

EGMONT PAPER 126

– DECEMBER 2023 –

The Ticking Clock for Russia's Endless War: Unveiling Silent Turmoil on Putin's Second Front

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Abstract

While the prevailing narrative suggests that time currently favors Russia in the ongoing conflict, it is imperative to recognize that this temporal advantage is not boundless for either side. Within Russia, the primary enigma revolves around the durability of the existing social contract, a delicate balance that safeguards the isolated lives of the passive majority while the Kremlin relentlessly pursues its wartime objectives. The ticking clock of an apparently endless war adds another layer of complexity to Russia's strategic calculus.

At first glance, Putin appears firmly entrenched in power, with sociological indicators such as trust and approval rates remaining notably high. Examining Russia's engagement in the war in Ukraine, polls suggest a broad consensus among the Russian population, even if they desire a swift resolution or favor peace talks. Despite the populace's desire for a resolution, sociological data fail to reveal signs of instability or imminent upheaval in Russia. The prevailing atmosphere is one of adaptation, justification, and acceptance, whether through learned indifference or pragmatic cooperation.

Moreover, dividing Russian society into the Party of War, the Party of Peace, and the Passive Majority highlights the authorities' effective silencing of extreme viewpoints. The most substantial segment, the Passive Majority, reveals subtle cracks in the facade of normalcy. Beyond the image of state resilience, challenges to the authorities, as seen in the case of Prigozhin, lack widespread support for Putin. Beneath economic optimism, families grapple with rising prices, mortgage payments, and diminishing savings. Beyond the military front, complaints emerge, particularly from women, regarding the impact of mobilization on their loved ones.

These observed cracks do not manifest as explicit anti-war protests but rather as discontent with broken promises, arbitrary behavior, and neglect of basic citizen rights, including the promised social benefits, by the state authorities. Presently, the Passive Majority remains subdued, but accumulating concerns could transform them into a latent force—the Floating Mass.



"Everything was forever, until it was no more."

Alexei Yurchak¹

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent discussions surrounding the entrenched stalemate in the Ukraine-Russian war, a prevalent assertion emerges: time appears to be favoring the Kremlin.² This contention holds weight when one considers Russia's relative demographic strength, its unexpectedly resilient economy, potential military resources, and the apparent stability observed within its society—ranging from apathy to sympathy for the regime. Beyond sheer size and seemingly unchanging patterns, Russia's strategic preparations for an extended, if not total, war are unmistakable. The nation is shifting its economy to align with a wartime footing and tightening control over both left and right-wing opposition factions. Recent global developments have further fueled optimism within the Kremlin, with a discernible focus on victory. Russia is diligently scanning the Western horizon for signs of hope and renewed confidence, potentially seeking solace in The Hague, Bratislava, Budapest, the Polish-Ukrainian border, or other unexpected quarters. The Kremlin's strategy pivots on anticipating Western fatigue, distraction, and self-absorption. Coupled with Russia's well-known tenacity, often characterized as indifference to suffering, these factors intuitively suggest that Russia is better positioned to sustain the conflict over a more extended period than Ukraine, underscoring that time currently tilts in Russia's favor.

Nevertheless, as evidenced in the initial phases of the war, a pure numerical assessment of Russia's potential proves to be an unreliable indicator of its actual performance in the conflict. Furthermore, there are no guarantees that the ambitious and robust plans outlined by the Russian executive to bolster the war effort will be fully implemented. As experience has shown, the space between aspiration and action often encounters formidable obstacles in the Russian reality. Additionally, as long as the principles of law, the unwritten codes of democracy, and the adherence to Western values persist, recent political developments in the West—disconcerting and unwelcome as they may be—are encapsulated within a system that allows for checks and balances, necessitating adaptation and consensus. In other words, despite the potential advantage in time, Russia's temporal edge is not boundless.

Indeed, by initiating the unprovoked war against Ukraine, the Kremlin has imposed another self-induced crisis contributing to the fragility of the Russian state and society. As such, the alternative to a victorious win is still a crushing loss. In this context, whatever Russia's intentions related to the war against Ukraine, Putin's first, most profound, and arguably most difficult task is 'to ensure internal stability, mobilize the population and the economy, increase the production of weapons and military equipment.' Russia's war against Ukraine begins at home, precisely in the realm of internal stability and the mobilization of the people. It is in this realm, what some call Putin's second front,³ that we will examine some recent developments, subtle as they may be.



2. THE FACADE OF STABILITY: A SURFACE GLANCE AT RUSSIAN PUBLIC OPINION

In March 2023, we released a comprehensive study delving into Russian public sentiment amid the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, titled “Captivated by War: The Russian People in the Face of the Ukraine War, Mobilization, and Tactical Defeat.” This study not only explored the application and potential misuse of public opinion research in Russia but also unveiled notable trends, showcasing high levels of trust and approval rates in Putin, and overall support for the war among the Russian populace—albeit with nuanced perspectives. As we approach the year’s end, with the conflict persisting for nearly 21 months, it becomes intriguing to examine recent developments in this domain.⁴

2.1. Key Indicators

Examining several key indicators, we do not readily observe significant changes or deviations from established trends. For example:⁵

