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Captivated by war

*The Russian People in the face of
the Ukraine War, Mobilization,
and Tactical Defeat*

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Table of Contents

Key Points	4
1. Introduction	6
2. Putinism, war, and the Russian people	8
2.1. Putin’s approval rates	8
2.2. Putin’s trust rates	11
3. Russian people and the war in Ukraine: what about the Donbas consensus?	15
3.1. Putin’s approval rates in 2022	17
3.2. Support for the actions of the Russian military in Ukraine	18
3.3. Russian society at war dissected: the tale of Four Russias	20
3.4. Russian society at war dissected: the paradox or the tale of three Russias	24
3.5. The profile of supporters and opposers of the war	26
3.6. The Crimea and Donbas consensus compared	27
4. The end	28
Information Box: A Critical View on Russian Opinion Research	29
Detailed List of illustrations, polling questions, and data References	31
Bibliography	32
Endnotes	36



Key points

Methodenstreit

Russian public opinion research is subject to many problems, including:

- a high number of refusals to participate, prematurely ending the survey, or non-responses to sensitive questions (a.k.a. the non-response bias).
- a high level of conformity and compliance (a.k.a. the social desirability bias or preference falsification).
- the acclamation phenomenon, or the “ritual agreeing” with the authorities (Grigory Yudin).
- the impact of the wording and presentation of the question. (For instance, the pure fact of using the name of V. Putin in the question may bias the survey’s outcome.)
- a confrontation with an abundance of questionnaires that leads to the saturation of the respondents.

As a result, alternative research estimates the approval and support levels 10 to 20% lower than those published by Russia’s leading polling agencies (Levada, VTsIOM, FOM). This observation doesn’t change the fact that the majority of the Russian population expresses its support for Putin’s war in the surveys.

Therefore, the following basic rules guide our analysis:

- Approximate knowledge is better than complete ignorance (Elena Koneva).
- Surveys do not necessarily reveal what people think or believe. They instead show what people want to share in public (Denis Volkov and Andrei Kolesnikov).
- Our focus is put on trends rather than on absolute numbers (Grigory Yudin).
- Surveys’ outcomes are considered within the strict context of Russian society.

Vladimir Putin’s fluctuating status (2012-2022)

- Vladimir Putin is Russia’s absolute first person [pervoye litso], and there is no alternative for him. (Potential competitors are side-tracked, isolated, if not eliminated). The president receives the highest trust and approval rates and the lowest distrust and disapproval rates.
- Vladimir Putin is most vulnerable when the weak economic foundations of the state show their effects and when drastic, unpopular social measures are unavoidable. His power is most solid and entrenched in times of war. Hence, war is instrumental in the regime’s survival, allowing us to suspect the Kremlin of an agenda-setting policy.
- There is a latent potential for discontent in Russian society. Paradoxically, the Russian population also shows high conformity and passivity. The latter may be explained by: (1) the highly centralized and authoritarian character of the Putin regime, which applies manipulation and coercion to keep the population regimented; (2) the existence of an autocratic middle class highly dependent on the privileges of the state (Bryn Rosenfeld) or the social contract; and (3) the concept of the *homo Sovieticus* (a.k.a. *Homo Putinus*). This refers to the idea that Putinism has re-installed the socio-political context that breeds scheming, hypocritical, frustrated, and opportunistic citizens showing little initiative or responsibility (Yuri Levada and Lev Gudkov).



The Ukraine war 2022

- Russia's invasion of Ukraine has caused a significant jump in the approval & trust rates of the president. Over 2022, Putin's approval rates and levels of support for the war remained high, with a slight decline in August and September. Approval and support levels at the end of the year seem to be consolidated just above the 2012-2022 average level of 74%. These outcomes indicate that, for the time being, the effect of mobilization and tactical defeat in the autumn of 2022 has had no lasting impact on the population's support for the war.
- The annexation of the Crimea has introduced a period of ecstatic national pride and euphoric mobilization, a.k.a. the Crimean Consensus [Krymskiy konsensus] or the Crimean Spring [Krymskaya vesna]. Currently, propagandists want to promote the idea of a similar Donbas Consensus. Given the survey outcomes, this may seem legitimate. Yet, alternative research shows more diffuse emotions, growing hesitation, and more paradoxes and inconsistencies among the population compared with 2014-2016. These observations do not only nuance the idea of a Donbas Consensus. They also show that the Russian people are confronted with a new reality: from a short, effective, and successful foreign operation against a relatively "weak opponent", the war has developed into a state of "total war against the West". In 2022, the Russian population woke up in a militant garrison state.
- Over 2022, several typologies of Russian society have been presented based on popular support for the war. Each of them has its advantages and inconveniences. The most relevant seems to us the typology where Russian society is subdivided into the party of war, the party of peace, and a large group of conformists.
- While the conformists constitute the most significant part of Russian society (35- 40%), alternative research shows that the war and peace parties represent about the same size (20 -25%). If true, this means that the established polling agencies have systematically underestimated the group of those who actively oppose the war (10-15%) and overestimated those who actively support the war (40-50%).
- Both the war and peace parties pose a potential threat to the Putin regime, representing a faction that may undermine Putin's power through a palace coup or a popular uprising.
- In the short run, the war effort can be maintained by running the propaganda machine at full capacity and nipping any form of protest in the bud. In the long run, however, Putin must achieve military success on the battlefield to appease the party of war, limit the economic damage to maintain the passivity of the conformists, and end the fighting to keep the party of peace isolated. This is a contradictory package of tasks, illustrating the absurdity of Putin's endeavour and the system's fragility.

The challenge

- One cannot fight the Kremlin's toxic propaganda program with rational arguments. Although Putin's course of action is a disaster in disguise, a strategy based solely on military logic is all that is left.
- Public opinion outcomes have little or no predictive value. Nevertheless, analysts should monitor how the balance between the war and peace parties develops in 2023. This is a critical indicator to assess how the Russian people face the war in Ukraine and how it relates to the leadership at home.
- The litmus test of the Putin regime will be the announced spring offensive. The renewed attack on Ukraine (Invasion 2.0) will determine the outcome of the Ukraine war and the future of Putinism.
- What is the attitude of the West towards this open-ended challenge?



“I console myself by saying that the people are with me. You must always be with your people. The people are always right, and when they are wrong, we do not have the right to abandon them”.
(Anna, a Russian citizen supporting the war)¹

“You don’t know what’s going on’, I heard from anti-European Russians in Paris and Rome. Always that talk: the people don’t like us here, neither over there. Listen, friends, if there’s one place they don’t like us, it’s at home, in Moscow”.
(Maxim Osipov)²

1. Introduction

On Saturday, 19 November 2022, on the occasion of the publication of his book *The Road to Ukraine: How the West Lost Its way*, the British-Hungarian sociologist Frank Furedi answered the question of whether the Russian people still supported Putin. His reply was sharp and surprisingly simple: “We don’t know, and there’s no way to know”.³ This view is not unique. In September 2022, Grigory Yudin, a renowned Russian sociologist and public opinion expert, responded similarly to whether the Russian people supported Putin’s partial mobilization decision. He squarely stated, “Impossible to tell”.⁴

There are solid arguments for upholding this sceptical position. Firstly, within the social sciences, there is a school of thought distrustful of public opinion even when all the conditions for methodological rigour are fulfilled. Pierre Bourdieu’s famous article “public opinion does not exist” may be referred to as one of the most outspoken representatives of this view.⁵ Today, elements of his argumentation are still used by critics who refuse to take Russian public opinion seriously.⁶ Secondly, public opinion research is considered even more suspicious when studied in authoritarian regimes. Indeed, as Putin has imposed an intricate system of state propaganda, censorship, and repression, the question of whether Russians are telling the truth when responding to survey questions is legitimate.

As an indication, when people who oppose the war are asked if they are afraid to answer survey questions related to the “events” in Ukraine, half of the respondents (48%) admit being afraid. For those who declare to support the war, a quarter of the respondents (24%) say they are scared to answer questions about the war.⁷ (This anxiousness, however, stands in sharp contrast with horrifying hashtags such as #IAmNotAshamed (#МнеНеСтыдно) one can find on Russian social media).⁸

Yet, approximate knowledge is better than complete ignorance.⁹ Therefore, the question remains whether we can approximate Russian reality and, thus, get a glimpse of the Russian people’s perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes concerning the Ukrainian war. Given the magnitude of this ongoing catastrophe, insight into Russian public opinion is critical as, sooner or later, it may have an impact on the war’s outcome.



Despite Russia's *process of authoritarianization*,¹⁰ Lev Gudkov has a straightforward answer to this question. In the *Methodenstreit*, the scientific director of Levada, Russia's independent public opinion agency most cited in the West, recently claimed, "The data we collect is reliable. Those who assert that polls cannot be trusted in an authoritarian or totalitarian regime and that people are afraid to answer know little about these subjects".¹¹ Gudkov's voice is not just crying in the wilderness. Several social scientists, such as Denis Volkov, Andrei Kolesnikov, and Aleksandar Matovski, support this opinion.¹² At the same time, however, they nuance their view saying that polls do not necessarily reveal what people think or believe. They instead show what people want to share in public.¹³

Between these extremes of believers and deniers, a third group of researchers does not deny the results of Russian public opinion research. Yet, they subject the polling agencies' inquiry to a thorough analysis. This often leads to a somewhat nuanced perspective on the published results.¹⁴

In this paper, we will spend little time on the above-mentioned methodological dispute. This is a technical and principled discussion that goes far beyond the purpose of this paper.¹⁵ Instead, diving into the Russian polling world, we will focus on trends rather than absolute numbers and consider survey outcomes within the strict context of Russian society.

Three sections will address three main questions:

1. Since militarism has proven to be a persistent feature of Putinism, we will look closely at the impact of war on Putin's longitudinal ratings in 2012-2022. This may reveal the brittleness of the regime;
2. Zooming in on 2022, we will observe how Russian society has dealt with Putin's war in Ukraine. This may reveal an ambivalent and diffuse anatomy of Russian society;
3. Based on this knowledge, we will share some thoughts on whether the discussed research results show the potential for collective action in Russia. Does the *ruskiy narod* [Russian people] confirm the clichés related to the *Homo Putinus*, or is Russian society more complex than this apparent truism?

Before we tackle this task, we need to make some remarks about the sources we use in this paper. Contemporary Russia knows a complex and chaotic field of agencies, commercial firms, state institutions, and media companies involved in public opinion research, each conducting research with specific purposes. In broad terms, they include:

1. The three leading public opinion agencies: the Levada Center (Levada), the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM), and the Public Opinion Foundation (FOM);
2. Russia's academic world, although the authorities severely scrutinize the humanities and social sciences at universities;
3. Independent research collaborations (e.g., Chronicles Project (хроники), Extreme Scan, Russia Watcher, Russian Field, OK Russians);
4. The Federal Protective Service (FSO) conducting sociological research for the President's eyes only;
5. The about 600 active commercial communication and consultancy firms (e.g., Minchenko Konsalting, Insomar, Bolshaya Strana, etc.).

