

Report on Russian Public Opinion Regarding the War in Ukraine and Opportunities for Anti-War Messaging

By Nonviolence International-Ukraine

June 2022 (Translated From Russian)

For Internal Use

Summary

Russian Federation (RF) public opinion about the 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, in June, allow us to make a number of additions to previously presented conclusions of April and May, 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.

The main change that has been recorded in recent weeks in the study of the mood of Russians is that the topic of war, as such, begins to become an issue for a wider circle of people than those who voluntarily chose the path of a military man and their close friends and relatives. The direct impact of the war, not just its economic consequences, is becoming visible to an ever-wider section of the population. This process is associated with two key factors:

- The dissemination of information from participants and eyewitnesses of the events in Ukraine,
- The "covert mobilization" conducted by the Russian state among various groups of the population.

1. GENERAL TRENDS OF COMMON ATTITUDES IN SOCIETY

Civil mobilization. People with first-hand experience are not only the direct participants in the military operation. Russia has begun recruiting people of various professions to work in the occupied territories of Ukraine, from builders to passport officers. The Russian authorities are quick to link the cities of Ukraine captured by the troops with Russian cities, proclaiming "sister city" ties and, thus, placing on the Russian cities a significant part of the reconstruction responsibilities.

Extra-military mobilization. To replenish the ranks of the armed forces without announcing an official mobilization, the authorities have come up with a large number of tricks. In particular, large businesses, which in Russian conditions are deeply dependent on the state, began to get "orders" to send some of their employees to join the ranks of the RF Armed Forces in a "voluntary-compulsory" manner. The Pension Fund of the Russian Federation began to send letters to persons who previously served in the army, and almost without any age restrictions, with a request to come to their offices with documents about military service, allegedly to "clarify the length of their work experience". In fact, due to the lack of official mobilization, there are many different campaigns going on in different regions of the country aimed to attract or compel people to military service. These campaigns, in total, address a much wider range of people than if there were an official call-up of certain groups of the population.

Increasing awareness of the war's reality. An increasing number of people are beginning to know about cases of the death of military personnel in Ukraine. In the course of casual conversations, an increasing number of references to such cases began to appear, when someone has a relative, acquaintance, relative of an acquaintance, etc. killed or injured in the war. At the same time, information is being received about the constant postponement of the return dates of servicemen who are currently in Ukraine and who, in accordance with earlier promises, were already supposed to return home. This, along with attempts to recruit people who did not consider such an opportunity for themselves, causes fear of possible mobilization. These fears are especially strong among professional groups whose leadership has power or leverage to send employees to war in a "voluntary-compulsory" manner. It's been noted in some places that law enforcement officers began to perform their duties more actively, trying to demonstrate their "necessity" at the place where they live and avoid being sent to Ukraine.

Economic consequences. As for the economic consequences of the war and the sanctions associated with it, over the past few weeks, no special influence of this factor, compared with the previous period, has been noticed. The rapid rise in prices that occurred in March-April has now slowed down, probably due to a decrease in bankruptcies. This immediately was exploited by state propaganda as a demonstration of Russia's "economic victory". Parts of Russian society are beginning to exploit traditional "survival skills" that have been learned from previous

difficult periods, in particular, people have begun to plant their plots of land much more actively, some are trying to buy additional plots of land for growing food. At the same time, this is also a dividing factor between generations. Many older people have the experience of self-supplying a significant part of their food needs; for many youth, spending considerable time and effort on growing potatoes hardly causes positive emotions.

Regulatory adjustment to new reality. If the population itself is still trying to adapt to the new, worsened economic realities, then the business world has “turned to survival mode”, canceling any expansion and development programs. And not only because of the direct impact of economic sanctions, but also because of the hectic work of various rule-making and regulatory bodies. An unexpected effect arises - economic sanctions lead to the feverish work of the government, trying to adequately respond to the new reality, and similar efforts are carried out by various regulatory bodies at the local level, but business, in turn, cannot quickly adapt to the constant flow of new regulatory documents and goes into minimal activity.

