

Russian views on the past, present & future

How do Russians assess the past 16 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union and what is their outlook for the future?

Three research efforts publicised today at the EBRD's Annual Meeting show that, looking back, what Russians most appreciate about the Soviet era is the stability it afforded. Looking at life today, what they prize most are the opportunities available in the new Russia.

The Life in Transition (LiT) survey undertaken by the EBRD and the World Bank provides statistical analysis of public opinion polls conducted in Russian cities and in other transition countries in 2006. Survey respondents were asked directly about their attitudes to things that affect their lives and about their general level of satisfaction or happiness. Additional data was gleaned through the Russian Longitudinal Monitoring Survey (see slides).

In addition, this spring the EBRD commissioned the Moscow-based Institute for Comparative Social Research to conduct 34 focus groups in nine cities, from Vladivostok to St Petersburg to Rostov-on-Don, to converse with everyday Russians about their attitudes and aspirations regarding their recent past, their present and their future. These results, published as the Russian Attitudes and Aspirations study (see summary), were inspired by data from the LiT survey in Russia.

All three came together today in an Annual Meeting panel discussion on Russian public opinion, titled *The view from the ground: which way is up?* Anna Andreenkova, co-director of the Moscow-based Institute for Comparative Social Research, discussed the results of the focus group sessions. Ekaterina Zhuravskaya, associate professor of economics at the New Economic School and academic director of the Centre for Economic and Financial Research, elaborated on the RLMS findings. It was moderated by Stephen Dalziel, former BBC World Service Russian affairs analyst.

According to the focus group study, what Russians like best about their country today is the economic and political stability it currently enjoys. What worries them most: low living standards, corruption and the decline in health care and education.

The research shows that younger and better-off Russians are more positive about the present vis-à-vis the Soviet past than are older people with less promising financial prospects. But even the latter agreed that the new Russia offers greater opportunities for hard-working, talented, educated people than did Soviet Russia. Regardless of age or income, the ideal in Russia today is to achieve a middle-class, western European standard of living, with a steady income, a car and a home of one's own with a computer, TV, etc.

All the same, many Russians "mythologise" the Soviet past, as Dr Andreenkova put it with regard to the fondness many Russians express for the certainties of the old system.

Dr Zhuravskaya concurred. "If you ask people if they trusted each other more in Soviet times, they will say 'yes', but after a while they start remembering reporting to the police, the KGB." Similarly, she said, while many people would like prices to be set by the state as they were in USSR times, they have forgotten that such centralised economic control meant shortages and lack of choice in shops.

Asked whether the Russians in her focus groups who pine for the Soviet days actually experienced those days, Dr Andreenkova mused, "They had experience with it, yes, but they know longer know the Soviet Union. Today the Soviet Union is so far detached, it is a faraway land of the golden age...where we probably never lived." In fact, she said, what they think they had in the past is actually what they long for in the future.

All the same, the Soviet Union as a point of reference is receding, the two said. "It's no longer as important," said Dr Andreenkova. "People reflect back more to the 1990s" when assessing whether today is good or bad.

There were many seeming contradictions in the surveys. For example, there was the widespread view that state intervention in the economy is a good thing (particularly regarding ownership and exploitation of natural resources), while at the same time many respondents expressed deep mistrust of state institutions. Added to this is the overriding concern about corruption.

"One gets the impression the people want to just hand over their lives to the government," said Dr Zhuravskaya. However, she doesn't believe this is the case. She explained that Russians want officials to assume their responsibility to manage state assets honestly and for citizens' benefit.

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