Throughout this paper, we will primarily use the data and insights collected by the leading agencies. It is essential to realize that the Kremlin controls VTsIOM and FOM, while Levada has been qualified as a foreign agent, complicating the latter's work.¹⁶ Nevertheless, Levada is the only leading pollster that publishes data about the war systematically and transparently.¹⁷ Wherever necessary, we will complement these data with the outcomes of alternative Western and Russian research sources. At the end of the paper, we will provide an extensive list of references justifying and crediting the sources we have used.



2. Putinism, war, and the Russian people

As many opinion questions in Russia are influenced by the special status of Russia’s first-person [Первое лицо], polls related to the position of Vladimir Putin are crucial to watch. Putin’s status is existential to the regime’s survival. It also significantly influences the outcome of polling questions.

The president’s status is mainly gauged based on his approval and trust rates. These are relational variables, which means that they are influenced by events and by the interactions of actions taking place over time. Longitudinal data series are interesting to observe as they reveal which events affect Putin’s status the most.

2.1. PUTIN’S APPROVAL RATES

Levada asks, “Do you approve of the activities of V. Putin as the President of Russia?”. VTsIOM, in its turn, presents the question, “Do you generally approve or disapprove of the activity of the President of Russia?”. The outcomes show a remarkable resemblance, as visualized in the following graph.

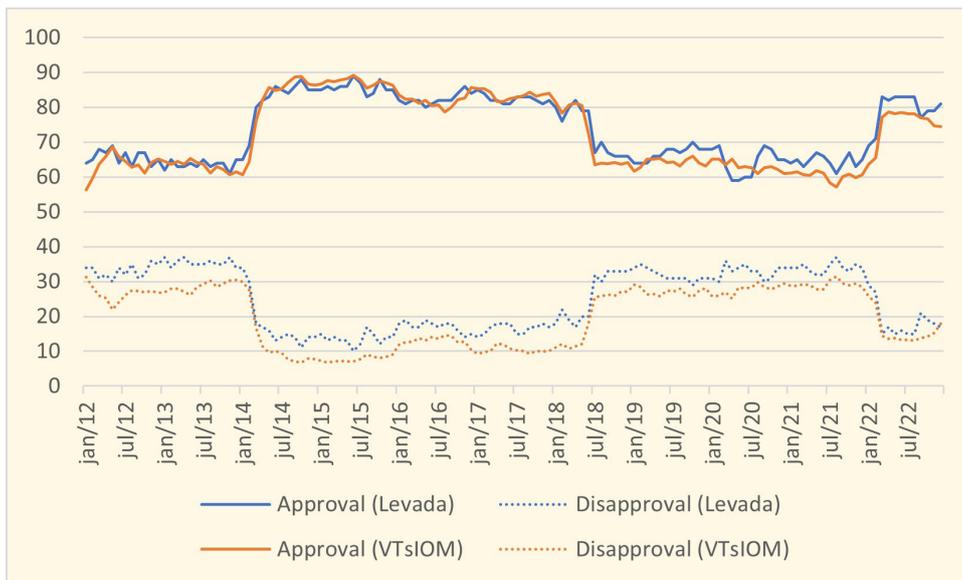


FIGURE 1: APPROVAL OF VLADIMIR PUTIN’S ACTIVITIES (2012-2020)
(SOURCE: LEVADA, VTSIOM)

The approval index, which is the distraction of approval and disapproval rates, shows a simplified outlook of the trends of both the Levada and VTsIOM longitudinal surveys.¹⁸



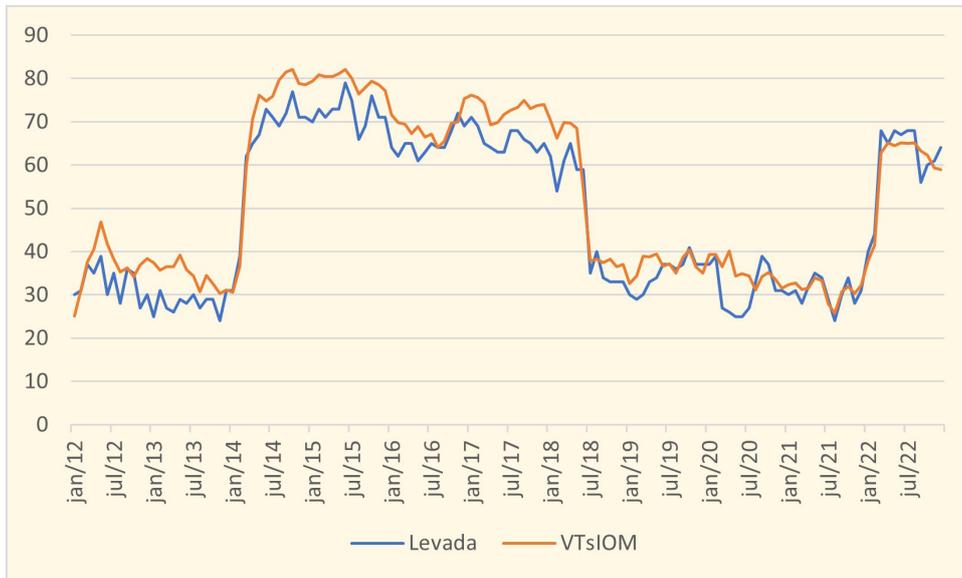


FIGURE 2: APPROVAL INDEX OF VLADIMIR PUTIN’S ACTIVITIES (2012-2020)
(SOURCE: LEVADA, VTSIOM)

The following comparative table summarizes the key outcomes.

Agency	Approval			Disapproval		
	Max	Min	Average	Max	Min	Average
Levada	89	59	74	37	10	25
VTsIOM	89	56	72	31	7	20

TABLE 1: KEY OUTCOMES OF PUTIN’S APPROVAL RATES.
(SOURCE: LEVADA, VTSIOM)

The similarities between the observed trends may be considered proof of the reliability of the reported results. Indeed, independent polling agency Levada shows similar results as those published by VTsIOM, which is considered to be controlled by the Kremlin.¹⁹ Critical voices, however, say that these similar results are obtained because the major public opinion agencies hire the same subcontracting firms that execute the fieldwork.²⁰

Whatever it may be, the following conclusions may be drawn from these graphs:

- War is instrumental for Putin as his approval rates significantly rise in times of war.**

In the observation period (2012-2022), Putin’s approval rates increased significantly between 2014-2017 and 2022. In this era of Putin’s “second coming”, “Militant Russia” came into full blossom: the Crimean Peninsula was annexed, the war in the Donbas started, the Assad regime was militarily supported, Moscow’s military expansion reached the African and South American continents, and, finally, Russian began to a full-blown invasion in Ukraine threatening to subdue the country.

During the annexation of Crimea, the Russian people reacted ecstatically and rallied around the flag, with approval rates as high as 89%. This phenomenon is known as the “Crimean Consensus” [Крымский консенсус] or the “Crimean Spring” [Крымская весна].²¹ The war in Ukraine, starting in February 2022, had a similar effect. Whether, in this case, we can speak about a “Donbas consensus” identical to the “Crimean Consensus,” is a question we will debate in the next section.

War enthusiasm is not limited to the observation period of this paper.²² Spells of enthusiasm have also been noted in the period 2000-2011. Indeed, the second Chechen war (1999-2006) and, to a lesser extent, the Georgian war (2008), have shown similar effects. Putin’s career at the helm of the state even started within the context of war. Some claim that the FSB staged the Second Chechen war to facilitate Putin’s way to the presidency.²³

This observation leads to the intriguing question of whether Putinism has used agenda-setting to mobilize public opinion. The agenda-setting theory claims that political actors create events so important that the mass media will not be able to ignore them and, as such, mobilize the public in favour of the regime.²⁴ Is war such a dramatic event able to mobilize the people and confirm Putin’s leadership? This question receives an unmistakably affirmative answer based on the data under consideration.

- **Putin seems to be most vulnerable (1) when economic growth slows down and, consequently, the weak economic foundations of the state show their effects and (2) when unpopular social measures are imposed.** As such, relatively low approval rates have been noted in 2012-2014 and 2018-2021.²⁵ In 2011-2013, the low approval rates could be exploited by Putin’s political opposition resulting in the Snow Revolution and the Bolotnaya Square protests. These protests, which mobilized more than 100.000 people, are considered one of the most threatening events to Putin’s rule.²⁶ Another severe drop in Putin’s approval rates started with the pension reform (2018) and stayed historically low due to the Moscow City Council elections (Summer of 2019) and Covid measures (2020).²⁷ This reality reveals a latent potential of discontent in Russian society. This scares the Kremlin, leading to a hardening of the regime and other measures. Some argue that Putin’s “Dresden syndrome”, which refers to the incident where a protesting mob personally threatened Putin, may have inspired him to isolate, fragment, and outlaw Russia’s political opposition. Others minimized Putin’s syndrome as it was abused as a propagandistic event to secure stability in the country. The authoritarian nature of Putin’s regime has been present since 2000 and has manifested itself in different stages, in which the years 2012 and 2022 are clear markers.

Despite the observed fluctuations, Putin has been able to count on high approval rates while the disapproval rates have never been alarmingly high. For 22 years, the Russian population has been approving Putin’s policy, or at least, it has tolerated it. Therefore, the question must be asked why Putin’s approval rates are that high. Several hypotheses have been formulated regarding Russia’s past, present, and future. Concretely, they refer to state and path dependency and the de-politicization of Russian society. Indeed, Putinism has created a system leaving no alternative for Russia’s strong man.

- Obviously, the Kremlin has installed a highly centralized, propagandistic, and monolithic information space where manipulation and coercion are standard modes of operation.²⁸ This does not leave much room for alternative voices, let alone a critical attitude. In this context, it is easier for Russian citizens to comply with the state’s demands. The risks that dissidents face are very high, going from social isolation and exclusion to physical abuse, imprisonment, or even death.
- There is also the hypothesis of *the autocratic middle class*. Traditionally the growth of the middle class has been considered to stimulate a democratization process. Lately, this general assumption has been questioned, especially in the case of transitional societies where the middle class is overly dependent on the privileges of the state.²⁹ These privileges may be very diverse, including wages, access to wealth, and influence.

