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My Country, Right or Wrong: Russian Public Opinion on Ukraine

Denis Volkov and Andrei Kolesnikov

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Introduction

When Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine on February 24, Western governments, including the United States, immediately condemned what they described as “Vladimir Putin’s war.”¹ Surely, this formulation was no accident. It was aimed, first and foremost, at drawing a distinction between the actions of the Kremlin and the attitudes of ordinary Russians. There was optimism that ordinary Russians would not countenance a war against a neighboring country.² But hopes of Russian grassroots opposition to the war were swiftly dashed. Indeed, public opinion polls have consistently shown overwhelming support (70 percent or higher) for what Moscow calls its “special military operation” in Ukraine. Contrary to expectations, Putin’s popularity has also seen a boost, similar to what happened in the immediate wake of the 2014 annexation of Crimea.

Partly in response to these indicators, figures like Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy have called for a visa ban for all Russian passport holders, with an exception for people whose safety is at risk or who are vulnerable to political persecution.³ According to Zelenskyy, “[T]he most important sanctions are to close the borders—because the Russians are taking away someone else’s land” and Russians should “live in their own world until they change their philosophy.” He added, “The population picked this government and they’re not fighting it, not arguing with it, not shouting at it.” Such sentiments are echoed in calls by some European politicians, such as Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin, for an EU ban on tourist visas. “It’s not right that at the same time as Russia is waging an aggressive, brutal war of aggression in Europe, Russians can live a normal life, travel in Europe, be tourists. It’s not right,” Marin said in mid-August.⁴

At the same time, a careful reading of popular Russian attitudes toward the war reveals important nuances that all too often are overlooked. First and foremost is the fact that rather than consolidating Russian society, the conflict has exacerbated existing divisions on a diverse array of issues, including support for the regime. Put another way, the impression that Putin now has the full support of the Russian public is simply incorrect. A more careful reading of sociological data, including conversations with focus group participants and quantitative research, presents a far more complex picture of Russian society.

Note: This paper is based on sociological research and opinion polling carried out across Russia by the Levada Center from February to August 2022, as well as on the findings of eight Levada-convened focus groups that were held from March to May 2022 in Moscow and in three regional centers.

Who Supports Putin and Why?

The general picture of public opinion in Russia can be understood in rather simple terms. All across Russia since February 24, old friends have fallen out; parents and children are no longer on speaking terms; long-married couples no longer trust each other; and teachers and students are denouncing each other. Opinions are becoming polarized. Over time, polarized opinions are becoming radicalized. All of that points to growing conflict within Russian society.

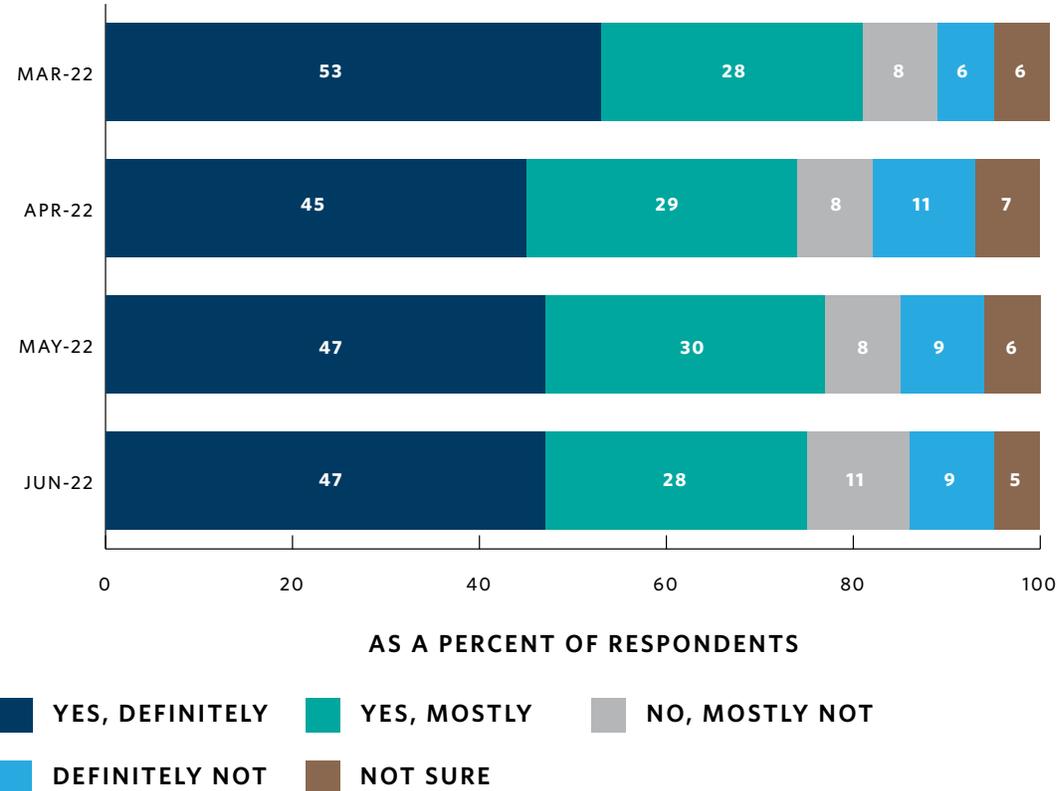
Opinion polls consistently show that the majority of respondents support the actions of the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine. The scale of that support changed little over the first four months of the war.⁵ But the collection of people who express support for what Moscow calls the “special operation” and for Putin himself is not at all homogenous. (As a rule, Putin supporters tend to support the military campaign.) In June 2022, 47 percent of Russians “definitely supported” the actions of the Russian military, while another 28 percent said they “mostly supported” them.

