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Alternate Reality: How Russian Society Learned to Stop Worrying About the War

Denis Volkov and Andrei Kolesnikov

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Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Publications Department
1779 Massachusetts Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20036
P: + 1 202 483 7600
F: + 1 202 483 1840
CarnegieEndowment.org

Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center
Pariser Platz 4a
10117 Berlin, Germany
CarnegieRussiaEurasia.org

This publication can be downloaded at no cost at CarnegieRussiaEurasia.org.

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In the nearly two years since Russia launched its “special military operation” against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Russian society has gotten used to living against the backdrop of a brutal armed conflict. A significant part of the population has reconciled itself to the idea that they will be living under the current state of affairs for quite some time, and that they must therefore adjust to reality, which ordinary Russians are in any case unable—and often unwilling—to change.

All the naïve predictions that popular discontent triggered by sanctions and the wartime restrictions imposed on daily life would bring down Vladimir Putin’s regime have come to nothing. In many ways, quite the opposite has happened. Most Russians might not identify with the regime, but they have consolidated around the Kremlin, which they believe to be fighting tooth and nail against a West that is seeking to destroy Russia. Despite the fact that such a depiction is at odds with reality, a great many Russians have accepted it as the most logical explanation for this protracted nightmare.

Naturally, some Russians are unhappy with the situation. Millions of people are opposed to authoritarianism and bloodshed, and some of them openly express their views and resist. There are also those known as “turbo-patriots” who earnestly and aggressively support Putin. But the vast majority is apathetic, and simply passively and automatically “mostly supports” what the regime is doing while waiting for “all this” to end. This part of the population has chosen to become apathetic: their condition can be referred to as **learned indifference**. Putin is a legitimate leader in such people’s eyes, so his “special military operation” must be too. The next ritual imitation of a presidential election in March 2024 will surely confirm that there is no alternative to Putin. The apathetic majority can do little but wait for this difficult time to pass.¹

At the same time, public opinion in Russia is not entirely static and is worthy of closer examination. This paper explores the drivers behind recent trends in public opinion as well as changes in society over the past year, from about August 2022 to August 2023. It builds on our previous joint research project, which focused on the first six months of the war.²

Levels of Support for the “Special Operation”

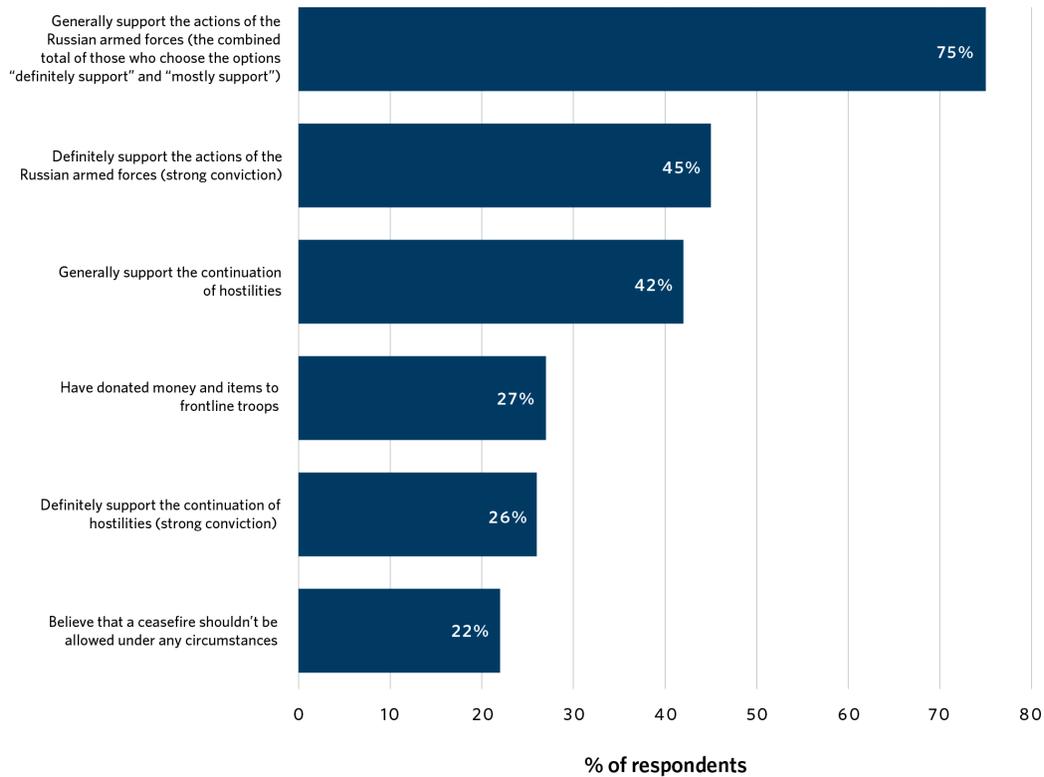
There are many different indicators measuring the level of support within Russian society for what the authorities officially refer to as the “special military operation.” The abundance of polling data provides fertile ground for speculation on the part of both supporters and opponents of the Putin regime. Some select the data that, in their interpretation, show the unequivocal support Russians display for their army’s actions, while others try to prove that such support is insignificant.

For our part, we firmly believe in analyzing all existing data and in identifying and evaluating the underlying arguments and rationales behind respondents’ answers in polling and focus groups. This approach generates a far more complex and less equivocal picture than that presented by supporters of either interpretation of reality.

Levels of support for the “special military operation” can be pictured as concentric circles radiating from the center (the highest support) and becoming wider and wider, like rings on a tree stump, with weak and conditional support toward the outside. It is worth noting here that at the start of the conflict, respondents to open-ended questions and focus group participants who supported Russia’s actions referred to the fighting as the “special military operation” or “SVO” (the Russian acronym for the term), while those who opposed it boldly called it what it is: a “war.” By the end of 2022, however, these differences in terminology had virtually disappeared.

