

## Public Opinion and Mass Sentiments in Russia and Ukraine: Before and After the Financial Crisis of August, 1998

Vorona, Valerij; Golovakha, Yevgen; Panina, Natalija

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**VALERIJ VORONA,**

*Doctor of Sciences in Economics, Professor, Director of the Institute of Sociology of the NAS of Ukraine*

**YEVGEN GOLOVAKHA,**

*Doctor of Sciences in Philosophy, Principal Research Fellow of the Department of Socio-Political Processes of the Institute of Sociology of the NAS of Ukraine*

**NATALIJA PANINA,**

*Doctor of Sciences in Sociology, Head of the Department of Socio-Political Processes of the Institute of Sociology of the NAS of Ukraine*

**Public Opinion and Mass Sentiments in  
Russia and Ukraine: Before and After the  
Financial Crisis of August, 1998\***

When people call Russia and Ukraine ‘brother republics’, it is not only due to their past hypocritical ideology, which understood brotherhood as a totally lawless existence for all members of the USSR. The common ‘social genotype’, which was inherited by independent Ukraine and Russia, still determines some common features of their similar social pathologies. Common traditions concerning the interpretation of social reality and ideological stereotypes of recent times lead to some principle similarity of emotional reactions related to an evaluation of these countries’ situations. Numerous studies, conducted in Russia and Ukraine, show that, in both states, the following sentiments have become popular: treating authorities and political institutions with distrust, a pessimistic attitude to the possible overcoming of socio-economic problems,

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the phenomenon of 'subjective impoverishment', and a sceptical attitude to the liberal strategy of economy transformations [1]. At the same time, we cannot deny the differences between Russia and Ukraine which prevent one from regarding both states as siamese siblings, separated by force due to their destiny or 'evil democrat-surgeons'. The ways of Russia and Ukraine are essentially in many aspects, not only in foreign and home policies but in mass consciousness, in the thoughts and estimations of people, their ideas about social, political and economic situations in their own country and in the countries of their near neighbours.

In the research, the results of which are presented in this article, we considered the aspects of a comparative analysis of Russia and Ukraine (their common features and distinctions in estimations by population about situations in society and their own socio-economic conditions) on the eve of the August events, which caused one more social shock in post-Soviet Russia and essentially affected the situation in Ukraine. In the article, we have used the data of comparative sociological research conducted by the All-Russian Centre of Public Opinion Research (ARCPOR) (N=2407) in Russia and by the Institute of Sociology of the NAS of Ukraine together with SOCIS-Gallup company (N=1810) in Ukraine. Also, all national public opinion polls were carried out in May 1998 in accordance with the programme developed by the ARCPOR and related to the monthly monitoring of public opinion. Some of the questions, formulated by research fellows of the ARCPOR, were included in the questionnaire of yearly monitoring conducted by the Institute of Sociology of the NAS of Ukraine.

## **1. Evaluation of the political situation and attitudes towards social protest: from preventive pessimism to declarative protest**

While making assessments about political situations in their own countries, Russian and Ukrainian people have expressed the same attitude towards the tendencies that prevail in political life: both rarely accept the situation as happy and quiet, most of them think that it is tense, in fact they often evaluate it as critical and explosive (see Table 1).

People in Ukraine assessed the political situation in their own country to be explosive twice as often as they did when making assessments about Russia (interesting that the 'burst' happened not where it was expected). At the same time, in both countries, the majority of the population said the situation was 'tense' because, as far as their feelings are

concerned, it was the most typical feature of the political situation. This aspect could be seen in self-analysis about their moods, where tension and annoyance prevailed (see Table 2).