The former can be put into the category of assured or unconditional support. The judgment of these respondents is the most dogmatic: they are more willing to portray the war as what they call a “preemptive blow,” “an unavoidable measure,” or a form of “defense against [the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)].” These people tend not to question news reports or narratives that are the bread and butter of Russian state media coverage of the war. They express the highest level of support for Putin and a sense of pride over what is happening in Ukraine. In focus group discussions, they pointedly call what is happening in Ukraine “the special operation.” This term makes sense to them because, as various participants outlined: “It’s not like we are taking anything [that isn’t ours]”; “We’re liberating [Ukraine] from Nazis and fascists”; or “That’s what Vladimir Vladimirovich [Putin] called it, and I trust him.”

In the second group, that is, those who “mostly support” Russia’s actions in Ukraine, the level of support is less resolute. There is more doubt over whether what is going on is right or not and the basis for the Kremlin’s actions. Compared with the group offering unconditional support, people in the second group were twice as likely to express feelings of anxiety, fear, and horror about what is going on. They are also far less likely to express pride. For them, the “special operation” is motivated above all by the desire to protect what Russians describe as Ukraine’s Russian-speaking population. Support for the Russian government’s actions is somewhat lower in this group. The convictions of this group are generally less clearly defined, and they are inclined to simply follow the dominant public opinion and official line. It’s likely that some of these respondents say that they support Russian soldiers out of fear of adverse consequences for themselves. But the number of such individuals should not be exaggerated (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Support for the Russian Armed Forces

Do you personally support the actions of the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine or not?



SOURCE: “The Conflict With Ukraine” (in Russian), Levada Center, June 30, 2022, <https://www.levada.ru/2022/06/30/konflikt-s-ukrainoj-3>.

Respondents' motivations for supporting the "special operation" are quite diverse. In the focus groups there were expressions of jingoistic aggression (mostly from men aged 45–50) such as: "Russia has been fighting since the moment it was founded . . . We watched and we waited for how many years? Eight! And why, what for? . . . It's better to strike first and assert your independence." Other participants said, "War is the locomotive of history. We have never invaded anyone; we've only ever defended our borders. Why didn't we do it eight years ago? It wasn't the right time!" Some respondents, especially women and younger people, engaged in a form of self-persuasion, claiming, for example: "There was no choice," or "No, you can't be in favor of war. Our soldiers are being killed there, and Ukrainian soldiers too, and civilians, and children. But what other choice was there? Who can say what other choice there was? Negotiate with them? It was too late!"

Another widespread form of support came from people who are largely indifferent to the situation but who support the government's actions because they believe the government knows best. Members of this grouping said things like: "The people who are worried are those who have relatives and loved ones [in Ukraine]. For everyone else, who doesn't have anyone there, they see it as normal." "I prefer to remain neutral, because I'm not a politician or a soldier and I don't know what's really happening." "I'm a pensioner, we don't have any say in things . . . I hope it will all be over soon and there will be peace."

For such people, the least uncomfortable option is to join the mainstream point of view, since that doesn't force them to think for themselves. It's not comfortable for such respondents to portray themselves as being outside the realm of the country's dominant thinking on current affairs. That attitude, in turn, fosters a tendency to block out negative information and difficult news stories. To this group, everything that is being reported about murder, destruction, and looting must be a provocation by the Ukrainians, fake news, or exaggerated information. Such respondents are ready to believe that Putin really didn't have any other option but to launch a "special operation" to head off an attack on Russia itself.

This sort of conformism does leave room for a certain degree of doubt, but people's desire to remain in their psychological comfort zone prevails: Russians can't be on the bad side; they can only be on the good side.

Another aspect of this kind of passive conformism is a predetermined submission to decisions taken by one's superiors. The type of obedience is dictated not only by passivity, but also by the fear of being fired or even repressed. This may not be the only reason for a respondent's stated position; after all, there are usually diverse factors at play, but fear is sometimes one of them.

Among the active conformists, there were respondents who were prepared to get up off the sofa and take part in the war themselves. But they were certainly the minority, and often, that participation consisted of denouncing those whom Putin calls national traitors or a fifth column. Such attitudes have become a widespread phenomenon.

How Reliable Are Russian Polls?