Throughout the conflict, support for what’s happening (an indicator based on positive answers to the question of whether people support the actions of Russia’s armed forces in Ukraine³) has averaged about **75 percent** (see figure 1). In their replies to this question, respondents often say, “These are our boys, our warriors, how can we not support them?” The key word here is “our,” which is also often used by government officials: “our guys”. But about thirty percent of respondents choose a softer prompt—“I mostly support it”—and often add something to the effect of “War is bad, but we have to support our own,” or “It’s bad that people are being killed, but there was no other way.”⁴ (“There was no other way” is another familiar cliché deployed by the country’s leaders and television coverage.) These voices can be classified as “weak,” “conditional,” or “less intensive support.” Only an average of **45 percent** declare “strong,” “categorical” support by choosing the option “I definitely support it.”

Figure 1: Russian Support for the “Special Military Operation”



Note: Consolidated graphs of various support levels for the “special military operation.”
Source: Levada Center’s monthly polls on the situation in Ukraine in 2022-2023 [in Russian], <https://www.levada.ru/tag/ukraina/>.

Motives and Demographics Behind the Support

Almost everyone expressing support for the actions of Russian troops can explain their position. Broad feelings of patriotism (“I support Russia,” “I stand with my country,” and so on) are the most common motives for support (19 percent). The three main official goals of the “special military operation” come next: the defense of Russia (including its territory and sovereignty), the destruction of Ukrainian nationalists (fascists, Nazism, and so on), and the defense of Russian speakers in the Donbas (such as our brethren, fellow countrymen, and children).⁵ Each of these three themes comes up in 14 to 16 percent of responses. Notably, there is not much difference in terms of the reasons cited between the strong and weak support groups. The former is perhaps slightly more indoctrinated and mentions the need to “combat Ukrainian Nazis” more often. As for demographics, traditional supporters of Putin’s regime (older respondents and TV viewers) also support the military operation. Men express greater support than women.

Another indicator of support for current developments is the question of whether the country should stop fighting and sit down for peace talks. Here there are more modest support numbers: from August 2022 to August 2023, **42 percent** of respondents were in favor of continuing hostilities (with a peak of 48 percent in May, perhaps due to the Russian takeover of the Ukrainian city of Bakhmut and attacks on Russian border towns, which may have hardened the attitudes of respondents). At the same time, about half of those polled consistently supported a ceasefire (including up to one-third of those who say they support the actions of Russian troops: see next section for details). Still, focus group discussions show that a significant number of those who support an end to the conflict defer to the government on the issue (“Who are we to say, let the top brass decide,” or “Those at the top know best.”)

Strong support for continuing the military operation (the “definitely continue” answers) averaged **26 percent** in the same period. The number of those actively helping the war effort through fundraising is roughly the same. **Twenty-two percent** of Russians are especially pro-war and believe that a ceasefire shouldn’t be allowed under any circumstances.

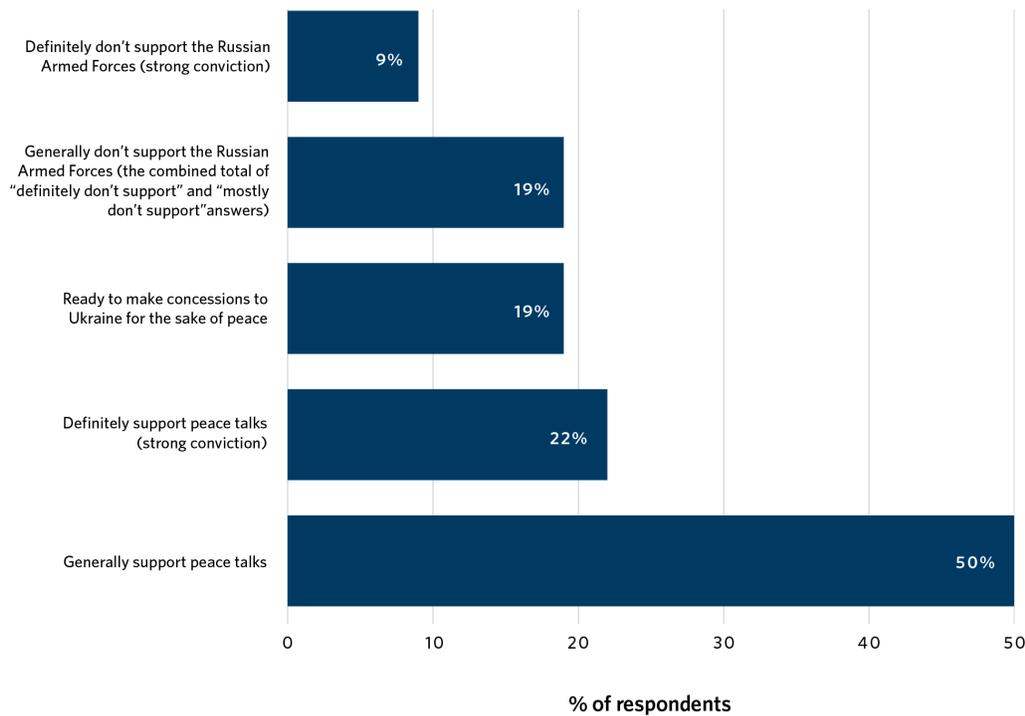
In other words, **about one-fifth of the Russian population are active and uncompromising supporters of the war**. Many of these are retirement-aged men, who are generally happy with their situation and support the government and the military. (Levels of education and income do not seem to significantly affect the answers.) The same segments support the partial mobilization. These are people who certainly won’t serve in the military themselves, so they don’t face any personal risks. They can easily send others to the trenches while caring about “our boys” from a distance. Those expressing this position say, “We shouldn’t stop halfway, we need to finish the job;” “If we stop now, we will lose this battle;” “There is no way back.” Since the second half of last year, the answers have revealed increasingly palpable bitterness. The logic is: we have sacrificed too much for the cause to give up now.

