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RUSSIA TOMORROW:
NAVIGATING A NEW PARADIGM

THE RELUCTANT CONSENSUS:
War and Russia's public opinion

Maria Snegovaya

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Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 challenged much of the common Western understanding of Russia. How can the world better understand Russia? What are the steps forward for Western policy? The Eurasia Center's new "Russia Tomorrow" series seeks to reevaluate conceptions of Russia today and better prepare for its future tomorrow.

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INTRODUCTION

Russian president Vladimir Putin has been in power for a quarter of a century. During his tenure, Russia has actively participated in five wars. But not even Putin's brutal full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has been able to shake Russian society's consolidation around the Kremlin, the so-called "Putin consensus" (i.e., Putin's consistently high support among the majority of the Russian public). This report aims to dig into the origin of this phenomenon.

THE WAR AND THE PUTIN CONSENSUS

Over the last two years, in surveys run through various modes and by several polling organizations, support for Russia's war among the Russian public has remained fairly stable. Based on face-to-face surveys by the Levada Center and phone surveys by Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM) and the Public Opinion Foundation (FOM), war support fluctuated between 70–75 percent (with about 20 percent of respondents consistently opposing the war). Online polls by Russia Watchers show similar results. According to phone surveys by Russian Field and ExtremeScan, support has fluctuated between 60–70 percent (the differences in numbers might be due to the framing of the question). While a consistent level of approval continues, Russians disagree about specific war aims: none of the official reasons (such as Ukraine's "denazification," by which the Kremlin means regime change in Kyiv) typically reach majority support in surveys.

THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF WAR SUPPORT

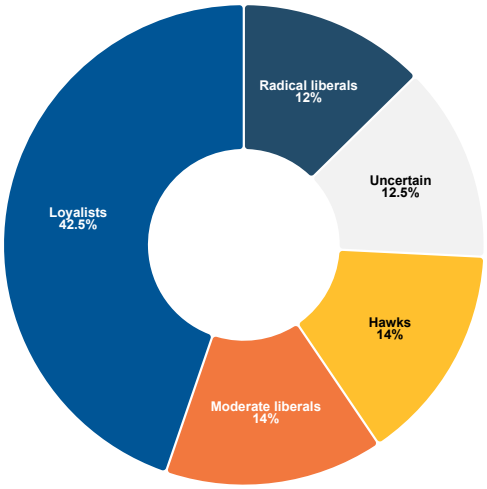
After February 2022, Putin's approval rating increased by double digits. This notable spike, a "rally around the flag," follows a pattern observed during previous Kremlin-led wars. The specific size of this effect has varied from one conflict to another. As one study estimated, the boost is usually smaller in magnitude for smaller conflicts, but major international crises were followed by increases in approval rating of more than 10 percentage points.

War often inflates the approval not only of the president, but of various political institutions such as the government, parliament, governors, the army, patriotism, and pride in Russia. Beyond political institutions, the rally-around-the-flag effect often boosts other indicators of perceived societal wellbeing and overall optimism about Russia's direction. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine proved no exception to this pattern, even if the popular consolidation was somewhat weaker than it was in 2014. Right after the invasion, public optimism and pride soared. They have remained high, as evidenced by the finding that average Russians are now significantly more likely to believe their country is headed in the right direction. Furthermore, views of Russia's economic, social, and political priorities shifted toward a siege mentality with a sense of grievance vis-à-vis the West.

What explains the rallying effect at the onset of the conflicts Russia initiates? Russian respondents are often categorized into several groups.

The separate but related "loyalist" (war supporters who express their beliefs with less intensity) and "uncertain" (those with average support for the war who are unsure whether Russia is moving in the right direction) groups—36–49 percent and 11–14 percent of the Open Minds Institute (OMI) sample, respectively—agree with the war in principle but in moderation. They are the groups most conformist with higher levels of authoritarian obedience. In Levada polls, a chunk of respondents (42 percent) broadly corresponding to this group has consistently supported the Russian invasion of Ukraine, albeit for pragmatic rather than ideological reasons. For example, they tend to claim that Russia should "win anyways" and "finish what we started." Such participants often describe the war as defensive, inevitable, or the result of the threat of NATO expansion. In polls, individuals in this group, while supporting the war, also typically want it to end soon.