The high levels of support for the actions of the Russian military and the surge in approval ratings for the Russian leadership have provoked frequent discussions inside Russia and abroad over the reliability of Russian polls. Many critics argue that pressure on dissent and the introduction of new criminal penalties for charges of “discrediting the armed forces” and other offenses mean that people are more scared and less willing to take part in opinion polls than they may have once been. However, research by the Levada Center to measure the response rate (as per the recommendations of the American Association for Public Opinion Research) does not back up this hypothesis.⁶ The frequency of responses, communication, and refusal to respond to Levada Center polls are broadly similar to what they were back in January 2021.⁷ In other words, Levada experts have not found corroborating evidence that Russian respondents have become more reluctant to answer sociologists’ questions since the start of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The authors are, of course, mindful that the general atmosphere in Russia has grown increasingly repressive over the past decade. Either way, additional research does not back up assertions that people who do not approve of the country’s leadership are more likely to refuse to take part in a poll or that polls only represent people who are prepared to engage and answer questions.⁸

As for polling experiments that appear to show a lower level of support for the “special operation,”⁹ the results cannot always be interpreted unambiguously. Researchers who carried out a series of similar experiments looking at mass support for Putin in Russia from 2015 to 2021 warn against the unequivocal interpretation of their results.¹⁰

It’s also worth noting that the overall patterns of people’s attitudes to what is happening today are entirely in keeping with the results of polls carried out at the end of 2021 and start of 2022.¹¹ By the start of February, two thirds of the public already supported the Russian regime and its Ukraine policy in one way or another. That support grew as the conflict escalated, with most Russians laying the blame for that escalation on the West. The portions of Russian society that expressed support or opposition were more or less clearly formed, and their composition has not changed significantly. It’s also worthwhile recalling that in 2014, many observers also refused to believe public opinion polls showing high figures of support for the Russian political regime following the annexation of Crimea.¹² Over time, the expression “the post-Crimea consensus” became commonplace in analysis about post-2014 shifts in Russian public opinion. Few experts today dispute the existence of such a shift.

A Defensive War

There are two key beliefs that allow respondents to remain convinced that the Russian leadership and military are taking the right action: first, that the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine was under threat and second, that responsibility for what is happening lies entirely with Russia's adversaries. The majority of those who support the "special operation" explain their position in terms of protecting the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine's Donbas region. A deadly threat to "our people," "compatriots," "brothers," "Russian-speakers," and "Russians" is reason enough in the eyes of the majority to justify military intervention in a neighboring country, even though the prevailing wisdom in Russian society under normal circumstances would be not to interfere. In such circumstances, the extreme nature of the situation seems to have justified or even required actions that in normal life would seem impossible and unacceptable. Eight years ago, the majority of respondents justified the annexation of Crimea by Russia and support for separatist fighters in the Donbas in a similar way.¹³

The readiness of Russian public opinion for such measures to be taken in an extreme situation was already being observed at the end of 2021 and start of 2022, when respondents were increasingly saying, "We don't want war, but we're being dragged into one," or "We're being provoked: we'll have to respond and help the Donbas."¹⁴

Another key source of support for the Russian military is the conviction of most Russians that the United States and NATO are responsible for escalating the conflict in the Donbas. Even in mid-February 2022, 60 percent of respondents expressed this belief, a number that was up 10 percentage points from November 2021.¹⁵

Only a very small percentage of respondents were prepared to blame the Russian side. Most focus group respondents, especially among the older generation, had no doubt that the West, led by the United States, had long been trying to bring Russia to its knees and surround it with military bases. Some said: "I don't want there to be a war, but it can't be avoided because the United States has come right up to Russia." "The world has forgotten that in recent years, the United States has bombed more than twenty countries: for some reason it's Russia that's the bad guy and the aggressor." "America does what it likes regardless of what others think; it drops bombs wherever it likes." And, "A fight was inevitable. They planned to send Ukrainian troops, with massive support from NATO countries, into the territory of the DNR and LNR [Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics] and possibly, in [the] future, even into Russian territory."

The Scale of Dissent

Currently, about 20 percent of Russians say they do not agree with Russia's actions in Ukraine, up from 14 percent in March. These respondents refer to what is happening as “war” and “Russian aggression.” They are more likely to be young, residents of Moscow or other large cities, and consumers of news from the internet. At the same time, people in this category (similar to the first two categories discussed) were still more likely than not to support the “special operation.” The only category of people in which the majority opposed the “operation” were those who are opposition-minded in general and, specifically, do not approve of the actions of Putin, the Russian government, or the State Duma. This same section of Russian society voted against the constitutional amendments in 2020, supported anti-Putin opposition figures, and attended anti-regime protests in early 2021. They are also more likely to have vacationed in Europe or to hold more positive views of the West in general.

When explaining their position, such people said first and foremost that it was unacceptable that people were dying.¹⁶ People in the focus groups said: “Many innocent civilians are dying, and I don’t believe that’s right.” “I can’t help but be moved by other people’s grief . . . I’m a citizen of the country that is, as they say, carrying out the special operation, and I am an unwilling accomplice.” “I feel sorry for the children.” And “It’s impossible to support war.”

Another reason often cited for opposing events in Ukraine was the negative socioeconomic impact in Russia. Respondents noted: “People are losing their jobs . . . Sanctions have been introduced, [and] the economy is collapsing.” “Everything we had dreamed of came crashing down in one moment. Our entire lives, everything we had fought for, all of our plans . . . Prices are increasing. You can’t buy dollars, or the goods we are accustomed to.” And “We should be focusing right now on our domestic problems: the economy, socioeconomic reforms. There’s more than enough to deal with at home!” Others worried that their sons and grandsons could be sent to Ukraine to fight.