Levels of Anti-War Views

Those who don’t support the Russian armed forces in their answers display a consistent anti-war position. This number is quite steady and averaged **19–20 percent** throughout the entire polling period (see figure 2). Another 7 percent find it hard to answer the question, but we do not believe they should be automatically classified as opposed to the war. According to their answers to other questions, they are closer to those who show passive support for the “special military operation.”

Another finding that has not changed significantly since the start of the conflict is that the clearest anti-war positions are expressed by those Russians who oppose the current government. These are primarily younger people from major Russian cities who predominantly get their information from the internet, and who are less likely to be indoctrinated by the propaganda that dominates television coverage of the war. Those opposed to the war, however, are still a minority in all of the above-mentioned groups.

Figure 2. Russian Anti-War Views



Note: Consolidated graphs of various levels of anti-war views.

Source: Levada Center's monthly polls on the situation in Ukraine in 2022-2023 [in Russian], <https://www.levada.ru/tag/ukraina/>.

Motives for Anti-War Views

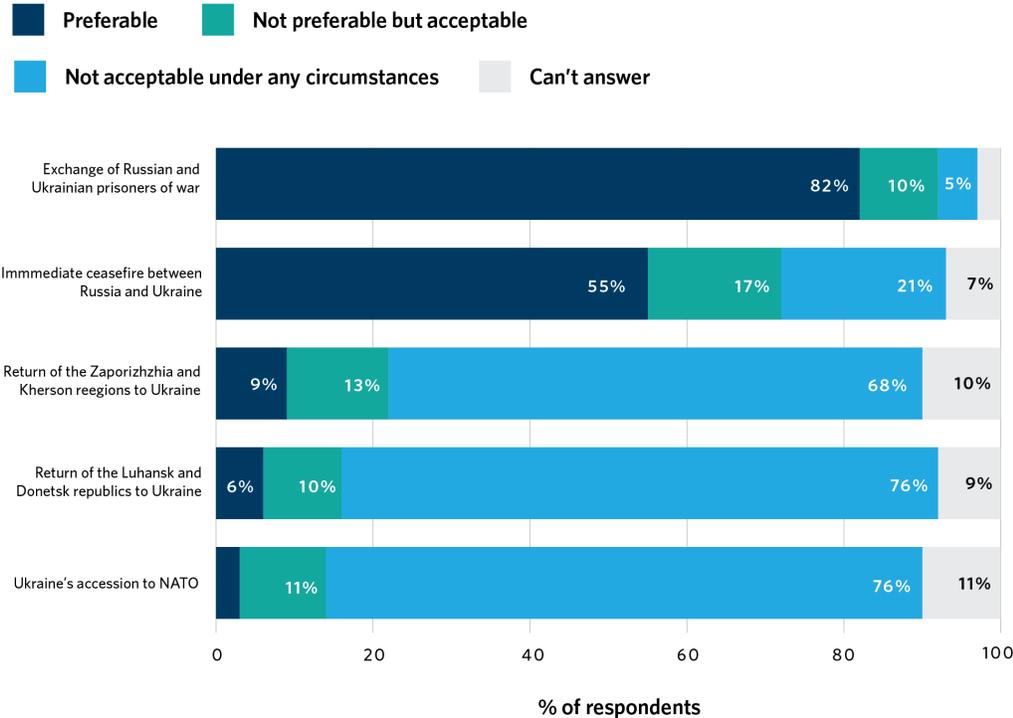
Opponents of the "special military operation" explain their position through primarily humanitarian reasons. They say that "war is always bad" and they are "for peace" and "against war" (22 percent of respondents). They also cite losses among military personnel and Ukrainian civilians: "People are dying," "People are suffering" (21 percent).⁶ Only about 13 percent of those expressing an anti-war stance don't just advocate for peace, but are prepared to assign responsibility for what's happening to their own country ("We started it," "It's not our land," "This is aggression," and so on).

As with support for the "special military operation," an anti-war stance can't be quantified using a single metric. For instance, the percentage of those who openly say they oppose the "special operation" is roughly equal to the number of those who believe that "Russia should make certain concessions to Ukraine" for the sake of ceasing hostilities and signing a peace agreement. The number of Russians who subscribe to this view did not change throughout the three polls taken from February to August 2023, hovering at around 20 percent.⁷

It is worth recalling that on average, **about 50 percent** of Russians were in favor of entering into peace talks from August 2022 to August 2023. That number reached its peak last fall, following the announcement of the partial mobilization. The fear sparked by this event drove the number up from 44 percent in August to 57 percent in September 2022, as Russians began to realize that the war affects everyone in one way or another. **When the mobilization came to an end, the public fear receded and the number of those in favor of peace talks returned to the yearly average.**

One-fifth of the population has been strongly in favor of peace negotiations the whole time. However, at least half of those who would like to see a ceasefire are unwilling to make any concessions to the Ukrainians. According to the polls, most Russians (92 percent in August 2023) are generally in favor of prisoner-of-war exchanges between the countries. There was also support for an immediate ceasefire (72 percent, while 21 percent believed it to be totally unacceptable). The idea of giving back occupied territory in exchange for peace doesn't get much traction: less than 25 percent of respondents approve of that idea (see Figure 3).⁸ These numbers reveal that **Russian society is not yet ready for tangible compromise with Ukraine.**

Figure 3: Do You Find These to be Preferable, Acceptable, or Unacceptable Conditions For a Peace Agreement?