Graph 1. Russian society clusters



Average percent of polled.
SOURCE: Open Minds Institute (June 2023)

Historically, these groups are foreign policy moderates. For years they have made up the core of Putin's support, believing through the end of 2021 that Putin was not a hardliner vis-à-vis the West. These conformist groups are also more susceptible to propagandist narratives due to their lack of strong preformed opinions. While they do not necessarily trust the authorities on day-to-day matters and economic issues, they often delegate foreign policy decisions to the Kremlin. They also tend to believe it's their duty to follow what the state considers morally correct, and even to sacralize the state allegedly waging a "defensive" and "liberation" war against an enemy "attacking their homeland."

Accordingly, the Kremlin easily convinced these groups of the need for another foreign adventure. When asked whether the war against Ukraine should continue, they tend to shift back and forth on the topic, parroting what they believe to be the Kremlin's intentions at the moment. The conformist groups display no distinct gender or age characteristics. They are usually less interested in politics, and they are more likely to switch back and forth between media channels depending on fluctuations in the news cycle.

The "hawks" (13–15 percent of the OMI sample, 18–22 percent of Levada's samples, and 27 percent of the Russian Field data) are the most ideological group, firmly supporting the war against Ukraine and sharing a strong sense of national identification with Russia. They typically believe that a ceasefire in Ukraine is unacceptable until Russia "destroys and eradicates fascism and Nazism." Pro-war groups are more likely to be male: 53 percent of men "completely" or "rather" support the war, while only 36 percent of women do. Age is another factor in respondents' support for the war. In the OMI polls, 58 percent of those aged 45–60 expressed support, as opposed to only 29 percent of 18–30-year-old respondents. In their study, Maria Snegovaya, Peter Pomerantsev, and Graeme Robertson also singled out a significant share of respondents that identifies with Russia, supports militaristic action more strongly, and is more nostalgic for Soviet times than the rest of the sample.

Hawkish groups are also more likely to reside in rural areas or small towns, and to rely on TV as their main source of information. They are usually less educated, have higher income levels, and are mostly satisfied with their financial situation. Better-off respondents are more likely to support the war because of the idiosyncrasy of the Russian middle class, which includes many members of the security services and state and public-sector employees, all of whom are more likely to take pro-Kremlin stances.

War opponents made up 22–30 percent of the OMI sample and 34 percent of the Russian Field data. Since February 2022, war opposition in Russia has remained at roughly steady levels of about 19–20 percent, and about one-fifth of respondents have consistently supported peace negotiations in the last 2.5 years. In today's Russia, these groups find themselves in an unenviable position, experiencing fear, shame, depression, horror, uncertainty, and despair. However, consistent pro-Western liberals constitute less than half of this group, and they are only about 7 percent of the total sample. War opponents are more likely to have lower levels of income and to be worried that the so-called special military operation will worsen their financial situation. They are younger, are more likely to reside in big cities, and primarily rely on information sources other than TV. In polls, the share of respondents who primarily rely on more independent media sources (YouTube, Telegram channels, or social networks) closely corresponds to the share of war opponents (about 18 percent). As sociologist Mikhail Sokolov put it: "If you are younger than 30, live in a big city, have a higher education and do not watch television, the probability that you will not support the actions of the Russian army exceeds 80%."

For a while, scholars believed that the Russian youth would become one of the most opposition-minded groups in Russian society. However, as they mature, younger Russians tend to become more conformist, adapting to the political mainstream. Prior to the 2022 war, polls and focus group interviews revealed that Russians were extremely homogeneous on Ukraine-related issues. Both older and younger respondents, and internet and TV watchers, were unusually united in blaming "the West for the current escalation of the conflict." In the post-2022 period, Kremlin-led indoctrination, which was particularly strong at the school and university levels, further reinforced this trend. Over time, according to polling data, the Russian youth has become more pro-Kremlin, more patriotic, and more pro-war. Hence, it is more accurate to speak of a generational continuum instead of a generational gap. Younger people still support the war in high numbers, though their support is lower than that of the older generation: 75–80 percent of people fifty-five and older support the Russian army's actions in Ukraine, while 61 percent of young respondents in Levada polls share this sentiment.

