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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Werning Rivera, S. (2023). The Views of Russian Elites on Military Intervention Abroad. *Russian Analytical Digest*, 299, 2-7. https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000625073

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https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-88682-9

ANALYSIS

The Views of Russian Elites on Military Intervention Abroad

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000625073

Abstract
In the aftermath of the mutiny led by Wagner Group head Evgenii Prigozhin, a lively debate ensued about what this series of events revealed about the pillars of President Vladimir Putin's support. One way to approach this issue is to examine the attitudes expressed before the onset of the Russo–Ukrainian War by those holding positions a few notches below the top leadership in Russia. These are individuals at the apex of their professions—part of an elite stratum whose support, research shows, is more crucial for a dictator to maintain than that of the mass public. An analysis of trends from a unique dataset extending from 1993 to 2020, the Survey of Russian Elites, shows that highly placed Russians exhibit a nuanced combination of views on issues pertinent to the ongoing war in Ukraine. Although overall approval of the use of Russia's military outside its borders is shown to be much higher in 2020 than it was in the early 2000s, support for the unification of Ukraine with Russia is weak, as is approval of military adventurism that comes at the expense of domestic improvements.

As the war in Ukraine grinds on, Russia watchers continue to debate the meaning of Evgenii Prigozhin's "march for justice" and its aftermath for Vladimir Putin's support among Russian elites. That is indeed the right question to ask, since research shows that the support of elites is more consequential for maintaining authoritarian rule than that of the mass public. Indeed, Milan Svolik (2012, pp. 4–5) finds that more than two-thirds of all dictators who lost power by nonconstitutional means did so following defections by regime insiders. One way to approach this issue is to examine the attitudes of those holding positions a few notches below the top leadership, i.e., the elite sector. This stratum consists of individuals who are at the apex of their professions and thus are influential in their respective spheres.

To be sure, these are not members of the president's inner circle—the small group of *siloviki* involved in the decision to invade Ukraine in February 2022 (Troianovski 2022a)—and elites outside of this circle exert little, if any, influence on Putin's political decisions. As Henry Hale (2015) has argued, power is concentrated in a pyramidal political system that Putin has consolidated while in office, in which power flows from personal connections. Atop the system sits the president, who encourages conflict among rival elite networks. His patronage-based relationships with political actors both prevent successors from being groomed in a systematic manner and make collective action by elites difficult (V.G. 2022). The president also has at his disposal well-funded security, law-enforcement, and regulatory agencies, such as the Federal Security Service (FSB) and Roskomnadzor, Russia's media censorship agency (Mozur et al. 2022). Nevertheless, members of the broader elite are important in their own arenas, and depending on the timing and circumstances of Putin's exit, some might even be positioned to move upward into governing circles after he leaves office.

Although Russian elites are difficult to reach and challenging to interview (Rivera, Kozyreva, and Sarovskii 2002), the Survey of Russian Elites (SRE) that I now direct has been querying a cross-section of highly placed individuals approximately every four years since 1993. My analysis of SRE data collected through 2020 reveals a nuanced combination of attitudes held by Russian elites: although overall approval of the use of Russia's military outside its borders is higher than it was in the early 2000s, support for the unification of Ukraine with Russia is weak, as is approval of military adventurism that comes at the expense of domestic improvements.

The Survey of Russian Elites: A Unique Resource

In each survey, the SRE interviews between 180 and 320 high-ranking Russians based in Moscow who work in a broad range of occupational sectors (Zimmerman, Rivera, and Kalinin 2023). Respondents are drawn from Russia's legislative branch, executive branch, military and security forces, state-owned enterprises, private businesses, scientific and educational institutions with strong international connections, and media outlets; all are connected in some way with foreign policy issues. The most recent survey, conducted in February–March 2020, included 245 respondents selected using a quota sample.

With the addition of the latest data, the series now spans 27 years and includes 1,909 individuals. The dataset is unique in that it constitutes the only repeated cross-sectional survey data of Russian elites available. As project founder William Zimmerman told me more than once, "It's almost like real science. We can now look at the same questions and responses given from basically the collapse of the USSR—1993—to today." Although a lively discussion con-

tinues about the validity of polls in Russia ("The Value of Public Opinion Polls" 2023), we believe that meaningful conclusions can be drawn when analyzing trends over time—especially across nearly three decades of data collection.