Source: "Conflict With Ukraine: Estimates at the End of August 2023" [in Russian], Levada Center, September 5, 2023, <https://www.levada.ru/2023/09/05/konflikt-s-ukrainoj-otsenki-kontsa-avgusta-2023-goda/>

Those Who Couldn't Say

Only about 10 percent of those polled by the Levada Center were unable to express a position on the main questions: support for Russian troops, peace talks versus the continuation of hostilities, and the acceptability of various compromises. This is important, because some researchers have artificially inflated that figure to as much as one-third of the population, which they then classify as opponents of war.⁹ We recommend against drawing such a conclusion. In our view, these respondents' other answers reveal that they are not closely following current events, which is one of the reasons they can't answer other substantive questions. People in this group tend to be younger than others, and there are more women among them.

Unwillingness to Protest

In our previous work,¹⁰ we showed that Russians who oppose the war are rarely prepared to protest. Very little has changed in that respect. Moreover, polls indicate that opponents of the “special military operation” are far less inclined than supporters to discuss events in Ukraine with their family (29 percent vs. 53 percent), not to mention express their position to other people (9 percent vs. 16 percent).¹¹ Given this context, very little protest activity can be expected. The risks associated with participating in protests remain prohibitively high. Any street protests are cracked down upon immediately and harshly, along with any other expression of discontent with the regime. Dissenters may be declared “foreign agents,” dismissed from their jobs, or face administrative and criminal penalties. (The number of people who have faced such measures is tracked closely by OVD-Info, a human rights project.)¹²

It is hard to escape the impression that Russian society has come to the conclusion that protests are futile and that the authorities will in any case do what they want. That reflects a number of developments in recent years, including the fizzling out of the Far East protests in support of the arrested regional governor [Sergei Furgal](#) in 2020, the crackdown on the 2021 protests in support of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, and the initial wave of anti-war protests in February–March 2022.

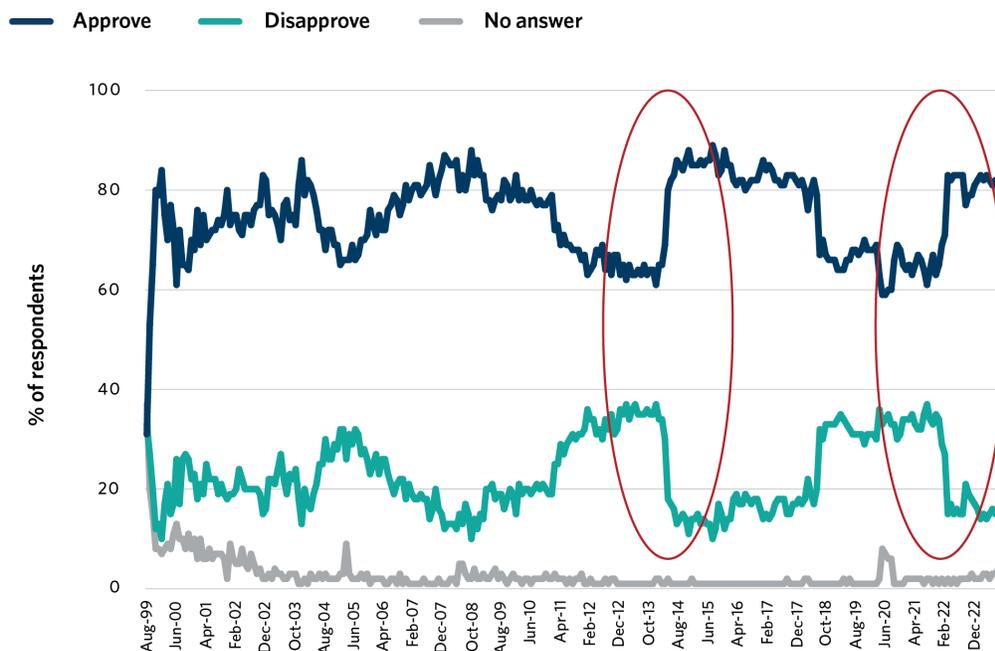
It's also worth taking into account the public consolidation around the regime that took place in February–March 2022 (see next section), which brought some former dissenters over to the government's side.

In 2022, there was a notable series of protests against the partial mobilization in the ethnic republics of Dagestan, Buryatia, and Yakutia that were attended primarily by wives and mothers of draftees. Similar (albeit brief) protests were also held in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Yet none of these protests gained momentum. The prevailing opinion among the public (not to be confused with the remnants of Russian civil society that remain inside the country and account for the significant number of prosecutions of anti-war Russians) is that protesting is both dangerous and futile.¹³

Sociopolitical Context for Views on War

Reasons for the consistency of public opinions on the special military operation can only be understood in the broader context of public views in 2022–2023. Key factors include government approval ratings, respondents' self-described views, opinions on the socioeconomic situation in the country, and future expectations. If we look at the indicators from before February–March 2022, the consolidation around the regime—as reflected in the level of support for all government institutions, including the ruling party, United Russia—that occurred immediately after Putin announced the “special military operation” is not surprising. Putin's approval ratings, for example, started growing as Russia and the West traded accusations in the runup to the conflict. In the three months from November 2021 to mid-February 2022, Putin's approval rating increased 9 percent from 63 percent to 71 percent, while from the end of February through March 2022, after Russia's invasion, it went up by another 12 percent (to 83 percent). The second surge is almost identical to that seen in February–March 2014, when the president's approval rating grew from 69 percent to 80 percent in the aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea and the subsequent sharp deterioration of the country's relations with the West (see Figure 4).¹⁴

Figure 4. Vladimir Putin's Approval Rating, 1999–2023



Source: “Approval of the Authorities,” Levada Center, accessed November 14, 2023, <https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/approval-of-the-authorities/>.