INFORMATION ACCESS

A common misconception about Russian public opinion has to do with the alleged lack of information available to ordinary Russians. While there is a strong correlation between reliance on state TV channels and war support, Russians also have access to alternative information. In the last decade, they have become far less reliant on state-controlled TV channels, a sharp drop from about 90-percent reliance to slightly above 60 percent between 2013 and 2021, as Russians switched to social media and YouTube. More than 85 percent of Russians now have internet access. Popular social apps have nearly 60 million users in a country of 145 million people. Even after the Kremlin increased censorship, independent channels such as YouTube and Telegram still exist, as do virtual private networks (VPNs) and other ways to circumvent the limitations.

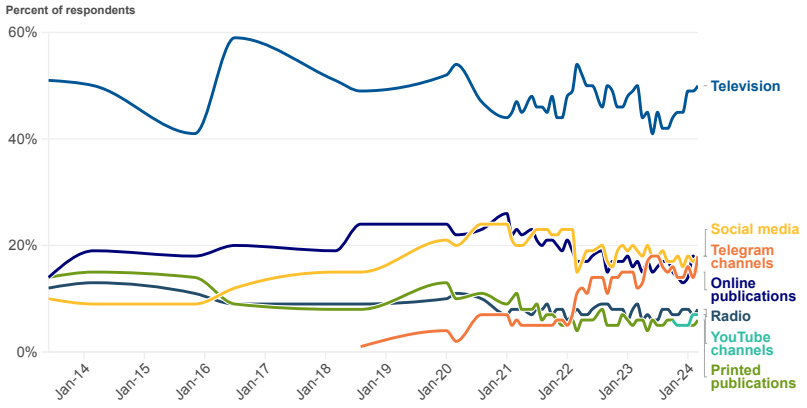
Yet, in the post-invasion period, state-controlled TV channels preserved their grip on the Russian public's hearts and minds, effectively creating an alternative reality for many. Even on the internet, Russians tend to seek out information that is closer to their views. They often find such information in the so-called Z channels (run by pro-war bloggers), whose popularity skyrocketed since the start of the 2022 war, and other pro-Kremlin channels. For example, in the first few months since the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, TikTok posts uploaded with the pro-war hashtags #zнаши ("Z-ours") and #мненестыдно ("I'm not ashamed") collected more than 2 billion views, and posts promoting the Wagner private military company (PMC) collected another billion. On the Russian-language internet, pro-Kremlin sources have surpassed exiled liberal voices in popularity by at least one order of magnitude.

While many Russians have access to true information about what happens in Ukraine, they often choose to avoid facts that challenge their propaganda-crafted preexisting beliefs. Even when such information was offered by their blood relatives, Russians commonly denied and refused to believe the facts, claiming that this evidence was fake. This is likely explained by Russians trying to avoid cognitive dissonance, the mental discomfort people experience when encountering facts challenging their preexisting beliefs. Conversely, many Russians are used to experiencing good feelings when Russia invades other countries. For most of the post-Soviet period, the Kremlin has waged wars of varying intensity, and periodic rallying around the flag has often triggered the sense of belonging to a great country. Indeed, the narratives the Kremlin promoted at the outset of its wars repeatedly boosted the perceptions of collective unity and allowed many Russians to derive their sense of worth from belonging to a large and strong state. For example, in the post-Crimea period, polls recorded that respondents' own self-respect spiked from 27 percent in July 2012 to 45 percent in August

2014. Why learn the unpleasant truth when propaganda offers a much more satisfying, glorious, and convenient version of reality?

