

A woman with short brown hair, wearing a red coat, has a cigarette in her mouth. She is holding a Russian flag. The background is a blurred crowd of people in an urban setting at dusk or night, with some lights visible.

# CHRONICLES OF WAR: DISAGGREGATING RUSSIAN SUPPORT AND REJECTION OF THE WAR

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APRIL 2022

## About the Chronicles of War

The Chronicles of War is an internal SecDev research initiative designed to assess the trajectory of the Russia-Ukraine war during the first month of the war. Relying principally on open sources and key informant interviews in Ukraine and Russia, the focus is on three key areas:

- Security and safety of Ukraine's civilian nuclear infrastructure. The war in Ukraine is the first to occur within a country operating multiple civilian nuclear plants and countless civilian and medical facilities containing radiological materials.
- The cyber dimensions of the Ukraine conflict. Most conflicts now occur in five domains, including cyberspace. The escalatory use of cyberweapons could result in the invocation of NATO Article 5 provisions and pull more countries into the war.
- The perception of fighting by Russian soldiers and civilians. Successful war-fighting often depends on motivated and trained troops and a supportive public. Using digital methods to listen in on soldier conversations and assess wider public sentiment, it is possible to assess the strength, organization and effectiveness of Russia's war effort.

## Key takeaways

**The validity and veracity of Russian polls is questionable due to high levels of state propaganda and censorship as well as biases in the ways surveys are constructed and conducted.** State-administered surveys are “political technologies” used to manufacture support for official positions. Even ostensibly independent surveys are often distorted by latent uncertainties and fears among respondents.

**Russian state-managed polling groups claim that the majority of Russians support the “special military operation” with a small number opposed.** According to a mid-March 2022 government-affiliated survey, 74% of respondents support the operation (compared to 65% on February 25). Just 17% said they did not support the operation in mid-March (compared to 25% on 25 February).

**Independent survey organizations find that while over half of Russians support the war, a significant minority are opposed.** Surveys by non-government affiliated pollsters in late February 2022 found that just 59% of respondents supported “military actions” and as many as 34% claimed to be opposed. A similar survey in mid-March 2022 found similar results: 59% in favor and 22% against.

**There appears to be less support for the war online than in official public surveys of either state or non-governmental organizations.** A review of 2.8 million social media posts published between 24 February and 4 March 2022 found that the proportion of content supporting the war in Russian averaged 52% while about 30% of users spoke out against the war. The validity of these kinds of descriptive studies must be examined closely.

**Online, at least, Russians are searching for terms related to “war” rather than “special operation”.** A review by Yandex of more than 47.5 million requests under the search-term “war in Ukraine” over a one month period in Russian. By comparison, the phrase “military special operation” generated just 83,236 hits - a difference of 570x.

**Older Russians and more avid television watchers are more inclined to support the war than younger people.** The highest level of support for the war occurs among Russians of retirement age (60-70 and older). Indeed, 9 out of 10 older Russians support the war. By way of comparison, more than 50% of people under 30 oppose the war. Urbanites and women are also less likely to support the war effort.

## How Russians perceive the war

The Russian government has invested considerable energy in fostering public support for the war in Ukraine. The approach has involved the ratcheting-up of aggressive support among state-controlled media companies while imposing strict censorship on public dissent and banning multiple social media platforms outright. In an environment of heightened nationalist and militarist rhetoric, it is unsurprising that opposing voices are minimized. The shut-down of independent media and threat of administrative and criminal charges has clearly affected the ability of expressing alternative views to the official state line.

Russians opposed to the war in Ukraine are already facing legal consequences. The group [Network Freedoms](#) has documented over [180](#) administrative and [seven](#) criminal cases of the state charging civilians for breaching newly introduced censorship laws. Russian security forces have acted quickly to repress public dissent in the public square and the courtroom. For example, on 23 March 2022, a court in Moscow [declared](#) that the poster “Fascism Will Not Pass” discredited the Russian army and fined activist Anna Krechetova, who was holding a solitary picket, 50,000 rubles.

## The limits of public polling in Russia

Predictably, a number of recent polls suggest that popular Russian support for the war effort is comparatively high. According to pro-Kremlin public opinion research centers, between [68%](#) and [74%](#) of Russians support a military campaign in Ukraine. By way of contrast, independent polling groups found that between [52%](#) and [59%](#) of Russians support a military engagement in Ukraine. Alongside state control of the media and pervasive censorship, determining “real” levels of support for the war is a problematic task for at least seven reasons.