This hypothesis may be seen as a variation on what is also known as the *social contract* hypothesis. Indeed, this assumption prescribes that Putin's popularity is based on an implicit agreement: the population accepts their freedom to be limited in exchange for stability and relative prosperity. "They pretend to care for us, we pretend to respect them" is an old cynical Soviet joke that depicts Russia's social contract. At the same time, aware of what happened with the Soviet Union in 1991, the joke also shows the regime's fragility.

- Since the 1990s, Russian sociologists have entertained a passionate debate about the survival of the *Homo Sovieticus* (Sovjetsky chelovek or Sovok) in post-Soviet Russia. (Lately, Lev Gudkov has also dubbed it as *Homo Putinist*).³⁰ This concept, originally initiated by Alexander Zinoviev in 1981, has been investigated by Yuri Levada and Lev Gudkov. In sociological terms, it refers to a Weberian ideal type (an archetype) that depicts Soviet/Russian citizens as scheming, hypocritical, frustrated, and opportunistic people showing little initiative or responsibility.³¹ The main idea is that the institutional context in which citizens live shapes and determines their attitudes and mentality. This topic was also the subject of Alexievich's book *Second-Hand Time*, which studied Soviet nostalgia and the *Sovok* mindset still widespread in post-Soviet Russia.³² The *Homo-Sovieticus* or the *sovok* mindset could explain why Russia's population shows such a docile attitude towards Russia's authorities and, thus, Putin's high approval rates. In this context, it is remarkable to note that most of the supporters of the military operation have a positive attitude to the return of the borders of the former USSR (78%). Opponents, by contrast, have no such ambition.³³

Fluctuations in Putin's approval rates show that they are "chiselled in stone". One may argue that Putin's approval rates are high yet fragile. This may not be a surprise as even Putin and his entourage show signs of nervousness if approval rates show a downward trend. Depending on which side is looking at the situation, some arguments suggest that concern about Putin's high approval rates is legitimate.

- One of them is based on the results of the so-called list experiment. This public opinion verification test is designed to check if people give genuine answers rather than expected ones to sensitive questions. In other words, it is a test to get insight into social desirability bias. Based on this test, Putin's high approval rates must be lowered by 10 to 20%.
- The other argument is that those who approve of Putin's policy do not all support it with the same level of conviction. Putin's supporters are a conglomerate of diverse people ranging from the fanatics and the zealots to the free riders and the cynics and the docile followers or trouble dodgers. As such, among the Russian people, it is estimated that fanatics constitute only 15 to 20% of Putin's supporters.

These arguments will be elaborated in the third section when we discuss the approval rates related to the Ukrainian war.

2.2. PUTIN'S TRUST RATES

What do the survey respondents express precisely when they claim they trust their leader? Trust is "the belief that somebody/something is good, sincere, honest, etc., and will not try to harm or trick you or the belief that something is true or correct or that you can rely on it".³⁴ Political trust, for its part, is a basic evaluative orientation towards a political leader that implies ethical qualities, the ability to govern efficiently, and the correctness of his political decisions.³⁵



Stepan Goncharov, a sociologist at the Levada Center, says that when they ask for the approval of an activity, they mean a specific assessment of the effectiveness. As for trust, they consider it a choice of whom the respondent likes; this is the person he is most ready to believe.³⁶ Putin’s trust rates assess a profound sentiment deeper than his management skills. In some Levada surveys, emotions such as admiration and sympathy are presented to determine Putin’s position.³⁷ Despite the controversy about whether the idea of trust may be measured accurately, it is generally considered an indicator of possible courses of action on the part of the respondents.

On the open question within a multicandidate field asked by VTsIOM, “We all trust some people, others don’t. And if we talk about politicians, whom do you trust, and who would not be entrusted with the solution of essential state issues?“, the following results may be visualized.³⁸



FIGURE 3: TRUST IN VLADIMIR PUTIN DYNAMICS (2012-2022)
(SOURCE: VTSIOM)

In the observation period (2012-2022), VTsIOM reports high trust levels fluctuating between 24 and 69 % and distrust rates developing between 1 and 12%. Since the question was somewhat changed and foresaw a “difficult to answer” and “there are no such politicians”-option – this is in August 2019 – between 40 to 50% of the respondents opted for these evasive answers, indicating much more doubt about the trust issue.

At first sight, Putin’s trust rates are significantly lower than the approval rates. This may be illustrated in the following visuals:



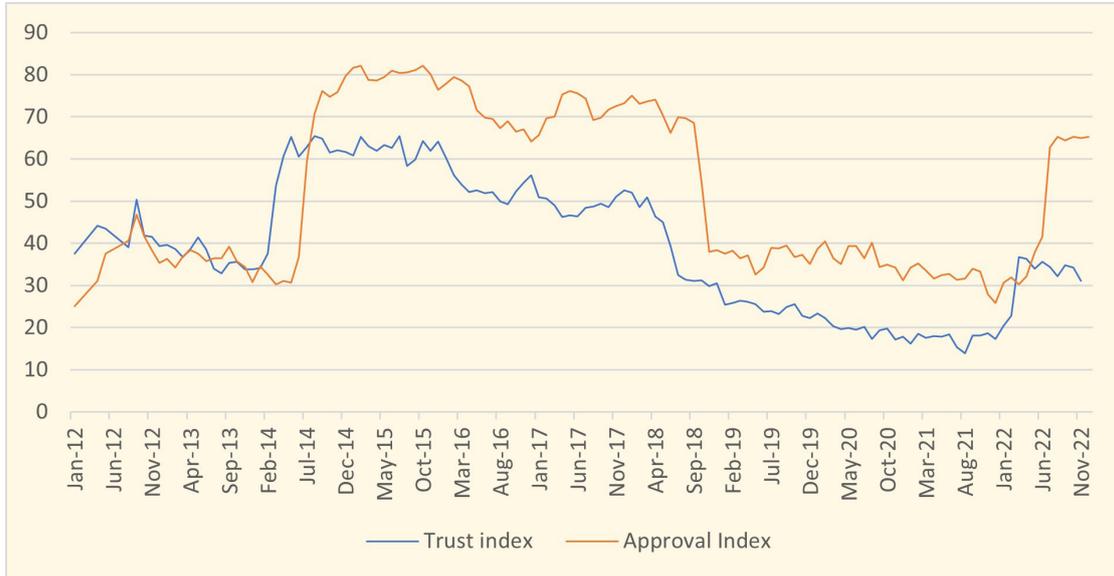


FIGURE 4: VLADIMIR PUTIN’S TRUST AND APPROVAL INDEX (2012-2022).
(SOURCE: VTSIOM)

Agency	Approval			Disapproval		
	Max	Min	Average	Max	Min	Average
VTSIOM	89	56	72	31	7	20
	Trust			Distrust		
	Max	Min	Average	Max	Min	Average
VTSIOM	68	24	45	12	1	6

TABLE 2: KEY OUTCOMES OF APPROVAL AND TRUST RATES
(SOURCE: VTSIOM)

However, we should not pay too much attention to the difference between Putin’s approval and trust rates. They may be explained by the wording or how the question is presented to the respondents. More important is that although the trust trends seem to appear somewhat sooner than the approval trends, trust and approval trends show similar patterns. In other words, trust and approval develop coherently. This confirms that Putin is most trusted in periods of war and considerably less trusted in periods where economic distress and the impact of social measures are most apparent.

All potential risks aside, for the time being, Putin remains the most trusted and the least distrusted politician in the country compared with other politicians and institutions. This may be illustrated by visualizing institutional trust from 1994-2020.³⁹



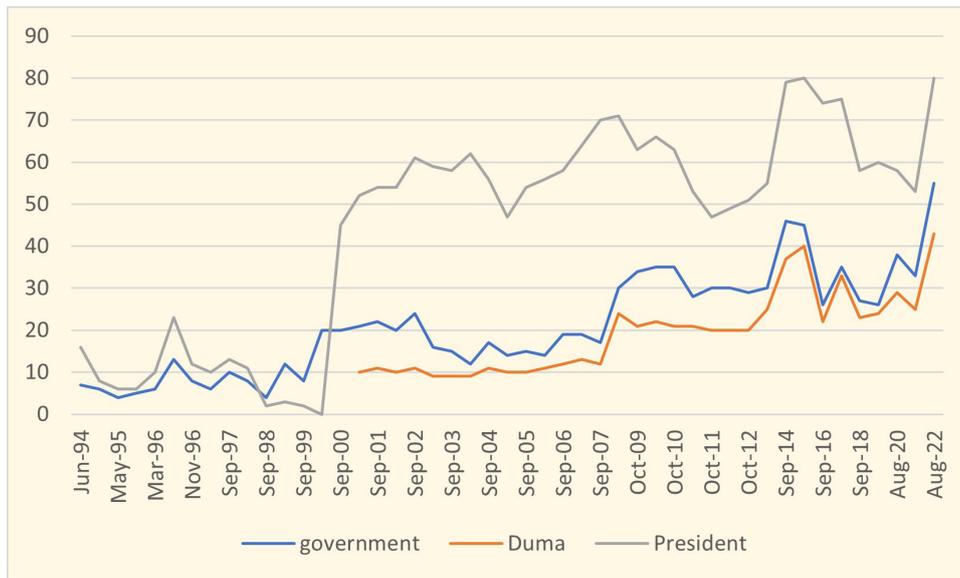


FIGURE 5: INSTITUTIONAL TRUST (1) -THE GOVERNMENT, THE DUMA, AND THE PRESIDENT (1994-2022)
(SOURCE: LEVADA)

Based on this graph, it is remarkable to note that the presidency received much higher trust in the “Putin period” (2000-2020) when V. Putin and D. Medvedev held office compared to the Yeltsin period (1994-1999). In this sense, Putin has installed an actual presidential regime, including the Putin cult and a permanently increasing grip on Russian society.⁴⁰ Moreover, in the Putin era, the Duma and the government received far less trust than the president.

Interestingly, the army is the only institution that receives comparable trust to the presidency. The security services, however, receive less confidence than the army and the president. Yet, also their trust rates have increased over time. These are essential indicators that Putin has installed a genuine siloviki state.

