Summary

Russian public opinion about the Russian war on Ukraine is diverse. The common notion, that the vast majority of ordinary Russians strongly support Putin’s war against Ukraine, is a myth. The most common attitude among Russians is distaste for war, but there is a substantial acceptance of Russian government propaganda that the so-called “special military operation” is a necessity. However, doubts about the official narratives are growing. Dissent is particularly common among younger people, professionals, and some ethnic minority populations.

The main Russian government justifications for the war are constantly evolving because of changes in the course and goals of the war itself. Common themes include:

- “Nazism” in Ukraine must be eradicated
- The suffering of Donbass for 8 years must end
- Hostility/threat from the West/NATO/USA must be challenged
- A “preventive strike” in Ukraine was necessary to interfere with plans to attack Russia
- “Biological weapons” being developed in Ukraine are a threat to Russia.

Many anti-war skeptics or opponents are fearful of protesting openly and are seeking safer ways to resist. They need to test various options as well as build networks with like-minded people. Anti-war messaging should not only address the current challenges, but also provide hope for people related to a change in Russia’s political direction. Messages for youth should be tested along the lines of "stop the war – save your future."

The updated results of the informal survey of the moods of Russian citizens, conducted in the first half of May 2022, allow us to make a number of additions to the previously presented conclusions of April 30th, regarding the dynamic of sentiments in Russia about the Russian-Ukrainian war, as well as regarding framing anti-war messages to ensure their maximum effectiveness.
1. GENERAL TRENDS CHARACTERIZING COMMON ATTITUDES IN SOCIETY

1.1 Russians avoid talking about the war. The most significant indicator of shifts in public sentiment is a change in the level of discussion related to Russia's war against Ukraine (in the official Russian lexicon – the "special military operation"). While in late February and early March this issue was actively discussed by the population in different places and circumstances, by mid-April there was a clear trend towards avoiding discussions of this topic. Such a change in attitude cannot be explained simply by fear of state reprisals for expressing one’s position. In March, even after the Russian Parliament adopted repressive laws, people continued to actively discuss the situation. The likely factors that determined this turn are: 1) the latent understanding that no quick “solution to the issue” was achieved, 2) that the war and the troubles associated with it turned out to be closer to everyday reality than the pictures on TV screens, and 3) the feeling that the country’s leadership also does not have a clear vision of how to resolve the situation. Although it is not directly stated, the population is beginning to feel that “something has gone wrong” in Ukraine. Escapism has become the most popular response to the growing unease in society and to the wide range of problems generated by the war. The frequently heard theses about supporting the president and his course, and about the need for unity in difficult times, apparently, in many cases, are also a form of avoiding difficult questions about the responsibility of ordinary people for what is happening.

1.2 Growing internal tensions in Russia. The tensions caused by the war also make visible cracks and fractures in the social fabric of Russian society, including those that had little to do with politics. In particular, this applies to relationships between the relatively younger and older generations, as well as to relationships between parents and adolescent children. In some national republics of the Russian Federation, one can expect an increase in tensions between the Russians and ethnic populations related to the anti-war position of ethnic-based organizations, as well as in connection with the disproportionately large military losses among national minorities.

1.3 More openness on non-war taboos. One of the results of both the war itself and the propaganda indoctrination of the population is an atmosphere of more acceptance and willingness to openly speak of the true realities of life, including violations of the law. For example, people began to more openly acknowledge that they are receiving illegal income (bribes, etc.).

1.4 People tend toward emotional distancing from the war. The dominant attitude toward the war itself is neither active support nor active resistance, but rather acceptance of the war as a difficult, but objective reality – like an earthquake or other large-scale natural disaster. State propaganda also works toward this, emphasizing helping refugees and other groups affected by hostilities. These persons are often shown as victims, not even at the hands of the “Nazi-Banderites”, but from some detached difficult reality. For example, state propaganda treats the suffering caused to a family by a shell hitting an apartment, as if an artillery shell is a meteorite from space. Thus, the question of the responsibility of one side or another for what is happening is removed, and the Russian population is offered a formula – "help victims without thinking about the cause of their suffering" – which, paradoxically, allows treating Ukrainians as
a "brotherly nation" with support, or at least a formal acceptance of the policy of their own state. At the same time, talk of helping the victims of the war is already causing some irritation among the population, which is facing a decline in income. If fears of a military defeat and/or the possible spillover of hostilities onto the territory of Russia itself exist, they have not yet been openly voiced.