First, the study of public opinion during wartime is non-trivial. Societies are often extremely emotional, polarized and divided. In such situations, people may answer questions in ways they would not

under normal circumstances, and those who are undecided may be forced to take one of the presented sides.

Second, public opinion research on political issues is a very specific field of activity in Russia. It is a sensitive topic for Russia’s political leadership and one of several “political technologies” to shape attitudes toward foreign and domestic policies. Russian sociologists, then, are often implicated in the “[production](#)” of public opinion in Russia and routinely used as [an instrument of propaganda and manipulation](#) of public opinion.

Third, public opinion research is monopolized by three structures. Two are controlled by the state, the All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion ([VTsIOM](#)) and the Public Opinion Foundation ([FOM](#)) and serve their [main customer](#), the Russian presidency. The third organization is [the Levada-Center](#), one of the only independent public opinion research outfits in the country. Yet in 2016 the center was labeled a “foreign agent” after the director [criticized](#) the Russian regime.

Fourth, public opinion polling in authoritarian countries is usually problematic. People typically conceal their opinions and offer socially approved answers for fear of reprisals and or government intervention. As a result, the proportion of people approving of government policies in poll samples may be higher than what is “objectively” the case. Autocrats also welcome inflated results that show widespread support as a means of disciplining elites, demoralizing opponents, and tilting ordinary citizens’ opinions in their favor.

Fifth, surveys undertaken in conditions of total media censorship and the threat of criminal prosecution for dissenting views must be treated with caution. On 4 March 2022, the Duma [adopted](#) a law imposing administrative and criminal responsibility (up to 15 years) on views criticizing activities of the Russian army in Ukraine. Further, on 22 March 2022 the Duma [adopted](#) another law introducing similar measures of responsibility for spreading fake news about the activities of the Russian state bodies abroad. Indeed, even the term “war in Ukraine” is banned.

Sixth, there is often extremely low involvement in Russian polls. According to one [study](#), only 7-10% of would-be respondents agree to participate in polls. According to Russian [experts](#), the high refusal rate raises questions about the validity of

polls claiming to represent public sentiment. It may indicate that many in Russian society who have views that differ from those endorsed by the state intentionally refuse to participate out of fear of being called-out or as a political statement.

Finally, Russians generally appear to have an ambivalent attitude toward the results of public opinion polls. As in other parts of the world, there is a downward trend in Russian trust in polling

results. For example, in 2018, VTsIOM [revealed](#) a record high level of distrust among Russians during the entire period of the survey. They found that 37% of Russians believed that the results of opinion polls in Russia either do not fully or partially reflect the actual opinion of citizens. This compares to 14% in 2005.

## Manufacturing support for the war

According to official polling companies supported by the government, the overwhelming majority of Russians support the “special military operation” in Ukraine. According to these same polls, the level of support is constantly increasing. [VTsIOM](#) found on 17 March 2022 that 74% of Russian citizens surveyed said they “rather support” the decision

to conduct a special military operation of Russia in Ukraine (as compared to 65% on February 25). The proportion of Russians who “rather do not support” the special operation was 17% (compared to 25% on 25 February).

### Do you support or do you not support the decision to conduct a special military operation by Russia in Ukraine?

|                           | February 25 | February 27 | March 03 | March 17 |
|---------------------------|-------------|-------------|----------|----------|
| Rather support it.        | 65%         | 68%         | 71%      | 74%      |
| Rather do not support it. | 25%         | 22%         | 21%      | 17%      |
| I can't answer that.      | 10%         | 10%         | 8%       | 9%       |

Source: [VTsIOM](#)

By way of comparison, a [FOM](#) survey on 13 March 2022 found that 68% of Russian respondents agree that the decision to conduct military operations in Ukraine “was correct” (compared

to 65% on 27 February 27). This is in contrast to the share of Russians who answered that such a decision “was wrong”: just 12% said it was wrong on 13 March compared to 17% on 27 February.