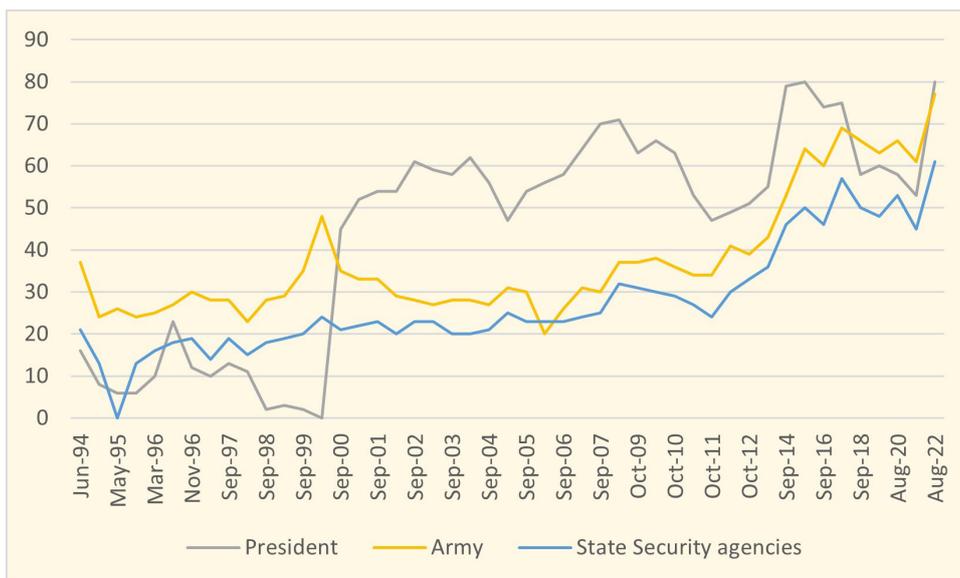


FIGURE 6: INSTITUTIONAL TRUST (2)- ARMY, STATE SECURITY AGENCIES, AND THE PRESIDENT (1994-2022)
(SOURCE: LEVADA)

In the context of our paper, though, the most crucial observation is that in times of war, all institutions gain more trust. War instigates a general boost in Russian society, substantiating the “war consensus” hypothesis as fabricated and moulded by the Kremlin.

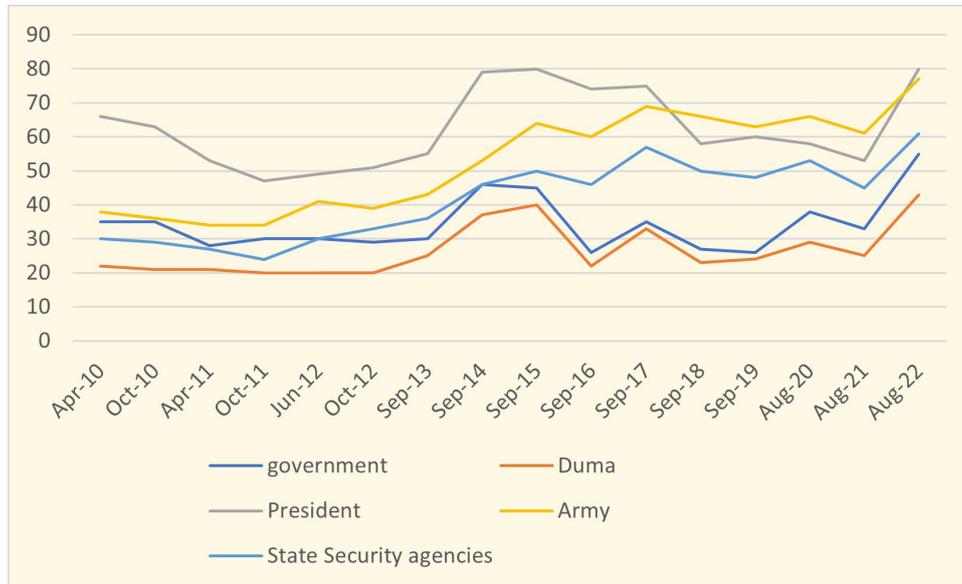


FIGURE 7: INSTITUTIONAL TRUST (3)-GOVERNMENT, DUMA, ARMY, STATE SECURITY AGENCIES, AND THE PRESIDENT (2010-2022)
(SOURCE: LEVADA)

3. Russian people and the war in Ukraine: what about the Donbas consensus?

In this section, we focus on the year 2022. This was the year in which Russia:

- built up its forces on Ukraine’s borders;
- invaded Ukraine and occupied significant areas of the country;
- experienced tactical defeat in the region of Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Kherson; and
- mobilized society and introduced terror attacks targeting the Ukraine people and infrastructure.

From an operation far beyond Russian borders, with stated “good” goals such as “denazification”, “demilitarization”, and “protection of the population of Donbas”, Putin’s invasion has developed into a war where hundreds of thousands or even millions of families are affected.⁴¹ In October 2022, the alternative *Chronicles Report* indicated that about 20 million Russians were directly affected by the war.⁴² As such, the Russian population has been creepingly involved in a war that has developed from a “special military operation” into a state of total warfare. This is a new situation compared with other operations where the Russian armed forces were deployed. As a result, the question arises of how the Russian people’s opinion on the Ukrainian war has developed over the year that shook the world.



We will discuss this based on a detailed look at Putin’s approval rates in 2022. In addition, we will focus on the direct question of whether people personally support the armed forces in Ukraine. Finally, we will try to dissect Russian society based on the survey outcomes.

We stress Putin’s status in the first place because it influences the result of many questions. Some Russian sociologists call this phenomenon the “burden of power” (Бремя власти).⁴³ We may rephrase it as the “Putin bias”, as citing the name of V. Putin in the survey question influences the answer, sometimes leading to contradictory results. For instance, when the Russian Field Project asked, “If Vladimir Putin announces a new offensive against Kyiv tomorrow, will you support such a decision?”, the answer is comparable to the paradoxical question, “If Vladimir Putin signs a peace agreement tomorrow and stops the military operation, will you support such a decision?”. At the end of September, respectively 60 and 75% would support these contradictory hypothetical decisions. Russian public opinion, at least as expressed in public, is clearly contradictory and modellable.

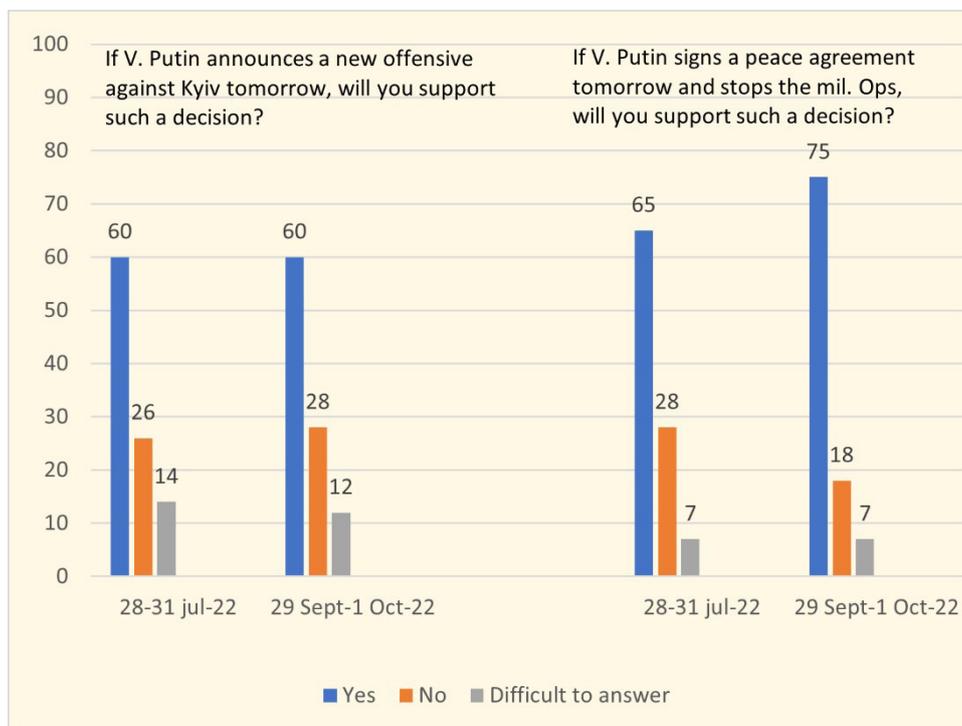


FIGURE 8: THE PUTIN BIAS – “THE BURDEN OF POWER” IN WAR AND PEACE
(SOURCE: RUSSIAN FIELD.COM)



3.1. PUTIN'S APPROVAL RATES IN 2022

Putin's approval rates, as measured by the three leading polling agencies in 2022, can be visualized as follows:

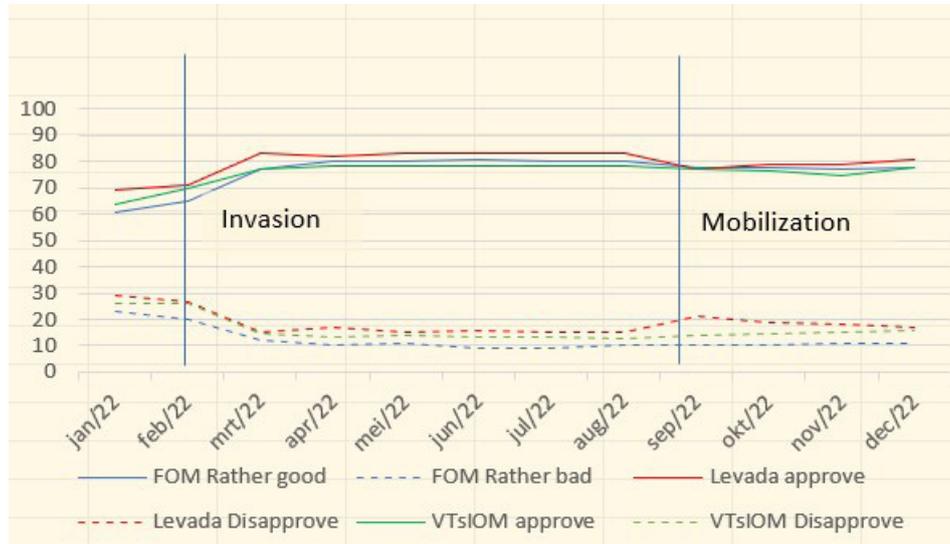


FIGURE 9: PUTIN'S APPROVAL RATE IN 2022
(SOURCE: LEVADA, VTSIOM, FOM)

Generally speaking, we observe that all the results – indifferent to whether Levada publishes them, VTsIOM, or FOM – reflect the same trend of high approval rates (between 83 and 75%) and low disapproval rates (between 21 and 9%). Even though the Levada data show somewhat more fluctuation than the other agencies, all data remain above Putin's average 2012-2022 approval rate of 74% and beneath the average disapproval level of 25%.

Somewhat more in detail, the visual shows the following trend:

- A clear jump with the start of the invasion in February 2022;
- stable and high approval rates and this until August 2022;
- a modest decline in the rates as a consequence of the tactical defeats suffered in August and, more clearly, as a result of the announcement of the “partial mobilization” (21 September 2022);
- a swift normalization of the rates shortly after the shock of mobilization.