It appears that state-promoted narratives are more consequential for the conformist groups. The loyalists and the uncertain groups, which constitute the majority within the Russian population, are more likely to shift their support back and forth depending on the Kremlin's view of the war at a given moment. In contrast, the more ideological hawks are less likely to support Putin during peaceful periods, believing he is too weak vis-à-vis the West. But during periods of escalation against the West, the hawks tend to join Putin's coalition and unite with the more conformist core support groups. This might explain Putin's popularity spike at the start of the war.

Graph 2. Which sources of information do Russians trust most in covering news in the country and in the world?



Data collected from Levada Center polling representative samples of Russians in Russia between June 2013 and March 2024.
SOURCE: Levada Center (April 2024)

THE NEW NORMAL

While the previous wars Putin started were relatively painless for Russians, the 2022 war—with half a million casualties, immense economic costs, and the largest occupation of Russian territory in seventy-five years—would seem likely to break the aforementioned pattern. In the past, Russians appeared to be more perceptive about the costs of war; during the Second Chechen War, the public was more sensitive than it is now to casualties among its own soldiers and alarmed at the economic costs. And yet, while several events in the past 2.5 years have somewhat challenged the Putin consensus, after a short period of increased anxiety and support for peace talks, support for the war and Putin's concurrent approval rating bounced back every time.

The introduction of sanctions was the earliest shock at the onset of the war. Under new conditions of uncertainty, many Russians postponed expensive purchases, as captured by the index of large-purchase expediency. However, the index subsequently recovered and kept growing until it reached its peak in June 2023. That is, adaptation to the economic shock happened within a few months, with few respondents experiencing any notable deterioration of their economic situations.

The announcement of partial mobilization in September 2022 led to a sudden and radical spike in anxiety levels, increased attention to the war, a decrease in Putin's approval, and a decrease in war support, while support for peace talks temporarily increased to its highest number since the war started. The share of those who felt "tension, irritation, fear and melancholy" increased from 21 percent to 47 percent, the sharpest one-time change in public mood since the start of such observations in the early 1990s. A few protests by the wives and mothers of the mobilized took place outside major cities, primarily in republics that were more affected by mobilization. By the end of September, however, Russian society had generally come to terms with these changes. Protests subsided and the public mood returned to "pre-mobilization" levels by the end of 2022.

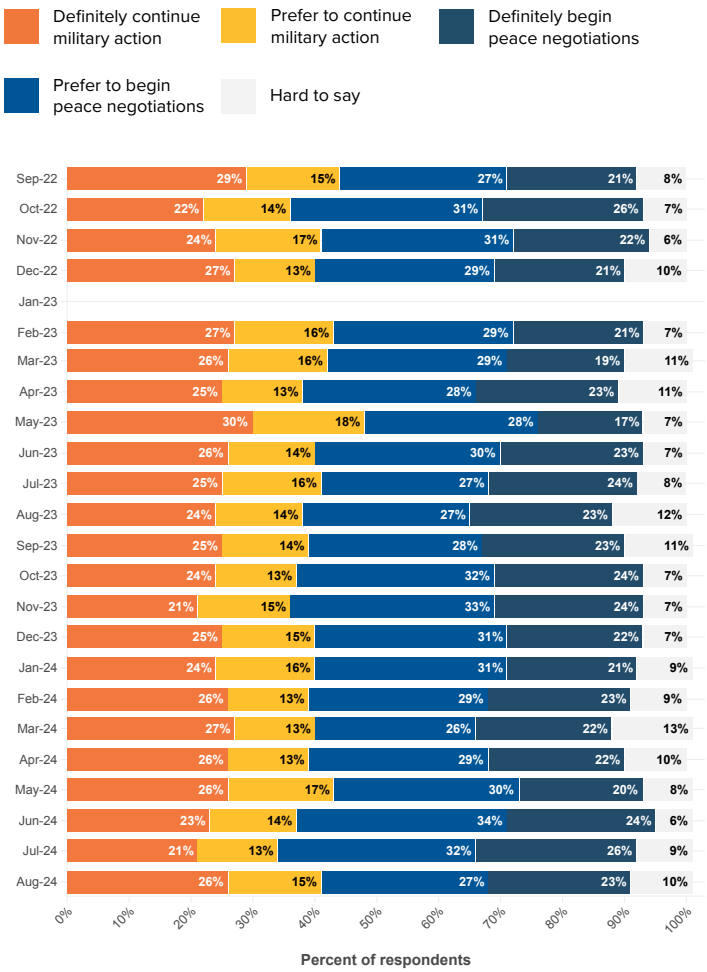
Yevgeny Prigozhin's mutiny attempt on June 23–24, 2023, also led to increased anxiety levels, with about one-third of respondents feeling anxious and depressed. However, public opinion soon returned to normal as, to many Russians, Putin appeared to have responded well by promptly condemning and cracking down on the rebels.