Despite the high level of support for both the “special operation” and the Russian regime overall, it is notable that there are now more dissenters in Russia today than there were in 2014. Eight years ago, no more than 10 percent spoke out against the annexation of Crimea (compared to 20 percent who disagree with the government actions in Ukraine in 2022). In 2014, only 11–12 percent of people said they were dissatisfied with Putin. Furthermore, in 2014, there were mass progovernment demonstrations organized by the government in support of its actions in Ukraine. Such gatherings were attended at their peak by tens of thousands of people, according to conservative estimates.¹⁷ But nothing of the sort is being staged today. So what has changed?

In recent months, there has been a significant decline in public support for participating in any type of protest, surely in response to a raft of restrictive measures imposed by the Russian government. Today, just 9–10 percent of respondents say they are prepared to attend a protest, less than half of the level only six months ago.¹⁸ Taking part in unsanctioned protests is now punishable by hefty fines and prison sentences for repeat offenses. Incitement of others to take part in unsanctioned protests and “the discrediting of the Russian Armed Forces” have also been criminalized.¹⁹ In addition, a nationwide ban on holding mass events introduced during the coronavirus pandemic has not yet been lifted.²⁰ This restriction has been cited by officials for refusing to grant permission for anti-war rallies.²¹

Focus group participants said: “They have really clamped down on everything. There can be no more mass protests now.” “Protests are pointless, and people have realized that.” “There’s no point, they won’t achieve anything. Everyone wants to live well, and no one wants to take to the streets; they could go to jail or lose their job. People are scared.” And, “I went to a rally, and what happened? Did it change anything? Yes it did: I was fired!”

Yet even in these circumstances, despite such bans and threats of retaliation, some protests continue. According to human rights activists, 16,000 people were detained across 200 Russian cities for taking part in anti-war protests between the launch of the invasion on February 24 and the middle of July.²² While such numbers remain small in aggregate terms, they are testimony to the fact that parts of a minority segment of Russian society remains prepared to risk their well-being in order to express disagreement with their government.

Comparing the Crimea and Donbas Effects

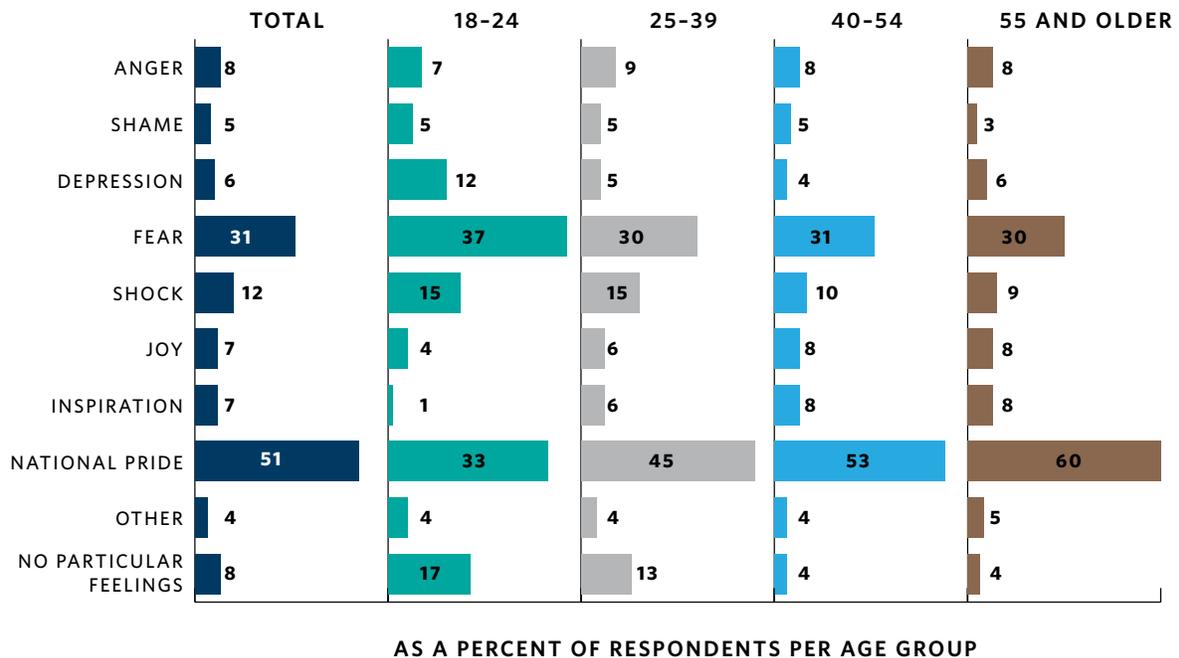
The approval ratings of state institutions had already improved as of the end of last year amid mounting tensions along the Russian-Ukrainian border. But when hostilities broke out, support for the Russian authorities immediately shot up. That spike in March was reminiscent of the one seen after the annexation of Crimea back in 2014. In March 2014, government approval ratings rose from 69 percent to 80 percent. In March 2022, the increase was from 71 percent to 83 percent.²³ This boost benefited all government institutions, including increased support for the ruling United Russia party.²⁴ As in 2014, there was also a parallel spike in optimism over the state of affairs in Russia and the country’s future development.²⁵ By the end of April, opinion polls were showing that more respondents felt “pride in their people.”²⁶ The shock from the initial spike in inflation was beginning to wear off by the end of the spring, and people had already started adapting to the new situation.