**Table 1****Assessments of political situation in Russia and Ukraine, %**

How do you evaluate the political situation in the country as a whole?	Ukrainians about Russia	Ukrainians about Ukraine	Russians about Russia
Happy	1.0	0.9	0.6
Quiet	6.7	8.2	6.7
Tense	52.6	50.3	57.0
Critical, explosive	16.4	33.9	27.2
No response	23.3	6.6	8.9

**Table 2****How the answers were distributed in response to the question: «What would you say was your mood during the past days?», %**

	Ukraine	Russia
Wonderful mood	2.3	4.0
Normal, balanced	26.5	35.6
I feel tensed, annoyed	48.2	43.3
I feel scared, depressed	12.8	11.6
No response	10.3	5.5

However, although people were emotionally ready for the fact that transformations for the better were some way off, they did not expect the sharp fall in the economy. Only 19% of Russians assumed the possibility of a sharp deterioration in the economic situation for forthcoming months, 17% assumed the same in the political situation.

Naturally, forecasts and estimates made by ordinary people about political and economic shocks coincide with real political life more often than prognoses by political scientists and economists, but they reflect general emotional sentiments that could be essential if the political situation in a country was to change sharply. The mass feeling of an ‘in-

flamed' political environment, common for Russia and Ukraine, enables the majority of people to perceive social shocks as quite an appropriate stage of society's development and do not respond to them too dramatically. At the same time, Ukrainians appeared to be more prepared for the worst circumstances than Russians. To begin with, on the eve of the crisis, they said their mood was 'normal' not as frequently as Russians (see Table 2), secondly, among Ukrainians, there were less optimists than in Russia, who believed that life would come right in the country within the year (11% against 15%). But the main thing is that, in both countries, a large majority of the population were pessimists.

Mass pessimism, which substituted the optimism of Soviet people, plays an important social role under the conditions of unforeseen political, social and economic development of society. It makes it possible to keep a distance from the failed illusions that lost their regulative character after the communist pseudo-paternalistic ideology lost its dominance in society. It might explain why the 'post-August' events, which profoundly affected the economic interests of Russians and Ukrainians, did not cause a rise in protest activity.

Separate protest actions, relating to delays of salary payments in Ukraine, and the trade-union demonstrations in Russia on October 7, 1998 can hardly be regarded as adequate public reaction to the slump in the economy, the fast growth in prices and sharp fall in living standards. Although almost a third of Russian and Ukrainian citizens considered mass actions against lowering standards of living to be expected where they lived, those who did not wait for public protest actions, held by their countrymen, appeared to be more prescient (see Table 3).

**Table 3**

**Estimation of the probability of public protest actions, %**

How do you estimate the possibility of public actions against the deteriorating standard of living, to defend your interests in your town, village or region now?	Ukraine	Russia
Quite possible	37.0	43.2
Unlikely	40.1	40.2
No response	22.9	16.6

In Ukraine, the percentage of those who expected public protest was almost equal to the percentage of those who were ready to take part in

these actions, whereas the Russian population expected public protest action more than Ukrainians, but the number of Russians ready to take part in these actions was significantly less (see Table 4).

**Table 4****Readiness to personal participation in protest actions, %**

If meetings and protest demonstrations were held, would you personally take part in them?	Ukraine	Russia
Rather yes	35.2	27.1
Rather no	35.4	53.5
No response	29.4	19.4

We would like to emphasize the principle similarity of attitudes towards protest for most of the population in Ukraine and Russia: most people do not declare any clearly expressed intention to participate in public actions. So, the potential of 'people's patience' is still not exhausted by authority up to the critical level despite numerous unsuccessful economic experiments that deteriorate the social and economic situation.

**2. The 'Bearing Unbearable Hardships' Phenomenon:  
in Ukraine, already on the eve of the crisis,  
the majority of the population could not  
put up with such conditions which  
the majority of Russian people  
cannot stand only after  
the crisis**

Taking into account the dominance of people who do not want to take part in protest actions against the deteriorating standard of living in Russia and Ukraine, a natural question follows: what level can be regarded as critical, when a mass protest turns from a hypothetical factor of social instability into a real one threatening social upheaval? We can assume that it depends on an inability to henceforth bear an abject poverty. Let us look at the distribution of answers to the question: To what extent are the current conditions for Russians and Ukrainians unbearable? (see Table 5).

