

Propaganda and Actual support – How to Make Sense of Russian Polls After February 24th?

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The war in Ukraine is in many ways a shocking, old-fashioned war, a brutal invasion of a kind that many believed could not happen in today's Europe. But at the same time, it is a war that is at least partly unfolding in a strikingly modern context: the digitised information environment. In a coming series of six memos, FOI will inform, describe and analyse how this is playing out: the struggle that is taking place around and with information, both on as well as beyond the physical battlefield. War and communication have always been closely linked, but with the war in Ukraine, that connection is probably stronger than ever.

Since February 24, Russia has been waging a war against Ukraine, in conflict with international conventions and law. Whether Russia's population considers this war just and legitimate will be of importance for the stability and longevity of the country's political system. Opinion polls from the early months of the war fixate president Vladimir Putin, whose personal prestige is vested in the "special military operation", at 83% approval among the population. However, there are concerns that these figures do not represent actual attitudes in Russia, that a veil of artificial legitimacy has been constructed by the Russian leadership, with the added problem of reliability when polling in wartime, and fear.¹

A central question regarding the invasion in Ukraine is whether Russians actually approve of the war, with the high approval ratings being just another example of Russian propaganda. From the Kremlin's position, high approval ratings are essential conditions for the "special military operation". Approval creates an image of legitimacy for the war and the regime, and thus greases the

political machinery in Moscow. Lacking other instruments for measuring acceptance, the polling institutes' approval ratings are important indicators of the support of not only the war, but especially the president himself. But to what extent can survey results be trusted in an authoritarian regime such as Russia's? This paper expands on this issue. It provides a deepened picture of the different types of data and critically analyses the sources of error. We discuss how Russian opinion statistics can or should be used, and whether they lend support to Russia's war in Ukraine.

THE IMPORTANCE OF POPULAR SUPPORT FOR THE RUSSIAN REGIME

Scholars have described Russia as increasingly authoritarian.² Indeed, since Putin's rise to power, much effort has been invested in creating "a cult of personality" around him. Already in the 2000s, youth organisations such as Walking Together (Идущие вместе) and Nashi (Наши) were established to bolster Putin's personal image and leadership. During his reign, a long list of opposition

- 1 Maxim Alyukov, 'In Russia, Opinion Polls Are a Political Weapon', *OpenDemocracy*, 2022 <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/russia-opinion-polls-war-ukraine/>> [accessed 25 March 2022]; Jeremy Morris, 'Don't Trust Opinion Polling about Support in Russia for the Ukraine Invasion', *Postsocialism*, 2022 <<https://postsocialism.org/2022/03/21/dont-trust-opinion-polling-about-support-in-russia-for-the-war-on-ukraine/>> [accessed 29 April 2022]; Сергей Мостовицкий, 'Атомизированная бомба Социальная разобщенность российского общества страшнее ядерной войны', *Новая газета*, 2022 <<https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2022/03/14/atomizirovannaja-bomba>> [accessed 30 March 2022].
- 2 Carsten Anckar and Cecilia Fredriksson, 'Classifying Political Regimes 1800–2016: A Typology and a New Dataset', *European Political Science*, 18.1 (2019), 84–96 <<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-018-0149-8>>; Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz, 'Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitions: A New Data Set', *Perspectives on Politics*, 12.2 (2014), 313–31 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592714000851>>.

forces have been eliminated, for example through imprisonment, poisoning, or murder.³ In effect, together with other institutional measures, the position of the Russian president is today very strong and the degree of personal control over the central state apparatus considerable.

The war in Ukraine is a prestige project, especially for President Putin, who has attributed much of the war effort to his name and position. During the days just prior to the war, the president ridiculed, belittled, and shamed his national security council, while at the same time forcing its members to become complicit in the recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk as independent states.⁴ State television has aired several national addresses in which the president explained and legitimised the war effort for the Russian population. To support the war, certain ways of speaking about it have been made illegal, as has any kind of protest. Since the war, at the time of writing, has not turned out as successfully as the Russian leadership had hoped, these restrictive measures strain not only the relationship to the Russian population, but the president's position as well. Notwithstanding the symbolic confidence that many people place in their leaders,⁵ president Putin is particularly associated with this war. Having personally vested himself in the aggression against Ukraine, an equivalence between Putin and the war is likely to have been generated among the Russian population. This makes the president's approval ratings even more important and increases the need to analyse them critically.

