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not (and no one can) accurately answer the question of “How many Russians support the war?” For ten months, we have seen a clear trend of growing dissatisfaction with what is happening on almost all war-related issues. The number of those who support the war is decreasing and the number of those wishing for peace negotiations is increasing.

About the Author

Anna Biriukova has been the head of the Anti-Corruption Foundation’s (<https://acf.international/>) public opinion research department since 2013. She leads its telephone and online surveys team, which conducts up to 20 nationwide polls in Russia per year, as well as its qualitative research team, which carries out interviews and focus group discussions across Russia.

What Is the Sociology of War?

Elena Koneva and Alexander Chilingaryan (ExtremeScan, Cyprus)

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When the war in Ukraine ends, it will take time to gather evidence, bring those responsible to justice, and understand the roots of the war. It will be time to investigate the underlying causes of conflict and prevent similar events from occurring. The critical issue to be examined is the mindset of Russian society before, during, and after the war.

Studying History

This future is one of the main reasons for beginning the sociology of war: to measure the truth of history for history. The so-called “Special Military Operation” mobilized independent sociology. In response to censorship, regulations, and repression, independent sociologists in Russia began volunteering their time and expertise, despite the risks they faced.

This movement became a crucial step toward bringing those responsible to justice and understanding the roots of the war. Opinion polls have become a powerful instrument of Kremlin propaganda. Tamed research institutions and organizations portray a unified majority of 70–80 percent supporting the war and Putin’s leadership.

This sophisticated propaganda targets high-profile domestic and international audiences, seeking to convey the monolithic consolidation of society around a strong leader.

Opinion polls can come from various sources, such as online surveys conducted by Western research centers from abroad and even telephone surveys conducted by Ukrainian centers. Official VTsIOM projects are occasionally published and “secret polls” under the Federal Security Service brand leaked to the media. This diversity indicates that sociology has become a weapon in the information war.

We primarily perceive our data as a study not of society as a whole, but of those who mainly support government policy. The fact that even among them we see a steady trend toward criticism and disappointment helps us maintain an objective view—and, frankly, inspires optimism.

Russian political scientists, journalists, and public figures formulate their opinions on these numbers in various ways: “we can’t trust polls today,” “polls today are meaningless,” “polls should be banned,” and “polls help Putin.” At the same time, they analyze the society that the propagandist sociology has sought to portray for them.

The notion of an “overwhelming majority” is a widespread myth imprinted by Russian propaganda.

It Is a War, Not an Operation

An analysis of Internet search trends reveals that the term “war” is overwhelmingly more prevalent than “military operation” among the Russian audience.

Artfully imposed legal restrictions and prosecutions of free speech by the Russian government make it impossible to gauge attitudes toward the war by posing directly the question “Do you support the military operation in Ukraine?”

Changing the wording from “military operation” to “war” would likely result in a significantly different result. But calling this war a “war” is forbidden; any attempt to do so results in repression, such as fines or even detention. And both researchers and respondents have found themselves at risk of prosecution.

“Thank you for giving me the right of silence,” said one of our respondents on being provided with the “refuse to answer” option.

What’s the Point?

In our publications on the ExtremeScan website and with our partner Chronicles, we went beyond regular research reports to provide actionable insights based on

an unbiased understanding of the state of mind of Russian society in wartime.

This information holds significant value for future policymakers as they work to design measures that will help prevent future conflicts.

Understanding the Genesis

War is a unique and extreme situation that requires a different approach to the audience than that taken by traditional or Kremlin-linked pollsters.

It is crucial to thoroughly comprehend the social and psychological factors that drive support for and opposition to it.

Resistance to Propaganda

The war in Ukraine has been fueled by well-funded propaganda campaigns. These started in the Russian media and continue in the minds of people around the globe.

Sociology is essential to counteracting Russian propaganda and shaping strategies to convey truth to the public.

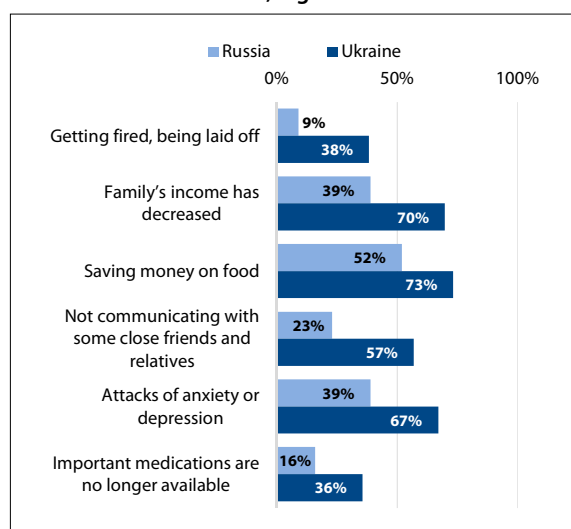
Learning Archetypes

War is an extreme state in which society finds itself, providing a rare opportunity to delve into deep archetypes that are not palpable under normal conditions.