**Table 5**

**How the answers were distributed in response to the question:  
«Which one of the following statements correspond to the current  
conditions in the best way?», %**

	Ukraine	Russia
It is not so bad, one can live	4.1	9.7
Life is hard, but one can bear it	30.6	41.6
It is impossible to bear our abject poverty	59.9	42.0
No response	5.4	6.8

We can see that, in May 1998, three out of five citizens in Ukraine considered their situation to be poor enough to be unbearable. In Russia, the same sentiments were expressed only by a minority. However, in Russia, protest actions were more active. In some regions, they even turned into collective hunger-strikes and 'rail wars'. So, we should not regard the situation, when most of the population in a post-Soviet country consider their situation to be completely unbearable, as critical. The 'Bearing Unbearable Hardships' phenomenon could be seen after the events of August in Russia too. According to data from a poll conducted in September 1998 as part of the ARCPOR monitoring, 61% of Russians thought that it was impossible to suffer their poverty. Among Ukrainian people, in September 1998, the same index reached 54% (according to data from a national public opinion poll held by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology). So, Russians reacted to the economic shock by 'distress alert' and were ahead of Ukrainians as far as an index of 'a subjective unbearable poor situation' was concerned. However, just after Russia changed its government and Russian reformers lost their monetary ambitions, the 'suffering and miserable' majority seemed agreed with the vague prospects of going out of the dead end of economic crisis.

In May 1998, Russians had more reason for feeling they had a better situation than Ukrainians. At least the standard of living of the average Russian were much better. For instance, in Russia, per capita family income (its USD equivalent value) was 2.1 times higher than that in Ukraine (according to polling data, in Russia, it was 78 USD, whereas in Ukraine, it was 37 USD). However, just one financial shock was enough to deteriorate the emotional situation in Russia, and people's moods became worse than the mood of Ukrainians during the May poll. For example, in September, the proportion of Russians who felt tense and annoyed grew to 48%, and the section of those feeling scared and depressed grew

to 20%. One could hardly expect any other reaction, when taking into account the fact that well-being and people's moods are directly connected with the actual situation found in a country. However, the serious change in mood of the Russian population did not affect their readiness to protest which was a general index of people's unwillingness to bear the current conditions.

So, we can state that, in post-Soviet countries, even 60% of citizens, living in unbearable conditions, cannot be regarded as the upper limit which threatens the safety of existing social order and inefficient government. Probably, such a limit does not exist at all. The only way out might be when 'inaccessible respondents' (presidents, ministers, people's deputies, etc.), who are the real source of social shocks, begin to consider their conditions of living unbearable. However, today they stand their conditions more stoically than the majority of the population. At least, the Presidents of Russia and Ukraine do not make public complaints about the unbearable living conditions, though ordinary citizens perceive their activities, relating to the current social situation, in a bad light. Such negative assessments of all branches of authority are very popular in Ukraine and in Russia. According to data from the May poll, when evaluating the activities of their Presidents on a 10-point scale, Ukrainian and Russian people marked them not higher than three points.

### **3. One possible source of social and economic shocks in post-Soviet states: when moderate demands become excessive**

People usually look for the source of economic crises in the wrong economic policies and in the inefficient actions of authorities. There is no reason to argue with this approach. Not only qualified experts but ordinary citizens accuse state leaders of such crises.

For instance, in Ukraine, the population think that the main reason for economic deterioration is inefficient state leadership. Ratings of trust in the President, government and Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine have persistently dropped since the last election and the appointment of a new Prime Minister. In May 1998, complete trust in the President of Ukraine was mentioned by only 3% of people, complete trust in the government and Verkhovna Rada was mentioned by 2% for both; L.Kuchma's activity (in 1998) was estimated as quite acceptable by less than 2% of population (cf.: 10% in 1994). In Russia, people's trust in B.Yeltsin, the Presi-

dent, has persistently dropped from a very high rate (at re-election time) to almost zero after the August events. It seems we could hardly refer to any other reasons of economic crisis, except inefficient state leadership, if people not only very patiently bear all the hardships of the transitional period but also bring very low material demands (see Table 6).