THE STATE OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA AND FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Already in 2021, Freedom House labelled Russia as "not free," and Reporters Without Borders deemed Russia to be one of the least free countries in the world (ranked

150/180).⁶ Since then the situation has deteriorated and the country is today again referred to as "totalitarian". Restrictions on freedom of speech have been tightening since Putin's first inauguration, in 2000. However, after the nationwide anti-government protests against election fraud, in 2011–12, the pressure on independent media has grown even stronger, and Russians have been penalised, sometimes even for "likes," or re-tweets, on social media.⁷ Today, a large number of individuals and organisations are labelled as "foreign agents", which limits these actors' ability to work in Russia. The amount of people and organisations receiving this label has increased substantially since the outbreak of the war, indicating that the Russian leadership is rapidly moving in a more authoritarian direction. Moreover, in the beginning of March 2022, a new law banning the "spread of false information" (also known as the "fakes law", in Russian *zakon o feykakh*) about the Russian armed forces was signed; violators of this law can be punished with up to 15 years in prison.⁸

The Russian state-controlled media outlets are the main sources of state propaganda for the domestic public. State-controlled media houses such as TV-Novosti, Gazprom Media and VGTRK have been broadcasting propagandistic messages on political matters for a long time. The political leadership in Russia has been paying close attention to state media; the president has even been known to instruct media outlets personally about their reporting at times.⁹ Many citizens, especially of the older generation (see below) base their opinions on this state-sponsored propaganda. Many Russians do not have easy access to impartial information about the war and in some ways can be said to support a fantasy in which Russia's actions are benevolent, the Ukrainians are either fascists or welcoming the Russian liberators,

3 Masha Gessen, *The future Is history: how totalitarianism reclaimed Russia* New York: Riverhead Books, 2017; Christo Grozev and others, 'Vladimir Kara-Murza Tailed by Members of FSB Squad Prior to Suspected Poisonings', 2021 <<https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2021/02/11/vladimir-kara-murza-tailed-by-members-of-fsb-squad-prior-to-suspected-poisonings/>>; Kalle Kniivilä, *Putins värsta fiende : Aleksej Navalnyj och hans anhängare* Stockholm: Bokförlaget Atlas, 2021.

4 Walker, Shaun. 'Putin's Absurd, Angry Spectacle Will Be a Turning Point in His Long Reign'. *The Guardian*, 21 February 2022, sec. World news. <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/21/putin-angry-spectacle-amounts-to-declaration-war-ukraine>>.

5 Vladimir Shlapentokh, 'Trust in Public Institutions in Russia: The Lowest in the World', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 39.2 (2006), 153–74 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2006.03.004>>.

6 These organisations rank countries' degree of freedom based on a number of different indicators, such rule of law, political rights, and electoral integrity. See: Freedom House, 'Russia: Freedom in the World 2022 Country Report', 2022 <<https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/freedom-world/2022>>; Reporters without borders, 'Russia', 2022 <<https://rsf.org/en/country/russia>>.

7 Associated Press, 'Russians Are Getting Years in Jail for Their Social Media 'Likes'', 2016 <<https://nypost.com/2016/05/31/russians-are-getting-years-in-jail-for-their-social-media-likes/>>; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 'Russian Editor Jailed Over Joke Retweet', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 2021 <<https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-smirnov-mediazona-editor-jailed-joke--retweet-mass-gatherings-navalny/31084551.html>>.

8 Anton Troianovski, 'Russia Takes Censorship to New Extremes, Stifling War Coverage', *The New York Times*, 2022 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/04/world/europe/russia-censorship-media-crackdown.html>>.

9 Zakem Vera et al, *Mapping Russian Media Network: Media's Role in Russian Foreign Policy and Decision-Making*, Fort Belvoir: Defense Technical Information Center, 2017 <<https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/AD1038224>>.

and the West is aggressively expanding ever eastwards.¹⁰ This is the context in which the opinion polls discussed here should be situated. In liberal democracies, people's political preferences are communicated via elections. However, in authoritarian countries such as Russia, it is harder to grasp the population's preferences because of the lack of free and fair elections. The Russian state has several ways of communicating the official policy, but authoritarian politics limit the capacity to accurately gauge domestic opinions. Polls are therefore an important source of both information and a potential propaganda tool.

SURVEYS IN RUSSIA: BEFORE AND AFTER THE INVASION IN UKRAINE

As repression of civil society and limitations on freedom of speech have grown in Russia since Putin came to power, one could think that Russian surveys are also likely to be heavily biased or even falsified. However, Russia is atypical in this case; although authoritarian politicians have rolled back nascent democratic institutions since the 2000s, Russia has participated in many reputable international social survey programs, such as the World Values Survey, European Social Survey, International Social Survey Programme, and the like, for decades. Consequently, there has traditionally been quite a lot of high quality survey data on Russians' attitudes, especially given the overall level of authoritarianism and increasingly tightening grip on independent media and other means of communication in the country.