### Do you think the decision to conduct a military operation was right or wrong?

|                      | February 27 | March 06 | March 13 |
|----------------------|-------------|----------|----------|
| Right                | 65%         | 68%      | 68%      |
| Not right.           | 17%         | 15%      | 12%      |
| I can't answer that. | 18%         | 16%      | 20%      |

Source: [FOM](#)

There are several reasons why support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine is gathering support. For one, the [massive propaganda campaign underway](#), combined with sharp penalties for opposition, could be yielding its desired effect. People often rally around the flag when threatened. Indeed, as a Russian political scientist recently [noted](#), the imposition of sanctions against Russia by western countries may also be rallying Russians to the cause. Because sanctions affect ordinary citizens, and not just Russian politicians and oligarchs, it could unify Russians rather than encourage them to blame the regime.

The apparent increase in Russian support is very likely connected to the adoption of a harsh and repressive legislation penalizing opposition to the war. Indeed, virtually any public disapproval of the military campaign in Ukraine - [including the holding of blank signs in public spaces](#) - is met with highly

visible and publicized force. Fearing negative consequences, most ordinary Russians may simply be too afraid to voice their real attitudes toward the war and align with state rhetoric instead.

Intriguingly, two polls highlight the varying perceptions of the Russian war effort in Ukraine. Conducted by [VTsIOM](#) and [FOM](#), they featured similar questions and were conducted a few days apart. They both emphasize support for aspects of the official line - to protect Russia, disarm Ukraine and prevent NATO expansion. However, they suggest low support for the more extreme elements of Putin’s narrative, including the “deNazification” of Ukraine or the occupation and annexation of Ukraine. This may help also explain the recent shift in strategy by the Russian government toward its more narrow ambitions, including in Donbas.

**What are the primary goals that Russia pursues in conducting a special military operation in Ukraine - comparing two different surveys**

|   | March 17 (VTsIOM) | March 13 (FOM) |
|---|-------------------|----------------|
| Protect Russia, disarm Ukraine, and prevent the placement of NATO military bases on its territory (VTsIOM) / Ensure the security of Russia, achieve the disarmament of Ukraine and prevent the placement of NATO bases on its territory (FOM) | 46%               | 67%            |
| To change the political course of Ukraine, to cleanse it of Nazis (VTsIOM) / Change the political course of Ukraine, remove the nationalists from power (FOM)   | 19%               | 22%            |
| Protect the population of Donbas (DNR and LNR) - (VTsIOM and FOM)   | 17%               | 51%            |
| Occupy Ukraine and annex it to Russia (VTsIOM) / Eliminate the statehood of Ukraine, annexing its territory to Russia (FOM)   | 5%                | 11%            |
| Other (VTsIOM)  | 7%                | NA             |
| I can’t answer that (VTsIOM and FOM)  | 6%                | 9%             |

Sources: [VTsIOM](#) and [FOM](#)

\*These two surveys were conducted at different times and used different sampling methods. They are not to be compared as equivalent or longitudinal. Rather, they are listed side by side due to the similarity in the questions posed.

# A more nuanced view from independent polls

Given the context in which they are undertaken, even independent polls indicate majority Russian support for the war in Ukraine. Predictably, the level of support is lower than in state-administered polls. For example, polls [conducted](#) by the independent research agency Russkoe Pole on February 26-28, 2022 found that 59% of respondents supported “military actions” on the territory of Ukraine. Notably, 34% of respondents claimed to be against military incursions. Likewise, a telephone survey conducted by the [“Do the Russians want war?”](#) project from 10-13 March 2022 found broadly similar results: 59% in support and 22% opposed.

Notwithstanding major efforts to restrict and reduce social media debate about the war, it is also possible to identify trends and levels of support. For example, the dynamics of pro- and anti-war statements [were tracked](#) by Tazeros data analysts who analyzed 2.8 million social media posts published between 24 February and 4 March 2022. Tazeros found that the proportion of content supporting the war in Russian averaged 52% while about 30% of users spoke out against the war. There were also variations in the types of motives shaping Russian viewpoints, as noted in the Figure below.

## Dynamics of change in the percentage share of pro and anti-war statements in social networks



Sources: [Tazeros](#)

## Main narratives in the publications of Russians in social networks related to the situation in Ukraine



Sources: [Tazeros](#)

Earlier studies conducted before the outbreak of war in Ukraine suggest that the majority of Russians support the use of military force against Ukraine. One prominent example is a poll conducted between 7-15 February 2022 by the British Savanta ResCom agency (commissioned by CNN). The survey [revealed](#) that 50% of respondents “would support Russia using force to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO” and that 36% “would support Russia using force to reunite Russia and Ukraine”.