1.5. The familiar world is collapsing. The effect of economic sanctions is not particularly strong so far and is not perceived as something critical. There are still strong hopes that these are temporary difficulties, and that the sanctions may actually help revive domestic production. The attitude reflected by a proverb, “We didn’t live well – there’s no reason to start,” reflects an intergenerational division, exacerbated by the war and its consequences. For the younger generation, especially for people with an average or higher income level, it is not so much direct economic losses that are painful, but the "collapse" of the familiar world, the disappearance of previously existing opportunities. As a result, a new wave of emigration is taking place.

Update to Section 1 on May 30, 2022

1.6 People’s reticence to talk about the war grows. The tendency to avoid discussion of the war continued into the first half of May 2022. Moreover, it clearly turned out to be often expressed by those who had previously mentioned their approval of the “special operation”. In those cases when it was still possible to get people to talk - the presence of doubts in official propaganda was often mentioned. This is facilitated, in some rare cases, by a relatively sober assessment of the situation in mainstream media. When, occasionally, this can be heard in the official media – it immediately attracts attention. People sometimes use Aesopian language, for example, instead of the term "war" or "special operation" they say, "the events that are happening." Thus, "closedness", saying little, can be an indicator of growing uncertainty about the official line, rather than a reaction to repressive actions of the state. An exception is the situation in Moscow and St. Petersburg, where, after a period of "closedness", people again began to discuss the topic of the "special operation". One can posit that the dynamics of public sentiment in these cities is ahead of similar dynamics in the country as a whole.

1.7 The Z symbol is less used. A reduction in the number of "Z-symbols" on private transport and private buildings was noted in a number of regions. At the same time, the government encourages businesses to introduce the "Z" symbol into the life of ordinary people, for example - by printing it on paper cups used in vending machines.

1.8 Famous people affect attitudes on the war. The situation with famous people also has an impact on people's willingness to speak. For example, attacks on Maxim Galkin (a well known comedian) are perceived as a signal to be cautious: “If it is so with them, then how will it be with us”. Singer Yuri Shevchuk’s position, on the contrary, allows people to speak more frankly, to express themselves by saying, “I think like Shevchuk.”

1.9 Critical discourse about the war is common among older youth. To the previously listed facets of division in society, one can add a possible gap among the youth themselves. Starting in their late teens, critical attitudes towards official discourse are common, while younger
children provide a convenient environment for a sharp increase in state efforts at "patriotic education". There is an increase in the intergenerational gap in attitudes to the war. Statements may be heard such as: "The country was seized by a gang of pensioners in order to ruin the lives of the young."

1.10 Anger at Ukranians receiving more aid. Continued propaganda efforts focusing on the issue of aid to Ukrainian refugees are irritating, as this is happening against the backdrop of a general deterioration in the economic situation, and because the statements of the refugees themselves often do not fit into the official line. There are also signs of a deterioration in the general attitude towards Ukrainians. For example, a case of bullying against a Ukrainian child in school has been reported.

1.11 Economic sanctions are having more impact. The economic consequences of the war and the sanctions regime, rising prices and unemployment are much more widely felt. More direct consequences of the war, such as the death and injury of people, and explosions on the territory of the Russian Federation, are not yet widely affecting the general mass of the population.

1.12 Polarization of attitudes is more pronounced. Against the background of a gradual, albeit slow, growth of skepticism of the official point of view, the formation of a certain group of “pro-state activists” is clearly noticeable, approximately 5% -10% of the population, who not only express their support of the official line, but also actively defend it. They, on their own initiative, conduct "educational work" with those around them. Some write accusations to official authorities about "incorrect" statements, etc. By their actions, this group quite successfully creates the illusion of a majority supporting the official course.