Thus, the initial stage shows a similar trend to the one observed during the annexation of the Crimea peninsula and Russia's intervention in Syria, with approval rates up to 83%. In this context, Russian propagandists suggest a new “Donbas consensus”.⁴⁴

Strangely enough, Russia's tactical defeat in Northern Ukraine in April 2022 has not had an impact on the recorded outcomes. Possibly, this has to do with the quick occupation of the Southern parts of Ukraine and some tactical victories achieved in this operational area, among them the battle of Mariupol. These events have been used and abused in the Kremlin's propaganda efforts, while the defeat in Northern Ukraine has been minimized.

However, the general stagnation of Russia's war effort and tactical defeats in the Donbas area and later in Kherson have infused some reluctance and uncertainty within Russian society. This hesitation was reinforced by the announcement of the partial mobilization in late September. Still, based on the observed data, societal hesitance may not be exaggerated as the approval decline is slight and has proven to be temporary. Levada has marked the highest fluctuation, with a decrease in approval rates of approximately 5%. The decline observed by FOM and VTsIOM was limited to 2 to 3%.

The new normal, again more outspoken with Levada, has quickly installed itself with approval rates above 75%. Thus, at the end of 2022, the three main polling agencies show that about three-quarters of the Russian population qualifies Putin's policy as positive.

To balance the abovementioned observations, it is worthwhile to refer to a cautionary note made by researchers evaluating Putin's approval rates, both in 2015 and 2021. They noted, "In 2015, we conducted analyses investigating [if Putin's actual level of support could be lower than responses to direct questions in public opinion polls suggest.] Our study, which exploited a common technique to elicit sensitive opinions from survey respondents, suggested that Putin's high approval ratings mostly reflected sincere support. In 2020–21, we investigated whether these results still held true. The recent analyses paint a more ambiguous portrait, such that there is considerably more uncertainty about Putin's loyal support than was apparent in 2015".⁴⁵

Concretely, in 2015, these researchers noted a 5% lower approval rate than observed in the Levada data, which is a statistically insignificant difference. In 2020–21, however, they found differences between 9 to 21%, implying that Putin's approval rate during the 2018–2021 drop may have been below 50%. We draw the reader's attention to this 50% support level. This approval level will return when we discuss alternative views on approval and support rates of the Ukraine war in the next paragraph.

3.2. SUPPORT FOR THE ACTIONS OF THE RUSSIAN MILITARY IN UKRAINE

Putin's general approval rates are one thing. The question arises if we observe the same trends when the respondents are confronted with direct questions about the war. In this context, Levada has asked, "Do you personally support or not support the actions of Russian armed forces in Ukraine". The results of this question are visualized in the following graph. As a remark, we remind the reader that the questionnaire uses the wording "the actions of Russian armed forces in Ukraine" instead of "the war against Ukraine," as the latter qualification is forbidden in Russia. Indeed, pollsters use somewhat vague wording to determine the war opinions of their respondents.



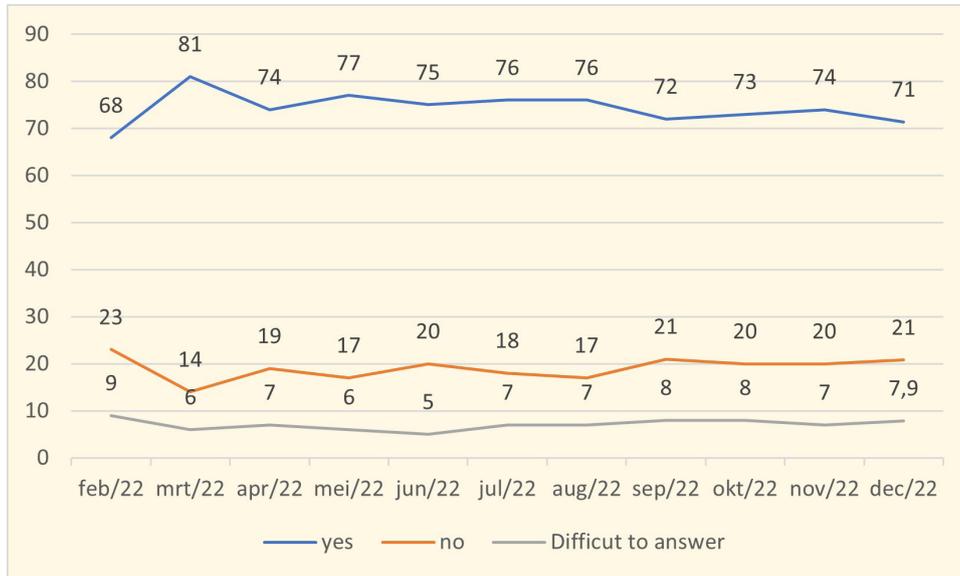


FIGURE 10: SUPPORT FOR THE ACTIONS OF RUSSIAN ARMED FORCES IN UKRAINE
(SOURCE: LEVADA)

This graph shows a supportive attitude toward the war of more than 70% in 2022. Generally speaking, the abovementioned changes observed in Putin’s approval rates are also discernible in the war support data. After the initial euphoria (with a support rate of 80%), a new realism has set in, with approval rates around 75%. After the “partial mobilization” announcement, a new normal has been installed with support rates of about 70%.

As suggested before, it is important not to fixate on absolute figures. In this context, it is relevant to introduce the results of a list experiment conducted on the war in Ukraine by two German social scientists, Philipp Chapkovski and Max Schaub. In April 2022, they tried to verify if the Russian people spoke the truth when answering survey questions on the war.⁴⁶ In different terms, they checked if the “preference falsification” bias influenced the war approval polls. And indeed, the researchers observed this bias. In their experiment, they observed that when people were directly asked whether they supported the war personally, 68% did so. However, using the list experiment method, the result was significantly lower, namely 53%, or 15% lower than the direct question. This experiment shows that the absolute numbers, as published by the main polling agencies, must be considered with caution given the specific political context in which they are obtained. Nevertheless, it confirms that most Russian people support Putin’s war and that the 50% support level returns once more considering alternative views on Russian public opinion.

This was also the case when Elena Koneva discussed the support for the partial mobilization in September 2022. She noted that in the two weeks following the announcement of the partial mobilization, about 52% of the respondents supported the mobilization, which is precisely the same amount as those who declared to support the military operation in Ukraine, yet nearly 20% less than the results noted by the three main polling agencies.⁴⁷

Elena Koneva’s research project *Chronicles*, published on the Extreme Scan website on October 8th, is worth having a closer look at. Indeed, just like Philipp Chapkovski and Max Schaub have shown, they suggest significantly lower support rates than the Levada data indicate. Moreover, Koneva has observed a steady decline, without reestablishment, in the support rates, which is the case from July 2022. Finally, the Koneva data confirm that a majority of the Russian population supports the military operation.

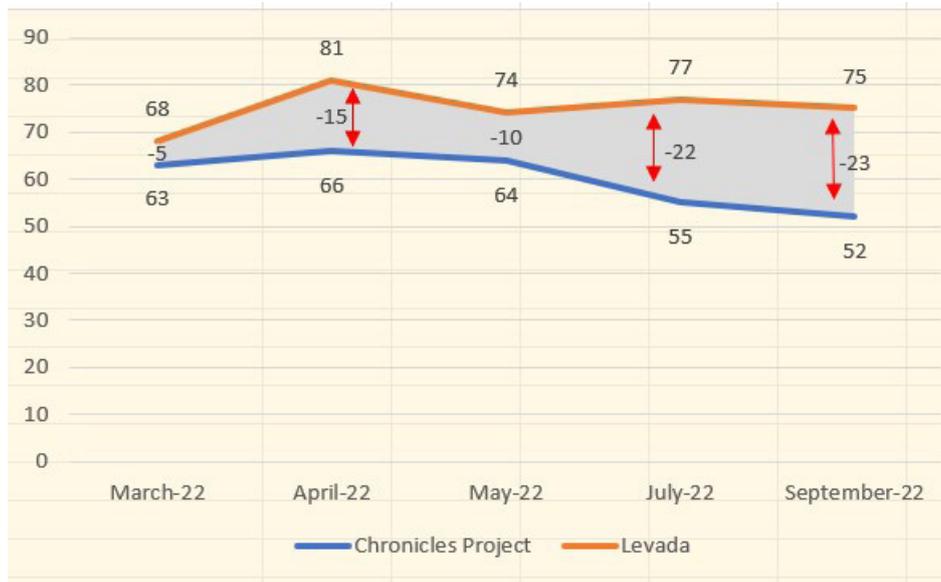


FIGURE 11: SUPPORT FOR MILITARY OPERATION IN UKRAINE-DICHOTOMIC PICTURE
(SOURCE: LEVADA, CHRONICLES PROJECT)

Observing a “war consensus” in the primary polling agencies (70-80%) and, to a lesser extent, in the alternative polling outcomes (50-60%) is one thing; interpreting it is another issue. The presented dichotomic approval-disapproval rates are indeed too simple to understand the complexity of Russian society.

In what follows, we will outline some attempts to dissect Russian society at war. As we will see, one possible typology is better than the other, as sociological models too may be used for propaganda reasons.

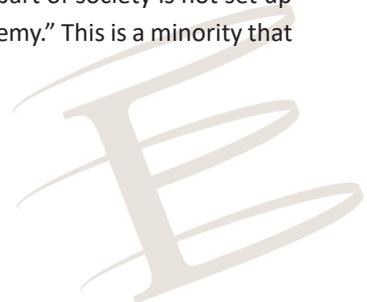
3.3. RUSSIAN SOCIETY AT WAR DISSECTED: THE TALE OF FOUR RUSSIAS

On 11 January 2023, the general director of VTsIOM, Valery Fedorov, gave an interview in which he commented on the 2022 trends in Russia. In this interview, he referred to the “four Russias” based on a typology proposed by the commercial Consulting company Minchenko Consulting. This typology subdivides the country into four ‘Russias,’ distinguishing “warring or belligerent Russia” (воюющая Россия), “those-who-departed Russia” (уехавшая Россия), “metropolitan Russia” (столичная Россия), and “deep Russia” (глубинная Россия).⁴⁸

As mentioned in one of our former publications, the idea of “four Russias” is not new. Indeed, in 2011, Professor Natalia Zubarevich presented already a center-peripheral model of Russian space, subdividing Russia into four divergent Russias, namely “white Russia,” or urban, educated Russia; “Blue Russia,” or urban, industrial Russia; “Green Russia,” or rural and apolitical Russia; and “Red Russia,” or ethnic, poor Russia. They represent 21, 25, 38, and 6 percent of the country’s population.⁴⁹

Fedorov described the “Four Russias” as follows:

- “Warring Russia” represents those who fight, support the war, and are emotionally involved in it. “Those who believe that without victory, Russia has no future and there can be no future. ... this part of society is not set up for any negotiations. Their slogan is ‘to crush the scum,’ to finish off, to destroy the enemy.” This is a minority that Fedorov estimates at 15 to 20 percent of Russian society.



