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ANALYSIS

Assessing Russian Public Opinion on the Ukraine War

By Kseniya Kizilova (World Value Survey Association) and Pippa Norris (Harvard University)

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Abstract

How do ordinary Russians really feel about Putin's decision to invade Ukraine? Although some suggest that the early polls—showing about 60% support for the war—can be treated as genuine signals of Russian public opinion, this article explores a number of reasons why these poll results should be treated with great caution or even discounted. These include state censorship; self-censorship and response bias; the existence of protests even in the authoritarian Russian context; and the fact that some of the early polls were asking about a hypothetical invasion that many Russians might not have given much thought. However, the article argues that the most plausible explanation for apparent initial support for the war lies in the manipulation of public opinion through state control of communication channels and the widespread use of censorship, propaganda, and disinformation at home and abroad.

The long-term outcome of Putin's bloody invasion of Ukraine will depend not only on hard power, but also on soft power (winning hearts and minds at home and abroad). Soft power, in turn, depends on cultural attitudes and information streams flowing through legacy airwaves, digital platforms, and personal networks.

Surveys conducted immediately before and after the outbreak of the Ukrainian invasion on February 24 report that the majority of ordinary Russians expressed support for the Ukrainian war and for President Putin. Overall, across the series of initial polls, a “silent majority”—about 60% of Russian respondents—said that they endorsed the “special military operation” in Ukraine.

But are these results reliable indicators of Russian views prior to the invasion? In February and early March, did the majority of ordinary Russians actually sympathize with Putin's decision to declare war?

History will ultimately decide how much of the responsibility for initiating the bloodshed rests on Vladimir Putin alone, as well as on his Kremlin acolytes, and how much blame can be laid on the tacit acceptance of ordinary Russians. It is important to determine this issue both morally, to assess culpability for the conflict, and legally, to prosecute potential war crimes. Understanding Putin's soft power can also provide insights into the long-term consequences of the conflict for his leadership and for the future of both countries.

The early polls, like surveys elsewhere, can be treated as genuine signals of Russian public opinion. After all, cultural attitudes of nationalism, patriotism, and support for strong leaders remain powerful forces in the world. Many Russian citizens may have no idea of what is happening in their name and form their opinions solely on the basis of pictures on Russian state TV. State propaganda and fake news about Ukraine “shooting its own citizens in Donbass” started back in 2014 and have

since been increasing in both pace and volume. Even if ordinary Russians are badly misinformed, however, the early polls may still capture *authentic* attitudes of support for Putin's actions among a silent majority at home, and thus represent the social construction of reality in modern Russia.

At the same time, there are several potential arguments that the results from the early polls should be treated with great caution—or perhaps even discounted.

State Censorship and Biased Pollsters?

One argument is that many Russian market research organizations, including VCIOM and FOM, are state-controlled and thus their surveys are far from equivalent to reputable independent polls by, say, Gallup, IPSOS or YouGov. This could indeed be an issue. Yet the results of several early surveys by different polling agencies, while far from identical, appear to suggest that in the initial phase, at least, the invasion was supported by the *majority* of the Russian public.

The most reputable public opinion data available in Russia come from the Levada Center, a non-governmental research organization that has been conducting regular surveys since 1988. Levada surveys on February 17–21 found that the majority of respondents (52%) felt negatively towards Ukraine. Most (60%) blamed the US and NATO for the escalation of tensions in Eastern Ukraine, while only 4% blamed Russia. The Levada polls suggest that net public approval of Putin surged by about 13 percentage points between December and February, when almost three-quarters (71%) of the population expressed approval of his leadership, presumably reflecting a rally-round-the-flag effect.

