
RUSSIA'S LOVE FOR DAMNED LIES AND STATISTICS

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The headline on Russia's Sputnik news website states that "One Third of Europeans and Americans Consider Crimea Part of Russia." The finding comes from a poll commissioned by the Kremlin-owned news agency asking residents in several European countries and the US on who they thought the peninsula belonged to.

Around 1,000 were questioned in each country, and the results showed that 26 percent of US and French residents thought Crimea was now Russian territory while 32 percent of Dutch, 33 percent of Brits, 37 percent of Germans and 39 percent of Italians agreed.

Sputnik's story claims this is evidence of a gradual change of heart by the west, moving away from its refusal to recognize the referendum in which 97 percent of Crimeans who voted were in favor of breaking away from some 20 years of Ukrainian rule and reuniting with Russia.

It cites UK academic Richard Sakwa, a Professor of Russian and European politics at the University of Kent, as saying Westerners are coming to "an acceptance that the overwhelming majority of the Crimean people did want to rejoin [sic] Russia."

But since there is no previous poll to compare it to we can't assume there has been any change of heart. And, in line with the old adage 'lies, damned lies and statistics,' you can look at it from the other side - 74 percent of Americans and French don't agree Crimea belongs to Russia along with around 66 percent of Europeans.

And, of course, the result you get in any poll depends on what question you asked - which wasn't stated in the Sputnik story. But asking "who does Crimea belong to" and "do you agree that Crimea is legally part of Russia" or "should Crimea remain part of Russia" could yield very different results.

Terrific timing

The timing of the poll is interesting as various French and Italian politicians have recently voiced concerns over the West's ongoing sanctions against Russia, claiming it's time they were lifted. They say President Vladimir Putin's counter sanctions are doing more harm to Europe than the West's sanctions on Russia. Russia stopped buying a variety of fresh produce and other goods from Europe after sanctions were imposed on it, which is costing farmers across the EU dearly.

Russia's economic crisis has also meant that Russian's are now penny pinching and have cut back on foreign travel. They've reduced their holiday spending in Europe by about a third according to

the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). It says Russians spent around \$15 billion (13 billion euros) less in 2015 than they did the previous year, down from \$50 billion to \$35 billion. Fortunately for Europe, Chinese travellers have been picking up the slack by spending a massive \$292 billion, but the loss from Russia is biting traditional summer holiday markets like Spain, Italy and Greece.

tourist resort in turkey

Crisis? What crisis?

The poll, no doubt, is part of an ongoing strategy aimed at showing opinion poll-driven European countries that their voters are not overwhelmingly against Russia and its policies. It's a not-so-subtle version of its domestic practices where media control is used to manufacture consensus, which is reflected and reinforced by opinion polls. An example of the strategy's effectiveness is another recent poll which showed that 56 percent of Russians hadn't heard about the Panama Papers. Russian's are avid TV watchers, so you'd think it would be impossible for that number to have no idea about the financial scandals the papers revealed that implicated 12 former and current world leaders and their own president's inner circle of friends.

But the Kremlin's warning of an imminent character assassination attempt on the president and its strict control over media coverage seems to have worked. Of those who had heard about the allegations against Putin's inner circle, 37 percent thought it would have no effect on the country or its leadership. When asked about why the papers were released, 34 percent said they thought they were published with the specific intention of discrediting the Russian president - which is exactly what the Kremlin had said.

And, just like water off a duck's back, the most recent popularity poll showed 84 percent of Russian voters were willing to re-elect Putin as the country's president and 82 percent were happy with his performance as the country's leader. After all, majority rules.

Kaynak/Source: