

Getting better? Or getting worse?

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What is the influence of President Putin's leadership on the quality of life in Russia? 77% of Russians think it is positive (against 8% that say it is negative), whereas 59% of Americans think it is negative (35% - positive)¹. Somebody has to be wrong.

Perhaps the experts know better? It does not look like it; they are also divided in their opinions. Many recognize that things improved under Putin as compared to the "the rocky 1990s", but others believe that there was a deterioration. In 1994 Anders Aslund wrote: "Even if they don't quite know it yet themselves, the Russians have already turned the corner on success... A market economy has been successfully created, but people do not understand that..."² 14 years later, in 2008, he claimed that Russia in crisis: "All state systems are in crisis: health care, education, law enforcement, and the military ...Can Russia really afford to keep Putin in a senior position any longer?"³

These differences in perceptions are not new, there are reasons for these differences, and they are being investigated by the researchers. But what is really puzzling is the inability to agree on how to interpret the same statistical data, even if the validity of the data is not questioned. Just one example – the murder rate under Yeltsin's and Putin's presidency.

Anders Aslund again: "*Time* magazine praised Putin for the stability he had brought to the country, but what stability? Russia's murder rate has been higher under Putin than under Yeltsin and is currently four times higher than in the U.S."⁴

¹ BBC World Service Poll (December 2007),
(http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/feb08/BBCPutin_Feb08_rpt.pdf)

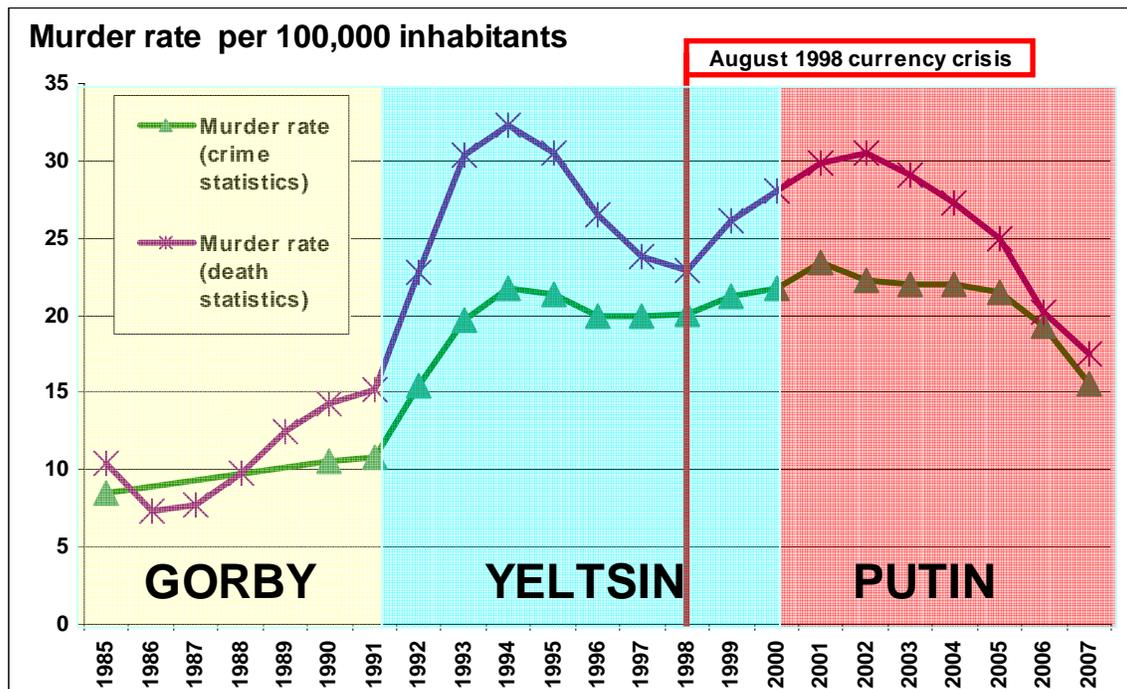
² Anders Aslund. Russia's Success Story: Chernomyrdin Pulls It Off. - *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 1994.

³ Anders Aslund. Putin's Economic Legacy. - *Russian Analytical Digest*, No. 36, March 8, 2008.

⁴ Anders Aslund. Putin's Economic Legacy. - *Russian Analytical Digest*, No. 36, March 8, 2008

Or Michael McFaul and Kathryn Stoner-Weiss: “The murder rate has also increased under Putin, according to data from Russia's Federal State Statistics Service. In the "anarchic" years of 1995-99, the average annual number of murders was 30,200; in the "orderly" years of 2000-2004, the number was 32,200.⁵

Do the Russian official data that they use bear these contentions? Look at the chart below, does it really show that murder rate under Putin increased? Yeltsin came to power in 1991, when the murder rate was 10 (15) people per 100,000 inhabitants and he left in 2000 when the murder rate was 22 (28). Putin started from there and is leaving the country 8 years later with the murder rate of 16 (18). In a nutshell, under Yeltsin’s rule the murder rate doubled, whereas Putin administration after 1-2 years in office managed to halt the trend inherited from Yeltsin’s times, to reverse this trend, and to cut the murder rate considerably.



Source: Goskomstat.

⁵ Michael McFaul and Kathryn Stoner-Weiss. The Myth of the Authoritarian Model How Putin's Crackdown Holds Russia Back. – *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2008.

There are many interesting issues to discuss about the patterns of change in the murder rate depicted in the chart⁶. One is the difference between the murder rate according to crime statistics and according to demographic statistics – the former is more restrictive than the latter, since it registers only illegal murders, whereas demographic figures cover all murders, including ‘legal’ ones – capital punishment and ‘collateral damage’ during wars, anti-terrorist and other police operations. The gap between these two indicators widened during the first and second Chechen wars (1994–96 and 1999–2002), see chart.

The other issue is the decline in the murder rate during Yeltsin’s short-lived macroeconomic stabilization (1995-98) that ended up in a spectacular currency crisis of 1998 and the increase in the murder rate after the currency crisis (1998-2002), when output was already growing, real incomes were on the rise and unemployment was falling. Even though at that time the economy was recovering from transformational recession, the deterioration of social indicators, including the murder rate, continued.

But the question of whether or not the murder rate increased under Putin is not interesting – it suffices to look at the chart above to get the answer.

⁶ See for details: Popov, Vladimir. RUSSIA REDUX? - *New Left Review*, No. 44, March-April 2007 (<http://http-server.carleton.ca/~vpopov/documents/NLR-April2007-Popov-Woods.pdf>)