These systematic surges of support in Russian public opinion demonstrate that overall, support for the regime and support for the “special operation” are largely the same thing. Nearly 90 percent of Putin supporters approve of the “special operation.” That figure is three times lower among Russians who are critical of Putin.

There are also differences between the current mood and that in 2014 (see figure 2). Today’s ratings surge is not accompanied by the euphoria that surrounded the Crimea annexation. In 2014, the dominant emotions among Russians were positive: pride in their country, a feeling that a historic injustice had been reversed, and joy over the prowess of the Russian military. Only 3 percent of respondents in 2014 mentioned feeling concerned or fearful.²⁷ Today is clearly a time of mixed emotions. Even in March 2022, when the feeling of “pride in Russia” prevailed among respondents, especially among the group showing unconditional support for the “special operation,” about a third of Russians—including many supporters of the Russian campaign—were experiencing “anxiety and fear.” Still, those feelings of fear did not affect the level of support for the country’s leadership.²⁸

Figure 2: Russians’ Feelings About Military Action in Ukraine

What feelings do Russian actions in Ukraine cause you?



SOURCE: “The Conflict With Ukraine” (in Russian), Levada Center, June 30, 2022, <https://www.levada.ru/2022/06/30/konflikt-s-ukrainoj-3>.

Support for the authorities was as diverse as it was for the “special operation.” In March 2022, about 45 percent of people “definitely approved” of Putin’s actions as president: twice as many as in January. Almost as many (38 percent) “mostly approved” of him, with numerous reservations.²⁹

For example, focus group respondents said, “Overall, I don’t agree with everything . . . My pension is small . . . but Putin’s policies are correct, because everywhere around us, there is intrigue against Russia” and “Right now we have to [approve]: you can’t oppose them when there is a war on!”

From their words, it can be concluded that international tensions, the growing pressure on Russia from Western countries, and the introduction of Western sanctions are encouraging the majority of the population to rally around the country’s leadership. This is precisely what happened back in 2014–2015.

Sources of Information

People’s attitudes to what is happening in Ukraine depend on which sources they rely on for news and information. This factor carries more weight than the region where the respondent lives or even whether they have relatives in Ukraine.

There were many examples in the focus groups of respondents viewing events through a pro-Russian lens, despite having relatives or acquaintances on the other side of the border. Respondents described how “my work colleague’s mother is in Ukraine and sends her daughter something nearly every day about what [bad people] we are, that we are bombing their homes, and so on,” and “my niece lives in Kyiv; my brother did military service there, got married, and stayed there . . . I’m in favor of the launch of this operation.”

International tensions have had a significant impact on long-term trends involving popular trust in the accuracy of news information from different types of media outlets.³⁰ In March 2022, there was a sharp increase (10 percentage points up from responses at the end of 2021) in people’s trust in television, which most Russians perceive as a source of “official information.” In recent years, viewership of and trust in television news had been decreasing steadily. There was also a simultaneous decrease (7–8 percentage points) in the level of trust in internet news sources, which had in recent years been growing steadily. Similar trends also occurred in 2014, when trust in official Russian media grew against the backdrop of the conflict.³¹

Conversations with focus group participants shed light on what caused these changes in mood. Many respondents noted the differences in how the conflict is being covered between Russian and Western media as well as between Russian television and internet resources. Respondents said that “an information and ideological war” had been unleashed by the West against Russia. In these circumstances, “it’s vital to listen to official information,” and “all media working for the enemy should be stopped.” For a significant number of Russians, “the truth is found in Russian resources,” whereas online publications and Western media are spreading fake news.

The following opinions were typical responses: “No one in the entire world is listening to us; they all think we are the enemy, that we’re the bad guys. How can we debunk all these fakes? We’re doing the right thing in good conscience. Meanwhile, the other side is deceiving people and presenting a completely different picture.” Or: “I know someone in Canada; they’re all being indoctrinated there that it was Russia who started this war. And she’s even started to believe that herself. My opinion is that it was the right thing [for Russia] to do. Because there’s pressure from the West; they want to destroy us. And the president is fighting against that, to stop Russia being obliterated.”

Information about what is happening in Ukraine today is being received and interpreted within the echo chambers of respondents’ long-held ideas about Russia and about broader processes that have been taking place across the former Soviet Union, Europe, and the world. These ideas have taken shape over many years and are informed by people’s political leanings, life experiences, and sources of news and information. Official Russian versions of news from Ukraine tie in with many respondents’ existing perceptions, making them easy to believe. Anything that contradicts such versions is rejected by many as lies, manifestations of Russophobia, or enemy propaganda.

Since the start of the conflict, therefore, the majority of Russians have more or less retained long-held convictions: most of those who preferred to get their news from Russian state-controlled television and who supported the regime back in mid-February support the actions of Russian troops today. Similarly, most people who were already opposition-minded (and there were more such people among those who get their news online) do not support the Russian authorities today.