Obtaining Statistics on Humanitarian Issues

When traditional statistical data are unavailable, incomplete, or falsified, sociological surveys can provide an alternative source of information about the impact of war.

Figure 1: Humanitarian Impact of the War on Russia and Ukraine, Eight Months Later



Source: ExtremeScan survey in Russia and Ukraine, September–October 2022, <https://www.extremescan.eu/post/15-call-of-duty-research-in-warzone>.

Difficulties and Limitations

Collecting accurate empirical data during the war is complex, and interpreting responses obtained under strict censorship requires meticulous attention to detail and consideration of the context.

Sample Bias and Deformation of the General Universe

War disrupts standard societal patterns and creates conditions that make it challenging for researchers to survey the population uniformly.

Contrary to our expectations, we have not observed a decrease in cooperation from respondents or a significant decline in response rate during the eleven months of our monitoring.

At the same time, the general universe's deformation may affect the polls' representativeness.

A notable example is young men. The October poll revealed a 40 percent loss in the youngest male demographic (18–25 years old), which dropped from its usual 11.5 percent to 7 percent, which is 3 million people in absolute terms.

This loss comprises individuals conscripted into the army, those who have left the country, and those who have changed their SIM cards or avoided communication from unknown telephone numbers.

War Biases Minds

The most significant difficulty is interpreting and comparing the data with the situation before the war.

People's opinions may be strongly influenced by their feelings about the war, making it more challenging to measure their views on other issues accurately.

We have identified signs of Putin's approval rating and the war dominating many dimensions: economic optimism, assessments of financial well-being, and attitudes toward the government and its decisions. Even such adverse events as the announcement of mobilization in September 2022 and the evaluation of the war's negative impact on personal life have dominated these dimensions.

The biggest challenge is the phrasing used when interacting with respondents and interpreting their responses, especially when comparing them to pre-war conditions. For instance, an improvement in a respondent's self-assessment of their financial status without external factors may indicate an adaptation to difficulties, consolidation of values, or a reevaluation of values.

Refusal to Answer Sensitive Questions

The number of respondents who are hesitant or refuse to answer questions has hugely increased during the war. Respondents who oppose military actions tend to avoid answering questions rather than express their attitudes openly.

In October 2022, 30 percent of women aged 18–35 expressed support for the war and 18 percent openly opposed it. Meanwhile, almost 52 percent avoided answering this question.

The most vocally supportive audience were men aged 55 or older. Eighty percent of them proclaimed their support for the “military operation” and only 11 percent refused to answer.

Overall, 33 percent of respondents to the October 2022 poll declined to answer questions about their support for the war.

The primary focus of our analysis has been the level of Russian citizens’ support for the war and their justifications for this.

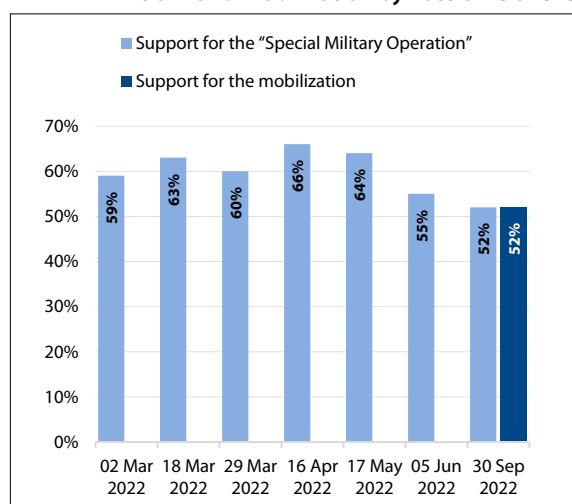
Mass media in Russia and abroad persistently broadcast that 70–80 percent of Russians support the war. When we asked Ukrainians what percentage of Russians supported the war, we received the same estimate: 80 percent.

Despite its widespread circulation, we are confident this figure needs to be corrected.

The notion of an “overwhelming majority” is a widespread myth imprinted by Russian propaganda.

The share of people who answered positively a direct question about support posed by the Chronicles Project (<https://www.chronicles.report/>) is significantly lower than the widely circulated “official ratings”: 60–65 percent through the invasion, falling to 50 percent by Autumn 2022.

Figure 2: Support for the “Special Military Operation” and Mobilization by Russian Citizens



Source: Support for the “Special Military Operation” and mobilization by Russian citizens, survey by ExtremeScan/Chronicles, Russia, October 2022, <https://www.extremescan.eu/post/15-call-of-duty-research-in-warzone>.

This difference from most polls can be attributed to our addition of an explicit “refuse to answer” option to the questionnaire. This measure does not provide insight into actual support for the war, but if it is not provided, then support for the war is usually inflated. Further anal-

ysis revealed a segment of genuine supporters who were directly or indirectly interested in the continuation of the aggression against Ukraine.

