Henry Hale

Title: “Putin and the West Through Russian Eyes”

Abstract: It is widely believed in Western media and academic research that the majority of Russians are generally hostile to the West (especially the US) and that this is pumped up by a Kremlin media machine that sees anti-Western/American sentiment as central to Putin’s popularity and hence his regime’s stability. The proposed paper challenges such views, demonstrating that Russians generally perceive Putin as a cautious foreign affairs moderate who pursues not conflict but cooperation with the West, including the United States. Attempts to engineer specifically anti-Western/American rally-around-the-regime effects have generally been ineffective in Russia, and if anything Putin draws more support from being seen as a moderate than he does from being seen as a hardliner. This argument is based on an analysis of volumes of nationally representative survey data collected since Putin first emerged in Russian high politics in 1999. The findings supporting the “common wisdom” are argued to be artefacts of the wording of key questions, which are actually capturing something different. Time and space permitting, the paper may also relate these findings to patterns of views among Russia’s foreign policy elite that have included some of the same questions as were asked the masses.