2. PERCEPTION OF PROPAGANDA

2.1 Initial justification for the war. From the wide palette of arguments used by state propaganda to manipulate the minds of Russian citizens to justify the war ("special military operation), three theses were successfully introduced into the minds of a significant percent of the population:

1) The need to fight "Nazism" and "Fascism"

2) The need for assistance to the residents of Donbass, who have suffered from shelling and crimes by the Ukrainian authorities for 8 years;

3) War is a consequence of the anti-Russian policy of Western countries that hate Russia for existential/historical reasons.

2.2 President Zelensky is blamed. The opinion is often voiced that the stubbornness of President Zelensky, who did not want to negotiate, and did not accept compromise, perhaps due to dependence on the West, resulted in the war.
2.3 Previously unknown threats. Other propaganda themes – :“biological laboratories”, “poisoned birds”, “dirty radioactive bombs”, “they themselves wanted to attack”, “medical experiments on people”, etc. – although pronounced occasionally, during disputes, as additional arguments, or a “cherry on the cake”, are not primary arguments widely used to justify the current policy.

2.4 Belief Ukrainians mistreating Russian POWs. There is a widespread belief in the population that the Ukrainians are mistreating Russian prisoners of war. In different cities where there are military hospitals, rumors are spreading about prisoners of war castrated by Ukrainians.

2.5 Growing social discord. Pro-government people actively oppose anti-war activists, calling them traitors and so on.

Update to Section 2 on  May 30, 2022

2.6 The invasion “rationale” is changing. There has been a significant blurring of the palette of arguments justifying the war. There is less talk about "Nazism", or about "8 years of bombing Donbass". However, opinions began to spread widely about: Russia’s pre-emptive strike in response to Ukraine preparing to attack; about the averted threat from biological laboratories allegedly discovered during the “special operation”; and about the abuse by Ukrainians of captured Russian servicemen. The topic of what was allegedly “revealed” after the start of the “special operation” is clearly affecting the minds of the population. Although the general direction of the change in public sentiment is towards doubts about official propaganda, there are cases when people say, “I used to be against it, but when I found out the truth about what was being prepared for us, I support the president.”

2.7 Western governments are being blamed. In addition, more and more people are referring to all sorts of theories about Western hostility towards Russia, with this topic taking on more and more original variants, including conspiracy theories, such as “the world government forced Putin to attack”, “England manages everyone, including the USA”, etc. In general, it can be assumed that people protect themselves from the painful truth with a variety of arguments.

2.8 Inability to know the truth promoted. As doubts about the official line grow, a discourse is spreading in society that can be conditionally called the “second line of propaganda”, associated with the denial of the possibility of objectively assessing current events: “We don’t know everything anyway,” “Ukraine is a battlefield between Russia and the USA,” etc.

3. FEARS / ANTI-WAR MOOD

Anti-war sentiment in Russian society can be considered in two components: concerns, fears, and difficulties in connection with the war, and its active rejection.

3.1 Concerns, fears, and difficulties
The first component affects almost the entire population. Moreover, if in the first days of the war the fears were of a rather general nature, “it will affect everyone,” by the second half of April, these fears became more concrete.

The first category of fears, typical among a wide range of people, is related to the economic consequences of the war and even supporters of the government do not deny the difficulties of this sort, but consider them not too serious, referring to previous experience: “if there is no toilet paper, we will use the newspaper”, "We all know how to plant potatoes." For young people, as already noted, fears are associated not only and not so much with immediate economic problems, but with a sense of a “collapsing world”. People are concerned that the country’s leadership is quarreling with practically the entire world, that "we are pointing our finger at everyone."

The second category of fears concerning the fate of specific people who may be drawn into the war are most often expressed by relatives of military personnel or persons of military age. People with children or relatives of military age are afraid, and try to reassure themselves that the “special military operation” will affect only regular military personnel. Although more and more information is being received about the death of military personnel, this does not yet cause a strong public reaction, since in most cases we are talking about professional military personnel, not conscript soldiers.

There is skepticism in society of official information about the war, for example, in regards to the officially announced number of casualties during the sinking of the cruiser “Moskva”. There is a similar skepticism in relation to information, coming from the other side. The belief that “everyone is lying” dominates.

3.2 What is not being said

It is important to note what concerns are currently not being voiced.