- Putin’s approval rates consistently remain remarkably high, never dipping below 80% throughout 2023. By October, it had reached 82%. As such, the consolidation effect around Putin remains steadfast, driven by factors such as the absence of a perceived competent alternative, the fear of chaos, and, significantly, the framing of the war as an existential war imposed by West, particularly the United States, from which people feel they cannot abstain. Interestingly, this argument becomes more sensitive as one ages in Russia.
- Notably, other prominent figures, including Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin (69%), the government (67%), the governors (71%), and even the Duma (57%), also maintain substantial approval rates. While the effect may not be as pronounced as during the ‘Crimea Spring’ observed in the period 2014-2017, certain elements in current developments suggest a similar trend.
- In October 2023, 62% of the Russian population believed the country was moving in the right direction, while 21% thought it was going in the wrong direction, and 15% were undecided on the matter.
- Regarding the potential for upheaval and protests in Russia, only 19% of the population, as of September 2023, could envision protests occurring in their town, city, or community based on economic or political demands (‘требование’). Furthermore, only 18% expressed the likelihood of personally participating in such protests if they were to take place.

These figures are substantiated by other polling centers. For instance, the Kremlin-related Public Opinion Foundation (FOM, Фонд Общественное Мнение) arrives at comparable conclusions:⁶

- Putin’s approval rate in mid-November was 78%, with a trust rate of 76%. In contrast, 12% did not approve of his work, and 14% expressed a lack of trust in Putin. Remarkably, according to FOM, the prime minister receives much lower approval rates, namely 58%, instead of 69% as noted by Levada.
- Although the question was formulated slightly differently, FOM also observed that 66% of the population had not heard any critique towards the Russian authorities (while 31% did), and 54% of the population described the mood within its circle of acquaintances as ‘calm,’ while 40% considered this mood as ‘anxious.’ This indicates that there is no immediate concern for upheaval or instability.
- On November 2, 2023, in an upward trend, 58% of the Russian population indicated that the authorities were appropriately attentive to domestic developments (with 18% expressing it was too little attention and 11% stating it was too much). Additionally, 49% perceived domestic politics as successful, while 23% considered it unsuccessful.

Another Kremlin related polling agency, Russian Public Opinion Research Center (Всероссийский центр изучения общественного мнения, VTsIOM), asked the question about trust in Vladimir Putin. In the weekly omnibus survey conducted in November, his trust rate was never under 78.5%.⁷

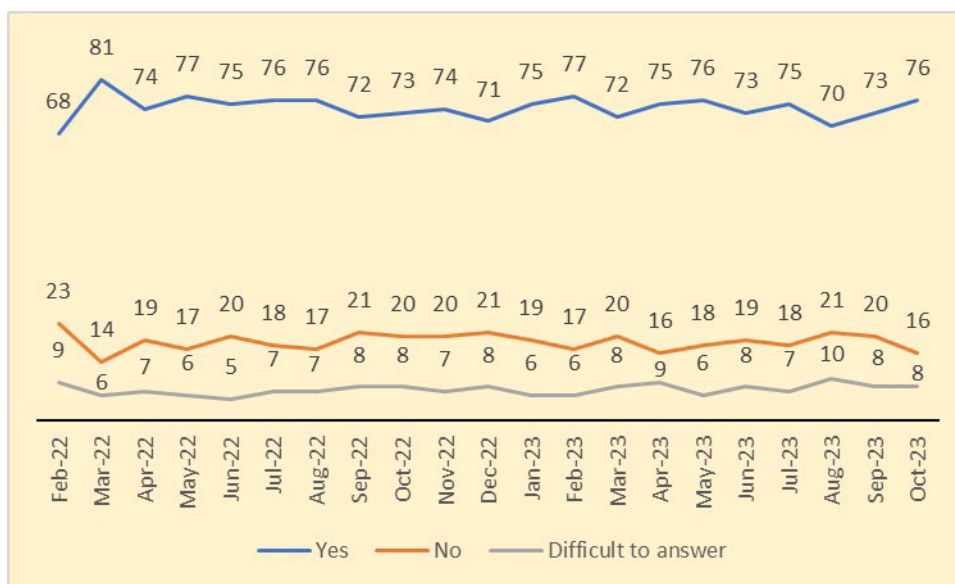
In parallel with Putin’s 71st birthday on October 7th, VTsIOM also conducted a survey evaluating the performance of the president. The results reveal strong support, with 72% expressing high appreciation for Vladimir Putin’s contribution to the country. Additionally, 74% of respondents conveyed confidence in his ability to maintain stability and promote development, while an overwhelming 79% see him as the sole politician capable of steering the country forward.⁸

In summary, the latest data, irrespective of the polling agency referenced, fail to reveal any discernible signs of instability or looming upheaval in Russia. What becomes evident is a seemingly robust and stable scenario, meticulously upheld by the regime’s amalgamation of repression, propaganda, and cooptation. In this landscape, the support of the populace is adeptly secured through the dispensation of unprecedented social benefits.

