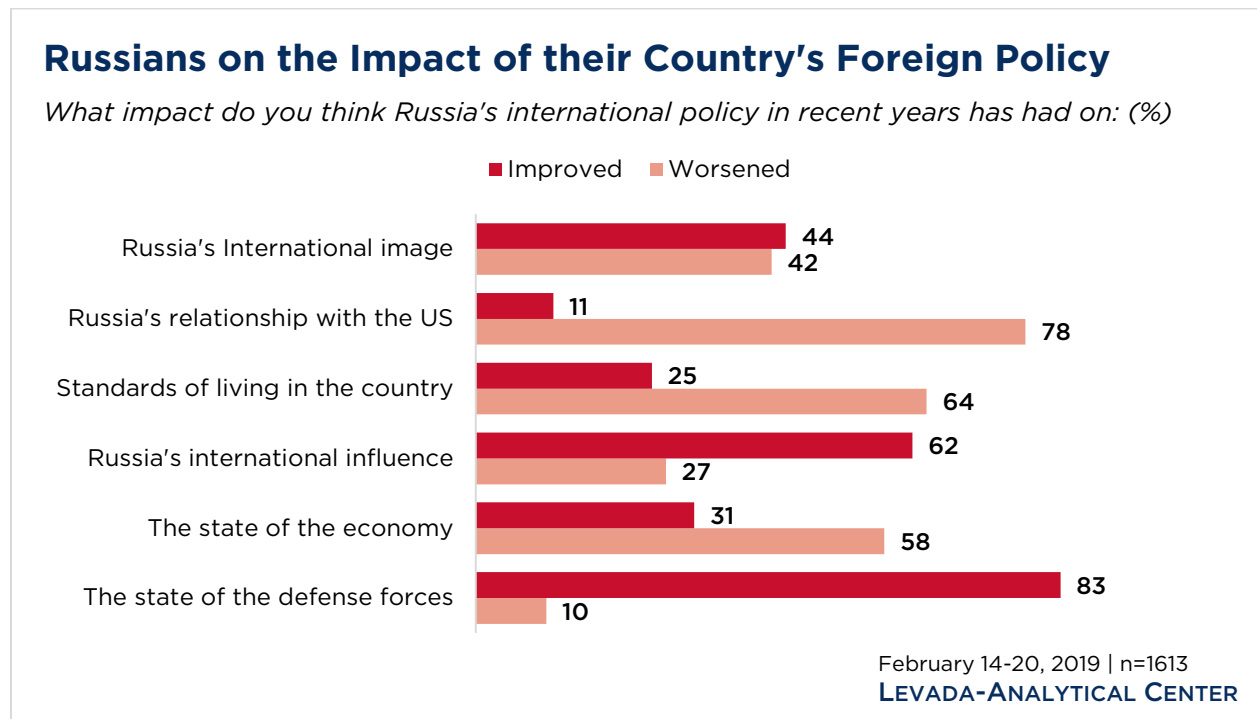
¹ Thomas De Waal, “No End in Sight in Eastern Ukraine,” Carnegie Europe, July 5, 2018, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/76742>.

² This brief is based on coordinated surveys conducted by Dina Smeltz and Lily Wojtowicz of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and Denis Volkov and Stepan Goncharov of the Levada Analytical Center in Moscow. The joint project on US-Russian public opinion about foreign policy issues was generously funded by the Carnegie Corporation.

Tradeoffs for Action in Crimea, Ukraine

Continued fighting between the Ukrainian government and rebel forces in the Donetsk and Luhansk republics is a double-edged sword for the Kremlin. On one hand, an ongoing conflict in Ukraine serves as a barrier to Ukrainian ambitions to join NATO and the European Union, something Russia has long opposed. On the other hand, Russia's involvement in that ongoing conflict provides little room for improvement in Russia's relations with Europe and the United States.