The effect of rallying around the regime at the start of a military conflict is not unique to Russia,¹⁵ nor is it unprecedented in Russia itself: today’s public sentiment is reminiscent of the patriotic surge seen at the outset of World War I.¹⁶

Attentive readers of these polls will not be surprised to learn that most Russians don’t see the current confrontation as a conflict between Russia and Ukraine, but rather as a **conflict between Russia and the West** over Ukraine. Such interpretations were already circulating in 2021,¹⁷ and the massive military aid provided by the West to Ukraine has only convinced those respondents that they were right all along. It’s worth noting, however, that this is also how Russian society interpreted the other recent military conflicts their country has been involved in: specifically, Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014, and Syria from 2015.¹⁸

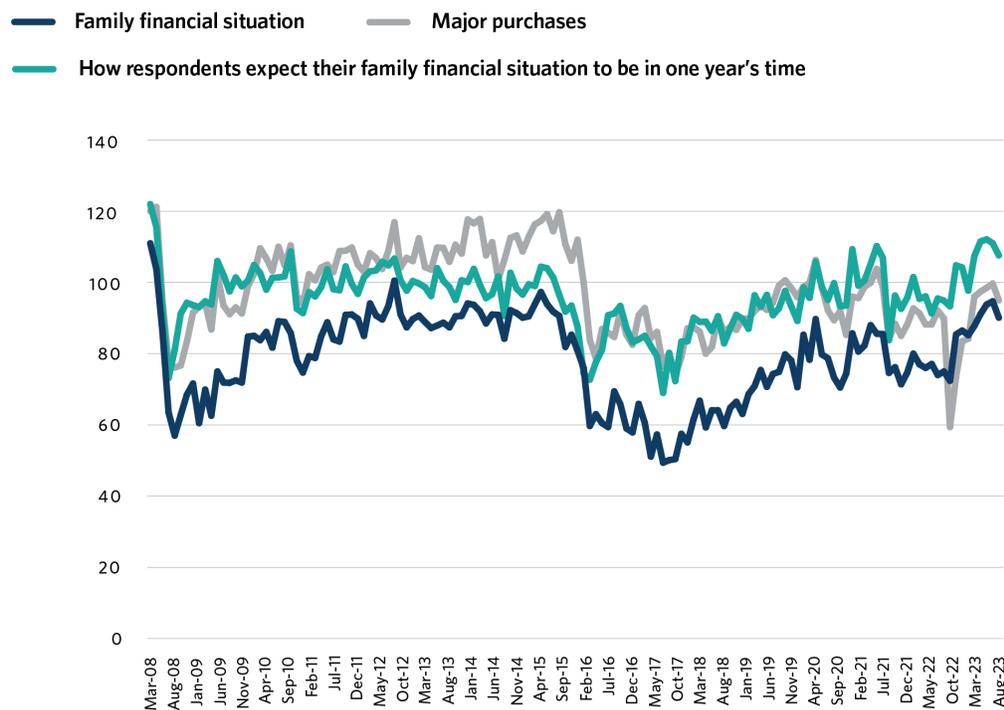
The authorities actively encourage negative perceptions of the West and the history of confrontation with it—including during Soviet times—via propaganda and other means. These efforts strengthen a popular perception that the West and its supporters are bent on nothing less than the destruction of Russia. In this light, the Putin regime’s justification of the start of the conflict looks respectable and almost grounded in Russian history. Frequent use of the word “existential” conveys the permanent and profound nature of this allegedly inevitable confrontation with the West.

The Price of Loyalty

Questions related to the economic situation also reveal several key trends. **The shock caused by the introduction of sanctions** was best reflected in the major purchase index, calculated based on the same question—whether it is a good or bad time to make major purchases—asked every two months.¹⁹ From February to April 2022, that index plummeted from 90 to 59 points, meaning that people were putting off major spending given the uncertainty of the situation. But just two months later, the index bounced back to 74 points and continued to grow steadily, peaking at 100 points in June 2023. These index dynamics signify that people **adapted to the new economic conditions** in the space of just one year. Focus group comments in April 2022 showed the first signs of such adaptation: respondents talked about focusing on their personal life, solving economic problems, and adjusting to higher prices, but showed no signs of panic. In May–June 2022, this successful adaptation was also reflected in poll results (see figure 5).

At the same time, respondents' assessment of their own economic situation (both the current and prospective one) remained virtually unchanged from February to April 2022. In other words, people experienced shock, but the situation stabilized so quickly that few felt that their own economic circumstances had drastically deteriorated. The government's swift reaction to stabilize the banking system likely played a key role in keeping the situation under control. The increase in interest rates for savings accounts convinced people to return their money to banks following mass withdrawals made at the end of February and in March. Had the banking system collapsed back then, we would probably be seeing entirely different popular sentiment now.

Figure 5: Russians' Assessment of Their Economic Situation, 2008–2023



Note: The index is calculated as the difference between positive and negative answers + 100%.
 Source: These are components of the Levada Center's Consumer Sentiment Index:
<https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/socio-economic-indicators/>.

The first people to feel the sting of sanctions were supposed to be Westernized residents of major cities. Such people are more likely to hold their savings in foreign currency or property and own property overseas. However, such people account for just a few percentage points of the total population. Some of those people quickly fled the country, while those who remained in Russia had enough resources to adapt. For the majority of the population, the economic and financial shock was actually quite limited. Starting in summer 2022, a **lengthy sustained trend toward more positive assessments of people's situations was observed** (see Figure 5).