2.2. The Russian people and the war in Ukraine

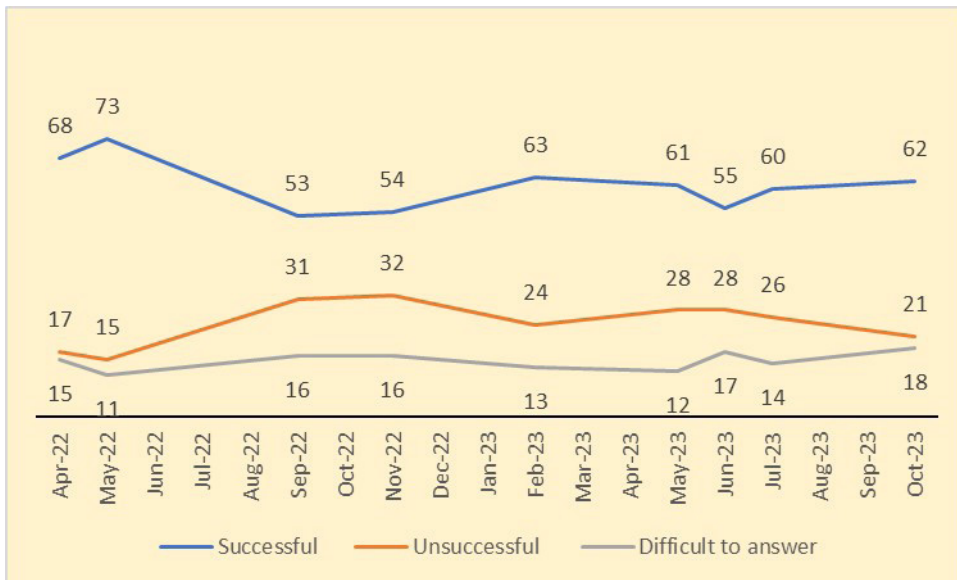
More specifically, one can also observe several consistent trends related to the Russian population’s attitude toward the war in Ukraine in general, their perception of how the conflict is unfolding, and their stance on peace negotiations.⁹

Regarding the question ‘Do you personally support or not support the actions of the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine?’ over time, according to Levada, no significant changes are immediately apparent. Indeed, a closer examination of the latest polling results in October 2023 (with a response rate of 30%), as depicted in the table, reveals notable patterns. The solid blue line for October 2023 indicates that 76% of the Russian population either fully agrees or somewhat agrees with the question. Simultaneously, the solid orange line illustrates that 16% completely disagree or rather do not agree. (For the sake of completeness, about 8% finds the question difficult to answer).¹⁰ These data demonstrate solid support for Putin’s war in Ukraine among the Russian people. Obviously, some nuances or clarifications are needed, which we will address in the next part where we discuss Russia’s “floating mass.”



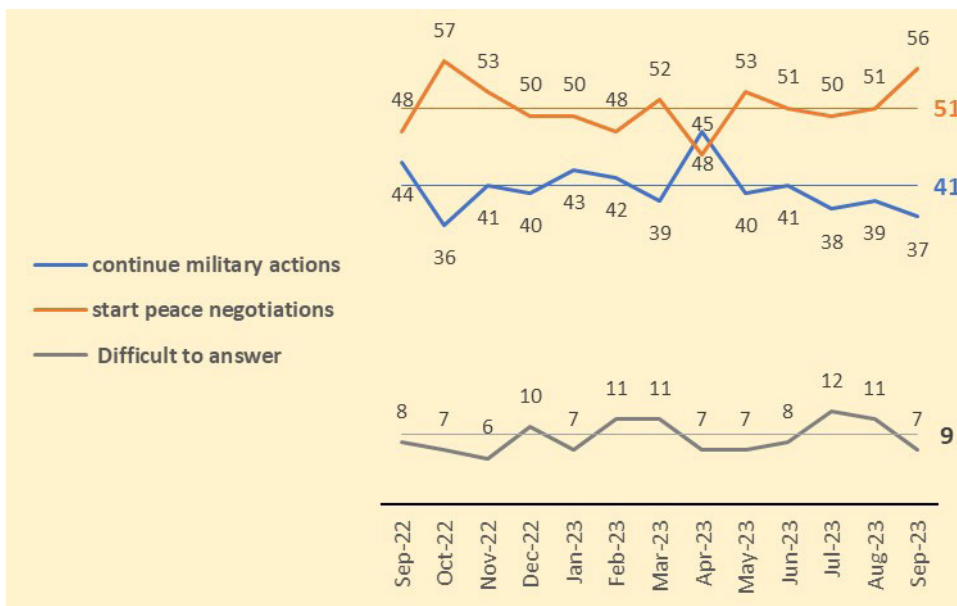
Graph 1: “Do you personally support or not support the actions of the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine?” (Levada, October 2023)

When Russians are asked, 'In your view, how successful or unsuccessful is the Russian 'special military operation' in Ukraine developing?' In October 2023, 62% considered the war to be successful (12% very successful, 50% rather successful), while 21% considered it to be unsuccessful (14% rather unsuccessful and 7% unsuccessful). Eighteen percent find it difficult to answer this question. Thus, also on this issue, we observe that the Russian population generally perceives the operation as going well, with a success rate oscillating between 55% and 65%.



