

# Research Reports

Research Group on 'Russia in an Era of Great Power Competition'

FY 2022-#1 9/13/2022

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## Do Russians support the military invasion of Ukraine?

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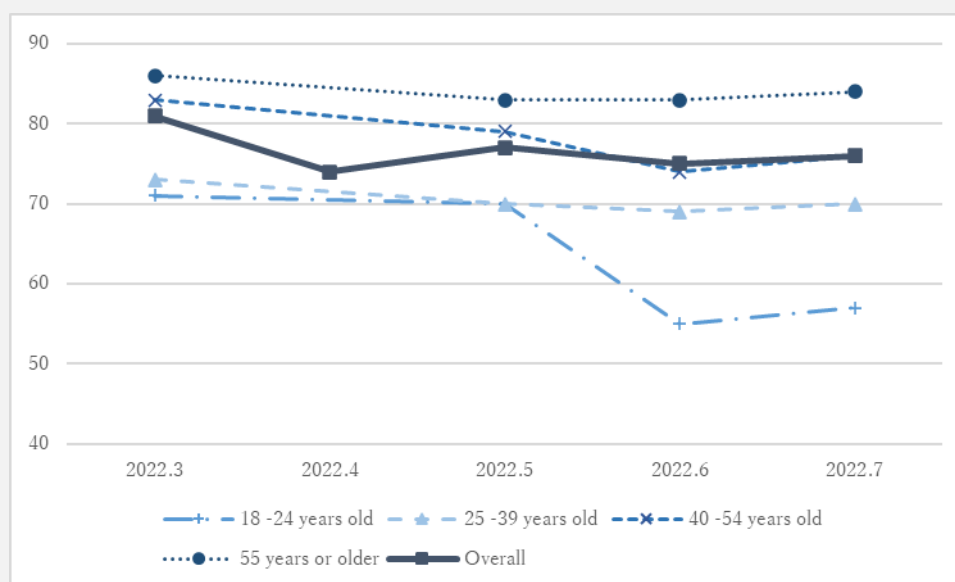
### Public reaction to the military invasion

Since starting the military invasion of Ukraine, Russia has been left under fire from the international community, but how has the invasion been perceived at home? This issue is important in considering how the prolonged war would affect the stability of Putin's regime. At the beginning of the war, anti-war movements occurred in Russia, but gradually they died down. This is because Russia's tightening crackdown on anti-regime protests in recent years has been ramped up with the start of the military invasion. In particular, the risk of staging a protest march increased significantly when the Criminal Code was amended at the beginning of March 2022 to penalize activities that "reduce confidence" in Russia's armed forces or spread "false information" against them. [\*]<sup>1</sup> Many independent media outlets have also been forced to move their operation bases overseas. Under these circumstances, it is difficult to understand from the outside what the Russian people think about the war.

In what follows, I will consider how the Russian public perceives the "special military operation" based on the results of recent research and with a focus on the results of surveys conducted by opinion pollsters.

## Support for the “special military operation”

Since the start of the war, opinion polls in Russia have shown that a majority of the public supports the "special military operation." According to the Levada Center, an independent pollster, support for Putin started to rise around the time Russian troops were deployed near Ukraine's border in October 2021 and exceeded 80% at the outbreak of the war. [\*]<sup>2</sup> This is the same level of support as after the annexation of Crimea. When asked whether they supported the actions of the Russian military in Ukraine, more than 70% of respondents answered in the affirmative. This figure declined slightly from March to April but has since remained almost unchanged (Figure 1). A survey by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center, a government-affiliated polling agency, also showed that more than 70% of respondents have continued to support the special military operation since the start of the war. Thus, six months after its inception, support for the military invasion has not declined significantly.