Meanwhile, a separate poll focusing on Russian attitudes toward the situation in Ukraine conducted by the Levada Center from 17-21 February 2022 [showed](#) that the prospect of war with Ukraine frightened more than half of all respondents. Just a few days before the Russian invasion on 24 February 2022, 51 percent of those surveyed said that the prospect of war “scares them a lot” or “mostly scares them,” while another 22 percent said that it “does not scare them much”.

## Beware of polls promising certainty

Many survey specialists [note problems](#) in the methodology applied by Russian surveys. A major concern relates to the terminology used in formulating questions. In surveys conducted by VTsIOM, FOM, and the “Do Russians Want War” project, the terms “special military operation” or “military operation” were used instead of “war”. These former terms are common in regime-controlled media precisely to downplay the invasion. Russkoe Polye also used the term “military operations” instead of war in its survey, although later used the term “special military operation” when publishing results.

[According](#) to Maxim Alyukov, a polling expert, the polling results are significantly distorted by the so-called [social desirability effect](#). In autocratic settings such as Russia, respondents typically prefer to keep quiet about their real preferences when answering polls, especially if they disagree with the official state position. Alyukov believes that a considerable proportion of the Russian

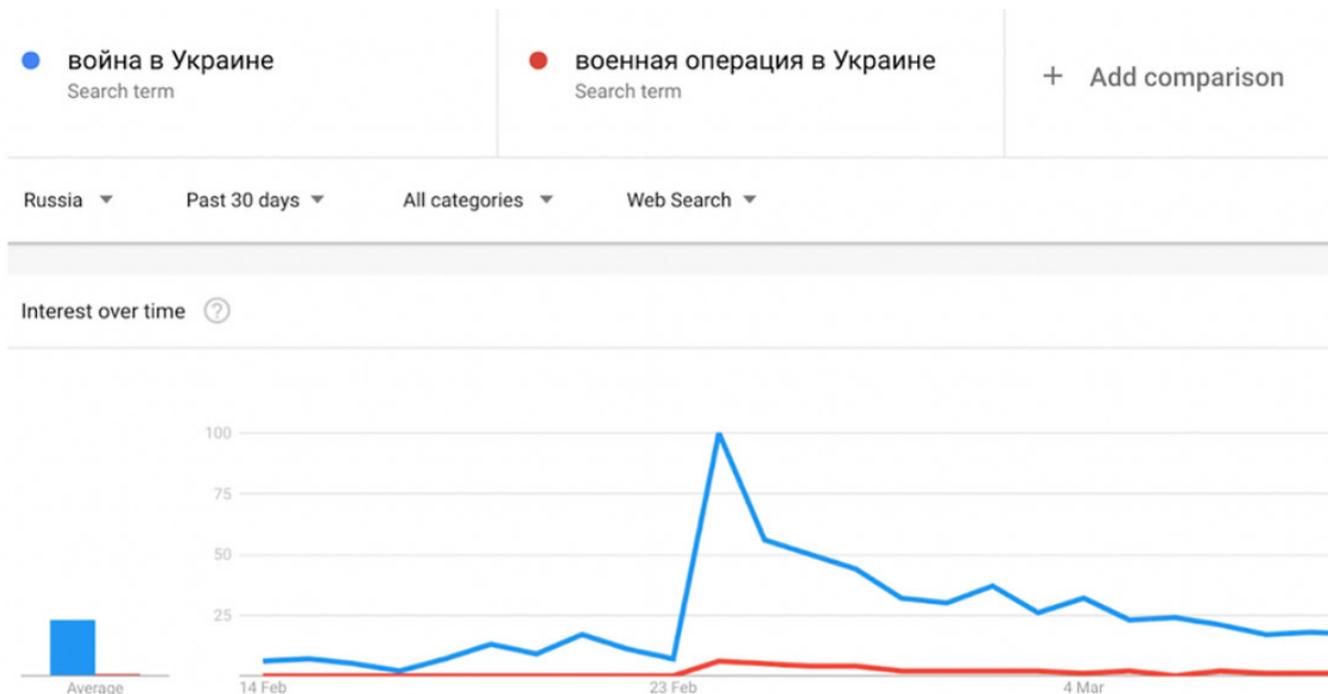
public neither approves nor disapproves of the war, because they simply do not have a coherent or informed opinion on the matter.