The New Normal

As time passes, attention to the fighting in Ukraine is starting to subside. In March, 64 percent of respondents said they were following events closely. In June, that figure had dropped to 55 percent.³² In the last few months, the proportion of respondents who mentioned events in Ukraine as among the most memorable occurrences in recent weeks has halved from 75

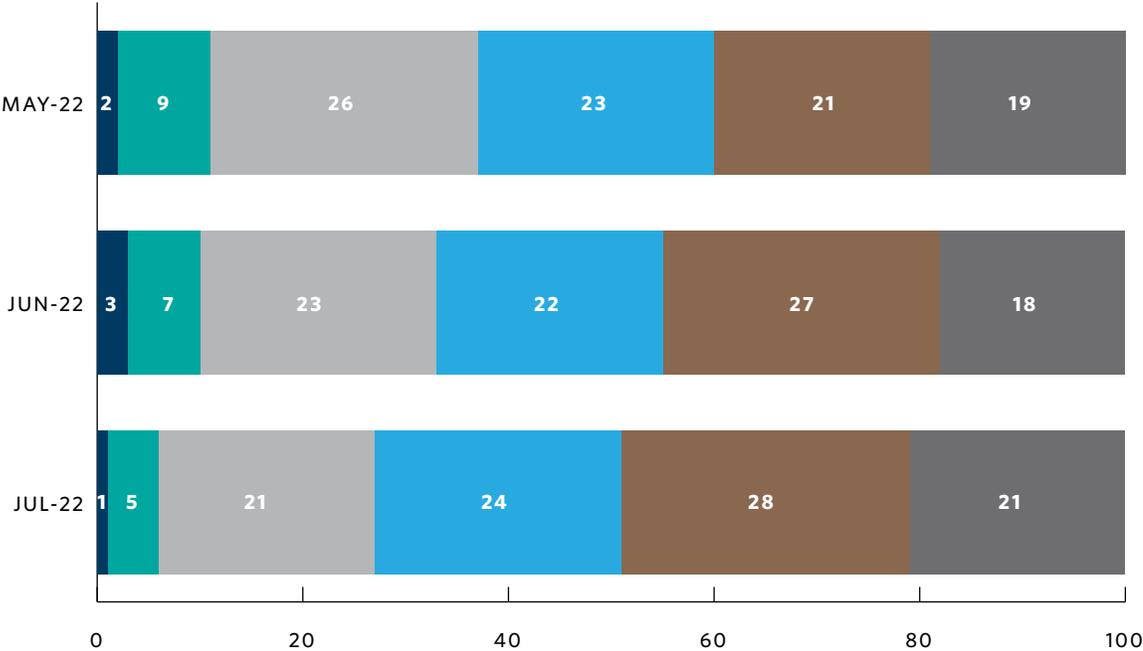
percent in March to 38 percent in June.³³ By mid-spring, the Russian public was already beginning to recover from the shock caused by the start of the conflict. An extreme situation had become part of people’s everyday routine.

This conclusion is backed up by the findings of focus groups. Respondents noted: “At the start of March, everyone was actively following [the conflict] . . . You wake up and immediately look at your smartphone . . . [But now] people are trying to think about it less.” “People have gotten accustomed to what is happening and have simply stopped paying attention.” “I don’t have any loved ones there, so it doesn’t particularly worry me. It did before, but not anymore.” And “People were panicking before, but now everyone has calmed down.”

The more time passes, the more the Russian public is distancing itself from what is happening. The conflict is becoming a distant war, and people are increasingly convinced that the fighting will continue for another six months or even longer (see figure 3).

Figure 3: Expectations for How Long the Conflict Will Last

How long will the “special military operation” in Ukraine last?



AS A PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS

- NO MORE THAN A MONTH
- FROM ONE TO TWO MONTHS
- FROM TWO TO SIX MONTHS
- FROM SIX MONTHS TO A YEAR
- MORE THAN A YEAR
- NOT SURE

SOURCE: “Conflict With Ukraine: July 2022,” Levada Center, August 17, 2022, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2022/08/17/conflict-with-ukraine-july-2022>.

Right now, the focus is on issues of economic and psychological adaptation. For a great many average Russians, daily life consists of coping with new and more challenging socio-economic conditions: higher prices, the loss of savings, and a lack of confidence in what tomorrow holds. The inability to influence events encourages people to become passive and to think less about international affairs and political development. They need to focus more on everyday issues and their basic survival needs—that is, the here and now. Respondents articulated: “What can I do about it? I can worry, and what then? Nothing will change. It will sort itself out one way or another.” “I can see that the older generation has just resigned itself to it. They understand that they can’t do anything about it or influence the situation in any way.” “It’s obvious that we are regressing, but since we have stayed here, we have to accept the situation for what it is, if we don’t have the opportunity to leave.” “It’s frightening, but what will be, will be. None of this depends on me, so I don’t dwell on it too much.” And “If we can’t change the situation, we have to change our attitude to it, and view everything with optimism and positivity. In any case, I think everything will work out soon, everything will be OK.”

Double-Edged Sanctions

At first, the expansion of Western sanctions against Russia elicited a new wave of anxiety among the Russian public. In March, 46 percent of people polled said they were worried about Western sanctions, up 14 percentage points from the end of last year. Twenty-nine percent of Russians said that sanctions had already created serious problems for their families, a 19 percent increase compared with the last poll two years earlier. Residents of large cities, young people, and less-well-off respondents were most likely to talk about the impact of sanctions on their family, though they felt the effects in different ways. Poorer people were most worried about inflation and the higher cost of living. Young people were more noticeably concerned by the exodus of foreign brands and the end of access to foreign online retailers.