The reason appears to be the increases in the minimum wage, pensions, and subsidies that came into effect on June 1, 2022,²⁰ as well as large payments for “participants of the special military operation” (these subsidies are to be adjusted for inflation early next year²¹). As one female survey respondent recently put it in response to the open-ended question of why life had become better: “My son is in the war, he sends money back home.” This is also what respondents indicated at the end of last year when explaining why they think “the country is heading in the right direction.”²² It would be fair to say, therefore, that to a large extent, the consistency of public opinion in Russia in 2022–2023 was achieved through substantial government payouts to the public.

All these steps point to a greater government control of the economy and a reinforcement of paternalist attitudes within Russian society. The regime has a vested interest in buying the loyalty of its core supporters: i.e., people who depend heavily on government handouts. These people include public-sector employees, socially vulnerable segments of the population, and combatants and their families. Large-scale social payouts and salary increases focused on the public and military sectors have led to real income growth for a great many households. Not surprisingly, state propaganda never misses a chance to emphasize Putin’s involvement in maintaining dynamic “sovereign” economic growth and the strengthening of the social safety net. Putin also demonstrates that the peacetime agenda is quite important to him: he frequently meets with entrepreneurs, innovators from the IT sector, gifted children, and large families.

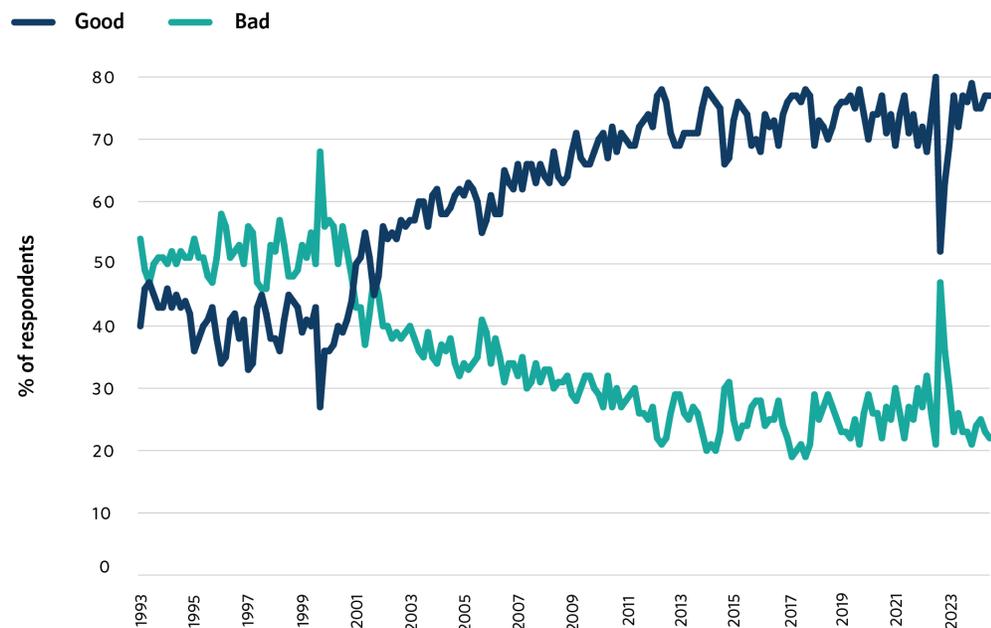
Most Russians understand that the war in Ukraine will not end any time soon, and they try not to focus too much on military topics or developments at the front. They prefer to concentrate instead on their own lives. By refraining from announcing another wave of mobilization, the authorities are able to sustain public calm and indifference. They sedate people with propaganda and buy their support with financial assistance. It is conceivable that this strategy will eventually expose various shortcomings in the country’s new economic model, for example, chronic budget deficits, inflation, and other economic problems. However, the technocratic bloc in the government has for some time demonstrated its aptitude for managing and stabilizing such unwelcome developments—at least in the short term. Of course, hardly anyone would suggest that the foundations of the Russian economy are stable or desirable. Conceivably, if the regime and its policies were to change, those who support the “special military operation” at the moment would be comfortable changing their outlook.

A Rude Awakening

Respondents’ **assessments of their own mood** have remained consistently positive throughout the past eighteen months, with one notable exception: the period of partial mobilization in late 2022. People’s feelings didn’t change much with the start of the military conflict, nor were they affected by economic sanctions and related economic problems. To the contrary, as noted above, the public mood had already become more upbeat by summer 2022 as most people adapted to the new economic conditions. Military losses such as the retreat from the Kharkiv region or Kherson had no impact on public mood either. Such behavior may stem from the fact that respondents tend to separate personal and state-related issues.²³ The general feeling is that while the country may have problems, such challenges shouldn’t impinge on a given person’s private life or material well-being. To be sure, the public experienced an initial shock in early 2022 when the war began. Russians started to pay closer attention to events, though they did not indicate that they were experiencing fear.

Before too long, the war became a distant concern for most people. This phase continued until September 2022, when the partial mobilization was announced and the public mood drastically deteriorated.

Figure 6: Russians' Assessments of Their Mood, 1993-2023



Source: This question is a component of the Levada Center's Consumer Sentiment Index: <https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/socio-economic-indicators/>.

The country had not seen such a dramatic and swift decline in public mood in thirty years of regular polls. The enormous stress triggered by the news of the mobilization partly stemmed from the fact that the criteria for being drafted were completely unclear, creating the impression that anyone could be called up. It seemed that the war in Ukraine now affected everyone, but people didn't want to get directly involved. It stands to reason that the percentage of those in favor of peace talks reached an all-time high during this period (it increased from 44 percent in August to 57 percent in October 2022). At the same time, Putin's rating went down, although not very significantly: from 83 percent in July–August to 77 percent in September 2022.²⁴

Still, the shock of mobilization was overcome rather quickly. The first evidence of this was visible as early as the end of September 2022.²⁵ This was how the public reacted to clarification of the draft rules, and the return home of some people drafted in error, and the partial nature of the mobilization. By the start of November, the authorities had declared the mobilization over, but a certain degree of anxiety remained. A significant number of families

simply had to reconcile themselves to the military conflict, to the fact that their family members had ended up at the front, and to the risks of latent mobilization. Most Russians, however, were able to resume their regular routine and block out any news from Ukraine, concluding once again that events there didn't directly concern them. This was sufficient to return mood indicators to almost pre-mobilization levels.