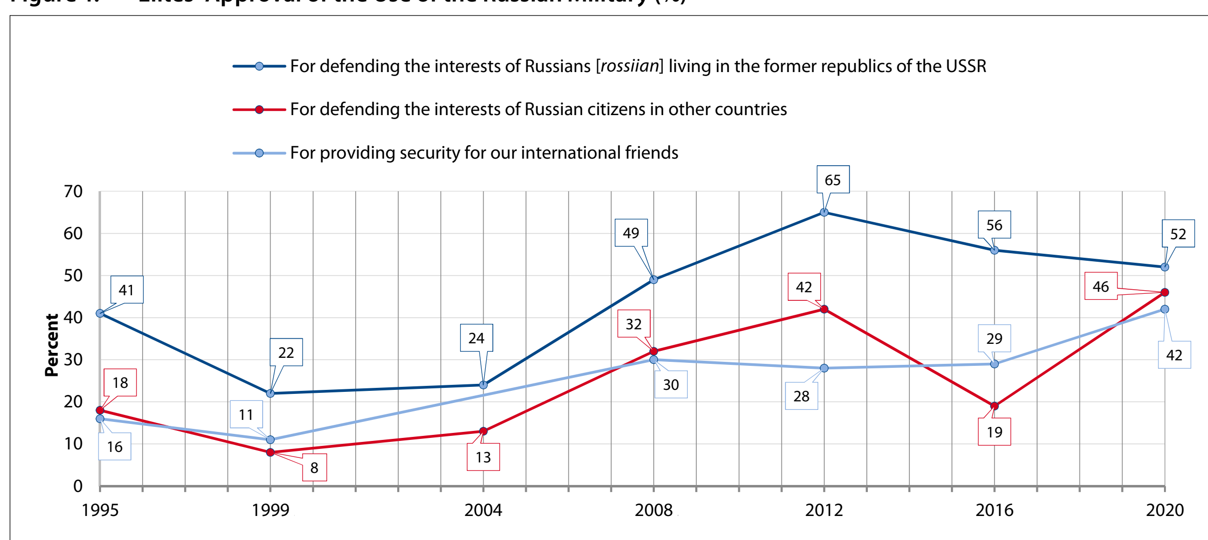
Trends in Elites' Attitudes, 1993–2020

So, what are the trends in elites' attitudes that might determine the extent of support for Putin's war in Ukraine—and, by extension, his rule itself? On the one hand, as I reported in the *Washington Post*'s *Monkey Cage* blog in the immediate aftermath of the February 2022 invasion, there is little appetite among Russian elites for the unification of Ukraine with Russia (Rivera 2022). Support for a merger with Ukraine was highest in 1995 (at 65 percent) and has fallen steadily to a low of 5 percent in 2020. In addition, a 2020 report that I co-authored with Hamilton College students shows that in every year since 1993 (with the partial exception of 2004), elites have viewed the failure to solve domestic problems as more threatening to Russia's security than the growth of U.S. military power (Rivera et al. 2020). Taken together, as I wrote in the *Monkey Cage*, "elites will be ambivalent about a costly military campaign in Ukraine."

On the other hand, Russian elites in 2020 are overall more favorably disposed toward the deployment of Russian troops abroad than in previous survey years. Every year since 1993, the SRE has asked the question, "In your opinion, for which of the following purposes is the use of the Russian military permissible?" This is followed by a list of scenarios, several of which concern regions outside of the Russian Federation. Figure 1 reveals that the percentage willing to dispatch troops to provide "security for our international friends" increased from 29 percent in 2016 to 42 percent in 2020, which is the highest level of support ever recorded in the survey. When the focus is on "defending the interests of Russian citizens in other countries," fully 46 percent agree that it is permissible to use the Russian military for this purpose—up from 42 percent in 2012 and 19 percent in 2016. Respondents expressed even more support for using the Russian military to defend "the interests of Russians [*rossiian*] living in the former republics of the USSR" in each of the surveys conducted. From 2008 on, the percentages viewing military intervention as permissible in this scenario are noticeably higher than either in the 1990s or at the end of Putin's first term in 2004, rising from 24 percent in 2004 to 65 percent soon after Putin returned to the presidency in 2012. Although down slightly from that 2012 high, 56 percent in 2016 and 52 percent in 2020 agree that the Russian military should be used to protect Russians [*rossiian*] in the post-Soviet regions.

At first glance, these two sets of results might seem contradictory, with the former challenging and the latter buttressing claims that those in Russia's elite circles adhere to an "imperial nationalism" (Ponarin and Komin 2018). In actuality, these two trends might coexist in uneasy tension, reflecting an unwillingness to renegotiate all of Russia's post-1991 borders, but also a willingness to project Russia's influence abroad, particularly when it can be done cheaply and effectively.