So far, there are practically no fears expressed about a possible military defeat of Russia or a possible transfer of hostilities to the territory of the Russian Federation. Also, weakly manifested are concerns about: 1) possible use of weapons of mass destruction; 2) expansion of the war into a 3rd World War, despite that this topic has been actively addressed by state propaganda; 3) the possible use of nuclear weapons. The latter is mentioned, but, as a rule, either in the style of denying such a possibility, or in a black humor format.

That these topics are not actively present in the public discourse does not mean that such fears do not exist, but rather that they are still perceived as both too scary and too unlikely to be the subject of discussion.

In public discourse, there is no noticeable discussion about the numerous war crimes of the Russian army on the territory of Ukraine. In general, Russian propaganda is quite successful in blocking such content by completely denying it. Propaganda takes advantage of the fact that it is psychologically easier for most people not to believe or question such information, and to adhere to the position that “there are lies from all sides” and “everything is not so clear”.


Between fears and anti-war sentiments, there are manifestations of people’s dissatisfaction that the tasks of the "special operation" are not clear and people are dying for something abstract.

Update to Section 3.1 on May 30, 2022

Concerns, Fears and Difficulties. The main changes from the earlier stage of the study in terms of fears and difficulties that are observed in Russia in connection with the war with Ukraine are as follows:

There has been a significant increase in the number of people facing the economic consequences of both war and sanctions. First, is the rise in prices, which is felt by almost everyone, and the deterioration of the labor market. The rise in prices bewildered people as it happens against the backdrop of a significant depreciation of the dollar, now lower than before February 24, 2022. Hopes that these are temporary difficulties, and that as a result of sanctions, domestic production will increase, are still present, but the general mood is pessimistic. The growth of unemployment, it should be noted, indirectly contributes to the growth of the contingent, ready to consider signing a contract for service in the armed forces. The fear of losing a job is also growing in society. This, in turn, is used by the authorities to stop critical statements addressed toward them.

In May statements began to appear, although not often, about the possibility of the defeat of Russia in the war. And even more often are statements denying such a possibility, which was almost never sounded before. There is also concern about possible “riots” after the end of the “special operation”, which also does not accord with the prospect of victory.

Although slowly, society is receiving information from people directly involved in the war, who assess what is happening in a negative way, like a "meat grinder".

3.2 Anti-war sentiment and action

Contrary to a popular belief that 80% of Russia’s citizens support the war, anti-war sentiment is quite widespread in Russian society. It is currently impossible to estimate its prevalence in percentage terms, but such attitudes are clearly much more common than is often presented by formal research of public opinion. Opinion polls, which are periodically cited by both the Russian authorities and various commentators in other countries, are more likely to mislead than to allow one to assess real trends. First, they are usually presented without taking into account one of their key results, which is the percentage of people who refused, for various reasons, to answer questions. This is far greater than 50% in polls conducted in March 2022. At informal meetings doubts, or voices “against”, often dominate. Second, polls on political topics generally show little under the conditions of authoritarian or dictatorial regimes.

The "informal sociology" work carried out allows us to assess the presence of fairly widespread elements of a negative attitude towards the war / "special operation".

In the most common form, there is a general perception of war as something obviously bad, combined with the fact that the goals and objectives of the actions of the government are poorly
understood by the population. As the “special operation” drags on, the losses grow, and its declared tasks continuously change. Irritation and discontent grow. As a result, certain groups of the population, for example, professional communities, trend in an anti-war direction, sometimes as a result of being irritated by orders "from above".

Teachers, especially in “advanced” schools (schools with in-depth study of certain subjects), express dissatisfaction with instructions coming down “from above” regarding the need to carry out “patriotic education” activities, the implementation of which often leads to conflicts with students’ parents. Some teachers respond to these demands by imitating the demanded “patriotic education”.

Courts, when considering administrative cases (including those related to anti-war actions), sometimes accept the argument that the general state of society provokes people to inappropriate actions as an extenuating circumstance resulting in a reduced verdict.

Anti-war sentiments are especially common among relatively socio-economically privileged groups, such as the IT sector, professors of elite universities, etc.

On the other hand, it is the low-income groups of the population, the so-called "deep people", to a large extent members of ethnic minorities, who are most directly affected by the war, since they are the main base for replenishing the ranks of the Russian Armed Forces. Accordingly, they also do not show much enthusiasm on this matter.