Most recently, Ukraine's incursion into Kursk, which started in early August 2024, has created a similar dynamic. Anxiety levels jumped from 33 percent to 49 percent between late July and early September, negative sentiment increased, and the share of respondents who thought things in Russia were headed in the right direction decreased. However, this time Putin's approval declined only slightly—by 2 percentage points (no statistical significance)—and the percentage of peace supporters did not increase, instead dropping from 58 percent to 50 percent.

Altogether, negative war developments typically increase anxiety levels and support for peace talks, while dragging down the approval for the Russian army and the president, probably due to some respondents in the conformist groups temporarily distancing themselves from the Kremlin. However, the effects are usually short in duration and the ratings bounce back after several weeks.

Since 2022, about half of Russians have consistently supported peace negotiations. But even those respondents embracing peace talks support them only with the condition that Russia retains its recent territorial gains in Ukraine. They are unwilling to accept Russia's strategic defeat. In recent months, some pollsters have noticed a slight increase of 7–8 percentage points more people in support of peace talks. Some believe this trend might indicate war fatigue spreading within Russian society. However, the pattern is not consistent across various studies.

Graph 3. Should Russia continue military action or pursue peace negotiations?



Data collected from Levada Center polling representative samples of Russians in Russia between September 2022 and August 2024.
SOURCE: Levada Center (August 2024)

To most Russians, things continue as usual, with many barely noticing any changes in their lives. They seem to be finding ways to accept the unprecedented developments even if they did not originally support or anticipate the war—as long as those developments do not concern them personally (a pattern that mobilization temporarily undermined). It is telling that many Kursk residents claimed in surveys that the war started only after Ukraine's incursion in August 2024. The appearance of normalcy is partly due to the regime's active propaganda efforts. Pro-Kremlin channels offer a reassuring picture that "everything is going according to plan, everything is as it should be, and we will win." Thus, the propaganda has tried to portray the highly unpopular mobilization as a small nuisance and the chances of an average Russian being mobilized as slim. It also hides the true numbers of war casualties and avoids publicizing the unprecedented growth of military expenditures. As long as the war remains a cinematographic picture on TV screens, the Russian public tries to ignore it against all odds.

CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO

Recent years have exposed fallacies in many analytical constructions about Russia, and expectations of Russia's ability to easily shed its authoritarian legacies turned out to be somewhat naïve. How did so many get it so wrong?

One problem is that, for too long, optimists tended to overfocus on trends. While trends matter, the sheer size of the effect ultimately determines the political outcome. Many observers also tended to underestimate the legacy of formal and informal institutions inherited from Russia's authoritarian past that continued to condition the public's beliefs and behavior—such as attitudes toward the wars launched by the Kremlin—more than previously understood.

While noticing encouraging modernization trends among younger Russians, observers often missed the limited size of this age group. In the 2019 census, Russians aged 15–29 constituted only 16.5 percent of the population because relatively few children were born between 1989 and 2003. Despite their small number vis-à-vis the rest of the population and their tendency toward political apathy, the regime scaled up its indoctrination efforts toward young Russians in the last decade and appears to have successfully coopted many into its support base. Since 2022, a majority of younger Russians have consistently supported the war.