- “Those who departed Russia” or the “New Emigrants” (новые эмигранты) are those who hide from mobilization, those who do not accept the “special military operation,” those who ideologically and politically have decided to fight against it, or those who emigrated for economic reasons. The latter are “entrepreneurs and employees of globalized industries and those who are so deeply integrated into the global, cosmopolitan world that the disconnection from it is perceived as a personal tragedy.” The number of political refugees, conscientious objectors, and economic migrants is limited. Without specifying how large this group is, Fedorov pretends they represent an absolute minority of Russian society.
- “**Metropolitan Russia**” represents those who reside in Moscow or St. Petersburg and those with a high standard of living, high educational qualifications, resources, and societal position. This is, in fact, Russia’s middle class. They try to adapt to the changed conditions and even take advantage of new opportunities. They usually try not to think or talk about the war. They wait for everything to end and become “like before.” They do not watch TV; their information is drawn mainly from the internet. In the meantime, as the war is still far away from their day-to-day experience, they cynically approve of what is happening in Ukraine.
- “**Deep Russia**” represents about 60 percent of the Russian population and embodies, as such, the most significant part of Russia. Its standard of living is low; its main problems are rising prices and unemployment. Declining incomes most painfully hit the population of this part of Russia. They are not politicized, live everyday life, and try to stay afloat. They are also the main tv viewers and use the internet less often. They are trying to abstract from the conflict. In this sense, it fully trusts the president. The majority would not like to be very involved in the war, but they are ready to support it at the level of slogans.⁵⁰

Based on this typology, Fedorov observes a new “Donbas consensus,” which he defines as “...that three out of four Russias have united around the president and the ‘special military operation’ with varying degrees of involvement” and that “... only the ‘New Emigrants’ have distanced themselves from Putin’s war.” Further, he commented, “... these ‘three Russias’ are now in the same boat. And they rely mainly on the president and the army. To the fact that Putin is a true patriot and a far-sighted strategist, that he knows what he is doing. And that the ‘indestructible and legendary’ army will bring us victory.”⁵¹

By stressing “societal cohesion,” “Putin’s brilliance,” and the “legendary Russian army,” Fedorov reveals himself as a political technologist/propagandist who manipulates Russian reality into an idealized image. Moreover, his analysis is intellectually incoherent and incomplete.

For instance, Fedorov ignores that there is still active and passive opposition to the war inside Russia. Incidents of sabotage and draft dodging are well documented, divergent opinions about the war split families and social relations, and brave peaceful protesters are still arrested, if not imprisoned; Those who support the war are not only people participating in the war. Some soldiers have ambivalent feelings about the war, and some civilians with outspoken opinions favour the war; Not all who have left the country are against the war. For instance, of the Russians living abroad, the share of opponents of the military operation is slightly higher (34% against 25%);⁵² Those who live in Russia’s metropolises - or the so-called middle class - are not unisono supporting the war. More importantly, Fedorov mixes socio-spatial categorization with categories based on occupational activities, which makes the presented typology incoherent. Also, the quantification of his typology is incomplete and unrealistic, reducing the opposition to the war to less than one or two percent of the population. Thus, Fedorov’s typology is far too simple, ideologically inspired, and intellectually incoherent. As a result, it is more an eloquent cliché rather than a serious analysis.



An alternative, yet more nuanced and subtle, four Russias analysis is presented by Denis Volkov and Andrei Kolesnikov, respectively, director of Levada and senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.⁵³ Based on a detailed view of the answers to the question, “Do you personally support or not support the actions of Russian armed forces in Ukraine?” they subdivide Russian society into four main categories.

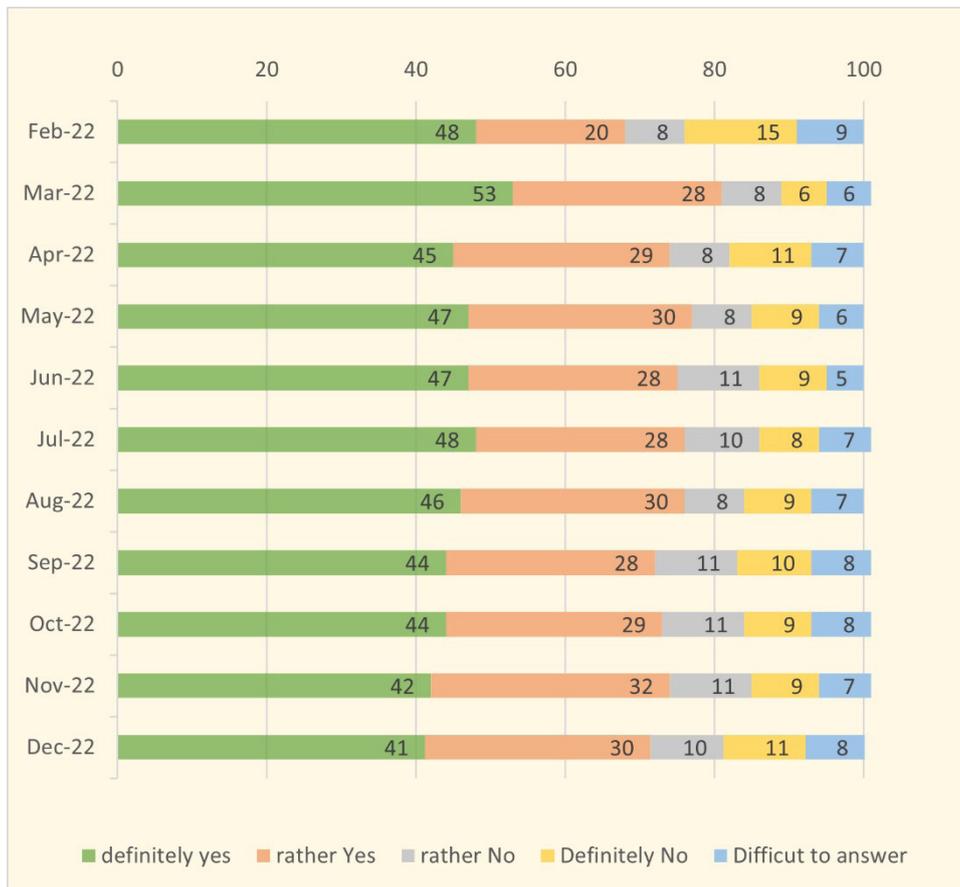


FIGURE 12: PERSONAL SUPPORT FOR THE ACTIONS OF THE RUSSIAN ARMED FORCES IN UKRAINE. (SOURCE: LEVADA)

Those who support the war – about 70 à 75 percent of the Russian population - can be subdivided into two categories: those who “definitely support” the war and those who “rather support” the war. In December 2022, these cohorts represented 41 and 30 percent of Russian society, respectively.

- Those who “definitely support” the war do this unconditionally. They are the most fanatic and dogmatic inspired. They do not question the war narrative as propagated by the Kremlin. They express the highest support for Putin and the highest sense of pride concerning the operations in Ukraine. There is also a sense of superiority, historical determination, and fatalistic acceptance that inspires their attitude.
- Those who “mostly support” the war are supporting it less resolutely. They are less sure whether the country’s situation is going in the right direction. They express much more anxiety, fear, and horror about the war and much less pride than the hawks. Their motivation to support the war is the situation of Russian speaking population in Ukraine. There is less support for the authorities, and their convictions are less outspoken. Yet, to avoid adverse

consequences for themselves, they become conformists. Reluctantly, they follow the dominant public opinion and the line of the Kremlin. They also adopt all kinds of coping mechanisms. As such, they say that the authorities are the best informed and know best. They categorize negative or difficult news simply as fake news to avoid thinking for themselves. In other words, they prefer to remain in their psychological comfort zone instead of the harsh confrontation with reality.

On the other side of the spectrum, about 20 percent dissent from the war. Yet, also here, there is a different level of opposition. There are those who “definitely do not” support the war and those who “mostly do not” support the war.

- Those who “definitely do not” support the war represent a small yet resolute minority. They do not support Putin, the government, or the duma. Instead, they support the anti-Putin opposition and are willing to attend anti-regime protests. Generally, they hold a pro-European, pro-Western opinion. They have principled views against the war.
- Those who “mostly do not” support the war are more inspired by economic and self-preservation motivations. They are concerned by the impact of the war on the economy and their own economic and social stability. They are afraid to lose their job. They claim they already have enough problems to cope with their domestic problems rather than those of other countries. Another aspect of their dissent is the fear of being involved in the war, as members of their families could be sent to Ukraine to fight.

Volkov and Kolesnikov’s analysis is clear, coherent, and intellectually acceptable. However, questions may be asked if the hawks are not overestimated, and the doves are not underestimated. In the next paragraph, we will come back to this remark.

Recently, Jack Watling from the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) has presented another dissection of Russian society based “on a range of academic polling conducted on behalf of the Kremlin – this is the FSB - related to the war in Ukraine. To protect the sources, the author says, details of these polls are withheld. Based on these surveys, conducted in August and October 2022, Russian society has been divided into five broad categories: Cosmopolitans, Nihilists, Loyalists, Globalist Patriots, and ‘Ura (Hoorah)-Patriots.’

The opposition is divided between an active and passive part and represents about 25 percent of the population:

- Cosmopolitans represent the core of the active opposition and constitute around 12 à 15 percent of the population. Most of them have personal connections with Ukraine.
- Nihilists are critical of the government but largely disengaged and passive. They represent just over 10% of the population. Even though they are critical of the government, they remain inactive as they do not support the cosmopolitan opposition.

Those who support the government – about 75 percent of the population - are composed of three groups, each with a different level of intensity: the Ura-Patriots (20 à 25 percent) are those who have invested the most in the war and are the most critical towards failures. The loyalists and globalist patriots largely reflect the level of engagement with politics and show the most significant variation in categorization.

Despite the author’s secretive attitude concerning his sources, the 5-type categorization of Russian society does not differ significantly from Volkov and Kolesnikov’s results. Watling reported an opposition size of about 22 à 25 percent, while Volkov and Kolesnikov estimated it at about 20 percent. However, based on the minimal description of the categories, the author mentions that most of the hard-line opposition - the cosmopolitans - have personal connections with Ukraine.

Family relations seem to be the most critical criterion to belong to the hard-line opposition. This is a massive simplification of reality. On the side of the hardliners -respectively ‘definite supporters’ and ‘ura Patriots’ - there is a significant difference between the reports of Watling and Volkov & Kolesnikov. The latter noted that the hardliners represented 40 to 50 percent of the population versus 20 to 25 percent, as mentioned by RUSI. The most crucial remark of Watling, however, is that the Kremlin is watching the hardline supporters of the war with the necessary suspicion. Indeed, if things go wrong, it is precisely this group that may threaten the regime.