Historically, the results of surveys in Russia have seemed to be reasonably credible. Different surveys often present

similar results on various social questions. Accordingly, Russian surveys do not paint a merely rosy picture of Russian society: for example, as documented in multiple surveys, political and generalised trust are among the lowest in the world, a result that is hardly flattering for the Kremlin, which emphasises unity and the community spirit of the Russian population.¹¹

Fluctuations in the figures resulting from sensitive questions such as "Do you approve Putin's actions?" indicate that Russians seem to speak out against the politics they dislike. As figure 1 illustrates, Putin's popularity, a potentially sensitive question¹², has fluctuated significantly over time. The figure shows a peak of support in Putin's approval ratings in 2014, after the annexation of Crimea. Putin's support peaked similarly after the recent invasion in Ukraine. Interestingly, the peaks in his support also seem to coincide with Russia's major foreign policy events (e.g. Russo-Georgian War, Annexation of Crimea) and go down with domestic policy crises (e.g. Beslan school siege, 2011 election and 2018 pension reform protests). It is also noteworthy that, unlike many other world leaders, in the light of his approval ratings Putin did not seem to benefit politically from the COVID-19 crisis.¹³ On the contrary, according to the Levada-Center polls, these ratings even reached a historical minimum in April-May 2020.¹⁴ Stagnating and dipping popularity figures since the 2018 pension reform might even be hypothesized as one of the factors behind Russia's invasion of Ukraine.¹⁵

After Russia invaded Ukraine, in February 2022, the state-aligned pollsters, VTsIOM and FOM, quickly reported that support for the war (or the "special military

10 Ilya Yablokov, 'The Five Conspiracy Theories That Putin Has Weaponized', *The New York Times*, 2022 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/25/opinion/putin-russia-conspiracy-theories.html>>.

11 Cooper, Julian. 'Russia's Updated National Security Strategy'. Russian Studies Series 2/21. NATO Defense College, 2021. <<https://www.ndc.nato.int/research/research.php?icode=704>>. >; Deutsche Welle, 'Vladimir Putin Interview: Liberal Idea Has "Outlived Its Purpose"', *DW.COM*, 2019 <<https://www.dw.com/en/vladimir-putin-interview-liberal-idea-has-outlived-its-purpose/a-49384176>> [accessed 1 August 2022].

12 In May 2020, the Russian Embassy accused the news agency Bloomberg news report on historic low approval ratings of Putin for citing the "wrong figures" of VTsIOM on Putin's trust ratings in Russia. The Russian Foreign Ministry slammed the report, showing that the real figures provided by VTsIOM (67–68%), which Bloomberg claimed to cite, were altered in the report. In reality, Bloomberg's report cited real VTsIOM's data on trust in Putin, but measured with a different question formulation. The trust data Bloomberg cited was measured with an open question, whereas "the real figures" that the Russian Foreign Ministry tried to promote were measured with a closed question. This is one example of how important opinion polls are for Russia's political leadership and political system established under Putin. For details, see: EU vs DISINFORMATION, 'Disinfo: Bloomberg Fakes Putin's Approval Numbers', *EU vs DISINFORMATION*, 2020 <<https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/bloomberg-fakes-putins-approval-numbers>> [accessed 1 August 2022]; Russian Embassy in USA [@RusEmbUSA], 'The Editors of #Bloomberg Continue to Show Complete Disrespect for Its Readers. They Probably Hope That Their Audience Will Not Check Russian Sources and Find a Real @WCIOM Data Read More: <https://Facebook.Com/RusEmbUSA/Photos/a.493759737501088/1315040288706358/> <https://T.Co/NKXtZPvtNO>', *Twitter*, 2020 <<https://twitter.com/RusEmbUSA/status/1264335928434229249>> [accessed 1 August 2022].

13 Bloomberg, 'Putin Approval Rating Hits Record Low As Virus Crisis Deepens', *Bloomberg.Com*, 6 May 2020 <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-05-06/putin-approval-rating-hits-record-low-as-virus-crisis-deepens>> [accessed 29 July 2022]; Sergei Klebnikov, 'Most World Leaders See Approval Ratings Surge Amid Coronavirus. Not Trump.' *Forbes*, 2020 <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/sergeiklebnikov/2020/04/18/most-world-leaders-see-approval-ratings-surge-amid-coronavirus-not-trump/>>.

14 Левада-центр, 'Одобрение органов власти', 2022 <<https://www.levada.ru/indikatory/odobrenie-organov-vlasti/>>.

15 Amy Kellogg, 'Could Putin Emerge Stronger after Russia-Ukraine War? Political Scientist Flags Warning Signs', *Fox News* (Fox News, 2022) <<https://www.foxnews.com/world/putin-emerge-stronger-russia-ukraine-war-political-scientist-warning-signs>> [accessed 29 July 2022].

Do you approve the activities of Vladimir Putin as the President (Prime Minister) of Russia? ('Yes' - %)