Conscious Supporters

are people who

- are personally willing to participate in the war
- OR donate money to the Russian military and supplies
- OR expect to derive “personal benefit” from the victory over Ukraine.

They comprise 30–40 percent of the population.

Belligerent Russians

Attitudes toward mobilization reveal that part of the Russian population is willing to go to war. We refer to this segment of genuine militarists, who comprise around 20 percent of our respondents, as “hawks.”

Figure 3: Core Support of the War with Ukraine among Russians

“Hawks” as core support of war—19 percent	
Support the mobilization	52%
AND	
Expressed their willingness to participate in hostilities	37%
AND	
Not willing to accept Putin’s potential decision to interrupt the military operation without achieving its objectives	35%

Source: Core support of the war with Ukraine among Russians. Survey by ExtremeScan/Chronicles, Russia, October 2022, <https://www.extremescan.eu/post/15-call-of-duty-research-in-warzone>.

They are Putin’s platform and the core audience of an extremely effective propaganda campaign.

“Hawks” in our surveys express euphoria, a feeling of supremacy, exaggerated masculinity, and the anticipation of an inevitable glorious Russian victory over Ukraine.

Propelled by propaganda, this profile is wrongly attributed to all Russian citizens.

Russians, Who Are They?

State propagandists’ manipulation of public opinion and subsequent polls is not the main problem. The main challenge is understanding the mindset of Russian citizens.

We are still learning to count the supporters and opponents of the war and to interpret and extrapolate our findings. How should we interpret the following statement by a conscription-age man that he is ready to go to war? “We have done so much harm to Ukraine that the Ukrainians will inevitably come with weapons to our territory, and then I will have to defend my home.” Can this confession be considered support for war and an expression of willingness to fight?

About ExtremeScan

ExtremeScan is a non-profit, non-governmental international collaboration of independent researchers and academics that aims to inform the public about the issues, attitudes, and trends shaping countries in the war zone. It conducts public opinion polling in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus to provide unbiased data on the general mood amid the escalating crisis. Its partner and primary research source is the “Chronicles” project.

About the Authors

Elena Koneva is a social-political psychologist and sociologist with 30 years of research experience.

Alexander Chilingaryan is a mathematician and data scientist who founded the software company DataTile. He has 15 years of hands-on experience in software development for scientific applications, data analysis, and integration.

Further Reading

- ExtremeScan, <https://www.extremescan.eu/>.
- Chronicles, <https://www.chronicles.report/>.

Methodological Issues of War Polls in Russia

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Polls in Russia during wartime are tricky—especially when it comes to questions that are not just sensitive but perceived by many as associated with felony. Researching Russians’ attitude toward the war is a vital and socially important task that requires prompt action. But attempts to uncover what lies beyond the fog of war also raise a number of methodological issues, including—but not limited to—confirmation bias, intricacy of interpretation, trade-offs between the gold standard of scientific rigor and obtaining relevant data, and the difficulty of explaining the complexity of the data to a broad audience.

Who We Are and What We Do

On February 24 we initiated the Chronicles project. We knew that the Putin regime would weaponize the polls to create the illusion of a majority, so as to help Russian society accept the war. We also reckoned that established pollsters would not tune their methods to the wartime reality with sufficient speed (for more details, see <https://twitter.com/AlekseiMiniailo/status/1597919707361075200> and <https://twitter.com/AlekseiMiniailo/status/1600067182628548608>). We therefore decided that society needed honest, professional, and war-tuned research. Since February 24, we have conducted 9 phone polls and 1 data analysis of social networks.

The results are presented on our website, <https://chronicles.report/en>. We also publish questionnaires, analytical reports, and anonymized raw data on GitHub: <https://github.com/dorussianswantwar/research1>.

Our team consists of two social scientists, a consultant with a long track record in polls, a PR manager, a press secretary, and a project manager. In addition, we regularly consult with several prominent social scientists. All team members hold an anti-war position, which might lead to confirmation bias. Our product is not a series of publications in scientific journals (though I hope these will come), but a narrative for the media, which requires boiling down the data to a few key statements. Both points will be discussed further.

Method

Polls were conducted by phone using a random sample of phone numbers distributed between mobile phone operators. The sample size was 800–1,800 respondents, distributed according to official statistics on age, sex, region, and type of settlement. The sample might be skewed toward conformists, but we have little proof that would allow us to state this with confidence. The response rate—calculated according to AAPOR guidelines—was 5–19 percent. The difference in response rate likely depends on the length of questionnaires but might also be influenced by season and other contingent circumstances (probably including fear of repressions, though we do not have enough data to confirm this).

We did our best to adapt our questionnaires and interpretations to get relevant results. For example, when we found out that a significant proportion of those who declared support for the war preferred not to answer the question of support for the war when given this option, we included this option in later polls and excluded