In short, even though all these categorizations divide society into supporters and opponents of the war, they all have specific problems. Some show a great deal of incoherence, incompleteness, and fuzziness. This is all the more so when it comes to assessing the size of the “party of war” (партия войны) and the “party of peace” (партия мира) at the extreme ends of the spectrum. This assessment is necessary if we want to get an idea of the stability of the Putin regime during the current war effort. Indeed, authoritarian regimes have two main threats to watch: a popular uprising and a coup d’état.⁵⁴ In other words, they have to carefully manage how they rule the people and how they share their power. In this context, an interesting attempt has been made to estimate the size of the parties that may threaten the regime more precisely.

3.4. RUSSIAN SOCIETY AT WAR DISSECTED: THE PARADOX OR THE TALE OF THREE RUSSIAS

In search for more nuance and in an attempt to minimize potential biases concerning the attitudes towards the war, investigators of alternative research initiatives, Russian Field and Chronicles (хроники), have presented additional questions to the direct support question to their respondents.⁵⁵ These are hypothetical, projective, or not direct questions.

The first such question is, “if they had the opportunity to go back in time, does it seem more correct for them that the decision to start an ‘operation’ should not be made or still be made?” In the summer of 2022, around 55 percent of the population said it still should have been made, while 51 percent maintained this opinion in the autumn. Nevertheless, a stable 70 percent of the population declared support when asked a direct question about the support of the war. Thus, about 15 à 20 percent of the respondents who said to support the war would have never started it in the first place.

The second question is what the respondents would prefer, to continue the “special operation” or to move on to peace negotiations. (We have visualized the results of this question in Figure 8, “the Putin Bias.”) Despite a paradoxical effect – the majority of respondents favour both war and peace – those in favour of peace negotiations (75 percent in early October) are more numerous than those in favour of a renewed attack on Kyiv (60 percent).

Finally, the question was asked if they were personally ready to participate in the “special operation.” More than half (60-64%) of the men surveyed answered negatively, while about 30% of men are ready to participate. Of this minority that wants to participate, only half of them are people of military age. Of those who are willing to participate, about 11 percent do this out of conviction, while the majority volunteer for essentially financial reasons. This “egocentric” motivation is even stronger when we consider the recruitment with the Wagner PMC. Volunteering inmates are granted amnesty after six months of front service.⁵⁶

These hypothetical questions may add to the paradoxicality of Russian society at war. Still, they also allow us to accurately estimate “the party of war” and “the party of peace.” This can be done by making an intersection of the questions of whether the respondents would support peace negotiations and whether they would support a new offensive against Kyiv. Such an intersection results in a subdivision of society into three groups:



- those who will support the offensive against Kyiv and will not support the signing of a peace agreement (“party of war”);
- those who support both decisions (“conformists”);
- and those who will not support the offensive and support the end of the “special operation” (the “party of peace”).

The outcomes of this intersection may be visualized as follows:

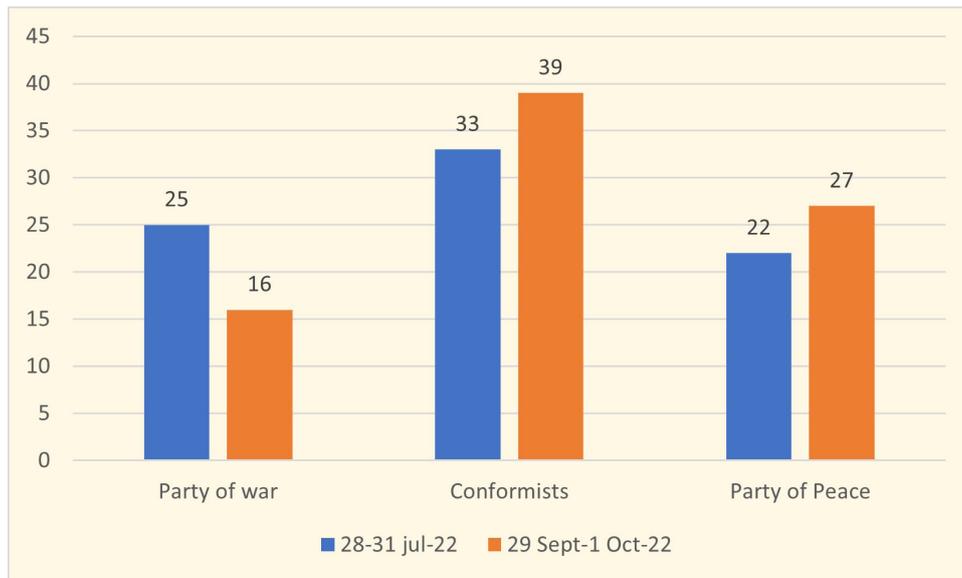


FIGURE 13: THE PARTY OF WAR, CONFORMISTS, AND THE PARTY OF PEACE.

(SOURCE: RUSSIAN FIELD)

This intersection shows:

- That a large part of Russian society is conformist. The researchers explain this high number of conformists due to their trust in the leadership. Hence, the importance of monitoring Putin’s trust rating closely.
- That the size of the extremes - the “party of war” and the “party of peace”- are not significantly different.
- That the hardliner represents about 22-25 percent of the Russian population. This number is somewhat confirmed by Elena Koneva, who estimated the group of ‘core militarists’ at about 15-16 percent.⁵⁷ Although it is not completely clear what Valery Fedorov exactly meant by “belligerent Russia,” he has gauged the size of this group at 15 à 20 percent.⁵⁸
- That the peaceniks represent between 22 and 27 percent of the Russian population, which is about double than generally assumed in the direct war support question (10 %). Based on this assessment, the hard-line opposers of the war are systematically underestimated.
- That in the summer, the party of war outbalanced the party of peace, while in the autumn, this situation was the opposite. The decline of the war party was significant (about 10 percent). The party of peace grew by about 5 percent.

For the sake of completeness, it must be remarked that about 10 percent of the respondents could not speak out about the presented scenario.



All the categorizations mentioned above can be shown in the following summary table. We are aware that some aspects of the different categorizations are somewhat stretched. Nevertheless, the combination of all the models may help to get a glimpse of the complexities of Russian society at war.

source	Support of the war			Opposing the war	
Valery Fedorov	Warring Russia	Deep Russia	Metropolitan Russia	Economic emigrants	Principled emigrants
Volkov and Kolesnikov	Definitely supporting	Mostly supporting		Hardly opposing	Definitely opposing
RUSI (Jack Walting)	Ura Patriots	Loyalists	Global Patriots	Nihilists	Cosmopolitans
Elena Koneva	Party of war	Conformist			Party of peace
	20 to 25 %	30 to 40 %			20 to 25 %

TABLE 3: DISSECTION OF RUSSIAN SOCIETY ACCORDING TO DIFFERENT AUTHORS

3.5. THE PROFILE OF SUPPORTERS AND OPPOSERS OF THE WAR

The next question is, who exactly are those who support the war and who oppose the war? In the most general way, based on the socio-economic background of the respondents, the following picture may be drawn:⁵⁹

- Although the difference between those supporting and opposing the military operation, **gender** is not a significant indicator. Nevertheless, men are inclined to be more in favour of the war than women (59 percent versus 52 %);
- Support for the war increases with **age**. Most of those older than 30 are primarily in favour of the war. Only within the age group of 18-29, the majority is against Ukraine’s campaign (42% versus 39%). In the age group above 60 years old, 68% support the war.
- Based on the **income bracket**, only the poorest – these are those who declare that “There is not enough money to buy food” – a majority are against the war. In all other income brackets, the majority support the war.
- **Education level** is not a significant indicator. At first, opponents of the military operation grew along with the level of education. Throughout the year, these minor differences have practically disappeared.
- Based on the **place of residence**, all regions show a majority of supporters, except Moscow and the North Caucasus. The most “fanatic regions” are located the furthest from Ukraine: the Far East, the Central, and the Ural region, respectively 67, 61, and 58%.
- Based on **profession**, only academics and those active in the advertisement and media business oppose mostly the war. All those with another professional background support the war. Law enforcement officers are the most fanatic (80%), but also civil servants, housing and communal service workers, people in the transport business, and pensioners support the war with more than 60%. Strangely enough, people in the culture and the information technology business support the war, with a majority of approximately 53%.
- Interestingly, of those who oppose the war, 42% still declare to be **willing to participate in the military operation**. Regarding the question of whether a relative should take part in the war, of those opposing the war, 36% still declare to agree with this statement. Of the majority of those who support the war, a significant majority are willing to participate in the war (84%).
- Concerning the **source of information** the respondents are consulting, these mainly are television (66%), Yandex, and Google (56%), and information received from friends, relatives, and acquaintances. Opponents are users of YouTube (48%), readers of VKontakte (44%), online media, and telegram channels (44%).



In sum, the idealized profile of the supporter of the war is thus a man of about 45 years old who lives in the Far East, uses mainly television to get informed about the world, is not affected by the sanctions, is not worried about his financial situation, who is willing to participate in the war, and who is satisfied with how the country is run. In contrast, the idealized profile of the person who opposes the war is a woman of about 25 years old who lives in Moscow, who reads Telegram and watches YouTube to be informed about the world, who is personally affected by the sanctions, who is confronted with a precarious financial situation, and who does not want to participate in the war.

3.6. THE CRIMEA AND DONBAS CONSENSUS COMPARED

The question may arise if the “Crimean consensus” can be compared with what propagandists call the current “Donbas consensus.” Indeed, at first glance, approval, trust, and support rates have risen spectacularly and have stayed at a high level in 2022. Absolute figures apart, most of the Russian population supports Putin’s war. However, there are arguments for believing that the current situation differs profoundly from 2014-2015.

First and foremost, both military efforts are not comparable. In 2014-15, despite the illegality of the move, we witnessed a short, spectacular, bloodless, and very successful operation in the Crimea. Also, the Russian “stealth interventions” in the Donbas in 2014 and 2015 were sharp, targeted, limited, and effective. In contrast, Russia’s massive intervention in Ukraine has been massive, complex, long, bloody, and ineffective. As such, we have witnessed two wars: a short, limited foreign intervention and a long, infinite total war. The role of the Russian people in both types of wars differs profoundly. The Russian people were uninvolved and did not feel any consequences of Putin’s annexation of the Crimea. In comparison, the mobilization, the transformation of the Russian economy into a war economy, the impact of the sanctions, and the increased level of mind control made the population increasingly involved in Russia’s current war effort. The effects of the latter are not immediately visible. However, on a deeper level, some significant differences are apparent:

- Some researchers remark that the “Donbas jump” is not as high as during the “Crimea consensus”, when approval rates reached 89%, and that the sentiments about the full invasion of Ukraine are more diffuse than the ecstatic mood in 2015.⁶⁰
- Besides sentiments of pride, feelings of fear and concern are more outspoken than in 2014-15;
- Pessimism about how the (economic) situation in the country is developing and the military operation is managed is shared in a broader cross-section of society;
- Although for most Russians, the war is still far away, tactical defeat and mobilization have brought the war closer to home;
- Elements of grave concern are the closure of the borders and the risk of nuclear war.