**Figure 1 Changes in Generational Support for Military Invasion**

Note: The data points indicate the sums of "clearly support" and "somewhat support" responses

Source: Prepared by the author using data from the Levada Center

(<https://www.levada.ru/2022/08/01/konflikt-s-ukrainoj-iyul-2022-goda/>;

<https://www.levada.ru/2022/06/30/konflikt-s-ukrainoj-3/>;

<https://www.levada.ru/2022/06/02/konflikt-s-ukrainoj-2/>;

<https://www.levada.ru/2022/04/28/konflikt-s-ukrainoj-i-otvetstvennost-za-gibel-mirnyh-zhitelej/>;

<https://www.levada.ru/2022/03/31/konflikt-s-ukrainoj/>).

However, attitudes toward the war differ greatly by generation. In the Levada Center survey above, the trend clearly shows less support among younger people for the special military operation. The data also show a decline in support for the special military operation among young people. Among those aged 18 to 24, the sum of "clearly support" and "somewhat support" responses was about 70% from

March to May, but since June it has fallen sharply to the 50% range. That number held in the mid-80% range for the 55 and older age group, so the difference between the two actually widened to nearly 30 points. Younger generations were less supportive of Putin even before the military invasion, but it seems that the war has increased the gap among generations.

## Do polls reflect public opinion?

One may doubt whether such polls are credible or not. In an authoritarian regime where freedom of speech is restricted, there is generally a strong psychological pressure dissuading respondents from giving answers critical of the regime or inconsistent with social norms. It has thus been pointed out that Putin's long-standing high approval ratings may not reflect the true voice of the Russian people. In other words, there may be some members of the public who think it socially undesirable to indicate that they do not support Putin or the special military operation, so they may suppress their true feelings and answer that they do support the president and his actions. This is known as the "social desirability bias," a bias that occurs not only in authoritarian regimes but in general.

A list experiment is a technique used to mitigate such bias. In a list experiment, respondents are randomly divided into several groups (control groups and treatment groups), each group is presented with a list of items or statements, and the respondents are asked to report how many items on the list pertain to them. Control groups are presented with a list that does not include a targeted choice, while treatment groups are presented with an identical list plus the targeted item (see Table 1). By looking at the difference between the average responses of the two groups, researchers can estimate the proportion of people to whom the targeted item pertains. The advantage of this method is that it can considerably mitigate the possibility of respondents falsifying their preferences, and it can reveal their preferences for questions they find difficult to answer without asking them directly. In other words, they do not need to directly respond with statements such as "I do not support Putin."

Using the list-experiment technique, Timothy Frye and others showed that Putin's approval rating after the annexation of Crimea was actually high, at around 80%. In their study, they made a list of famous Russian politicians and had respondents answer how many of these politicians they supported. They then estimated Putin's approval rating by adding the name "Putin" to the list for only one group [\*]<sup>3</sup> and thus concluded that the high approval ratings after the annexation of Crimea were not very different from the findings of opinion pollsters.

**Table 1 Choices for List Experiments by Frye**

Control group	Treatment group
Stalin	Stalin
Brezhnev	Brezhnev
Yeltsin	Yeltsin
	Putin

Source: Frye et al., op. cit., p. 6

That may have changed, however, due to increased control of speech and social pressure to conform since the war began. In fact, there are differences of opinion among Russian sociologists on this point. Alexei Titkov has pointed out that younger and more educated people who tended to oppose the war evaded the polls more. He also says they are increasingly likely to give "socially desirable" answers that differ from their true feelings, fearing that their answers will subject them to penalties for disseminating "false information" or "diminishing trust." [\*]<sup>4</sup> Lev Gudkov of the Levada Center, meanwhile, says that refusal to respond to the polls has not increased. Years of propaganda and strict wartime controls on speech by the Russian government have forced most of the population to believe what it says, leading to high levels of support for the special military operation, he asserts. [\*]<sup>5</sup>

A research group that conducted a list experiment after the military invasion of Ukraine showed that around 10% of Russians disguised their preferences and declared their support for the special military operation. [\*]<sup>6</sup> According to an online survey conducted by Philipp Chapkovski and Max Schaub, 71% of people who were directly asked about their support or disapproval of Russian military actions in Ukraine said they supported these actions, compared to 61% who supported them in the list experiment. In other words, about 10% of people who were directly asked about their support for the war misrepresented their preferences.