Figure 1: Elites' Approval of the Use of the Russian Military (%)



n=180 (1995), 240 (1999), 320 (2004), 241 (2008), 240 (2012), 243 (2016), and 245 (2020)

Source: Data from Survey of Russian Elites, 1993-2020.

Notes: The figure displays the percentage of all respondents (including those who answered "don't know" or refused to answer) who responded yes to the question.

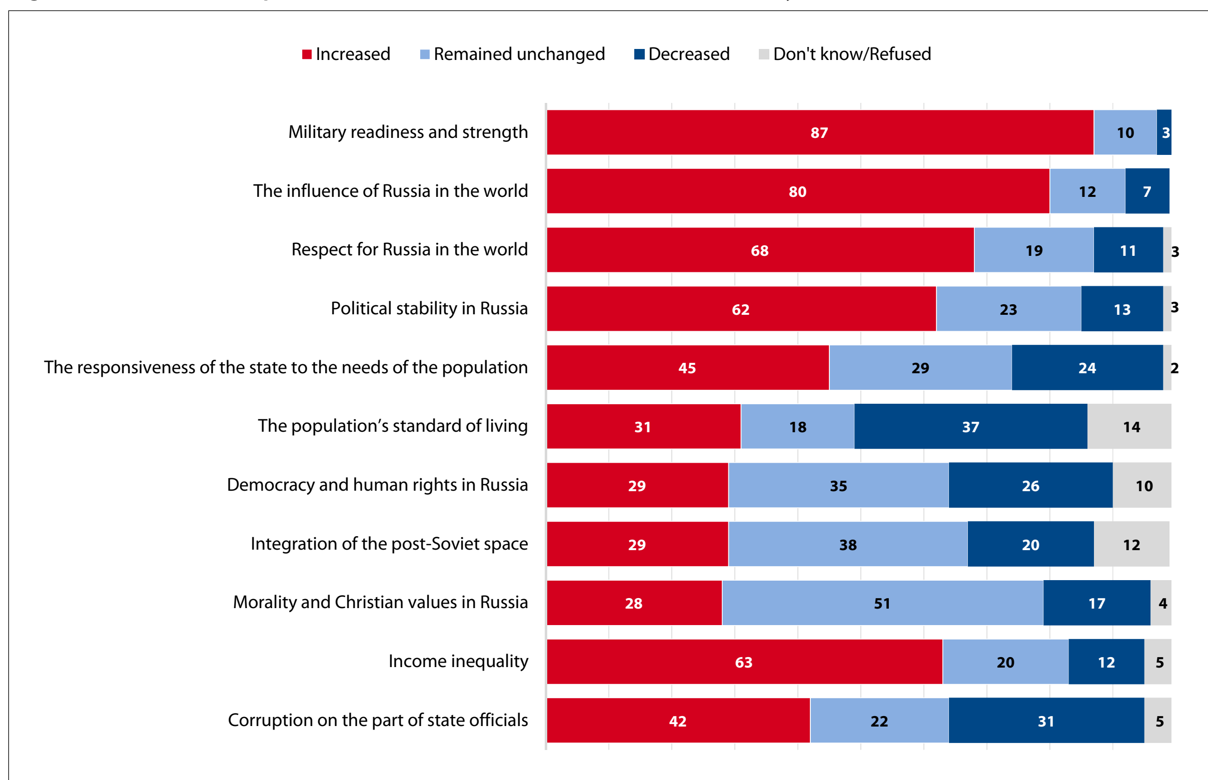
Question wording: "In your opinion, for which of the following purposes is the use of the Russian military permissible? [Defending the interests of Russians [rossiian] living in the former republics of the USSR] [Defending the interests of Russian citizens in other countries] [Providing security for our international friends] 1. Yes, 2. No."

Another finding is that the vast majority of Russian elites assert that Russia's influence and respect in the world, as well as its military capabilities, have increased since Putin came to power in 2000. In the Putin era, Russia has pursued a muscular foreign policy around the globe, whether in Syria, Africa, or the post-Soviet region. Putin also oversaw a dramatic economic recovery and boom after a deep economic contraction in the 1990s. Both Russia's enhanced international status and economic growth have been important pillars of the president's popularity. As Henry Hale's analysis of mass survey data from Russia shows, some foreign policy moves—such as the annexation of Crimea—can generate a "rally-'round-the-flag" effect, increasing levels of trust in Putin (Hale 2018).