Graph 2: "In your opinion, how successful or unsuccessful is the Russian 'Special Military Operation' unfolding in Ukraine?" (Levada, October 2023)

In mid-November, several Western media outlets reported on a noteworthy development following the observation that a majority of the Russian population (56%) expressed a preference for peace negotiations over continuing the war (37%).¹¹ When Russians were asked, 'In your opinion, should we continue military actions now or start peace negotiations?', the following results were observed:



Graph 3: "In your opinion, do you think it is advisable to continue military actions now or initiate peace negotiations?" (Levada, October 2023)

It is noteworthy to observe that, upon considering the discrete measurement point in October 2023 in context and comparing it with the data observed since September 2022, the period when this question was first posed, there is no discernible extreme change, let alone a deviation from the established trend. With the exception of April 2023, the Russian population has consistently shown a preference for peace negotiations over continuing the war. Cynically enough, Russians consider themselves as peaceful people. However, two important remarks must be made: this view aligns with Vladimir Putin's perspective on peace negotiations with Ukraine, as expressed on several occasions. The crucial question, however, is under which conditions these peace talks should take place. Russians agree with peace negotiations as long as the occupied oblasts – in particular Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia - are considered Russian. In other words, it is not a call to end the war under whatever circumstances, an outlet of desperation, or the like. It is a repetition of the Kremlin's framing of the issue, as expressed in Putin's speeches broadcasted on television and discussed on Telegram Channel.

Three other issues related to the war are noteworthy:

- **Perception of War Duration:** In October 2023, nearly half of the Russian population (46%) expressed the belief that the war in Ukraine would extend for more than another year. This sentiment has been on the rise since November 2022, with over 40% of Russians adopting this perspective. These figures indicate a mental preparedness among the Russian people for a prolonged conflict. As elaborated in the forthcoming paragraph, it's noteworthy that the majority of Russians do not feel the significant effects of the war in their day-to-day lives. They either adapt or are compensated by the Russian authorities through massive social support efforts.
- **Hypothetical Support for the invasion:** When presented with a hypothetical scenario, the Russian population appears somewhat divided. If given the opportunity to revisit the past and either support or cancel the initiation of the military operation in Ukraine, 43% would still choose to support it, while 41% would opt to cancel the decision.
- **Impact of Ukrainian Attacks on Russian Soil:** Examining the impact of Ukrainian attacks on Russian soil, noteworthy observations emerge. The attack on Moscow, lacking casualties or fatalities, is perceived as an incident with no significant or lasting impact on daily life. Conversely, attacks on border regions with Ukraine surprisingly result in heightened support for the war among inhabitants, rather than prompting a reconsideration of their stance on the conflict.

In conclusion, on a surface level, these results seem to indicate widespread support for the war in Ukraine, a narrative carefully crafted by the regime as a protracted and existential struggle against the collective West, ostensibly aimed at Russia's destruction. Broadly speaking, what unfolds in Russia aligns with sociological concepts such as 'learned indifference' (Andrei Kolesnikov and Denis Volkov) or 'pragmatic cooperation' (Elena Koneva). The Russian people appears driven by a desire to navigate the challenging socio-economic and political landscape, prioritizing survival within this context. Fearing chaos or personal harm, individuals adapt, accept, conceal, or rationalize the situation, often paying the price for their silence or support by avoiding direct or physical confrontation with the state. This dynamic inevitably contributes to a condition of anomie, as described by Durkheim—an erosion or breakdown of moral values, standards, or guidance due to a misalignment of individual standards with broader social norms.¹² Over time, this condition poses a significant detriment, if not a potential catastrophe, for Russia as both a state and society.

Despite the apparent timidity or even cowardice associated with this stance, considering the historical context of public attitudes within authoritarian and totalitarian regimes offers a more nuanced perspective. From a historical standpoint, the behavior of the Russian public appears relatively 'normal.' Moreover, historical literature underscores the complexity of support and apathy within the context of such regimes, challenging simplistic interpretations. As explored in the next section, the Russian masses exhibit a level of fluidity and complexity beyond initial impressions.

3. BENEATH THE SURFACE: ANALYZING CRACKS IN RUSSIA’S PERCEIVED SOCIAL STABILITY

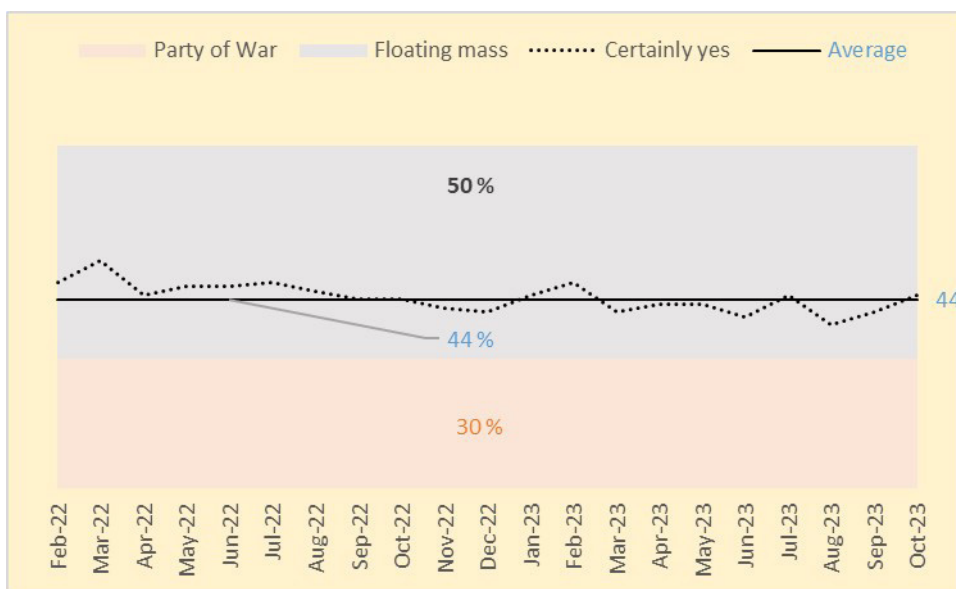
When sociologists delve deeper into the polling data, additional layers and nuances emerge. Thus, with Oleksandr Shulga, we may question whether we are dealing with a myth or a true social reality.¹³ As highlighted in our initial paper, ‘Captivated by War,’ through experiments and thorough analysis, the Russian population can be categorized into three groups:

- **The Party of War:** Comprising hard-core, ideologically driven supporters of the war.
- **The Party of Peace:** Encompassing individuals staunchly against the war, either due to principled moral or incidental objections to the conflict with Ukraine.
- **The Passive Majority** or, as termed, **The Floating Mass:** Consisting of those who align with the state narrative for survival, with minimal consideration of the broader consequences of their stance.

While there are no fundamental differences among the researchers, minor variations exist in the quantification of these groups. Andrei Kolesnikov and Denis Volkov estimate that 20% of Russian society belongs to the Party of War, 20% to the Party of Peace, leaving 60% in the Passive Majority.¹⁴ On the other hand, Elena Koneva quantifies these groups as 30%, 20%, and 50%, respectively.¹⁵ Considering Elena Koneva’s methodology, we lean towards her results for greater accuracy.

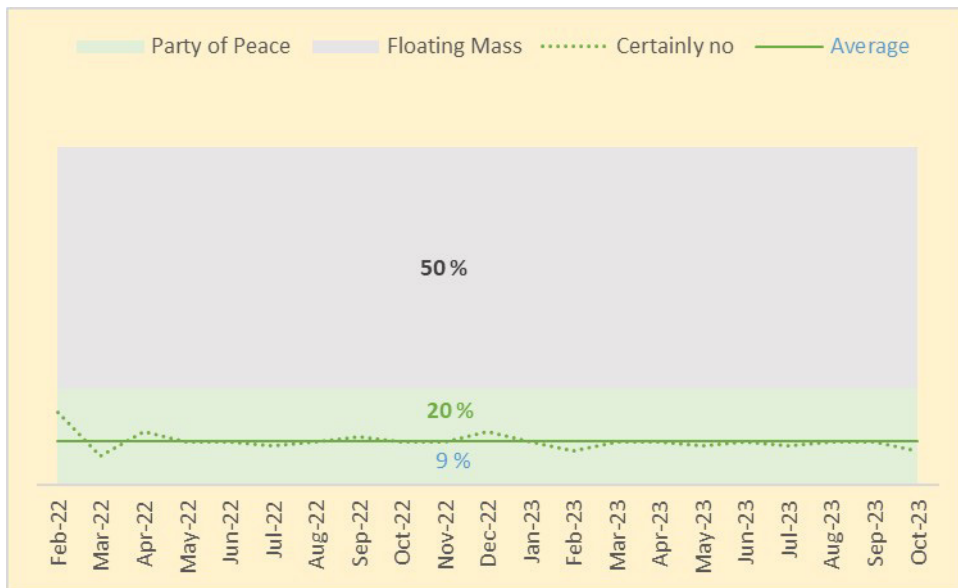
3.1. Quantifying and evolving dynamics within the Party of War and the Party of Peace

Based on the data of Levada, the Party of War is somewhat overestimated in the poll observations. When comparing the results of those who answer ‘definitely yes’ to the question of whether they support the war in Ukraine with the analyzed quantification of the Party of War, we observe an average of about 44%, whereas Koneva’s estimation suggests around 30%, indicating an overestimation of about 15%.



Graph 4: Divergent Views on the War: Insights from ‘The Party of War’ vs. ‘The Floating Mass’

Conversely, the Party of Peace is somewhat underestimated. If we conduct the same analysis as mentioned above, we note an underestimation of approximately 11%. This is evident in the average of 9% of individuals expressing categorical opposition to the war, contrasting with Koneva’s estimate of 20% for the Party of Peace.

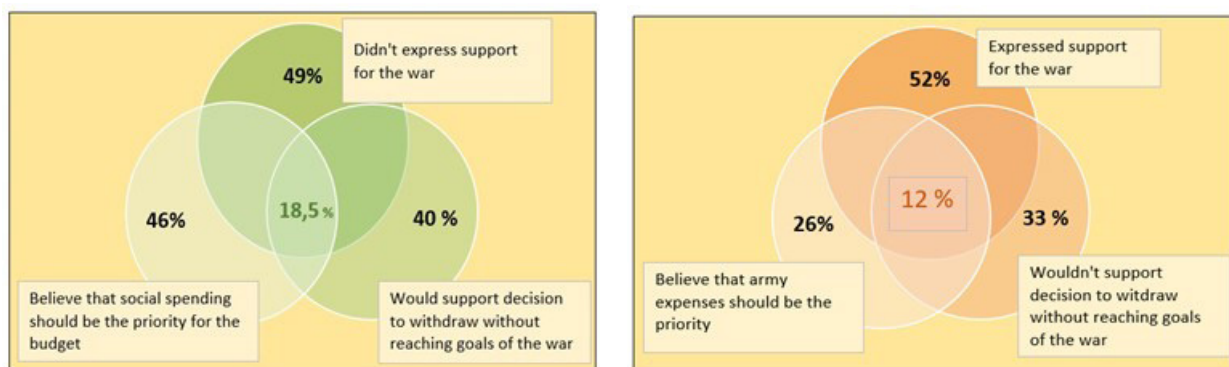


Graph 5: Divergent Views on the War: Insights from 'The Party of Peace' vs. 'The Floating Mass'