Notable actions include the appearance of anti-war slogans on the walls, use of yellow-blue colors in their social media avatars, etc. Moreover, rumors are spreading about the emergence of some "partisan detachments" fighting against the current authorities of the Russian Federation, but it is not yet possible to confirm this information.

People believe there is a clear need for a wider palette of anti-war actions and their better organization. In modern Russian conditions, such actions as an open protest, coming out on a city square result in serious reprisals. Therefore, there is a need to find relatively safe forms of anti-war resistance.

Update to Section 3.2 on May 30, 2022

Despite the trend towards general disillusionment with the war / "special operation", there is no noticeable increase in anti-war activity. In many ways, this can be explained by the effectiveness of state repression. Almost any open anti-war manifestation leads to an immediate reaction. At the same time, there is a clear request for other methods of anti-war actions that are not related to open demonstration of one’s position. Also, great importance is attached to the position of various well-known figures and the reaction to it from the state (for example, different people referred to the words of signer Yuri Shevchuk about the true meaning of the term “motherland”). To some extent, the open manifestation of an anti-war position is hindered by an artificially created feeling of the marginality of such sentiments.
4. RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ANTI-WAR MOVEMENT

This research demonstrates that in Russia there is a fairly wide field of opportunities for the purposeful dissemination of anti-war messages. At the same time, when developing such messages, it is important to set realistic goals. It makes no sense to expect that such messages may persuade many people to change their openly declared attitudes towards the war.

Under the current conditions, nevertheless, anti-war messaging in Russia can significantly contribute to achieving the following tasks:

- Increase negative attitudes of people toward war / military operations as a mean of achieving different goals and objectives
- Interfere with efforts to mobilize Russian people in support of the war decrease their readiness to make additional sacrifices;
- Accelerate the process of developing the population’s doubts about the government’s course into action;
- Take steps, aimed to make avoidance of personal involvement in the war a social norm;
- Inform the population about ways to avoid participation in the “military operation” and about possibilities for alternative service;
- Provide the population with positive narratives about the country’s exit out of the situation of the “special military operation”/war.

Our research allows us to formulate a viewpoint and approaches for stimulating anti-war sentiments and actions in the Russian Federation:

**Viewpoint:** Messages that can be construed to reinforce the desire of foreign elements to weaken or humiliate Russia could seriously damage the anti-war movement. A healthy world needs a vibrant democratic Russia with a good economy and high quality of life for its citizens. A thriving Russia, freed of imperialistic or messianic inclinations, is needed to help fight climate change, ecological collapse, pandemics, and promote human rights for all. To be effective, criticism from abroad should be focussed on President Putin and his government rather than directed at the Russian people.

4.1 Older generation’s war. The prevailing social base that supports the declared geopolitical goals of the war is mainly the older generation, while youth bear the greatest losses both from direct participation in the war and from its various consequences — economic sanctions, "closure" of the world, a drastic decrease of opportunities, etc. This creates a social rift that can be effectively used for anti-war messages, along such lines as: "If old people need it, let the old people fight," "War is the business of fools and losers."

4.2 Targeted appeals to “advantaged” demographics and to the “cannon fodder”. Russia occupies a leading place (among relatively developed countries) in the level of inequality. In particular, this is manifested in the nature of its armed forces, which have become a social lift for people from the poorest, most backward regions of the country. Accordingly, those anti-war
messages that are aimed at a more “advantaged” part of the population and those that are aimed at the pool of possible direct participants in the war should take into account these differences. For the first category it is important to condemn the war as such to and expose its realities, to demonstrate its criminal nature. For the second category it makes sense to actively pedal the injustice and incorrectness of the very process of waging war, bringing attention to the differences between those who send others to death and those who must die for someone’s interests.

4.3 Promote sources of honest Russian-language information. Russian society is growing increasingly distrustful of official sources of information about the war. At the same time, there is no understanding of where to obtain objective information. Ukrainian or opposition sources are also not trusted, their content is perceived as propaganda, and there is widespread belief that “everyone is lying.” It seems useful to allocate and widely promote a maximally objective information resource with serious capabilities. Such a resource could be located in a country that is perceived as relatively neutral.