These were not isolated results. Even stronger sentiments were recorded in a pre-war poll conducted February 7–15 for CNN in Russia by a British agency,

Savanta ComRes, in which half (50%) of respondents agreed that “it would be right for Moscow to use military force to prevent Kyiv from joining NATO.” Two-thirds of Russians (64%) surveyed said that Russians and Ukrainians were “one people,” a position taught in the Soviet era and a view that Vladimir Putin has been pushing, compared to just 28% of Ukrainians. In their survey of February 25–27, VCIOM reported finding strong support for the “special military operation” in Ukraine, with two-thirds (68%) of respondents in favor, around one-quarter (22%) against, and only 10% unable to provide an answer. FOM showed that 65% of respondents to a February 25–27 survey supported the “launch of Russia’s special military operation.” A private survey agency, Russian Field, reported that 58.8% of respondents to polls conducted from February 26 to 28 supported “Russian military action in Ukraine.” Finally, the Washington Post reported a poll conducted a week into the assault by a consortium of researchers that confirmed that the majority of Russians (58%) approved of the invasion, while only a quarter (23%) opposed it.

Clearly, not all Russians supported the war prior to the outbreak of conflict, but overall, a majority of about 60% did, according to different measures by different polls. If a common bias influences the results of all the private and state-controlled survey organizations, then it may well be impossible to marshal any systematic and genuine evidence of Russian public opinion either for or against the war.

Self-Censorship and Response Bias?

Another possible reason for any potential bias could be self-censorship by respondents, which might generate inauthentic replies and response bias. Citizens living in repressive states may avoid expressing dissenting views in survey interviews involving sensitive issues to avoid the risk of their opinions being reported to state authorities.

This claim may also be valid. Even in Western countries it is often difficult to establish respondents’ true views on certain moral topics—such as those concerning risky sexual behavior, the overt expression of racism, sexism, and homophobia, or even their turnout to vote—as respondents may be reluctant to express their views when questioned directly for fear of social sanction. These difficulties are compounded when monitoring attitudes toward the authorities in repressive states that lack human rights and freedom of expression. Survey list experiments are designed to detect hidden biases. Some studies using this technique to measure Putin’s popularity have found only modest response biases. Others, including studies in China, have detected more substantial practices of self-censorship. Our own (forthcoming) list experiments in the World Values Survey suggest varied degrees of bias in expressing support for their

own leader across diverse authoritarian states like Ethiopia, Nicaragua, and Iran. Yet even if some Russians self-censor, it remains doubtful if even the most generous estimates of response bias could reverse the balance of public opinion reported in many of the early polls favoring the use of military force in Ukraine.

Protests and Dissent

Another view suggests that a more reliable guide to “genuine” Russian attitudes may be garnered from the exodus of dissenters and the outbreak of mass street protests and civil disobedience. Human rights groups report widespread anti-war protests in cities across the country despite the harsh police crackdown and the risks of serious injury and imprisonment. Thousands of anti-war demonstrators have been arrested to date. Thousands more Russians have fled abroad.

But the claim that dissenters express the underlying genuine views of most ordinary Russians may reflect Western hopes more than reality. Activists constitute an atypical cross-section of the general population in most countries, even in liberal democracies without constraints on the freedom to demonstrate peacefully. The “silent majority” is unlikely to engage.

Hypothetical Questions and Fluid Opinion

Further doubts about the reliability of Russian polls may arise in relation to the meaning of survey responses on hypothetical issues where public opinion remains fluid and vague. This process can generate “top of the head” answers that tick the interviewer’s boxes without most people probably having given the matter much thought.

The early polls are just that. Attitudes are likely to become firmer over time, although the direction of any response depends on cultural values and the attribution of blame. Whether Russian attitudes persist as events unfold remains an open question, particularly as soldiers come home in body-bags, economic sanctions bite even harder, personal messages flow across borders, and the strength of Ukrainian resistance becomes evident. Dramatic shifts in public and elite opinion have occurred around the world following the historic events in Ukraine and the accompanying blanket media coverage, which has shared heart-rending images of refugees and of cities flattened to rubble, speeches by President Zelensky, and moving interviews with ordinary Ukrainians. The impact of war coverage globally has been reflected in dramatic policy changes to military funding and perceptions of the importance of security in NATO member states (especially Germany) and the EU. But its impact on domestic opinion in Russia depends on prior cultural attitudes, especially fatalism toward the authorities and the powerful forces of nationalism, as well as efforts to access the available informa-

tion, such as by using VPNs. Even if opposition gradually grows, however, subsequent polls cannot be read backwards as an indication of Russian opinion at the time of the invasion.