Similarly, observers have consistently ignored the size of Russia's liberal pro-Western segment (less than 7 percent of polling samples). A recent German study has estimated the total audience of Russian-language independent media at around 6.7–9.6 million unique users, including 5.4–7.8 million inside Russia. A joint study by Levada and Spektr found that about 7 percent of Russian respondents have relied on independent media, such as Meduza, *Novaya Gazeta*, Deutsche Welle, etc. Another study asked respondents about YouTube channels they rely on for news about military operations. It discovered that among 1,600 respondents in Russia, the only liberal outlet receiving double-digit mentions was TV Rain, which was named only ten times. Altogether, Russian liberals appear to have failed to make a decisive imprint on Russian society, or even to resist the wave of repression unleashed by the Kremlin since mid-2020. The Kremlin's brutal crackdown on Russia's small liberal community, including its multiple attempts to murder opposition leader Alexey Navalny, encountered little pushback from Russian society short of several protests in Russia's major cities. That was the abrupt end of a decades-long effort to nurture Russian civic groups.

Nor did the simple deterioration in the quality of life brought about by sanctions provoke a level of discontent strong enough to undermine the regime or the prosecution of the war. While research shows that economically worse-off

respondents tend to decrease their war support, Russians also proved remarkably resilient to war casualties, which have now exceeded half a million. Invoking comparative cases like the Afghanistan war that helped bring down the Soviet Union, it appears now that only a perfect storm of military losses and economic collapse could cause major public-opinion reversal. As Levada Center sociologist Alexey Levinson points out, the first step in this process would be for the public to embrace the attitude of "screw it all!" But such mass despair appears unlikely in the near future. Instead, economic optimism has been on the rise. As long as Russian society views the war costs as acceptable, the pro-war status quo can be maintained.

Even in the event of an economic crisis in Russia, the decline in war support might not be as radical or pronounced as many hope. The Kremlin has proved remarkably successful at feeding Russians an alternative reality that is too pleasant and addictive for them to abandon. The goal of the analytical community should be to work on strategies designed to help Russians overcome their cognitive dissonance, force them out of denial, and make them challenge their own beliefs.

CAN ONE TRUST THE RUSSIAN POLLS?

After the war started, some observers criticized the reliability of Russian polls. However, most criticism of the polls comes from exiled Russian opposition figures who have their own agenda, or from journalists and experts who do not personally have experience working with the polling data in their research. The below section addresses most of the frequently raised concerns regarding the reliability of Russian polling data.

Types of polls

Critics claim that intensifying repressions in Russia and multiplying legal restrictions have made it hard to rely on polling evidence. As the argument goes, many Russians today have strong incentives to misrepresent their actual beliefs to avoid state persecution. Indeed, one should be careful interpreting polls in authoritarian contexts given the possible repercussions of disagreeing with official narratives.

However, as the above section demonstrated, most polls—regardless of pollster or mode (online, phone, face to face)—show comparable results. The majority of Russians support the war. One would expect more pronounced discrepancies between, say, online and face-to-face polling results if there was a systematic misrepresentation on behalf of a sizeable share of respondents.

Sample composition

If respondents are increasingly reluctant to talk to pollsters, this should be reflected in changing sample compositions (i.e., how well a sample represents various groups across society). But since the start of the 2022 war, no convincing evidence of this has emerged. Non-sensitive demographic indicators (from prevalence of wearing corrective eyewear to marital status) have generally remained in line with official statistics. Since the start of the war, polls have continued to quite accurately represent the socio-demographic structure of the Russian population. The only exception is a tiny decline in the share of young people willing to participate in surveys since the onset of mobilization. But such fluctuations in the sample structure are too marginal to significantly affect response distribution.

The emigration of many Russians with anti-war and pro-Western attitudes, which followed the start of the war, might have also affected survey composition. But the number of emigrants, estimated between 800,000 and 1 million, is small relative to the rest of the population. Accordingly, the emigration-related change is likely negligible from the sample-composition viewpoint.

Response rates

Poll critics often argue that response rates in Russia are too low to ensure that the samples reliably represent Russian society. In face-to-face surveys, for example, only about one-third or fewer of contacted respondents typically talk to pollsters. Can one trust Russian polls with such seemingly low response rates?