**Table 6**

**Comparative estimates of per capita income and material demands of Russians and Ukrainians**

Question	Ukraine (USD)	Russia (USD)	Correlation of incomes and demands (times)
1. What was the average income (per person) in your family last month?	37	78	2.1
2. What monthly income (per person) could provide a living wage nowadays?	94	147	1.6
3. How much money (per person) does a family need to live normally, in your opinion?	179	296	1.7
4. What average monthly income (per person) could mean that the family is poor?	41	79	1.9
5. What is the lowest average monthly income (per person) which could mean that the family is rich?	761	1261	1.7

Today's demands of the Russian and Ukrainian populations can be regarded as pretty moderate not only in comparison with the standard of living in developed western countries but with corresponding indices that were in the USSR before its ending (see Table 7 [2]).

According to the data, Russians and Ukrainians now wish to have (to lead a normal life) less than they (according to official statistics) had in 1990. However, the current modest demands were formed in a social and economic environment which differs from the one of the former USSR. While extensive economic development is coming to its end and an intensive stage is far from being started, even modest material demands can become excessive for a transitional economy. No wonder that all countries which have experienced even weaker economic shocks started with strong consumer discipline and labour intensification.

**Table 7****International comparison of gross national product (GNP) and gross inner product (GIP) per capita in 1990**

Country	GNP per capita (USD)	GIP per capita (on a par with purchasing power of USD)
Russian Federation	3430	7968
Ukrainian Republic	2500	5433
Socialist countries of Eastern Europe and the USSR	2670	6100
Countries of middle income	2350	4830
Industrial developed countries	14580	14440
Developing countries	810	2170

According to the polling data obtained in May 1998, in Ukraine, per capita income was twice as less than the same income in Russia (37 USD and 78 USD respectively, though Russians as well as Ukrainians perceive conditions in their countries as poverty); it means that Ukrainians estimated their living wage, normal conditions and rich life up to 1.6-1.7 times lower than Russians did. Are the current demands of Russians reasonable, if their neighbors, who had the same starting position in 1990, now have much more modest demands?

In the times of the former USSR, in spite of less gross national product per capita in Ukraine than in the Russian Federation, Ukrainian levels of consumption per capita (concerning basic foodstuffs) exceeded the average indices. In 1990, the Ukrainian index of people's life expectancy exceeded the average indices calculated for the USSR and for the Russian Federation (71.0 and 69.3 years respectively).

As part of the USSR, Ukraine was traditionally regarded as a relatively successful Soviet republic, if not as a wealthy. Concerning the following indices of economic potential — production of steel, cast-iron, coal, sugar, butter and etc. per capita — Ukraine was in first place not only in the USSR but also in Europe. Its corn production rate met the European standards. As to one of the main, internationally recognized, integral indices of the quality of life — the Index of Human Development (IHD) — Ukraine was among the top thirty industrially developed countries in the world.

Taking into account the above-mentioned factors and the common cultural and historical preconditions of Russian and Ukrainian development as sovereign states, we can conclude that after the USSR was ruined, both countries had approximately identical initial positions as far as their declared development goals are concerned: a democratic state and a market economy. Perhaps in Russia, a smarter economic start, due to economic liberalization, and higher world prices for fuel (the main Russian export resource) made for their higher standard of living and higher material demands. However, the favourable factors of the first years were lost, while the demands remained. In order to meet them under less favorable conditions, the Russian government began to construct an enormous state financial pyramid, which, of course, ruined many Russians and left them with an unpleasant choice before them: to scale down their demands to the same bare level as found in Ukraine, and, under these circumstances, go on with reform experiments or, on market 'ruins', to try to renew an administrative economy similar to the 'Belarus scenario'. Russia has not still made a clear choice. Ukraine, which has already constructed its own financial pyramid (not as high as its neighbors did on their demands), managed to get agreements with its creditors and avoid any scandalous economic crash. However, Ukraine did not manage to avoid a slump in the value of its national currency and a rise in the rate of inflation (though they were not as steep as happened in Russia). The moderate 'post-Soviet' demands, the average shock, and the higher demands, the more serious shock. Is it right!? Let us hope that this rule is not a historical law.

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