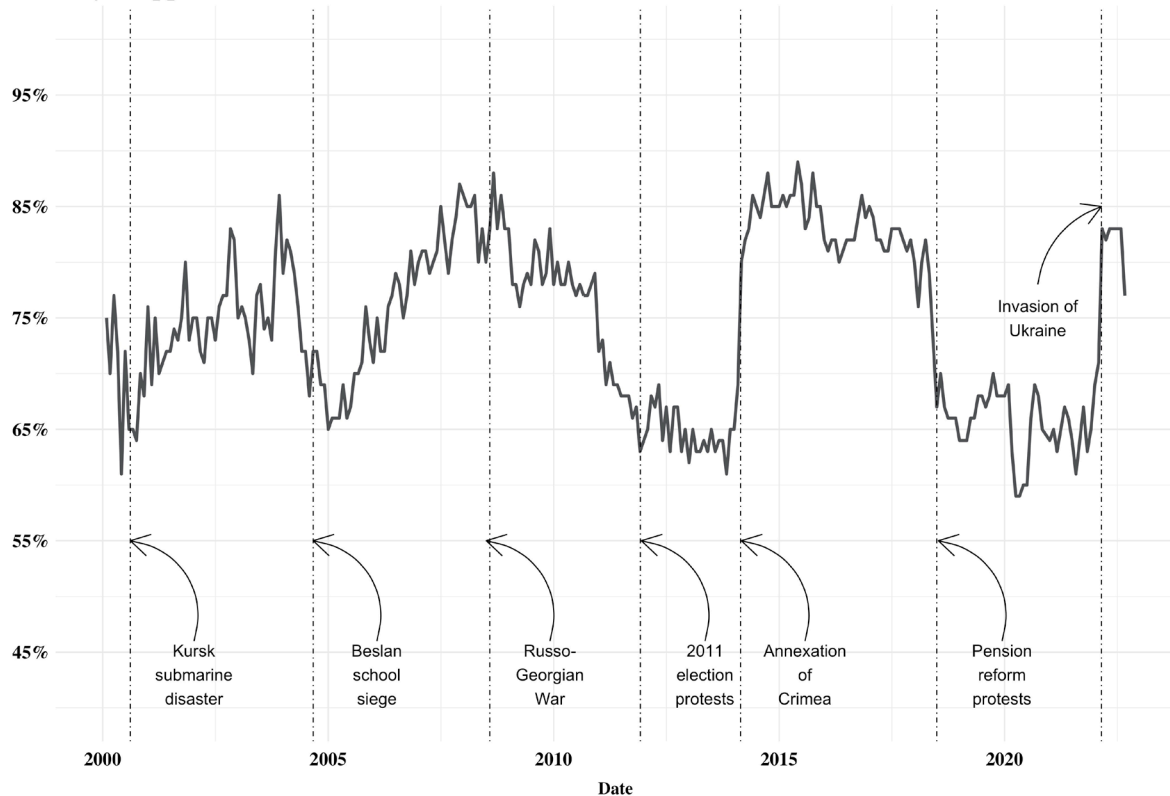


Figure 1: Putin's approval ratings in. Percentage of positive replies to the question "Do you approve of the activities of Vladimir Putin as the President (Prime Minister) of Russia?" for the years 2000-2022.

operation") among Russians was somewhere between 65% and 70%. At the same time, independent pollsters reported that support for the Russian invasion was a bit less than 60%, rather than close to 70%, among Russians. A month after the invasion, the reputed Russian pollster Levada-Center reported support among the Russian population for Russia's military actions was around 80%.¹⁶ The most recent figure show a strong decline in the president's popularity after the announcement of mass mobilisation in support of the war in September.

The differences between opinion polls carried out by different Russian pollsters since the 2022 invasion started are shown in figure 2. Besides the major Russian polling organisations, VTsIOM, FOM and Levada-Center, three other state-independent research groups have also conducted polls about the subject and published their results recently.¹⁷

Of these six organisations, the VTsIOM (Russian Public Opinion Research Center) and the FOM (Public Opinion Fund) are, practically speaking, owned by the Kremlin; both have close ties to the president himself and share the Presidential Administration and the ruling party, United Russia, as their biggest clients.¹⁸ The Levada-Center, in turn, was established in 2003 by the former head of VTsIOM, Yuri Levada. Levada was also early key resesarchers at VTsIOM, but left and founded the Levada-Center after the Kremlin took over VTsIOM. The new management at VTsIOM appointed sociologists loyal to the state to head VTsIOM.¹⁹ Levada-Center was labelled as a foreign agent in 2016 on the grounds that it had received funding from the U.S. It is currently the institute that arguably, holds the highest regard in Russia.²⁰ "Chronicles" and Russian Field's polls represent, in turn,

¹⁶ Interestingly, the raw data for most of these surveys can be downloaded, which enables researchers and other interested actors to examine the figures in more detail – quite often the three major Russian polling agencies Levada-Center, VTsIOM and FOM offer only the descriptive results of their surveys, which prevents the further investigation of their data. However, the raw data of VTsIOM's surveys are openly available.

¹⁷ Левада-центр, 'Одобрение органов власти', 2022 <<https://www.levada.ru/indikatory/odobrenie-organov-vlasti/>> [accessed 7 April 2022].

¹⁸ Павел Макеев, 'Директор ВЦИОМ Валерий Федоров: Наш основной заказчик Кремль и «Единая Россия»', 2013 <<https://snob.ru/selected/entry/64052>>.

¹⁹ Михаил Зыгарь, *Вся кремлевская рать Краткая история современной России* (Москва: ООО «Интеллектуальная литература», 2016), p. 73.

²⁰ It should be noted that VTsIOM and FOM are also generally considered to be professional institutes, despite their close ties to the Presidential Administration.