While Russia's annexation of Crimea was the catalyst for its isolation from much of the international community, Russians see both positive and negative impacts from their government's recent actions abroad. A majority of Russians believe Russia's foreign policy negatively affected the country's economy and standards of living. However, those who think that the annexation of Crimea brought more good are also more positive about the effects of Russia's international policy on its economy (40% vs. 31% in general) and standards of living (32% vs. 25%).



Russian opinion is more divided on the effect of the Kremlin's foreign policy on Russia's image abroad, but they also see several upsides. A majority are convinced Moscow's foreign policy has improved the country's international influence and the state of their country's military forces. They also describe their country as a rising (83%) military power.³

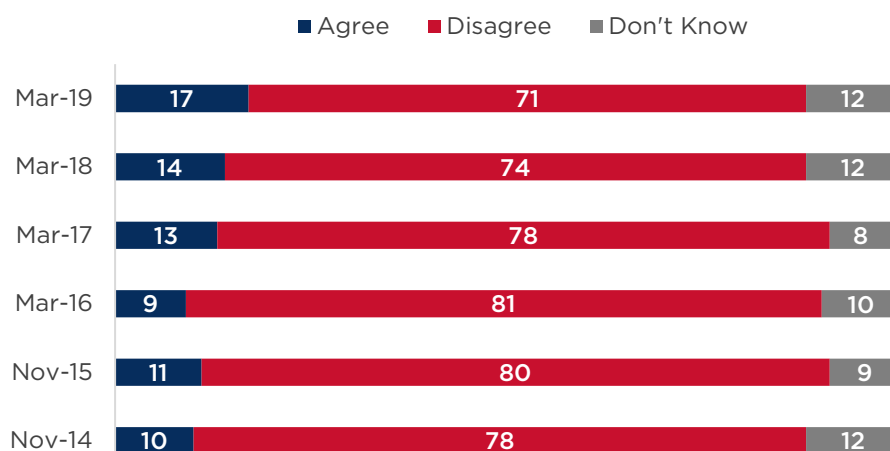
³ Dina Smeltz and Lily Wojtowicz, "Russians Say Their Country Is A Rising Military Power; And a Growing Percentage of Americans View Russia as a Threat," The Chicago Council on Global

Russians Generally Positive on Crimean Annexation

The West took umbrage to Russia's annexation of Crimea, which Barack Obama, then the US president, likened to "dark tactics of the 20th century."⁴ However, according to a March 2019 Levada Center poll, 71 percent of Russians do not see the annexation of Crimea as a violation of international law. The public rejects what it sees as the Western narrative that the annexation was illegitimate.⁵ Instead, they find legitimacy in the results of the 2014 referendum in which 96 percent of Crimeans voted to become part of Russia.⁶ Still, the number of Russians who think Russia violated international agreements by annexing Crimea has risen slightly since 2016 (from 9% to 17%).

Legality of the Crimean Annexation

Do you agree or not agree that the Russian incorporation of Crimea violated international laws and agreements? (%)