2. PERCEPTION OF PROPAGANDA

During recent weeks, the “blurring” of various arguments related to the “special operation” / war in Ukraine continued. Also the formation of a certain “core group” of supporters of the current policy continues. These are not necessarily people who are obliged to defend the official position by virtue of their job. Since the official propaganda itself constantly juggles a variety of claims in support of the “special operation”, sometimes contradicting each other, the arguments of representatives of this group are often not tied to one or another specific thesis, but boil down to the need to support the authorities in this critical moment, simply because it is right to support those in power. They use arguments such as: since Putin is the elected president, *“he knows what he is doing”*. An often mentioned point is, *“It is necessary to support the authorities so that this ends faster.”* These pro-government supporters are trying to openly impose on society an idea about a certain sacredness of power and the inadmissibility of a critical attitude towards it. Although people who share such ideas are in a minority, their presence and willingness to openly voice their position creates a certain background in which other people often feel like a minority.

The lack of noticeable “progress” at the front often causes this “core group” and some representatives of other groups of the population who tend to favor the “special operation” to further radicalize their attitude towards Ukraine as a whole, and in particular towards its authorities and armed forces. There are examples of people voicing the desirability to execute Ukrainian prisoners of war, or claiming that Ukrainian children were taught from childhood to hate and kill Russians, etc. Rumors continue to circulate about the terrible treatment of Russian prisoners of war in Ukraine. This active pro-government “core group” makes up a relatively small part of the population and the general trends in public sentiment in Russia are by no means in favor of the policy pursued by the state. We can hypothesize that the radicalness and demonstrative nature of the statements and actions of this category of the population is partly due to the reaction both to general trends in public sentiment as well as to the absence of any significant victories on the front lines.

3. FEARS / ANTI-WAR MOOD

Increasing fears of mobilization. Fears have grown significantly in Russian society, connected not only with the economic consequences of the war, but also with its direct impact on people's lives. First of all, fears associated with mobilization have intensified. A certain trigger for these sentiments was the announcement of raising the age for military service to 65 years. Citizens, especially middle-aged and older people, most often respond to these fears by building individual strategies to avoid conscription, but not by expressing an open anti-war position.

Subtle indicators. An interesting factor in the gradual change in the attitude of the population towards the "special operation" / war is the ongoing trend in most regions of avoiding conversations on this topic (with the exception of a group of "activists" supporting the authorities). Even taxi drivers, traditionally the most "informed" and talkative social group, fall silent when it comes to the war. Even assuming that a key factor behind such behavior is the fear of possible reprisals, this demonstrates the low popularity of the "pro-Kremlin" narrative.

We note cases when people who were "undecided" in their attitude to the policy of the authorities noticed obvious blunders of state propaganda, for example, cases when the same footage was shown on state television at different times and with different narratives.

There are also other indirect indicators of changes in public sentiment towards the war and Ukraine. For example, an unexpected full house in the regional theater at the production of "Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka", or an administrative case against Y. Shevchuk that ended in nothing, due at first to long ordeals searching for a judge and then the presentation of the prosecutor's office was rejected by the court on procedural grounds.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ANTI-WAR MESSAGING

1) **Passive resistance.** In Russian society, especially among young people, there is a demand for various forms of passive resistance. This includes actions that can complicate the further conduct of the war, in the first place, informing people as widely as possible about the possibilities of avoiding personal participation in hostilities, as well as about how to help relatives or acquaintances avoid such a fate. The very nature of the policy pursued by the state, "special operation" instead of war, the formally voluntary nature of mobilization, creates opportunities for this.

2) **Use weaknesses inherent in the system against the system.** For different professional groups, it is possible to offer models of actions that will slow down the military machine of the Putin regime, preferably without a formal violation of existing laws. The system of power, built mainly on various informal connections, manipulations, "telephone law", etc. may become vulnerable when certain elements of the state machine begin to focus on formal rules and regulations.

3) **Using safe language.** Information should be disseminated in every possible way on how it is possible to safely express one's personal opinion, when it is at odds with state propaganda,

what turns of phrase can be used relatively safely in order to reduce the risk of state repressions.

4) **Illuminate “patriotic duty”**. Among young people, who are skeptical about the “special operation” / war, sometimes there is an opinion that one must still join the armed forces and be ready to fight, particularly if conscripted, because it is a "patriotic duty". Teach young people that real patriotism and service to the Motherland in no way requires automatic obedience to illegal orders or actions of authorities that may cause catastrophic damage to their own country. It is necessary to promote understanding that struggling for a better future for the country against its criminal regime, is patriotism.

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.

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