Comparison of Russian war polls:

"Do you support war/special military operation in Ukraine?"

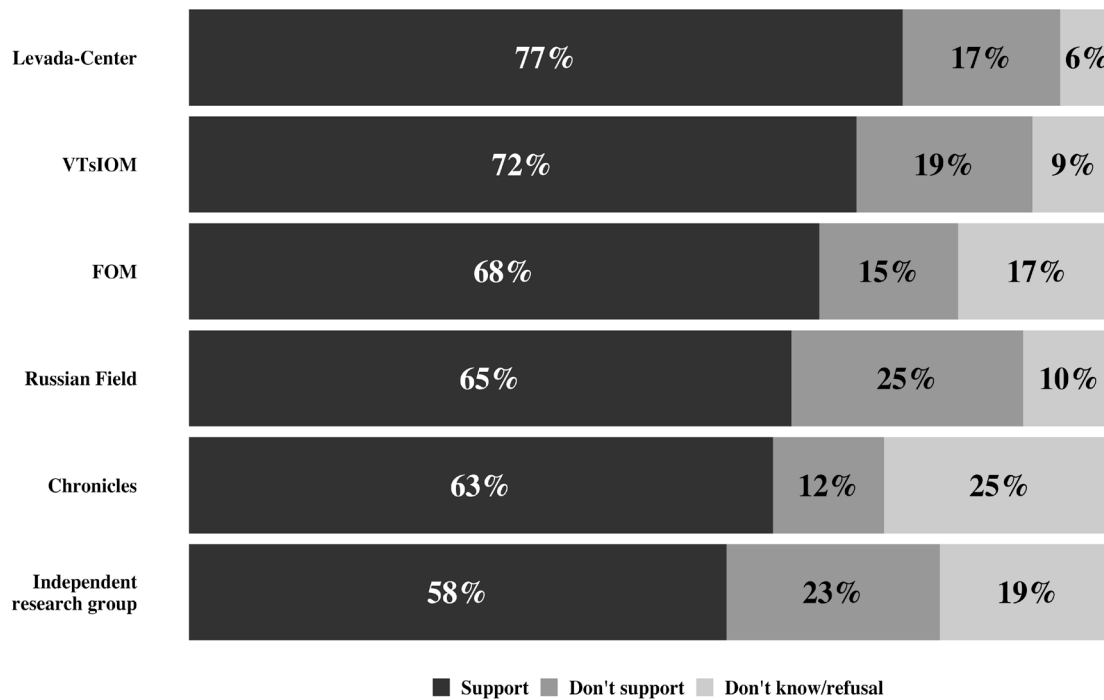


Figure 2: Support for the war among the Russian population, according to different surveys.

Note: More detailed description of these surveys and organizations behind them below and in Table 1.

state-independent and oppositional actors. The former, a research project, was “designed by a Russian oppositional politician Alexei Minailo and the like-minded (sociologists, analytics, data-analysts).”²¹ It aims at “speaking up on how the war with Ukraine is being perceived in Russia” and “changing the public opinion on the war”²². One of the key figures of the Russian Field’s polls, in turn, is Russian oppositional activist Maxim Katz²³, who was labelled as a “foreign agent” by the Kremlin in July 2022.

Polling data of the organisation named here as “independent research group” could previously be found online on the DropMeFiles.com website, but the link no longer works. However, there are good grounds for believing that this poll was also driven by Russian opposition forces, as Russian opposition politician Vladimir Milov tweeted about the results soon after the

poll was conducted.²⁴ Nevertheless, it seems that the people behind this survey preferred to stay anonymous. Table 1 summarises the basic information about the polling organisations visualised in Figure 2. Note that the polls were conducted on different dates, some of them were conducted before the amendment of the Russian Penal Code that criminalised talking about the war (the “fakes” law), and some of them afterwards.

Depending on how these polls are perceived, they tell different stories. If poll figures are viewed simply as propaganda tools, the figures tell us what the Kremlin propaganda machinery wishes the Russian public, as well as international audiences, to perceive. Viewed as essentially valid data but beset with methodological problems, the data tells a story about how Russians relate to the Russian leadership, and possibly about the effectiveness of long-term propaganda.

21 Dorussianswantwar.com, ‘Хотят Ли Русские Войны’, 2022 <<https://www.dorussianswantwar.com/en>>.

22 ‘Chronicles – About’, *Хроники - Chronicles*, 2022 <<https://www.chronicles.report/en/about>> [accessed 29 July 2022].

23 Russian Field, ‘«Специальная Военная Операция» На Украине: Отношение Россиян’, 2022 <<https://russianfield.com/netvoine>>.