4.4 Need succinct counter-arguments to the Kremlin's reasons for war. As noted, the three key theses of Russian propaganda that "entered" the minds of a large number of Russian citizens are: "Nazism in Ukraine"; “the suffering of Donbass for 8 years” and “hostility/threat from the West/NATO/USA”. Accordingly, we need now short counter-arguments, in plain language that effectively strike at these theses. It should be taken into account that arguments based on formal points (for example, that Zelensky is a Jew and thus cannot be a Nazi) may not be accepted by society.

4.5 Promote appropriate anti-war tools. There is a public demand for effective and relatively safe forms of anti-war action. It is especially important to offer forms of action that would help people opposed to the war to overcome the feeling of their marginality and helplessness. It is proposed to develop and provide the population with a wide choice of methods for expressing their anti-war position, a whole "ladder" of possible anti-war steps – from an internal, personal decision that "I am against" to actions of direct sabotage of the military machine of the Russian Federation.

4.6 Anti-war messaging should offer a positive vision. When working with a mass Russian audience, one should not focus on the crimes of the Russian military on the territory of Ukraine, or on the collective guilt of Russians for their actions, as this reinforces the “Stockholm Syndrome” and creates a feeling among ordinary people that they are forced to be on the same boat with the authorities, no matter what they actually think. At the moment, it is more relevant to emphasize to the citizens of Russia the possibility of overcoming the historical impasse, to demonstrate a positive agenda regarding the future of the country in the event of a change in the political course. This is especially important for the younger generation, who can be reached with messages in the style of "stop the war - save your future." It may also be emphasized that the failures and defeats of Russian troops on foreign territory will in no way mean the end or

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1 All these questions must be raised, as well as the painful process of “de-fascismization” of Russia, but this will become relevant after the end of the war, and possible after the fall of the current Kremlin regime.
collapse of Russia itself as a geopolitical reality. As history shows, in the defeat of imperial ambitions, countries often find a path of successful development.

**Update to Section 4 on May 30, 2022**

4.7 **A source of reliable reporting on treatment of POWs should be promoted.** It is important to respond to the widespread rumors about the bad attitude towards Russian prisoners of war in Ukraine (as opposed to the “good” attitude towards Ukrainian prisoners of war, which is constantly demonstrated by TV propaganda). For this, it would be optimal to conduct an independent journalistic investigation by some Russian-language media from a third country, for example, by the “Current Times” channel. It is important that such an investigation as objectively as possible sheds light on the real situation on both sides of the conflict and respond to the most widespread rumors related to this issue.

4.8 **Support people who feel isolated in being anti-war.** It is important to work towards overcoming the sense of isolation of those who share anti-war sentiment. This can be done at the level of social networks, as well as in informal communications. It is also desirable that the untrue thesis that 80% of Russians support the war should not be broadcast by the Ukrainian and foreign media, as it weakens the protest movement inside Russia.

4.9 **Callout authorities offering war work to the unemployed because of the war.** As Russian authorities, in order to replenish the ranks of the armed forces, use the growing unemployment, which is a result of their own actions, this argument can be used by the anti-war movement: people lose their jobs, are forced to change their way of life because of the war, and then the same authorities that are responsible for this send them to continue the same war.

**Methodology**

In the current situation formal polling is not an option nor even a preferred tool to assess and report on Russian Federation public opinion for two reasons: 1) The Russian Federation has criminalized any dissent or reporting that is not in line with the official state narrative. 2) Traditional polling that has been conducted in recent weeks reports that more than 50% of contacted people refuse to participate.

Our research is conducted by monitoring public attitudes through contacts who regularly engage in informal conversations with different people in varying geographic, socio-economic, and ethnic circumstances, as well as monitor social networks, record circumstantial evidence (like graffiti) and so on. We communicate with these contacts, who remain completely anonymous, about once a week. Our information is reviewed by Nonviolence International and NVI-Ukraine.

For comments and inquiries please contact us at info@nonviolenceinternational.net.

See NVI Annex: **PUBLIC REACTION TOWARD FUTURE SCENARIOS**