Muscovites lamented the disappearance of overseas air travel routes, as well as the departure of many brands. The bigger the city, the more integrated it was into the global economy, and the more keenly sanctions are being felt. Interestingly, the segment that was the most worried by sanctions were Russians who were critical of their government and who did not support the “special operation.” They were almost twice as likely to express concern over sanctions compared with supporters of the Russian regime, and they were four times more likely to say they had already felt the impact of sanctions.³⁴

Generally, the direct effect of Western sanctions for ordinary Russians has been felt in terms of higher inflation and the overnight disappearance of certain goods from store shelves. Notably, fewer people complained about the blocking of transnational payments, the exit

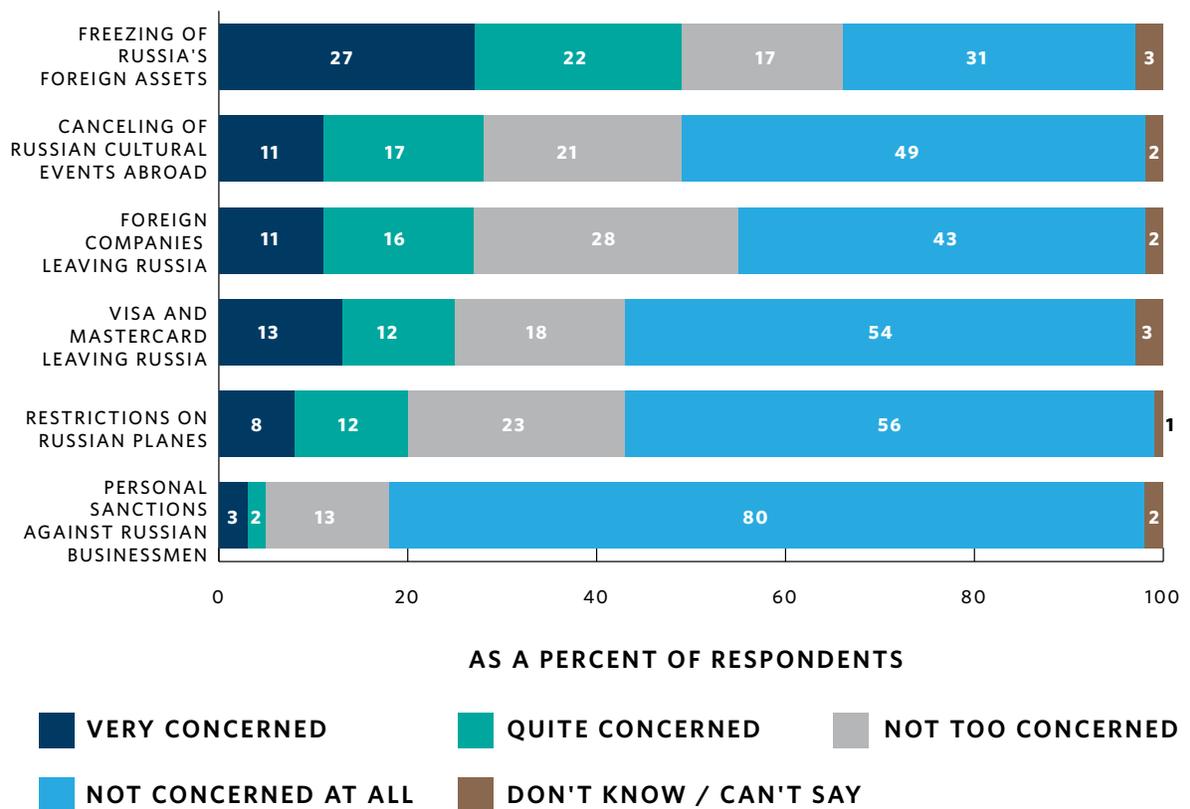
from the Russian market by Visa and Mastercard, or about the cancelation of air routes (see figures 4 and 5).³⁵ It is important to point out that the number of Russians regularly traveling abroad has always been small in overall terms: in 2018, only one in ten respondents traveled abroad.³⁶ It seems it would be fair to say that sanctions are having the biggest impact on the most globally integrated Russians, but this population segment is not large enough to have a significant effect on public opinion overall.

By the end of May, the initial shock from the introduction of sanctions had passed.³⁷ Focus group discussions revealed that many respondents increasingly believe that sanctions “will boost the development of many sectors, both in industry and in agriculture.” Others said: “Without sanctions, we weren’t trying. Now they’ve introduced sanctions, we’ll start trying right away!” and “Sanctions are . . . an opportunity! A chance for new development.”

A poll carried out in Moscow found that just over half of respondents shared that belief, and only a quarter believed that sanctions would do more harm than good.³⁸

Figure 4: What Concerns Russians

Are you concerned about...?