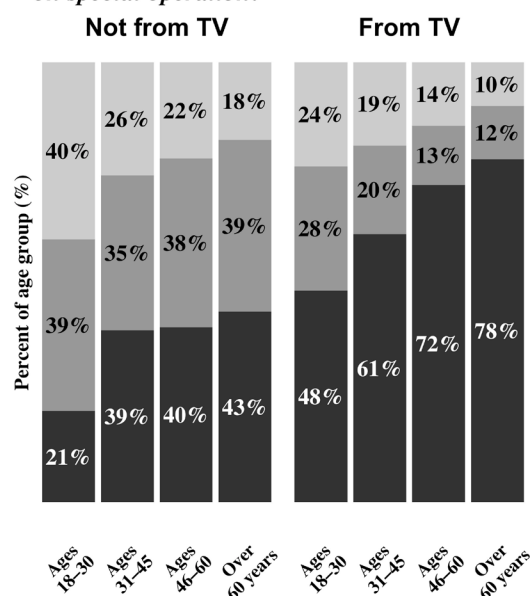
24 Vladimir Milov, ‘Далеко не всё так безнадежно в плане общественного мнения, есть с чем работать + твердого большинства в поддержке путинской агрессии нет даже на начальной стадии войны. Подробнее позже. Распространяем правду и боремся с пропагандой! <https://t.co/d1v7NpJpE>’, 2022 <https://mobile.twitter.com/v_milov/status/1499730397328031744>.

Tabell 1: Summary of the polling organisations and their surveys on Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Survey organization	Date of survey	Sample size	State dependency	Affiliation
Levada-Center	24.–31.5.2022	4882	No	Labelled as “foreign agent” by Russian state authorities since 2016
VTsIOM	25.2.–26.5.2022	14400	Yes	Close ties to Presidential Administration and government
FOM	27.2.–20.5.2022	6000	Yes	Close ties to Presidential Administration and government
Chronicles	28.2.–19.5.2022	8438	No	Oppositional
Russian Field	26.2.–26.5.2022	6821	No	Oppositional
Independent researchers	28.2.–1.3.2022	1640	No	Anonymous non-governmental researchers

Independent research group:

"Where do you receive information on special operation?"



VTsIOM:

"Do you watch TV daily?"

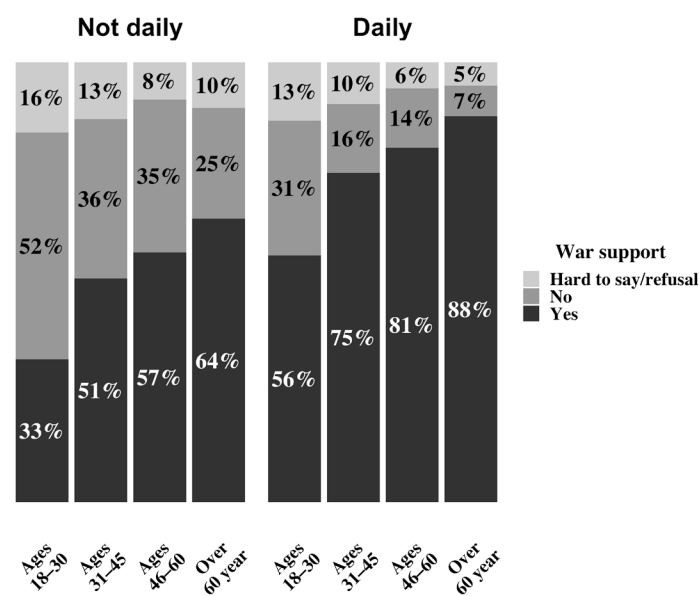


Figure 3: Relationship between age, TV consumption and support for the war.

In the latter context, some figures are more or less stable, and similar trends were already reported before the war.²⁵ Some of the clearest trends we can observe from the recent polls on the invasion are the generational gap and how

television consumption affects the perceptions of war. Figure 3 compares the independent researcher group's figures with the state-owned VTsIOM data with respect to these variables. It shows notable similarities between the results

25 Graeme Robertson, 'Political Orientation, Information and Perceptions of Election Fraud: Evidence from Russia', *British Journal of Political Science*, 47.3 (2017), 589–608 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123415000356>>; Graeme Robertson and Samuel Greene, 'The Kremlin Emboldened: How Putin Wins Support', *Journal of Democracy*, 28.4 (2017), 86–100 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2017.0069>>.

of the different polls and resonates with previous research on media consumption and political attitudes in Russia.²⁶ They also hint at the importance of media consumption for critical questioning of the Russian political leadership: people who receive most of their information from TV tend to support not only the regime but, today, also the war.

While the numbers differ quite substantially at times, the trends are very similar in both data sets. Younger people and those who do not watch TV daily report substantially lower rates of support for the war. The main difference is the category, “Hard to say/refusal,” where the independent researcher group’s data show much higher rates. This might be an indication of the tendency by Russian citizens to respond in a politically expected manner. On the other hand, the VTsIOM data reports a much higher degree of opposition to the war among young people who have low TV consumption. Whether or not the figures are accurate representations of the support among the Russian population, the samples are large enough to constitute interesting sources of information. Below, we discuss the validity of Russian surveys, based on four generic criticisms.

HOW TO USE WARTIME OPINION POLLS?