“Brainwashing”

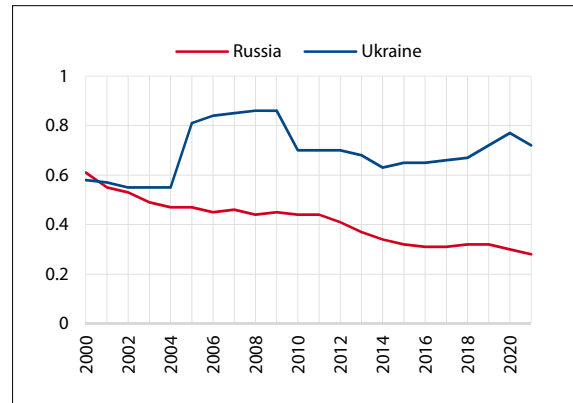
The final and most plausible explanation for the initial polls reporting Russian support for the war lies in the manipulation of public opinion through state control of communication channels and the widespread use of censorship, propaganda, and disinformation at home and abroad.

Reports suggest that Russians have dismissed the word of friends and relatives living in Ukraine with first-hand experience of the war. Instead, Russians suggest that the Ukrainian army attacked its own population in “false flag” operations and then sought to pin the blame on Putin, following the orders of a Ukrainian government full of “neo-fascists,” “nationalists,” and “drug addicts.” This “official” account of the events, formulated by Putin’s regime, has been widely disseminated on state TV. Information shared by Ukrainian or international media is labelled as “fake,” while graphic images of flattened Ukrainian cities are described as “manipulated.”

State control of the media has been growing under Putin for many years, and this process has accelerated sharply in recent weeks. The Varieties of Democracy project publishes a freedom of expression and alternative sources of information index that reflects the extent to which the government respects press and media freedom. Since 2000, the index has steadily plummeted in Russia while remaining higher in Ukraine by comparison. The latest crackdown has greatly tightened Putin’s censorship: a new law means that journalists providing military information deemed false by the state could face jail sentences of up to 15 years; many international news corporations, like CNN and the BBC, suspended their operations, while the remaining independent media outlets in Russia have been shuttered. Even before these events, in 2021 Russia ranked 150th out of 180 countries worldwide in press freedom, according to *Reporters without Borders*.

But modern, well-educated, middle-class Russians, particularly tech-savvy younger generations, have not yet become as isolated and rigidly controlled as populations living in Turkmenistan, Eritrea, and North Korea. To counter censorship, Russians can still use Virtual Private Networks (VPN) to gain access to international news—and indeed demand has surged. But access takes effort and technical know-how. Evidence from the latest World Values Survey, conducted in Russia in 2018 and Ukraine in 2020, indicates that two-thirds of Russians still use television as their primary source of daily news

Figure 1: Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information Index



Source: Varieties of Democracies dataset 2021; see also Table 1 overleaf.

and only a minority rely on the Internet. By contrast, in Ukraine, an almost equal number of people now get their news from the Internet as receive it from TV.

Among Russian Internet users, even before recent state bans on international platforms like Facebook and Twitter, many relied on domestic sources. According to Wave 3 of the Eurasia Barometer (EAB), conducted in November 2021, Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki, both Russian social media platforms, were widely used at home. Ukrainians used Western/international social media far more than Russians.

Most importantly, we find that use of TV and the Internet predict Russian political attitudes, *but in divergent directions*. The Eurasia Barometer survey, founded in 1989, provides one of the most authoritative and reliable sources of academic data. The survey monitors trust in the President and assessments of Russia’s influence on the world. In general, in November 2021 Russia’s role in the world was viewed positively by about 81% of respondents in Russia and only 14% in Ukraine. Trust in their own leader stood at 59% in Russia and just 35% in Ukraine.