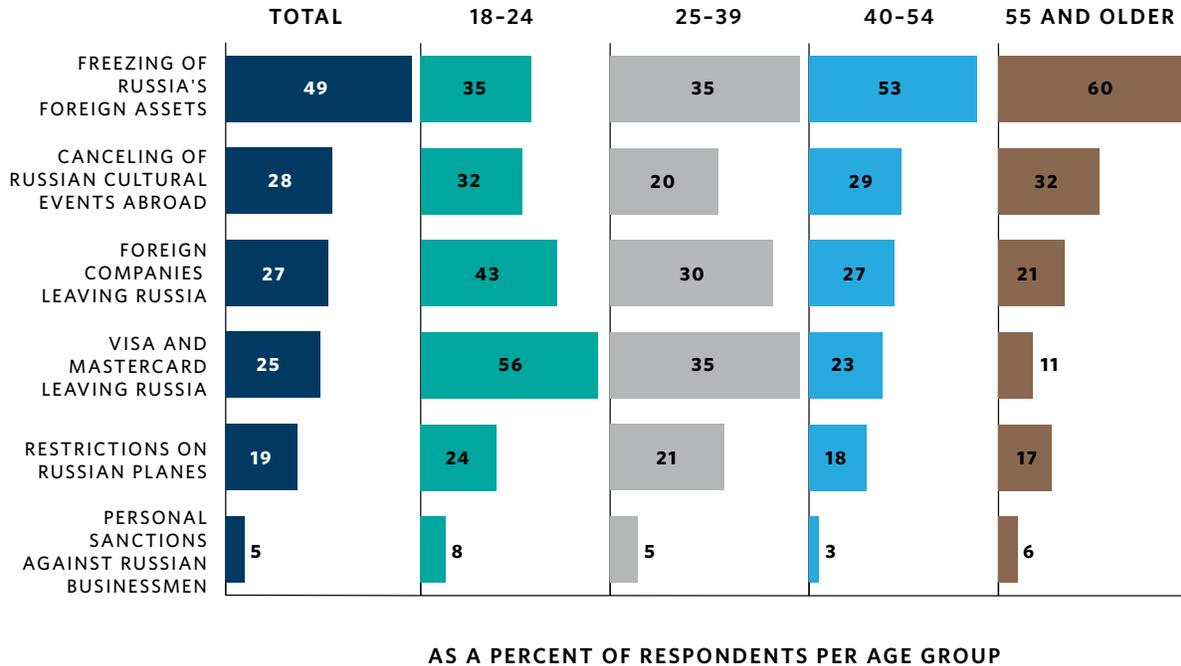


SOURCE: “Sanctions,” Levada Center, June 10, 2022, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2022/06/10/sanctions-6>.

NOTE: Data are as of May 2022.

Figure 5: What Concerns Russians (by Age Group)

Are you concerned about...?



SOURCE: "Sanctions," Levada Center, June 10, 2022, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2022/06/10/sanctions-6>.

NOTE: Data are as of May 2022.

The Context of the 2024 Presidential Election

The “special operation” has triggered the polarization of opinions and positions within different segments of Russian society. Such polarization is making these divisions even more radical and, perhaps, irreconcilable. But even among supporters of the Kremlin’s actions in Ukraine, there is a divide between, first, those who insist on “seeing it through” (essentially, uncompromising supporters of “de-Ukrainianization,” or people who support the complete Russification of Ukraine, including the denial of Ukraine’s nationhood and statehood) and, second, those who support Putin’s actions but would like Russia to cut its losses, declare victory, and agree to peace terms so that everything can go back to how it was before February 24.

Very few respondents were prepared to admit that a Russian defeat was even theoretically possible.³⁹ If such a turn of events presents itself, one suspects that the Kremlin would still attempt to portray its actions as a form of victory. In turn, such a so-called victory would likely be perceived and accepted as such by public opinion, thanks in part to the level of conformism within society and the amplifying effects of the state propaganda apparatus.

Conclusion

As the war in Ukraine enters its seventh month, the conflict is becoming a routine backdrop to everyday life. Fewer Russians are paying attention. Concern over the conflict is waning. As long as the border remains open for the most dissatisfied Russians to leave the country and there is no mass mobilization order compelling the average person to send their sons and daughters to fight next door, the feeling of basic normality is likely to continue. The drawn-out hostilities are starting to be seen as something of a second pandemic: a storm that must simply be weathered, after which everything will return to the way it should be.

The unanswered question is whether the deterioration of Russia's socioeconomic conditions will change this picture. Already there are indications of reduced state resources for supporting the social needs of an increasingly impoverished population. While the peculiarities of the Russian labor market have yet to result in mass unemployment, there are numerous indications that growing numbers of workers have been placed on furlough by their employers.⁴⁰ Smaller numbers of employees have lost their jobs entirely due to the exodus of Western businesses. But will such factors influence public attitudes toward Putin and the "special operation" in Ukraine?

It would be logical to presume that these factors must bring about a change in the public mood, but for now, as far as most respondents are concerned, it is still the West that is to blame for everything. Rumbblings of discontent are possible, but with the opposition and civil society decimated, the general population has shown no interest in effective self-organization. Of course, black swan events can always take the authorities by surprise. In the recent past, protests have erupted in unexpected places over unexpected causes, such as the protests in Khabarovsk in 2020.⁴¹ Still, given the harsh repression of unauthorized civic activity, the emergence of a massive anti-war movement in Russia is unlikely.

It's also worth remembering that the Russian leadership is moving slowly to prepare for the 2024 presidential election, which will take place amid an increasingly authoritarian system. Such preparations may involve show trials and the search for so-called national traitors. Almost surely, there will be even greater pressure on dissenters, with a range of authoritarian tools and repressive laws. Such moves will almost certainly anger average people and alienate parts of the elite. However, such tactics largely serve to frighten key parts of Russian society, which, as experience teaches, will ultimately lead them to rally around the regime yet again.

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