Essentially, the old social contract was restored, and rather than a general mobilization, people got an **emotional and psychological demobilization**. The “special military operation” may be dragging on, but the government has assured the public that it will be dealt with by professionals, volunteers, and contract soldiers—in exchange for general public support. The majority has accepted this line of argument.

As a result, Russians have had the ability to adapt to recent developments. If anything, most elements of everyday life remain the same. Everything is happening in manageable or limited fashion: the mobilization, the military economy, and the changes in the standard of living and quality of life. This gives people the time and strength to adapt to a new normal. Notably, plans to introduce electronic draft notices and broaden the age range of those eligible for the draft had practically no impact on public opinion, perhaps due to their limited scale. While in the first weeks of the mobilization campaign, Russians believed it might affect everyone, the expansion of the draft concerns a specific and much smaller group of people. The general attitude seems to be: you may be spared, so only panic when it actually happens and affects you personally.

The Russian authorities apparently learned a lesson from the public reaction to the partial mobilization. For the time being, they prefer to recruit contract soldiers and volunteers. Russian officials recently claimed that 280,000 people had been drafted this way, though it is hard to confirm the accuracy of such assertions.²⁶ Respondents did express annoyance over the proliferation of recruitment posters and fliers, advertising on social media, and recruitment booths in shopping malls. But this is all far better than being forced to enlist at your place of work, or being detained and drafted at a metro station. So long as someone else is fighting for you, you can close your eyes to a lot of things.

How Reliable Is the Polling Data?

The polls cited here are face-to-face national representative surveys of 1,600 people. The reliability of each poll is calculated according to recommendations from the American Association for Public Opinion Research.²⁷ The average response rate for data calculated through this method in 2022 and January–August 2023 was 27 percent. This is slightly less than the 2021 average (31 percent), but higher than in 2020 (25 percent) and 2019 (20 percent). American National Elections Studies surveys, considered the gold standard for survey research on U.S. politics, have a similar refusal rate.²⁸ It is incorrect, therefore, to suggest that Russians are refusing to participate in polls en masse. The situation has changed little since February 2022.

We have devoted a separate study to the issue of interrupted interviews.²⁹ That analysis revealed that their number has hardly changed over time. Only two to seven interviews—an insignificant number in polls of about 1,600 people—were interrupted in each poll in 2022 when questions related to Ukraine and the “special operation” came up. In this respect, questions on this topic are no different from any others: if respondents agreed to answer, they generally go through with the entire poll (especially if the polling format is a personal interview).

Finally, it’s often said that respondents face increasing pressure from the authorities and pro-government media outlets, and they are therefore afraid to give a “wrong” answer, meaning the polls can’t be trusted, since they don’t reflect what people “really” feel. Yet as the poet John Donne wrote, “No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.” In other words, an individual is never free from outside influences, be that the media, politicians, or other people’s views. In fact, even people’s ability to detect the “right” or “socially acceptable” answer demonstrates the existence of public opinion that forces an individual to conform. And conformism, in turn, forces people to act within socially acceptable boundaries. Sometimes they may be doing so out of fear, but far from always. More usually, it’s a desire to be part of the mainstream. Such behavior also signifies that many people have no consistent opinion of their own on the topic.

Afterword: A Collective Doctor Strangelove?

Russian mass consciousness is stuck between two contradictory views: “We need to finish what we started, we have already lost too much to stop now, only victory will suffice” (about a third of those in favor of continuing to fight express this view) versus “Too many of our boys are dying, there are too many casualties on both sides” (a view shared by about half of those in favor of peace talks).³⁰ While the public is tired of the “special military operation,” there are different views on how the fighting should end. The problem is that the average Russian believes it is their duty to endorse what the state deems to be moral and right. This explains the increase in support for repressive and restrictive laws.³¹ Moreover, two-thirds of respondents said they would support to a greater or lesser extent a friend or family member who decided to go and fight, according to a May 2023 poll.³² Fifty-three percent disapprove of those leaving the country to avoid being drafted: another reflection on the sense of duty.³³

Some data, however, do point to doubts the respondents might have. If they could go back in time, 48 percent of them would still support the “special military operation,” but 39 percent would not: a significant number that correlates to the 41 percent of Russians who believe the “special operation” has done more harm than good (38 percent believe the opposite).³⁴ In other words, many people back government initiatives while recognizing the harm they are doing. This tells us something about the mechanism behind people’s decisionmaking: they

will submit to anything the government has decided. Many Russians equate their country with the political regime that rules it. To quote focus group participants: “The country’s destiny is hanging in the balance.” In fact, it’s the regime’s destiny that is at stake, and its interests are not necessarily synonymous with those of the country. Not many people share this outlook, however.

Even as the years have passed, Russian society still hasn’t been able to emancipate itself from the state. For most people, the interest of the state, especially on a symbolic level (for example, the Russian national anthem, the flag of the Russian Federation, the president, and the army), is equated with the national interest. The “special military operation” has laid this phenomenon bare. While there is little trust for the authorities on everyday matters, the state is still sacralized as waging a “defensive” and “liberational” battle against an imaginary enemy “attack” on the homeland.