First, Russian response rates are not unusual. In fact, they are comparable to the response rate in surveys run by American National Elections Studies—the gold standard for survey research on US politics—and are often higher than in most US opinion surveys. Second, if Russian respondents hide their true preferences, they should be reluctant to talk to pollsters. Response rates in Russia have historically varied considerably depending on the specific pollster and method. But when those sources of variation are kept constant, most pollsters' response rates have not changed much since the start of the war.

Interrupted interviews

Is it also possible that respondents agree to be interviewed but abruptly end a conversation when asked sensitive questions?

Once having agreed to an interview, most respondents tend to complete the survey. The number of interrupted interviews did not change much since the start of the war, and interviews are rarely interrupted specifically when sensitive Ukraine-related questions are asked. In addition, the respondents who typically cut interviews short or give "don't know" answers are not regime opponents; rather, they are less interested in politics altogether. When pressed, they are more likely to parrot official narratives.

The average length of interviews also did not change much since 2022. For example, according to data from Morning Consult, the average interview length for its monthly tracker in Russia has remained relatively stable since November 2021 at around twenty-five minutes. Lastly, related indicators—such as the numbers of "don't knows," "no opinions," and refusals to answer—have not varied much from various pollsters' data.

Sensitivity bias

To look for evidence of preference falsification (i.e., respondents misrepresenting their beliefs), scholars have used list experiments that allow respondents to indirectly report their preferences and to avoid expressing their opinions directly.

Such approaches have discovered a small difference between direct and indirect responses in Russia. A study by Philipp Chapkovski and Max Schaub, using an online list experiment, discovered that direct questioning artificially inflated war support among Russians by about 10 percentage points (from 61 percent to 71 percent). Another study found similar evidence of preference falsification in war support, at less than 6 percentage points. Timothy Frye, Henry Hale, Ora John Reuter, and Bryn Rosenfeld found no evidence of artificial deflation from the design of their list experiment. However, they also found that the opposition to the war might be a few percentage points higher than opinion polls suggest. Altogether, to the extent that preference falsification exists, it is likely to be less than 10 percent of the overall sample, at 6–10 percentage points.

Historical trends

Lastly, do the post-invasion public-opinion polls tell something completely different from the evidence collected before the 2022 war started?

Juxtaposing the pre-full-scale invasion polls with those collected from 2022 onward, the results generally align. For example, a survey experiment conducted in February 2021 found that even a vaguely described security threat from a neighboring country significantly increased public support for military intervention from an estimated 8 percent to 40 percent (and to 48 percent if the survey attributed the statement to Putin). Polls conducted in late 2021 and in the early 2022 pre-invasion period discovered that three-quarters of respondents were willing to back the Kremlin if a military conflict with the West broke out. A mid-February 2022 poll conducted before the invasion found that 50 percent of respondents supported the use of force to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO, and 36 percent to supported it to "reunite" Russia and Ukraine. The polls conducted around the annexation of Crimea similarly demonstrated high levels of support, which became known as "the Crimea consensus."

Altogether, even in the period when the Putin regime was much less repressive, more than half of respondents in Russia consistently favored military action against neighboring states. It is hardly surprising that state-led propaganda was able to raise these numbers to 70–80 percent after February 2022. Conversely, no alternative robust evidence (such as large-scale protests within Russia or cities hosting large concentrations of the Russian diaspora) has emerged to cast doubt on these conclusions.

THE JOKE IS ON US

Altogether, various approaches suggest that one can generally trust Russian public opinion data, albeit with some reservations. Specific feelings that underlie the war support—such as resignation, acquiescence, or avoidance—might be up for debate. But the very fact that the war is embraced by a majority of Russians, and that it has become part of Russia's "new normal," is not.

The cognitive difficulty among Russia watchers and members of the exiled liberal community to accept that reality is more puzzling. After all, why should Russians not support the war, given the years of state-led indoctrination, the legacy of Soviet beliefs, the lack of alternative narratives in the public sphere, and more pragmatic considerations such as adaption and avoidance of cognitive dissonance?

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William J. Perry
Condoleezza Rice
Horst Teltschik
William H. Webster

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List as of April 24, 2024

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