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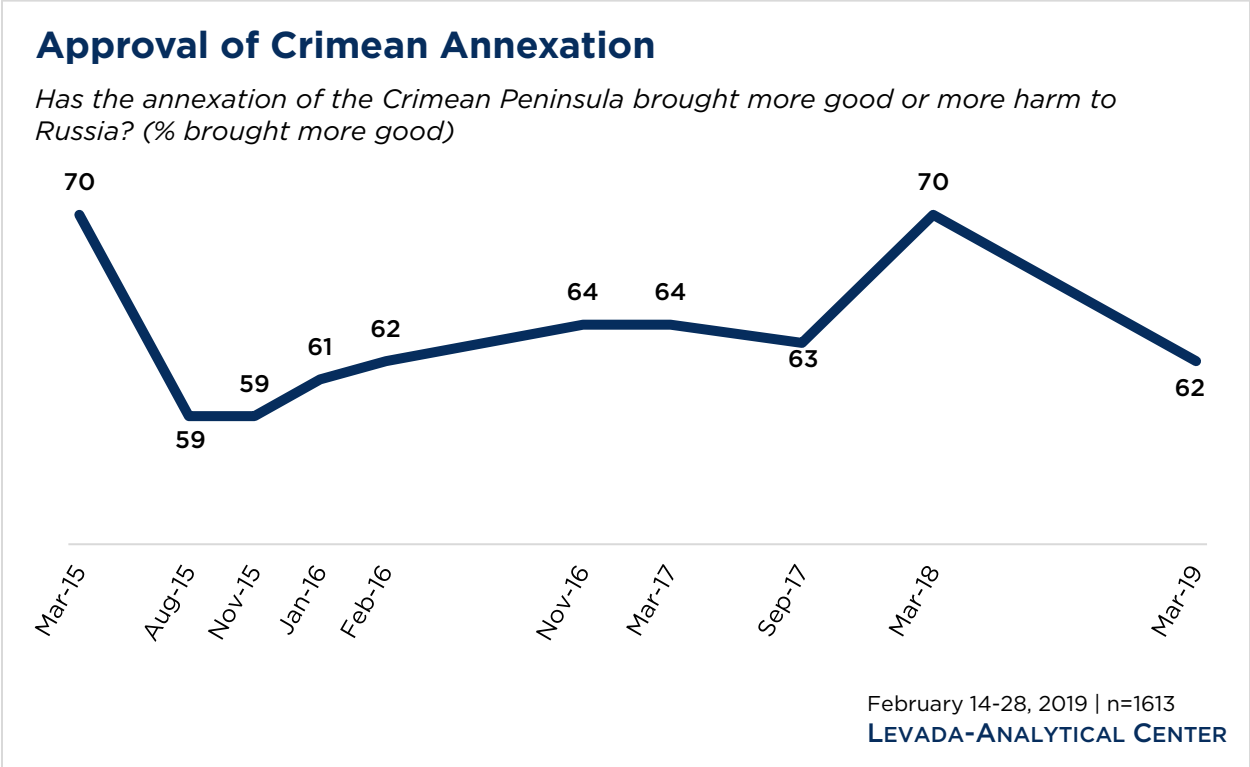
Affairs, March 21, 2019, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/russians-say-their-country-rising-military-power-and-growing-percentage-americans-view>.

⁴ "Remarks by President Obama at 25th Anniversary of Freedom Day - Warsaw, Poland," The White House Office of the Press Secretary, June 4, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/04/remarks-president-obama-25th-anniversary-freedom-day-warsaw-poland>.

⁵ What's more, many experts in Russia see the terms of international legal norms as self-serving to the West; see: Dina Smeltz, Lily Wojtowicz, Denis Volkov, and Stepan Goncharov, "US-Russia Experts Paint a Dim Picture of Bilateral Relations Before Summit," The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, July 12, 2018, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/us-russia-experts-paint-dim-picture-bilateral-relations-summit>

⁶ However, most Western governments find this referendum illegitimate as it violated the Ukrainian constitution and international law; see: John B. Bellinger III, interviewed by Johnathan Masters, "Why the Crimean Referendum is Illegitimate," Council on Foreign Relations, March 16, 2014, <https://www.cfr.org/interview/why-crimean-referendum-illegitimate>.

Despite the economic consequences of the annexation, Russians remain positive about the effects of the Crimean annexation. Today, 62 percent of Russians think the annexation of Crimea has brought more good than harm to Russia. Sixteen percent believe Russian actions brought more harm than good, and a similar proportion says they brought neither good nor harm. Since 2015, the results have been relatively stable, with between six and seven in ten Russians saying the annexation has brought more good than harm.