Such trends are particularly strong among those whose primary source of information is television. When asked directly, 87% of habitual TV watchers said they supported Russian military actions in Ukraine, while the figure dropped to 71% in a list experiment. Both of these numbers are higher than for those whose primary source of information is not television, but the difference is smaller for list experiments than for direct questioning (8 points and 22 points, respectively). This suggests that television viewers in Russia are not so much inclined to believe government propaganda as they believe it better to go along with the propaganda because it represents "socially desirable" views. The contention that the Russian public does not necessarily believe state television propaganda is itself quite interesting.

By the authors' own admission, it is not clear whether the trends shown here will also be seen in the general population, because the survey was conducted online and participants were disproportionately young, highly educated, and metropolitan residents, a relatively "liberal" segment of Russian society. It should also be noted that, even among this "liberal" demographic, more than 60% support the war. In the current climate, the results of the Levada Center and other pollsters need to be taken with a grain of salt, but it cannot be concluded that they diverge significantly from reality.

## Perceived threats from NATO and the US, concerns over prolonged war

Let us return to the Levada Center's findings and take a closer look at the Russian public's thinking about the military aggression. As of March 2022, protecting ethnic Russians in the Donetsk and the Luhansk People's Republics was the most cited reason for Russia's special military operation (43%), followed by deterring attacks on Russia (25%). By contrast, only 14% gave halting NATO expansion

as the reason. [\*]<sup>7</sup> This echoes the way the Russian government cited the protection of ethnic Russians as the reason for starting the war, while initially stressing the threat posed by NATO and deployed Russian troops near the Ukrainian border.

However, it is also true that, in the wake of the war, an increasing number of Russians have perceived NATO as a threat. While the number of people who think that "Russia has reason to fear the Western countries in NATO" peaked around 2014, the year in which Crimea was annexed and was on the decline, it climbed from 48% in November 2021 to 60% in May 2022. [\*]<sup>8</sup> More than half (57%) blame the US or NATO for the casualties and destructions in Ukraine. [\*]<sup>9</sup> The percentage of respondents with negative feelings toward NATO is also on the rise, reaching 82% in May 2022. In this way, Russia's deep-embedded anti-American sentiment and growing hostility toward NATO are believed to be major factors underpinning the support of the military invasion of Ukraine by a majority of the population.

On the other hand, a small number of people taking part in the polls expressed concern about a protracted war. In a survey conducted in late April 2022, 68% of respondents said that the special military operation was going "very well" or "somewhat well" because it was "going according to plan" and "liberating the People's Republics and others from the Banderites," [\*]<sup>10</sup> as well as that "the Russian military is strong." On the other hand, not many people said that the special military operation was not working; of those who did, 48% cited as the reason that "they said it would be short, but it's taking a long time" and 31% said "civilians, children and Russian soldiers have been killed." It is worth noting that in April there were already concerns about a protracted war. [\*]<sup>11</sup> In fact, in response to the question "How long will the special military operation last?", 37% said in May 2022 it would last less than six months, while by July that figure had dropped to 27%. On the other hand, those who think it will last more than a year rose from 21% to 28%. [\*]<sup>12</sup> We can see that an increasing number of people in Russia also believe that the war will be prolonged. Indeed, as the war drags on, there could be a shift in public opinion in support of the war, but that is unlikely to happen in the short term.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have examined how the military invasion of Ukraine, conducted as a "special military operation," is perceived within Russia. It is true that voicing anti-war sentiment in Russia is extremely difficult due to repression and strict control of speech, and that opposition to and apathy toward the war is in an uptrend, especially among young people. However, most of the public still support the special military operation, and their approval has not declined in the five months since the start of the war. Massive economic sanctions have been imposed in concert by the West, but they have yet to change the public's perception of the war. Rather, hostility toward the United States and NATO has intensified, underpinning public support for the war. Some may hope that the growing anti-war movement will change the behavior of the Putin regime or bring it down, but no such trend is apparent at the moment.