The Kremlin is aware of these concerns and underlying sentiments. Yet, propaganda and repression are potent weapons to eliminate, counter, or manipulate these sentiments in favour of the Kremlin’s war goals. In 2022, this strategy seemed to be successful. Putin can still count on a majority of the Russian population. It seems that with the preparation for a new offensive in 2023, the minds are even toughened and solidified for what is coming. Another question is whether this strategy can hold for a long time without spectacular victories on the battlefield. Will the party of war accept defeat? Will the party of war be able to mobilize the conformists against the regime? Will the cost of the war maintain Russia’s conformist passivity?



4. The end

If anything, public opinion research has little predictive value. As a result, the question of how Russian citizens will react to new developments in the war remains difficult, if not impossible to answer, through public opinion research. It is a different ballgame to mobilize people and incite them to action than monitoring/controlling their opinions.⁶¹ In this sense, time and black swans will be the ultimate factors that will decide the war's outcome. However, building a counterstrategy based on contingency is an uncomfortable and unsatisfying position, especially for people with decision-making responsibilities.

So let us briefly outline the situation we are facing:

Despite the illegality, absurdity, and criminal nature of his endeavour, Putin has shown not to accept defeat in Ukraine. On the contrary, since the winter of 2022, he has been preparing a spring offensive. The dimensions of these preparations, including hundreds of thousands of newly mobilized soldiers, are huge, which suggests that an offensive rivalling the February 2022 invasion is in the making.

The preparation of this "invasion 2.0" includes preparing the Russian population for what Russian propagandists call Russia's "second Stalingrad" and "Russia's ultimate battle for survival". So far, the Kremlin's toxic propaganda programme seems to succeed in placating the "party of war," keeping the "conformists" inert, and isolating the "party of peace".

Russia's self-inflicted point of disintegration or collapse has not arrived yet. Nevertheless, independent of the outcome of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Russia is witnessing a disaster in disguise. Therefore, we consider Putin's spring offensive a desperate last chance to stack the odds in his favour in Ukraine. It will be the litmus test of the Putin regime, as the renewed attack on Ukraine will determine the outcome of the Ukraine war and the future of Putinism.

For the time being, we are confronted with an opponent whose strategy is built on a purely military logic, in which "mass" and "total war," concepts we believed were things of the past, take centre stage. This scary situation reminds us of the tragedy we learned about in history class when "the end" in late April 1945 in Berlin was discussed.⁶² This comparison does not hold across the board. Yet, Russia's "desperation against all odds", its "stubborn sanctimoniousness", and preparedness to use "unspeakable acts of violence", in short, its irrationality, makes the Ukraine tragedy infuriating and insupportable.

In this context, Western hopes based on rational argumentation, economic sanctions, and military support for Ukraine alone may be futile, especially when the Russian people consider financial hardship and human sacrifice as an honourable alternative for continental peace.

As mentioned, the democratic West finds itself in a difficult spot as Russia's propaganda brands the West as the alpha and omega of the conflict. In the case of a Russian defeat, propagandists will deny any responsibility and blame the West for their support to Ukraine; in the case of victory, Russia's political technologists will take all credits, and describe their conquest as a victory against the decadent West. And thus, the main question remains whether the democratic West is prepared to take responsibility for this uncomfortable burden. Our next appointment is scheduled somewhere in April or May of this year. In the meantime, our thoughts are with those who suffer and could never have imagined that they would find themselves in this situation in 2023.



Information Box: A Critical View on Russian Opinion Research

The literature mentions four main interrelated problems influencing Russian survey polls. Most of these problems concern respondents spontaneously associating polls and surveys with the (authoritarian) state. (1) The following problems are observed:

- **The high number of refusals to participate and non-response to sensitive questions (also known as the non-response bias):** In Russia, a non-response rate of approximately 40% is observed on questions related to the war in Ukraine, while a target response in the range of 70 to 85% is prescribed in survey methods textbooks. (2) Based on this observation, the validity of these surveys may be questioned. However, Lev Gudkov somewhat nuances this observation as “most of the time, these [non-respondents] are technical refusals on the part of the busy people. [...] We consider refusals motivated by political considerations about 10 to 15% of the people surveyed”.(3) The latter is confirmed by Elena Koneva, who has reported a refusal rate of around 5% in her study on the Ukraine war. However, she noted an increased non-response of up to 17% in the case of *sensitive questions*, which is not problematic. (4)
- **A high level of conformity and compliance (also known as *social desirability bias* or *preference falsification*):** People’s answer is influenced by the desire to conform to the conventional view or people are misrepresenting their wants under perceived social pressure. (5) While the link between attitude and behaviour is seldom straightforward, these surveys possibly mask a difference between what people publicly say and privately think. This observation makes Natalia Savelyeva remark that the outcomes of surveys in Russia are not necessarily demonstrating Russia’s *slave mentality* or *the absence of morality*. Instead, they may reflect the depoliticization of Russian society, another primal characteristic of Putin’s regime. (6) Several survey techniques are used to get insight into this bias and minimize its effect. One of them is the *listing technique*. Meta studies show that, on average, this technique lowers the observed outcomes by approximately 10 percent. (7) A listing experiment applied to Russia’s war support in April 2022 showed a 15% lower support rate: from 68% to 53%. (8) Depoliticization, however, does not absolve the Russian population of its responsibility. The Russian population, accepting Putin’s *social contract*, is the co-founder of the Putin Regime. Without the Russian population, Putin wouldn’t survive (9)
- **The existence of the so-called acclamation phenomenon:** this phenomenon, mentioned by Grigory Yudin, is a variation of the aforementioned social desirability bias. It has to do with the specific Russian attitude toward leadership and power [*vlast*]. (10) Maxim, a 34-year-old product designer for a textile manufacturer in St. Petersburg, justified *vlast* by saying, “No one should criticize *vlast*”. (11) Respondents indeed tend to confirm and support what the leader has decided. As such, the fact that Putin has announced the start of the special military operation in person influences the results. Or, in the case of the *partial mobilization*: “The fact that it was Putin who gave the order to mobilize ... played a large role. Likely, what we have measured so far is specifically the support for Putin’s decision, rather than a conscious attitude toward expanding the military contingent”. (12) This shows Putin’s special status within Putinism and its effect on public opinion research in the country.
- **The impact of the wording and presentation of the question:** Russia’s current military campaign is officially called a *special (military) operation*. The qualification of *war* is forbidden. This influences the results of the polls. One can imagine that people tend to favour the Kremlin adventure when it is called a (*special*) *military operation* instead of what it is: a war in which Russia illegally invades a sovereign country. Moreover, the fact that a question is presented as an open or closed, a direct or indirect question also influences the results.



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Detailed List of illustrations, polling questions, and data References (02.02.2023)

Figure 1: Approval of Vladimir Putin’s Activities (2012-2020).....	8
Levada.	
<u>Question:</u> “Do you generally approve or disapprove of Vladimir Putin’s activities as Russia’s President (Prime Minister)?”	
<u>Source:</u> Левада-Центр : Одобрение органов власти (levada.ru)	
VTsIOM (Adapted)	
<u>Question:</u> “In general, do you approve or disapprove of the activities of the President of Russia?”	
<u>Source:</u> ВЦИОМ. Новости: Деятельность государственных институтов (wciom.ru)	
Figure 2: Approval index of Vladimir Putin’s activities.....	9
Adapted from the same sources as Figure 1.	
Figure 3: Trust in Vladimir Putin Dynamics.....	12
VTsIOM (Adapted)	
<u>Question:</u> “We all tend to trust some people and distrust others. Speaking about the politicians, who would you entrust important public matters to?” (open-ended question, any number of answers)	
<u>Source:</u> ВЦИОМ. Новости: Доверие политикам (wciom.ru)	
Figure 4: Vladimir Putin’s trust and approval index (2012-2022).....	13
Adapted from the same VTsIOM sources as Figures 1 & 3.	
Figure 5: Institutional Trust (1) – The Government, the Duma, and the President (1994-2022).....	14
Levada (adapted)	
<u>Question:</u> “To what extent do you think they are trustworthy...”	
<u>Source:</u> Левада-Центр : Доверие общественным институтам (levada.ru)	
Figure 6: Institutional Trust (2) – The Army, the State Security Agencies, and the President (1994-2022).....	14
Adapted from the same sources as Figure 5.	
Figure 7: Institutional Trust (3) – The Government, the Duma, the Army, the State Security Agencies, and the President (2010-2022).....	15
Adapted from the same sources as Figure 5.	
Figure 8: The Putin Bias – “The Burden of power” in war and peace.....	16
Russian Field (Adapted)	
<u>Question 1:</u> If Vladimir Putin announces a new offensive against Kyiv tomorrow, will you support such a decision?	
<u>Question 2:</u> If Vladimir Putin signs a peace agreement tomorrow and stops the military operation, will you support such a decision?	
<u>Source:</u> Партия войны становится меньше во всех опросах (re-russia.net)	
Figure 9: Approval of Vladimir Putin’s Activities (2022).....	17
Adapted from the same Levada & VTsIOM sources as Figure 1.	
FOM (Adapted)	
<u>Question:</u> “In your opinion, does President V. Putin work in his post rather well or rather poorly?”	
<u>Source:</u> d50pi2022.pdf (fom.ru)	
Figure 10: Support for the actions of Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine.....	19
Levada (adapted)	
<u>Question:</u> “Do you personally support or not support the actions of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine?”	
<u>Source:</u> Левада-Центр : Конфликт с Украиной: оценки декабря 2022 года (levada.ru)	
Figure 11: Support for military Operation in Ukraine-Dichotomic picture.....	20
Adapted from the same Levada source as Figure 10.	
Chronicles Project & Extreme Scan (adapted)	
<u>Question:</u> “Tell me, please, do you support, or do not support, the military operation of Russia on the territory of Ukraine, find it difficult to answer unequivocally, or do not want to answer this question?”	
<u>Source:</u> Поддержка войны среди опрошенных в России снизилась до 55% (extremescan.eu)	
Figure 12: Personal support for the actions of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine.....	22
Adapted from the same source as Figure 10.	
Figure 13: The party of war, Conformists, and the party of Peace.....	25
Adapted from the same Russian Filed source as Figure 8.	



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