There are important concerns that surveys do not represent the genuine sentiments of respondents in authoritarian countries. First, the numbers may be fabricated.²⁷ Second, the respondents hide their true preferences when answering the surveys.²⁸ Third, public opinion is manipulated by the Kremlin-controlled media; and, finally, the extremely low response and completion rates in Russian surveys erode their representativeness.²⁹

After Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine began, in February 2022, these critiques have been repeated. Additionally, some scholars suggest we should not trust the polls on Russia’s current military actions at all, and that in general these surveys should not be used to analyse Russian

public support for the invasion.³⁰ The rationale for not using these polls is that they can be weaponised to bolster the Kremlin’s narrative on there being high support for the Ukraine invasion. Moreover, there are concerns that poll results indicating high support for the invasion can also downplay the anti-war and oppositional activism in Russia, and simply label all Russians as “pro-war Putin supporters.”

The first line of critique, about the numbers simply being made up, seems unlikely, because multiple polls by different organisations, and different questions, paint a rather similar picture of the support for the war. Also, since there are various non-governmental and oppositional polls on the invasion, one can rightfully ask why the people behind these oppositional surveys would engage in risky anti-Kremlin research just to present fabricated numbers? As for the concern that Russians might be hiding their true opinions when answering the war polls, it is true that this issue is highly politicised, and the danger of severe social desirability bias is real. Indeed, results of an experimental survey on Russians’ support of the war suggest that among the respondents there is significant preference falsification on this question.³¹ Yet, as the authors of the experiment conclude, a large number of Russians – more precisely, 53% – do support the invasion, even when given the option of revealing their true private preferences without consequences.³² Another experimental study on Putin’s support, from 2017, suggested that his popularity at that time was by and large real.³³ When it comes to the Kremlin’s ability to manipulate public opinion, the state’s control over major media outlets limits the ability of many Russians to come into contact with alternative views on the invasion. However, Russians are generally well educated and over 80% have access to the internet.³⁴ Thus, Russians also have ways to receive alternative information on the situation. Also, even if the majority of Russians receive

26 Smyth, Regina, and Sarah Oates. ‘Mind the Gaps: Media Use and Mass Action in Russia’. *Europe-Asia Studies* 67, no. 2 (2015): 285–305. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2014.1002682>>.

27 Jeremy Morris, ‘Don’t Trust Opinion Polling about Support in Russia for the Ukraine Invasion’, Blog entry Postsocialism, 2022 <<https://postsocialism.org/2022/03/21/dont-trust-opinion-polling-about-support-in-russia-for-the-war-on-ukraine/>>.

28 Kirill Rogov, *Public opinion in Putin’s Russia. The public sphere, opinion climate and ‘authoritarian bias’*, NUPI Working Paper 878, Oslo: NUPI, 2017 <<https://nupi.brage.unit.no/nupi-xmlui/handle/11250/2452184>>.

29 Gleb Napreenko, “‘Scratch a Russian Liberal and You’ll Find an Educated Conservative’: An Interview with Sociologist Greg Yudin”, Blog entry, LeftEast, 2017 <<https://lefteast.org/scratch-a-russian-liberal-and-youll-find-an-educated-conservative-an-interview-with-sociologist-greg-yudin/>>.

30 Aleksanteri Institute, ‘How to Deal with Surveys from Russia? An Expert Panel Discussion’, 2022 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n1Kp9nTyYyo>>.

31 Philipp Chapkovski and Max Schaub, ‘Do Russians Tell the Truth When They Say They Support the War in Ukraine? Evidence from a List Experiment’, Blog entry, Europp, 2022 <<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2022/04/06/do-russians-tell-the-truth-when-they-say-they-support-the-war-in-ukraine-evidence-from-a-list-experiment/>>.

32 The respondents were recruited on Toloka, a platform similar to Amazon MTurk.

33 Timothy Frye and others, ‘Is Putin’s Popularity Real?’, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 33.1 (2017), 1–15 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2016.1144334>>.

34 ФОМ [FOM]. ‘Источники информации. Интернет’. ФОМ, 17 February 2022. <<https://fom.ru/SMI-i-internet/14689>>.

their information about the invasion from state-owned media, we cannot directly conclude from this that all of the support for Putin and the war is, by default, fabricated.

Perhaps the most relevant concern about polls on the invasion regards the low response and completion rates. The willingness to respond to surveys is low not only in Russia and, typically, response rates around 20–25% are today not uncommon even in most democratic countries. The fact that most of the pollsters report neither the response nor completion rates of their surveys emphasises this problem. Although the sample sizes of these polls might be adequate for generalisations, it is less clear what kind of conclusions we can draw from them, if, say, less than 10% of potential respondents are willing to participate (low response rate).³⁵ The same thing is true if a majority of the respondents abort the interview after they hear the questions (low completion rate). In this case, it is reasonable to ask, “who are these 90–95% who were reluctant to participate?”; and “what was the motivation of the 5–10% who participated in the survey?” The only polls to report the completion rates are the ones by “independent research group[s]” and Russian Field. The former reports the completion rate to be around 6%, while the latter reports a rate of around 8%. Naturally, this poses a severe reliability issue and questions the overall generalisability of the results. Moreover, nothing indicates that other polling institutes would have dramatically different conditions that would yield substantially higher ratios.