(The original Japanese version of this paper is dated August 29, 2022)

<sup>1</sup> Mari Aburamoto, "Invasion of Ukraine and Anti-War Demonstrations in Russia," IDE Square, April 2022 (<http://hdl.handle.net/2344/00053021>).

<sup>2</sup> «Одобрение деятельности Владимира Путина» Левада-Центр (<https://www.levada.ru/indikatory/>)

<sup>3</sup> Two experiments were conducted here, with respondents stating the number of politicians they support from a group of prominent historical politicians (Stalin, Brezhnev, Yeltsin, (Putin)) and from a group of prominent contemporary politicians (Zhirinovskiy, Zyuganov, Mironov, (Putin)). Incidentally, approval ratings when respondents were asked directly whether they support Putin were 6% to 9% higher than in the list experiments. Frye, Timothy, Scott Gehlbach, Kyle L. Marquardt, and Ora John Reuter. "Is Putin's Popularity Real?" *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol.33, no.1 (2017): 1–15.

<sup>4</sup> «Как 100 дней войны изменили россиян? Объясняем с точки зрения социологии» Медуза. 3 июня 2022. (<https://meduza.io/feature/2022/06/03/kak-100-dney-voyny-izmenili-rossiyan>)

<sup>5</sup> «Это пассивная форма привычного соучастия в преступлениях государства» Социолог Лев Гудков - о том, почему многие россияне смирились с войной и продолжают поддерживать власть» Медуза. 18 июля 2022. ([https://meduza.io/feature/2022/07/18/eto-passivnaya-forma-privychnogo-souchastiya-v-prestupleniyah-gosudarstva?utm\\_source=telegram&utm\\_medium=live&utm\\_campaign=live](https://meduza.io/feature/2022/07/18/eto-passivnaya-forma-privychnogo-souchastiya-v-prestupleniyah-gosudarstva?utm_source=telegram&utm_medium=live&utm_campaign=live))

<sup>6</sup> Philipp Chapkovski and Max Schaub, "Solid Support or Secret Dissent? A List Experiment on Preference Falsification During the Russian War Against Ukraine," *Research & Politics* 9, no. 2 (April 1, 2022): 20531680221108330, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20531680221108328>.

<sup>7</sup> «Конфликт с Украиной» Левада-Центр. 31 марта 2022г. (<https://www.levada.ru/2022/03/31/konflikt-s-ukrainoj/>)

<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, there was a sharp increase in the number of people who believed that "NATO countries have reasons to fear Russia" (from 36% in November 2021 to 61% in May 2022). «Россия и НАТО» Левада-Центр. 6 июня 2022г. (<https://www.levada.ru/2022/06/06/rossiya-i-nato-2/>)

<sup>9</sup> 7% hold Russia responsible and 17% hold Ukraine responsible. «Конфликт с Украиной» Левада-Центр. 28 апреля 2022г. (<https://www.levada.ru/2022/04/28/konflikt-s-ukrainoj-i-otvetstvennost-za-gibel-mirnyh-zhitelej/>)

<sup>10</sup> Along with "neo-Nazis," "Banderite" is a term often used in Russia to deride Ukrainian nationalists as followers of Stepan Bandera, a nationalist who campaigned for Ukrainian independence in the first half of the 20th century. Although Bandera is a hero to Ukrainian nationalists, the Russian government has labeled him a "collaborator with Nazi Germany" and has accused the Zelensky government itself of being "Banderite" and "neo-Nazi."

<sup>11</sup> «Конфликт с Украиной» Левада-Центр. 28 апреля 2022г. (<https://www.levada.ru/2022/04/28/konflikt-s-ukrainoj-i-otvetstvennost-za-gibel-mirnyh-zhitelej/>)

<sup>12</sup> «Конфликт с Украиной: июль 2022 года» Левада-Центр. 1 августа 2022г. (<https://www.levada.ru/2022/08/01/konflikt-s-ukrainoj-iyul-2022-goda/>)