While various assessments of the pro-war and pro-peace factions exist, Chronicles, an alternative sociological research platform, has presented notably different findings in comparison to Levada regarding the quantification of these factions. The historian, political activist and author of the 11th iteration of Chronicles war studies, Aleksey Minyailo, conducted an experiment in which he intersected the results of three key questions:

1. Do you support or oppose the war?
2. Do you support or oppose the withdrawal from the war in Ukraine without achieving its goals?
3. Should social spending or war spending be the government's top priority?

As a result, the Party of Peace was estimated to be at 18.5%, while the Party of War stood at 12%. According to Minyailo's report in February 2023, the Party of Peace faction was at 20%, while the Party of War was at 22%. In other words, Chronicles suggests that the Party of Peace faction has remained stable, while the Party of War faction has experienced a 10% decline over the last nine months.



Graph 6: The party of peace/the party of war as quantified by 'Chronicles'.



Moreover, Chronicles significantly indicates a shift where the Party of Peace faction now outnumbers the Party of War faction. This notable transformation is attributed to socio-economic factors: 44% of respondents reported a decrease in their family income, while only 5% anticipate an increase in their family budget due to the rise in military spending. Additionally, 20% mentioned that essential medicines are no longer accessible.¹⁶ The Ukrainian Institute for Conflict Studies and Analysis of Russia (IKAR) has also reported increasing financial problems within Russian families. In their monthly monitor of Russian society, 'Russian Mirror,' for September 2023, conducted in cooperation with the sociological company Info Sapiens, they observed that financial problems became the most pressing issue for Russians. They noted that inflation has rendered salaries and pensions inadequate to keep up with rising prices, with more than half of Russians having savings to survive only a few weeks to a month.¹⁷ These findings sharply contrast with Russia's optimistic macro-economic data for 2023 recently published by the Central Bank of the Russian Federation and the Western press.¹⁸

In addition to the quantitative assessment of the Party of War/Party of Peace, significant developments concerning these groups on the extreme ends of the spectrum have unfolded. Since the onset of the war, Russian authorities have subjected the Party of Peace to rigorous scrutiny and repression, effectively silencing their voices. Those who haven't fled the country have faced arrests and received unjust prison sentences based on fabricated charges. Some argue that this phenomenon signals the demise of liberal Russia.¹⁹

Since the summer of 2023, increased state pressure has been observed on the Party of War following the Prigozhin mutiny. Surprisingly, for a significant period, advocates of this group criticized the authorities for mismanaging military operations and not fully committing to the war effort. However, as they began to pose a threat to Putin's power, they were either marginalized, imprisoned, or even killed. The story of former FSB agent Igor Strelkov/Girkin, the war blogger who was jailed in July 2023 and is said to have presidential ambitions, may also illustrate this phenomenon.

On the part of the Party of War, some observers have noted significant changes. Since the summer of 2023, internal conflicts within the Party of War have escalated, shifting their focus and rhetoric from Ukraine to internal disputes. Across various platforms, from television to Twitter accounts and Telegram channels, figures ranging from opinion makers to propagandists have begun accusing each other of treason, sexual impropriety, impure Russian origin (including instances of antisemitism and racism), unprofessionalism, and self-promotion. In essence, beneath the surface of a seemingly unified war objective and glorified sense of Russianness, the Party of War appears to be prioritizing internal discord, potentially resulting in a loss of momentum for their war efforts.²⁰

On the part of the Party of Peace, in November 2023, Russian sociologist Lyubov Borusyak attempted to capture the mindset of anti-war Russians who chose to stay in Russia.²¹ This study marked the third iteration, primarily focused on a group dominated by well-educated residents of major cities. The initial wave occurred in May 2022, followed by a second wave in November of the same year.

Although Borusyak acknowledges the somewhat uncertain methodological grounds of her research, she reported a notable trend. In response to the war announcement in February 2022 and the declaration of partial mobilization in September 2022, most respondents expressed a mix of shock, fear, horror, hopelessness, fury, shame, and anger. Despite these emotions, they remained prepared to take public action, aiming to assert their existence and impact.

However, by November 2023, there was a fundamental shift in the emotional state and readiness for action among anti-war Russians in Russia. Their mindset is now characterized by feelings of hopelessness, powerlessness, fatigue, depression, dejection, and impending doom, leading them towards states of "adaptation," "acceptance," "calmness," and "indifference." These individuals feel marginalized and isolated, while also expressing disappointment in the actions of the West, particularly criticizing the perceived hypocrisy of sanctions against Russia.