After controlling for standard background characteristics, watching TV news was positively linked with Russian trust in Putin, and positive perceptions of Russia’s role in the world. By contrast, using the Internet and social media in Russia produces the opposite pattern: less trust in Putin and more negative views of Russia’s influence. The impact of radio and newspaper use is more mixed. This process is likely to work as a “virtuous circle”; self-selection of news sources and the effects of exposure connect use of the media with political attitudes.

The impact of online resources and social media diverge sharply in the two countries. In Russia, state propaganda on television and censorship of independent social media have isolated the country and successfully brainwashed numerous citizens into obediently parroting the narratives “as heard on TV.” It requires some

effort for Russians to obtain and compare information from various sources. It requires far more sacrifice for ordinary citizens to stand up and publicly express dissent from the authorities. It is easiest for all of us to blame Putin, his Kremlin acolytes, and the security forces for the carnage, rubble, and bloodshed in this war of choice. But even passive public support (as expressed in polls) for Putin's decision to invade Ukraine means that, as with Hitler's "willing executioners," broader culpability for the subsequent catastrophe in both countries is shared by the silent majority of ordinary Russians.

In Ukraine, by contrast, the flood of real-time videos across Facebook, Telegram, Twitter, WhatsApp, and other social media networks has become a major source of information about the cruelty of Putin's ruthless actions toward their country and exposed Moscow's propaganda, both at home and abroad. The direct voices of the Ukrainian people—not least through interviews with numerous fluent English-speakers, refugees, and official spokespersons—have been heard all over the world. All Ukrainian settlements share constantly updated live information through Telegram channels and WhatsApp groups about the ongoing shelling and fire alarms, gains and losses among Ukrainian forces and the civilian population, the schedule for pharmacies and supermarkets, available humanitarian and medical help, and much more. Thousands of videos of the conflict are disseminated on a daily basis. Social media have thereby helped to coordinate Ukrainian defense, evacuation, and humanitarian activities at home, while the whole world watches the conflict live and in real time.

In an attempt to curb this process, Moscow has sought to export well-established fake news and disinformation practices to Ukraine. In early March, the TV towers in Kyiv and Kharkiv were attacked. The broadcasting tower was seized by the Russian invaders in Kherson, with local TV and radio channels switched to Russia-promoting video and audio messages. The Russian-appointed "acting mayor" of Melitopol has urged that local people switch to Russian TV channels for

"more reliable" information. These strategies are designed to impose a false narrative around Russia's invasion into Ukraine, as well as revising the whole history of Ukraine-Russia relations.

Lessons from the Information Wars

Several polls from diverse polling organizations have reported that the silent majority of Russians—roughly 60%—initially favored the use of force in Ukraine, and polls registered rising support for Putin. Many factors may help to explain these results. Putin's domestic control rests on hard power, namely harsh coercion of opponents, like the imprisonment of Alexei Navalny. But it also depends on soft power, notably prior cultural values and feelings of nationalism reinforced by state control of television news and newspapers since the gradual crack-down on the free press in recent decades, which has been accelerated by the recent draconian restrictions on independent channels. Official censorship has aggressively throttled independent sources of news about Ukraine. Self-censorship is likely to have reinforced a spiral of silence in society, with perceptions of majority support amplifying official propaganda while silencing critics.

The Ukrainian conflict, like other modern conflicts, involves a complex combination of hard-power military force and soft-power information wars. So far on the world stage, following the unprovoked attack on a sovereign nation, the moral clarity of Ukrainian refugees, and the bravery of the resistance, Ukraine has achieved an overwhelming victory in soft power worldwide. This is exemplified by the almost universal condemnation and call for unconditional withdrawal expressed by member states in the UN General Assembly. But unless that message also penetrates hearts and minds at home throughout Russia, sparking active dissent and domestic outrage against the war wrecking both countries, it is powerless to challenge Putin's rule. In the interim, while the free world watches in horror, hard power continues to turn Ukrainian cities into rubble.

About the Authors

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