Low eagerness to participate in surveys might also indicate that Russians are afraid to participate in polls on political subjects. This concern is especially relevant regarding highly politicised events such as Russia’s current invasion in Ukraine. Yet, the evidence on whether Russians dare to participate the surveys on the topic or not is mixed. On the one hand, the extremely low response rates presented above indicate that many respondents were likely to be afraid to participate in surveys after the February 24th of 2022. On the other, the Levada-Center’s polls on willingness to participate in surveys before (in 2020) and after the invasion of Ukraine suggest that the level of willingness to take part in surveys has not changed dramatically in Russia during this time.³⁶ Moreover, in one of the Russian Field’s surveys (an “oppositional” poll as per the table above), respondents were asked directly whether they are afraid to answer poll questions on the events in

Ukraine. 76% of the respondents said that they are not afraid to answer, while 21% were afraid, and 3% refused to answer this question. The question of masking opinion may therefore be more open than previously thought.

In sum, the question of whether or not to use the available data may not be black or white. While there are certainly important reasons to approach Russian opinion polls with caution, it would be a mistake not to use the information at all. Since we have a limited amount of alternative data on the subject, we are at the moment dependent on these survey data. The question of how to relate to the data is discussed below.

CONCLUSION

How can one relate to opinion polls during wartime? The easy answer is that the Russian propaganda machinery utilises information and manipulates opinions in ways that makes it impossible to discern any “real” opinions. Even the most vivid supporters may fear for their lives about the possibility of giving the wrong answer. Also, the tendency for humans to seek to be part of the majority easily creates a “rally ’round the flag” type of behaviour that may in the short term create higher support for the regime than normal. In short, polls have the potential to become weaponised information, used strategically by the Russian leadership to curb dissent.

However, this is a view that may need reflection and a perspective on a post-war scenario. First, it is likely that a substantial portion of Russians genuinely support the war and the president, regardless of whether or not they do it as an effect of the propaganda. The part of the population that is sceptical to the war, and to the increasing authoritarianism in Russia, is perhaps more interesting to us. How large is it? Can it be a source of change in the coming years or is it too marginalised to make any difference? Given a change in the degree of repression, is it likely that this group will be more prevalent and attract others? Accordingly, it is important to note that even if the “actual support” for the recent invasion is not as high as the polls suggest, the prospects for a change in the situation due to public demands are slim. Silent approval is still approval, and if most Russians are indifferent about the invasion, they do not challenge the status quo, either.

Second, it is difficult when envisioning a post-war scenario to ignore the sizeable support for Putin and the

35 As a comparison, the European Social Survey has a target response rate of 70%. In round 6, only two countries included in the survey has response rates below 50 %. See: Beullens, K. Matsuo, H., Loosveldt, G., & Vandenplas, C., *Quality report for the European Social Survey*, Round 6. London: European Social Survey ERIC, 2014.

36 Левада-центр, ‘Участие в опросах и доверие данным’, 2022 <<https://www.levada.ru/2022/05/24/uchastie-v-oprosah-i-doverie-dannym/>> [accessed 1 August 2022].

war. Let us play with the idea that the Putin regime ends. What would that situation be like? If there is an 83 % support for the (then) previous regime's politics,³⁷ there is a substantial risk that a new revanchist political agency assumes power in the Kremlin, which may simply continue on the same road as before. The West must not be naïve with respect to the potential support for a continuation of such authoritarian politics even when Putin himself is gone. If we view contemporary opinion polls strictly as propaganda instruments, there is a risk of missing the potential for backlash in the future. When planning for a post-Putin, post-war scenario, not only the institutional structures of the existing regime must be taken into consideration, but also the attitudinal structures, whether manipulated by years of propaganda and fear, or not. Otherwise, there is a great risk that another Putinesque politician simply takes his place after him.

Polls tell us much about a society, but as researchers we must be careful not to use them as real representations of reality. Also, rather than seeking for the "true level" of support for the war, it is often probably more revealing to examine the relative relationships and/or correlations between different variables from the Russian polls on war, as was done here in figure 5. The low response and completion frequencies alone pose important reliability problems, and the use of opinion data for propaganda purposes increases the need to treat such data with care. But we must not be indifferent to the possibility that a part

of the story the opinion polls tell us is accurate. The very similar results by different pollsters tend to favour such an interpretation. What is or is not manipulation may never be revealed, but a critically informed use of such data is still possible. ■

ACCESS THE DATA

All internet sources referenced in this document were last accessed on September 22, 2022, unless stated otherwise. The survey data used in this paper, excluding the data of the "independent research group," can be accessed from the following sources:

- [Russian Field](#)
- [Chronicles](#)
- [VTsIOM](#)
- [FOM](#)
- [Levada-Center \(descriptive statistics only, no raw data\)](#)

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³⁷ This was the approval rating for president Putin from the Levada-Center, as of March 2022.