In conclusion, notwithstanding the debate over the true strength of both the Party of War and the Party of Peace in Russia, it is evident that both factions are under the control of the Kremlin. Consequently, these once vocal and dedicated camps are gradually losing influence in Russian society. Their decline can be attributed to a combination of exhaustion and self-isolation, as well as internal conflicts and bombastic rhetoric, rendering them unable to influence the agenda within Putin's war machine. What remains is the largest group, which we refer to as the Floating mass. As we will demonstrate, this often-overlooked and morally condemned segment demands our attention, harboring the potential for unforeseen shifts and surprises that may shape the course of events.

3.2. The unpredictable Floating Mass

In the intense discourse surrounding collaboration and resistance, historians specializing in authoritarian regimes, such as Ian Kershaw, Pierre Ayçoberry, Johann Chapoutot, Norbert Frei, Robert Gellately, and others, consistently caution that as observers and analysts, we tend to concentrate on the overt and outspoken voices and the most dramatic actions either in favor of or against the regime.²² Our focus often leans towards political assassinations, acts of sabotage, striking social media pronouncements, and the like. However, as their research indicates, the attitudes and opinions of the general populace may be less conspicuous or spectacular but are by no means less intricate. Indeed, their perspectives are multifaceted and considerably more nuanced than one might initially perceive. The fact that individuals do not express their views publicly does not imply ignorance; rather, they hold their own private opinions. Most of the time, people are surprisingly well-informed about the situation; they recognize government deceit and are cognizant of the unfolding circumstances, even if they are unfavorable or challenging to defend. Yet, they choose to keep their opinions private, opting not for direct action but for a survival strategy that encompasses adaptation, justification, or what Ian Kershaw calls dissension rather than dissidence. In other words, they chose a 'normal life' within a context of war, moral and physical decay.²³

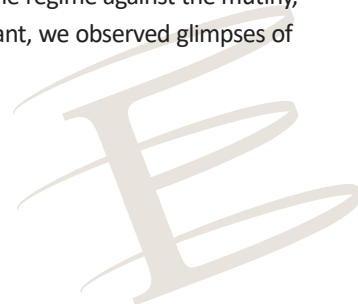
In concrete terms, we are addressing approximately 50 to 60% of the Russian population who choose to navigate the Russian paradox — a fusion of the ordinary within the extraordinary, justified goodness amid a sea of moral repugnance, private freedom within a repressive authoritarian system, security amid a context of violence, and television serving as a surrogate for the frontline. To an observer, this behavior may be deemed morally repulsive; however, to the dismay of those who criticize it, it constitutes part of the repertoire of human behavior adapting to stressful situations.

Leaving moral considerations aside, it might be interesting to look at recent developments within this faction of society as they may reveal some potential interesting analytical elements, if not indicators of change. They have to do with the position of Putin, economics, mobilization, and the way the war is managed.

3.2.1. No alternatives for Putin yet

One of the reasons why Putin enjoys high trust rates is the absence of a viable alternative for him. He is framed and considered as the sole figure capable of managing Russia's precarious situation, as demonstrated in the first lustrum of the 2000s. The alternative to Putin is perceived as chaos, or, as the French would say, 'après Putin, le déluge' [after Putin, the deluge]. The Russian population, haunted by the trauma of the 1990s, vehemently seeks to avoid a recurrence of this period at all costs.

However, a crucial question emerges: What if a viable alternative to Putin exists? With some exaggeration, we caught a glimpse of this possibility in the summer of 2023 with the Prigozhin mutiny. In stark contrast to the widely expressed high esteem for Putin, there were no visible actions either from the authorities or the population to defend Putin and the regime against the mutiny, even when an armed convoy approached Moscow. Instead, albeit small and seemingly insignificant, we observed glimpses of support for Prigozhin.



While there is no concrete proof of who killed Prigozhin, the rationale behind it is clear: to eliminate all potential contenders for Putin's power. Therefore, it is important to keep scanning Russia's political horizon and be sensitive to possible contenders for Putin, whether indicated or self-made, from within or outside his inner circle. Recently, the Russian journalist Andrey Pertsev has suggested some names in this context:²⁴ Sergei Sobyanin (Mayor of Moscow), Marat Khusnullin (Deputy Prime Minister overseeing the construction sector), Sergei Kiriyenko (the presidential administration deputy chief of staff), Yuri Trutnev (presidential envoy to Russia's Far East), Maxim Oreshkin (Putin's aide), Mikhail Mishustin (Prime Minister), and Dmitry Chernyshenko (Deputy Prime Minister attracting attention with his sporting events and IT projects).²⁵

3.2.2. A deteriorating financial situation of Russian families

One can imagine when people want to build up a secluded private life far away from the public domain and with as less possible contact with the state, their private financial situation is of crucial importance. As indicated and contrary to recent optimistic macro-economic news from Russian pollsters have noted that more and more families see their income not matching the rising prices, that their private savings secure their standard of living for a limited period of maximum 1 month, that more and more families are confronted with problems related to their private mortgages, etc. In order words, when asked, people get more and more anxious about their private financial situation. This situation contradicts the positive results of questions that gauge if people think that the country is going in the good direction, or if they trust the president, the prime minister, the government etc.