Elites recognize Russia's international achievements and, at least as late as 2020, give Putin credit for them. In the 2020 wave of the SRE, Russian elites were asked about Putin's accomplishments during his two decades in office. As is displayed in Figure 2, 87 percent assert that Russia's military readiness and strength have grown during this period. Another 80 percent state that Russia's influence in the world has increased. Furthermore, more than two-thirds (68 percent) credit Putin with increasing global respect for Russia.

Notably, however, evaluations of the president's accomplishments on the international stage (represented by the top three bars) differ markedly from assessments of his domestic performance. Respondents were asked about a wide variety of domestic issues, including official corruption, income inequality, and democracy and human rights in Russia. Elites notice marked improvement in only one of these areas—political stability—with 62 percent saying that it is higher and only 13 percent perceiving it as lower. On all other domestic indicators, less than half of the sample sees improvement over the past two decades. Respondents reserve their sharpest criticism for the economy (sentiments that were expressed even before oil prices collapsed in April 2020 and the coronavirus health crisis really took hold in Russia). During the February–March 2020 survey period, a plurality (37 percent) reported that the standard of living had fallen since 2000 and only 12 percent agreed that Putin had been able to reduce income inequality.

Figure 2: Elites' Perceptions of Putin's Performance Over the Past Twenty Years (%)



n=245

Source: Data from Survey of Russian Elites, 1993-2020*. Figure from Sharon Werning Rivera, et al., "*Survey of Russian Elites 2020: New Perspectives on Foreign and Domestic Policy*," July 28, 2020, p. 27.*

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100.0% due to rounding.

Question wording: "In the last twenty years since the year 2000, when Putin first became president, do you think the following things have increased, decreased, or remained unchanged? 1. Corruption on the part of state officials, 2. Income inequality, 3. Political stability in Russia, 4. The influence of Russia in the world, 5. Democracy and human rights in Russia, 6. The responsiveness of the state to the needs of the population, 7. The population's standard of living, 8. Respect for Russia in the world, 9. Morality and Christian values in Russia, 10. Military readiness and strength, 11. Integration of the post-Soviet space."

Implications for the Russo–Ukrainian War

What do these data mean for the ongoing war in Ukraine? First, they suggest that the strong approval of Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea observed in the 2016 SRE data will not repeat itself during Russia's efforts to absorb broad swaths of Ukrainian territory (Rivera et al. 2016). The Crimean operation could plausibly be framed as correcting a historical error left over from the Soviet era and, most importantly, was quick, successful, and virtually bloodless. In contrast, as the SRE shows, elite support for the unification of Russia and Ukraine has declined significantly since 1995 and was anemic as of 2020.

The second implication that can be extracted from the SRE is that the Kremlin will have more success sustaining its war effort if it can capitalize on elites' preexisting inclinations to assign Putin high marks in the foreign policy domain, as well as their support for military intervention in international conflicts and the "Near Abroad." Putin's speeches are chock-full of grievances and diatribes against the West (e.g., Putin 2022); these will resonate less with most elites than a recounting of the ways in which he increased Russia's international respect and influence during his first two decades in power. Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, however, Russia's foreign policy has been marked by notable setbacks (e.g., the West's shift away from Russian hydrocarbons, Central Asian states' distancing from Russia, the expansion of NATO to include Finland and Sweden, and an order for Putin's arrest issued by the International Criminal Court) that could complicate Putin's ability to use his foreign policy record to maintain elite support.

Third, the SRE highlights the importance of differentiating between Putin's inner circle and the elite sector more broadly. Analysts and scholars have rightly emphasized that the elite stratum is not monolithic. For instance, Alexandra Prokopenko (2022) describes it as having been "divided into war and peace camps" at the beginning of the war; more recently, Tatiana Stanovaya says it is split between "technocrat-executors" and "patriots" (Chotiner 2023). Empirical studies demonstrate that the *siloviki* have a more illiberal orientation than civilian elites (Rivera and Rivera 2019). And intra-elite divisions became apparent to all when the long-running feud between Prigozhin (who appears to have the tacit support of the milbloggers and Russian "superhawks," to use Eliot Cohen's phrase, but who horrifies the bureaucracy) and the Ministry of Defense played out visibly on the road from Rostov-on-Don to Moscow (Cohen 2023; Remnick 2023; Soldatov and Borogan 2023).