The state continues to create the prevailing public opinion through propaganda. That success artificially generates demand for the country’s false imperial grandeur. Russian society has yet to develop immunity against such moves by the state. Of course, the Russian public is not some kind of collective Dr. Strangelove that has “learned to stop worrying and love the bomb.” But the processes by which society has absorbed ideas and events over the past twenty months of the protracted “special military operation” have tarnished people’s morals and distorted their sense of reality. A year ago, this segment of society might have chosen to hide from reality. Today it is living in an artificial world in which the Russian nation is carrying out a messianic mission and defending itself from the West that seeks to destroy it.

About the Authors

[Andrei Kolesnikov](#) is a senior fellow at the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center.

[Denis Volkov](#) is the director of the Levada Center in Moscow.

Notes

- 1 Andrei Kolesnikov, “Wait and See: How Ordinary Russians Are Adapting to the New Reality,” Carnegie Politika, Aug. 4, 2023. <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/90327>.
- 2 Denis Volkov and Andrei Kolesnikov, “My Country, Right or Wrong: Russian Public Opinion on Ukraine,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 7, 2022. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/09/07/my-country-right-or-wrong-russian-public-opinion-on-ukraine-pub-87803>.
- 3 The average total numbers of “definitely support” and “mostly support” answers are recorded in this Levada Center poll: “Conflict With Ukraine: Review at the End of August 2023” [in Russian], published September 5, 2023. <https://www.levada.ru/2023/09/05/konflikt-s-ukrainoj-otsenki-kontsa-avgusta-2023-goda/>.
- 4 We wrote about this last year, and the situation has changed little since then. See Volkov and Kolesnikov, “My Country, Right or Wrong.” See also the October 2023 survey with detailed figures [in Russian]: <https://www.levada.ru/2023/10/31/konflikt-s-ukrainoj-otsenki-oktyabrya2023-goda/>.
- 5 See the Levada Center poll “Conflict With Ukraine: Assessments for February 2023,” published March 13, 2023. <https://www.levada.ru/en/2023/03/13/conflict-with-ukraine-assessments-for-february-2023/>.
- 6 See the Levada Center poll “Conflict With Ukraine: Assessments for April 2023” [in Russian], published April 27, 2023, <https://www.levada.ru/2023/04/27/konflikt-s-ukrainoj-otsenki-aprelya-2023-goda/>; and the August 2023 poll, <https://www.levada.ru/2023/09/05/konflikt-s-ukrainoj-otsenki-kontsa-avgusta-2023-goda/>.
- 7 Sergey Aleksashenko, “We Are for Peace. As per Putin’s Formula” [in Russian], Substack, March 3, 2023, <https://hronika.substack.com/p/fdc>.
- 8 See the August assessments poll on the conflict with Ukraine: <https://www.levada.ru/2023/09/05/konflikt-s-ukrainoj-otsenki-kontsa-avgusta-2023-goda/>.
- 9 See Chronicles polls 2–9. The larger number of those who could not answer the question about their support for the “special operation” can be attributed to the fact that the “cannot answer” and “prefer not to answer” options were included in the question and read to respondents. In contrast, other questions (like those posed by the Levada Center) didn’t contain such options, and they were registered only if the respondents themselves could not or would not answer the question. See <https://www.chronicles.report/en>.
- 10 Volkov and Kolesnikov, “My Country, Right or Wrong.”
- 11 See the Levada Center poll “Conversations With Friends and Discussion of Ukrainian Events,” April 10, 2023: <https://www.levada.ru/en/2023/04/10/conversations-with-friends-and-discussion-of-ukrainian-events/>.
- 12 “Wartime Repressions Report. August 2023,” OVD-Info, August 30, 2023: <https://data.ovd.info/svodka-antivoennykh-repressiy-august#3>.

- 13 Kolesnikov, “To Each Their Own Square” [in Russian], New Times, August 20, 2023: <https://newtimes.ru/articles/detail/245355>.
- 14 See Levada Center polling data on Putin’s approval rating: <https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/> For differences between the 2022 and the 2014 consolidation, see Lev Gudkov, “The Three Stages of Adaptation” [in Russian], Re: Russia, July 5, 2022: <https://re-russia.net/expertise/009>
- 15 See Sergey Aleksashenko, “Support for the War, Alas, Is ‘Normal’” [in Russian], Substack, February 5, 2023, <https://hronika.substack.com/p/59f>; or Gallup polls on opinions of Iraq: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1633/Iraq.aspx>.
- 16 Vladislav Aksenov, “The War of Patriotisms. Propaganda and Mass Mood in Russia During the Collapse of the Empire,” New Literary Review, Moscow, 2023.
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- 18 Volkov, “They are Drawing Us Into a War” [in Russian], Levada Center, January 18, 2022: <https://www.levada.ru/2022/01/18/nas-vtyagivayut-v-vojnu/>
- 19 The index is calculated as the difference between positive and negative answers. These are components of Levada’s consumer sentiment index: <https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/socio-economic-indicators/>.
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- 21 “Mishustin Says Minimum Wage Increase From January 1 2024 Will Boost Salaries of 4.8 Million Russians” [in Russian], TASS, April 25, 2023: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/17606145>
- 22 Volkov, “Reservoir for Resilience: Why Russians Do Not See 2022 as a Disaster,” Russia.Post, January 11, 2023: https://russiapost.info/society/reservoir_resilience
- 23 Ibid for differences in how respondents see the results of the past year for Russia and for themselves. See also discrepancies in the Levada Center Public Mood Index components related to the situation in the country and the respondents’ personal situation: <https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/socio-economic-indicators/>
- 24 It usually takes several months before negative changes sink in and blame for them is assigned to the government, causing the ratings of the president and other state institutions to fall. See the Levada Center’s polls of Putin’s approval ratings: <https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/approval-of-the-authorities/>.
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