3.2.3. The state's broken promises

In Russia there is a tradition that people write complain letters to the president as a last attempt to achieve justice and solve their problems. Polina Uzhvak, a data journalist related to I-stories has analyzed these letters and they give a good view on concerns that live among the Russian people. Before the war, the highest number of such complaints was notes in 2018, when 2,300 letters were written, to the president. Since the war, the number of complaints has exploded as 180,000 appeals have been sent to the president mostly regarding issues handled by the military department.

In order of importance, the following complaints have to be handled by the ministry of defense:



Graph 7: Number and content of presidential complaints

Source: Polina Uzhvak, На что россияне жалуются Путину [What Russians complain to Putin about], I-Stories, 29 November 2023 (<https://storage.googleapis.com>)

Russians express their primary concerns to President Putin regarding financial compensations tied to military service. Mobilization issues, the second most prevalent complaint, involve concerns such as the lack of rotation, uncertainty about mobilization end dates, and service conditions for those deployed in combat zones. The third-highest complaint category, contract service, raises issues of conscript soldiers being forced into contracts and deployed to war. Leave entitlements for mobilized soldiers, a rightful benefit, face chaos due to the absence of clear instructions, resulting in arbitrary decisions, and some soldiers being denied leave. Notably, 17% of mobilized soldiers have never taken leave. This is more outrageous considering pardoned criminals are allowed to return home after just six months, while those mobilized are obliged to serve until the end of the war.²⁶ Since the full-scale invasion began, over seven thousand letters have reached the president concerning prisoners of war and the missing in action. In October 2023, complaints about medical care for servicemen and their families surged, including issues with medical examinations, military medical expertise, disability determination, and treatment. Improper tourniquet application caused over 30% of amputations, and more than 50% of deaths resulted from non-life-threatening injuries. The Ministry of Defense's provision of rehabilitation aids faces delays of up to six months, leading wounded individuals to return to the front after recovering. Non-military complaints, such as violations of legislation and child benefit payments, also exceeded 50,000 each. Despite the review of these concerns, resolutions are not guaranteed, with only 1.3% of federal-level appeals receiving support in 2022.

The grievances expressed in these complaints are, to some extent, unsurprising, given the historical neglect of soldiers and citizens by the Russian state. What stands out, however, is the increasing activism of wives, mothers, and sisters of mobilized soldiers, demanding the return of their loved ones in a climate of heightened state oppression. It's premature to align their actions with the well-known 'soldiers' mothers' organization that advocated for soldiers' rights since the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan. To clarify, the current actions, encompassing minor protests, complaint letters to regional and federal authorities, communication with local military offices, and the establishment of Telegram channels, don't categorize as anti-war protests or any other sort of moral protest against the state. Instead, they constitute protests aimed at state authorities who have broken promises, exhibited arbitrary behavior, or neglected the basic rights of citizens.

In conclusion, the war has injected a self-styled social crisis into Russia, silently fermenting beneath the veneer of normalcy. Presently, there is no widespread upheaval or revolutionary fervor in Russia. Despite some minor dissident expressions, the passive majority remains subdued and controlled. However, accumulating concerns may contribute to the discontent of the masses, turning them into a latent force. As history shows, once set in motion, such a force becomes challenging to contain. It raises the question of whether the current social contract holds—securing the private, isolated lives of the Floating Mass while the Kremlin pursues its war goals. Can the Kremlin achieve these goals with less than five percent of the population actively participating in the war, while at least 50-60 percent remains passive, indifferent, and uninvolved? Also for Russia, time appears to be ticking in what seems like an endless war.



4. CONCLUSIONS

In summary, at first glance, Putin appears firmly entrenched in power, with sociological indicators such as trust and approval rates remaining notably high. This extends to the government, as well as local and regional governors. Examining Russia's engagement in the war in Ukraine, polls suggest a broad consensus among the Russian population, even if they desire a swift resolution or favor peace talks. However, this alignment is within the parameters set by the Kremlin.

The condition for ending the war is contingent on Russia achieving its objectives, primarily holding the currently occupied territories and potentially expanding into the four Ukrainian oblasts (Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia). Despite the populace's desire for a resolution, sociological data fail to reveal signs of instability or imminent upheaval in Russia. The prevailing atmosphere is one of adaptation, justification, and acceptance, whether through learned indifference or pragmatic cooperation.

Moreover, dividing Russian society into the Party of War, the Party of Peace, and the Passive Majority highlights the authorities' effective silencing of extreme viewpoints. The most substantial segment, the Passive Majority, reveals subtle cracks in the facade of normalcy. Beyond the image of state resilience, challenges to the authorities, as seen in the case of Prigozhin, lack widespread support for Putin. Beneath economic optimism, families grapple with rising prices, mortgage payments, and diminishing savings. Beyond the military front, complaints emerge, particularly from women, regarding the impact of mobilization on their loved ones.

These observed cracks do not manifest as explicit anti-war protests but rather as discontent with broken promises, arbitrary behavior, and neglect of basic citizen rights by the state authorities. Presently, the Passive Majority remains subdued, but accumulating concerns could transform them into a latent force—the Floating Mass.

While it's often asserted that time is currently in favor of Russia in the ongoing conflict, it's crucial to acknowledge that time is not limitless for either side. In Russia, the main puzzle lies in whether the current social contract can endure, securing the isolated lives of the Floating Mass while the Kremlin pursues its war goals. For Russia, too, time appears to be ticking in what seems like an endless war.



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