Related, it is straight-forward to manipulate poll results by so-called “shaping questions”, the wording of which can structure the choice of a certain answers. Alyukov has identified several other biases that cast doubt on the results of public opinion surveys:

- People who are critical of the Russian regime are less likely to participate in surveys and are therefore underrepresented in the sample;
- Even people who are critical of the government and answer the poll may elect to conceal their real preferences; and
- Some respondents who do not have a clear opinion on the war may approve of the government’s actions because of the wording of the questions or external influence from Russian media.

It is possible to test for these biases in surveys. For example, the aforementioned telephone [survey](#) about how Russians perceive the current situation in Ukraine found that 63.3% of respondents affirmed that Russia was conducting a “special military operation”. Yet when examining online search queries, it is clear that Russians tend to call the “war” a war. Yandex reported over 47,558,925 requests under the search-term “war in Ukraine” over a one month period. By comparison, the phrase “military special operation” generated just 83,236 hits - a difference of 570x.

**Comparison of the dynamics of search queries in two categories “war in Ukraine” (blue) and “military operation in Ukraine” (red)**



Source: [“Do the Russians want war?”](#)

Some Russian specialists are finding that survey respondents are increasingly refusing to answer direct questions. Many are also wary of disclosing their place of residence, explaining to pollsters that they do not want to go to prison for their answers. What this means is that opinion polls in Russia may no longer fully or even partially reflect real opinion and should be treated with extreme caution. If anything, they may reveal just how intimidated respondents feel.

Researchers from the “Do Russians want war” project have also singled out the effects of social desirability on survey results. In their experience, a significant number of respondents answer precisely because they fear not giving a response. When asked if they support military action (yes/no), some respondents were given the option to refuse an answer. When provided this option, the share who declared support actually decreased by 7%. On this basis, the researchers conclude that at least 7% of Russians said they “approved” of intervention out of fear.

## The effects of age and television

Notwithstanding the many survey-related caveats noted above, findings from both government and independent polling outlets provide hints of the factors that appear to shape Russian positions on the war in Ukraine. Two variables in particular stand out - the age of respondents and their level of attachment to television as a source of information.

Specifically, the highest level of support for the war occurs among Russians of retirement age (60-70 and older). Indeed, 9 out of 10 older Russians support the war. By way of comparison, more than 50% of people under 30 oppose the war. It is worth noting that President Putin himself turns 70 in 2022 and that most members of the Security Council that approved the invasion are in a similar demographic bracket. This compares to the majority of soldiers fighting in Ukraine who are under 30.

What is more, there is compelling evidence that support for the war is significantly higher among Russians that watch TV on a daily basis, especially the category of respondents who have a higher level of trust in state media. Again, older Russians over 45, and especially pensioners, tend to be more avid television watchers than younger ones. The effect here, however, appears to be two-way: not only is television amplifying propaganda and war-mongering, but it is also watched more often by those who agree in advance with these state-endorsed views.

Several other demographic factors are worth signaling. For example, women tend to harbor more anti-war sentiment than men. This difference is especially evident in the 30 to 50 year bracket. What is more, residents of larger cities are less likely to support the war than those Russians living in periphery and rural settings, a widely recognized phenomenon. Mikhail Sokolov [analyzed](#) VCIOM data and found that “If you are under 30, live in a big city, have a higher education, and don’t watch TV, the probability that you do not support the actions of the Russian military is 80%”. As Maksim Alyukov [notes](#), the political preferences of the regime’s supporters are widely studied. They tend to share Soviet nostalgia and see Putin as the man who successfully led the country out of the political and economic chaos of the 1990s, and thus feel emotionally attached to the regime.



Crimean residents watch the broadcast of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s annual address to the Federal Assembly, 2020 // Konstantin Mikhailchevsky. RIA Novosti. All rights reserved.

## About SecDev

SecDev is an agile research and innovation firm helping clients navigate digital-geopolitical, geospatial and geodigital risk. SecDev builds value through innovation in strategic foresight, data science and urban analytics. SecDev's team is fluent in technology, global in scope and results-oriented. SecDev empowers clients, such as national governments, technology companies and international organizations, to make informed choices that deliver value in the digital-urban age.



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