Twitter Thread by Roman Pable



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What are the concerns of young Russians? And how will they shape the future of their country & its relationship with Europe? The Levada Centre has done a fascinating study. Buckle up for a long thread. But be aware, it might shatter your Illusions.

First, young Russians are proud of their country and support the forceful restoration of Moscow's role in the international system under Putin. Around 69% agree with the statement “I am proud to be a citizen of Russia”. 2/X

Half of the respondents are sure that Russia’s prestige and international clout will keep growing and many lament that Moscow’s interests are not sufficiently emphasized on the international stage. 3/X

Young Russians are less religious than the overall population and the church is highly polarizing. At the same time, a vast majority considers itself to be Orthodox Christian. No signs of a demographic “Islamisation” of Russia. 4/X

To put it mildly: young Russians are not woke. Many do not want to live in the same neighborhood with Roma (75%), homosexual (61%), refugees (49%), Jews (27%), or people from the Caucasus (34%). 5/X

Young Russians trust Putin & the military more than democratic institutions like the Duma. The reasons for this can (probably) be related to the perceived role of the president and the army as guarantors of national security & dignity, seen apart from domestic policies. 6/X

The Kremlin’s idea of a sovereign or “controlled” democracy seems in line with the political ideology of young Russians. While many of them strongly support democracy and the need for political opposition, over 40% also fully support “a leader who rules with a strong hand". 7/X

Is Putin only popular because he controls state television? That’s at best part of the story. The digital shift is very evident among Russian youth. Over 80% get their information from the Internet, only 50% from television. 8/X

What's the ideology of young Russians? Social democratic ideas are most popular, followed by nationalism, liberalism, and communism. This does not differ greatly from the general population. But note that Russian nationalism is significantly more popular amongst the young. 9/X

What's the view on Europe? Young Russians are estranged from Europe & the West. Many don't identify with "Western" culture. Most see Europe & Russia in a state of confrontation. Only 52% believe that the relationship between Russia and the West can be truly friendly. 10/X

Young Russians blame (mostly) America for the conflict between Russia and Europe. Similar to the Russian government, they see NATO as a dividing force and Europe as a vassal of American interests. Note, that Putin gets hardly any blame for the escalating tensions. 11/X

Young Russians fully support their government in the Ukrainian conflict. And they are willing to pay the price for it. 67% would not support the return of Crimea if sanctions were lifted and 55% support providing support to the Donetsk & Lugansk enclaves in Eastern Ukraine. 12/X

So, what should we conclude from this? Two things: First, Putin is not going to be replaced by a Liberal. And second, the Kremlin's foreign policy is primarily shaped by popular demand, not by Putin. Let me elaborate. 13/X

Putin might leave soon, or he might stay on for another decade. But whatever happens, he will not be replaced by a pro-Western Liberal like Navalny. The Russians don't like these people. Navalny polls at 2%, behind the nationalists and communists. 14/X

https://t.co/fKziDKgTvY

Most Russians support conservative domestic policies, state intervention in the economy & a robust foreign policy. Thus Putin will be replaced by a chosen successor or a populist-nationalist who doubles down on standing up to the Oligarchs & NATO. Think of Orban or Duterte. 15/X

Ironically, the only way to replace Putin with someone like Navalny would be to ignore the will of the people. Only a Coup d'état engineered by parts of the elite, like the end of the Soviets, could boost a Navalny into the Kremlin. Elections will not. 16/X

Waiting until Putin is gone to negotiate with his successor will therefore not work. Russian foreign policy is fundamentally shaped by public opinion, not just by Putin's worldview. Russians are willing to face Western sanctions and see NATO as the clear aggressor. 17/X

This leaves Europe with two options: 1) Following Clausewitz, we can use war to force our will upon the enemy. This seems stupid because we might lose, and even winning will probably get us killed. 2) As Macron and others have suggested, engaging in diplomacy. 18/X

Now diplomacy does not mean surrender. Europe clearly should not allow Russia to further carve up Ukraine or infringe on EU/NATO territory. Military deterrence, democracy promotion, and political unity are thereby crucial. 19/X

But accepting some of Moscow's interests in its immediate neighborhood will be a necessary precondition for easing tensions. Russia is simply not going to accept further NATO expansion without a fight of some sort. (Read Mearsheimer on this.) 20/X

https://t.co/tppM81FizL

Additional sanctions will not change the Kremlin’s mind, since the Russian people are not deterred by them. Any additional economic pain will be seen as another form of Western aggression. This is clearly shown in the Levada study. 21/X

To conclude: Europe must decide if it wants to keep Moscow close. I think we should. We, therefore, need to consider the viewpoints of the Russian people, even if they diverge from ours.