But another dividing line—that between the top Kremlin leadership and lower-ranking elites in a broad variety of spheres—is also noteworthy. The small cadre of individuals in Putin's inner circle are cut from the same hawkish cloth as he is; even erstwhile voices of moderate reform such as Dmitrii Medvedev are falling over themselves to demonstrate their alignment with Putin's positions (e.g., Medvedev 2022). Yet according to the SRE, a broader group of elites expresses a more complex set of attitudes toward Russia's foreign policy course. The immediate reaction of many Russian elites to Prigozhin's mutiny illustrates this point: observers have characterized it as lackluster in defense of Putin (Belton and Dixon 2023; Kilner 2023; Steinberg and Gel'man 2023; Verstka 2023). The findings from the SRE suggest that this may result from generally tepid support for foreign policy adventurism—especially when it is conducted ineptly—that diverts attention from Russia's economy and limits elites' ability to maneuver therein for personal gain.

That said, how the war is framed and what elites may privately think are likely to be overshadowed by the multiple levers employed by Putin's dictatorship to keep its upper stratum in line. Strong signals continually beam from the Kremlin to the elite, conveying that even in that privileged sector, dissent from the state's official line will not be tolerated. For instance, after he took to Instagram to denounce the invasion, former banking tycoon Oleg Tinkov was forced to sell his stake in his Tinkoff bank for a fraction of its value (Troianovski 2022b). Similarly, the frequent deaths of highly placed individuals have led one writer to dub this phenomenon the "Sudden Russian Death Syndrome" (Godfrey 2022). Repression is at a post-1985 high, and the Kremlin has been binding the career prospects of Russian elites ever more tightly to the regime as a means of preventing defections—even going so far as to confiscate the passports of high-ranking civil servants and executives in state-owned corporations (Pertsev 2023; Seddon 2023). Indeed, reporting by *Meduza* suggests that government officials' compliance with the president's decisions is primarily due to fear of, rather than respect for, Putin (Pertsev 2022). Predictably, elites have accepted their new reality and are publicly falling into line in an effort to preserve their assets and survive politically and personally (Inozemtsev 2023). In other words, most Russian elites have outwardly acquiesced and adapted to Putin's war; they are biding their time in the hope that things will eventually work out. As Alexandra Prokopenko (2023) writes, they "have no choice but to hunker down in Russia…anyone who has anything to lose simply prefers to lie low and keep quiet."

To be sure, accounts of dissatisfaction among high-ranking individuals do surface periodically. Some journalists who have interviewed a smattering of Russian elites report frustration among business executives and a sense of impending doom among political and economic elites (Belton 2022; Rustamova and Tovkaylo 2022). As Stanovaya (2022) writes, "a significant part of the Russian elite considers the war a catastrophe," even if it has not turned against Putin. In a more recent article, she identifies a trend among Russia's elites, namely "growing alarm and despair, and

a sense that Putin is leading the country over a precipice to imminent doom" (Stanovaya 2023). According to Cooley and Harrington (2022), Russia's oligarchs have suffered what has been called the "social death" of stigmatization brought about by Russia's international pariah status, and that stings.

What is unknown at the moment is how the underlying trends in elite attitudes identified by the SRE will shift as the war in Ukraine continues. As we recall, elites have consistently viewed the failure to solve domestic problems as more threatening to Russia's security than the growth of U.S. military power, and in 2020 gave Putin low marks for domestic accomplishments. If the military, human, and economic costs of the Ukrainian invasion escalate, elites' privileged positions are threatened, and, crucially, a viable alternative to Putin or Putinism appears, segments of the now-quiescent elite stratum may well change course. In that case, Russian elites' tacit support for the individual occupying the top office in the Kremlin—the one who is personally responsible for perpetrating the war—might just dissipate in surprising fashion.

About the Author

Sharon Werning Rivera is the Sidney Wertimer Professor of Government and Director of Russian Studies at Hamilton College (Clinton, NY). Her articles have appeared in numerous journals, such as *Perspectives on Politics, Post-Soviet Affairs, Problems of Post-Communism,* and *Demokratizatsiya*. She is the Principal Investigator of the Survey of Russian Elites, a project funded by the National Science Foundation (Award # 1742798) and on deposit with the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research at the University of Michigan. She is grateful to Naval Lappalainen for research assistance and to Fabian Burkhardt, Kirill Chmel, David Rivera, and Maria Snegovaya for their comments on previous drafts of this article.

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