What Donetsk and Luhansk Will and Should Be

In contrast to their views on Crimea, Russians are mixed on the future of Donetsk and Luhansk possibly because a resolution to the conflict in eastern Ukraine is far less straightforward. The terms agreed upon by Ukraine, Russia, France, and Germany under the Minsk II agreement for the re-integration of the rebel republics in Ukraine do not seem realistic.⁷ Russia insists on the Ukrainian government’s decentralization, which Ukraine has little interest in implementing. In certain ways, the Russian public’s

⁷ Johnathan Brunson, “Implementing the Minsk Agreements might Drive Ukraine to Civil War. That’s Been Russia’s Plan All Along,” *War on the Rocks*, February 1, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/02/implementing-the-minsk-agreements-might-drive-ukraine-to-civil-war-thats-been-russias-plan-all-along/>.

mixed view on re-integration of the republics mirrors that of the leaders attempting to negotiate a resolution to the conflict.

Levada surveys have shown a decline in interest among Russians to absorb these Ukrainian regions.⁸ In April 2014, one-third of Russians thought Donetsk and Luhansk should be a part of Russia in the near future (35%) while a quarter of Russians welcomed the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk (25%). Yet once the military clashes between separatist and government forces in eastern Ukraine broke into open warfare and Western sanctions against Russia were introduced, the public became less enthusiastic towards the idea that these republics would become part of Russia. After 2015, when the tensest phase of the conflict ended, the number of Russians in favor of seeing eastern Ukraine become a part of Russia started increasing again.

Which of the following options would you like more?								
	Apr-14 (%)	May-14 (%)	Aug-14 (%)	Jan-15 (%)	Feb-15 (%)	Jun-15 (%)	May-16 (%)	Apr-17 (%)
Eastern Ukraine should become a part of Russia	35	26	21	19	15	19	22	21
Eastern Ukraine should be independent states	25	36	40	43	41	39	38	37
Eastern Ukraine should be a part of Ukraine but more independent from Kiev	21	17	18	17	21	24	20	21
Eastern Ukraine should be a part of Ukraine on the same principles as before conflict	6	6	6	4	7	4	6	7
Hard to say	13	15	16	17	16	15	15	14

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The recent Council-Levada survey—asking a slightly different question—finds that almost half of Russians (46%) believe that Luhansk and Donetsk in eastern Ukraine *should be* independent states, up from 25 percent in April 2014. Three in ten (29%) think they should be a part of Russia (similar to 2014) while only 13 percent think they should be a part of Ukraine.⁹

⁸ “Russians On Events in Ukraine,” trans., Levada Analytical Center, published May 6, 2014, <https://www.levada.ru/2014/05/06/rossiyane-ob-ukrainskih-sobytyah/>.

⁹ It should be noted that in 2014, only 6 percent thought Donetsk and Luhansk should be part of Ukraine under the same principals as before the conflict began. Twenty-one percent favored the republics remaining part of Ukraine on the condition that Donetsk and Luhansk

This survey finds little difference between what Russians prefer and what they expect the outcome will be. Asked what Luhansk and Donetsk *will be* in ten years, 37 percent think they will be independent states, slightly more than those who predict Donetsk and Luhansk will become a part of Russia (29%) and 10 percent think they will remain part of Ukraine.

The Fate of Luhansk and Donetsk		
	Should the Republics of Luhansk and Donetsk be: (%)	Ten years from now, do you think Republics of Luhansk and Donetsk will be: (%)
A part of Ukraine	13	10
A part of Russia	29	29
Independent states	46	37
Hard to say	13	25

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would get more independence from Kiev. The phrasing of the response options for this recent survey—see the chart above—could have resulted in fewer respondents preferring re-integration compared to the survey conducted in April 2017. This could mean that a minority of Russians may accept re-integration of rebel republics, but only on the condition of decentralization.

Methodology

The analysis in this report is based on data from a joint Chicago Council-Levada Analytical Center survey on Russian and American Attitudes conducted in February 2019.

The US survey was conducted by Ipsos Public Affairs using their national online omnibus service, KnowledgePanel™, between February 22-24, 2019 among a weighted national sample of 1,016 American adults, 18 years of age or older, living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia. The margin of error is ±3 percentage points.

The Russia survey was conducted between February 14-20, 2019 by the Levada-Center (Levada Analytical Center) with face-to-face interviews conducted among a representative sample of 1,613 persons aged 18 years and older, living in eight federal districts of the Russian Federation. Inside each district, the sample is distributed among five strata of settlements proportionally to the number of population living in them, 18 years of age or older. The margin of error is ±3.4 percentage points.

The 2019 and 2017 Chicago Council-Levada Analytical Center Joint Surveys on Russian and American Attitudes are made possible by the generous support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

About the Chicago Council on Global Affairs

The Chicago Council on Global Affairs is an independent, nonpartisan membership organization that provides insight—and influences the public discourse—on critical global issues. We convene leading global voices, conduct independent research, and engage the public to explore ideas that will shape our global future. The Council is committed to bringing clarity and offering solutions to issues that transcend borders and transform how people, business, and governments engage the world. Learn more at thechicagocouncil.org and follow [@ChicagoCouncil](https://twitter.com/ChicagoCouncil).

About the Levada-Center

The Levada-Center is one of the leading research organizations in Russia that conducts public opinion surveys, expert and elite surveys, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and other survey methods. The Center brings together experts in the fields of sociology, political science, economics, psychology, market research, and public opinion polls. The Center's research and experts have been cited in national and international media such as *Kommersant*, *Vedomosti*, *RBC*, *The Economist*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *Reuters*, *BBC Radio*, *Radio Liberty*, and others. Learn more at levada.ru and follow [@levada_ru](https://twitter.com/levada_ru) or on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/levada.ru).

Appendix 1: Russian Topline*

Q. What impact do you think Russia's international policy in recent years has had on the following factors:

Russia's relationship with the US

	Improved (%)	Worsened (%)	NR (%)
Overall	11	78	11
Approve of Putin	14	73	13
Do not approve of Putin	6	85	9

Russia's international influence

	Improved (%)	Worsened (%)	NR (%)
Overall	62	27	12
Approve of Putin	70	19	11
Do not approve of Putin	47	42	12

Russia's international image

	Improved (%)	Worsened (%)	NR (%)
Overall	44	42	14
Approve of Putin	51	35	14
Do not approve of Putin	31	56	13

The states of the defense forces

	Improved (%)	Worsened (%)	NR (%)
Overall	83	10	7
Approve of Putin	89	6	5
Do not approve of Putin	72	18	10

The state of the economy

	Improved (%)	Worsened (%)	NR (%)
Overall	31	58	12
Approve of Putin	40	46	14
Do not approve of Putin	14	79	7

* Due to rounding, totals may not add up to 100%; Russians were asked "All-in-all, do you approve of the job Vladimir Putin is doing as President of Russia?" for those who approve of Putin n=1037, for those who do not approve n=564.

Standards of living in the country

	Improved (%)	Worsened (%)	NR (%)
Overall	25	64	10
Approve of Putin	35	53	13
Do not approve of Putin	8	85	7

Q. For each of the following countries, do you think it is a rising military power, a declining military power, or is it staying about the same relative to other countries?

Russia

	Rising (%)	Declining (%)	About the same (%)	NR (%)
Overall	83	4	10	3
Approve of Putin	88	2	8	2
Do not approve of Putin	75	8	14	3

Q: What do you think, should the Republics of Luhansk and Donetsk be:

	A part of Ukraine (%)	A part of Russia (%)	Independent States (%)	NR (%)
Overall	13	29	46	13
Approve of Putin	10	31	46	13
Do not approve of Putin	18	24	46	13

Q: Ten years from now, do you think the Republics of Luhansk and Donetsk be:

	A part of Ukraine (%)	A part of Russia (%)	Independent States (%)	NR (%)
Overall	10	29	36	25
Approve of Putin	8	32	37	23
Do not approve of Putin	15	22	36	27