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.

Our Research

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). We communicate with these contacts, who remain completely anonymous, about once a week. Random communication with citizens of the Russian Federation through existing social networks are also used. Our information is reviewed by Nonviolence International and NVI-Ukraine.

This paper formulates the conclusions obtained as a result of the analysis of information on the mood of Russians, collected from mid-June to mid-July 2022.

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1. GENERAL TRENDS CHARACTERIZING COMMON ATTITUDES IN SOCIETY

In terms of general trends in the mood of Russian citizens in connection with the war (“special operation”) in Ukraine over the past month, the following can be noted:

**There is a growing tendency to avoid talking about the war / “special operation”.** Cases were reported when people simply “froze” as the conversation touched on this topic. Moreover, three factors leading to such a reaction are clearly manifested:

- Fear of reprisals. For example, young people pay close attention to stories of repression against civil activists when such stories happen “nearby” - in their city, region, etc. Society also notes the threats by authorities and official propaganda in relation to famous people, for example, to A.B. Pugacheva. Repression may be economic, political, social in addition to actions by the relevant law enforcement agencies.

- Feeling of helplessness. People feel the inability to somehow influence what is happening. One of the forms of avoiding the discussion on the topic are expressions like "This is God's will."

- Conflict avoidance. This topic strongly polarizes society and negatively affects relationships with loved ones, relatives, etc. Interestingly, in some cases, when there is widespread conflict avoidance and people find themselves in a calm, trusting environment, they themselves sometimes begin to look for opportunities for dialogue with those who hold a different position: "Let's hear a different opinion."

**Stabilization of the economic situation combined with negative expectations.**

Russian society, for the most part, has absorbed the economic losses and restrictions resulting from the unleashed war and the economic sanctions that followed. And the long-term effects of the new economic realities are not yet fully understood by society.

In addition, the economic situation of people is affected by the summer season, especially given that much more attention has been paid this year to the efficient use of private plots of land. Also, industries related to the military-industrial complex are often working 24/7.

At the same time, in relation to long-term prospects, negative sentiments dominate, both among those critical of the war / "special operation" and among its supporters. Over the past period, as before, there were no bravado statements recorded about the prospects for “development of domestic production”, despite the fact that in a number of cases there was a decrease in the prices of fuel and certain foodstuffs (with the continuing rise in prices for imported goods). The assortment of goods in stores has decreased, the appearance of “double shelves” was noted, when the same goods are laid out over a significant part of the counter.

In addition, the measures taken by the state to force private businesses to complete orders from the military for low prices have already resulted in a situation when the heads of the relevant enterprises begin to look for different ways to avoid this, for example, by changing their formally declared types of activities.

**Growing skepticism towards official sources of information and different levels of the "third information flow".**

There are reports of diminishing interest in official propaganda and increasing skepticism towards political TV shows. A number of factors come into play here:

- The war / "special operation" has become perceived as an ordinary part of the information flow.
   It is interesting that in the regional and local media the war/"special operation" itself is
practically not covered, only some domestic topics are touched upon that are somehow connected with it (refugees, assistance to the military, etc.).

- Propaganda has clearly begun to “get boring”, endless talk shows are practically indistinguishable from each other, and the authorities themselves, not being able to present to society any significant “achievements” are trying to draw less attention to this topic. It is interesting that the attempt to show the “liberation” of the Lugansk region of Ukraine as a "victory" – was hardly reflected in the public consciousness. Reports about private “victories” in locations that most Russian citizens know nothing about, in the context of the ongoing war, do not cause a noticeable public response, and sometimes there is irritation created by reports of constant “victories” with no real victory and no end of the war.

- The impact of the "third information flow" - information from participants in the events in Ukraine, their relatives and friends. It should be noted that this information factor manifests itself very differently in different regions. In large cities, where the percentage of direct participants in the events is quite small and a significant part of the population relies on the Internet as a source of information, this factor is still hardly noticeable. It is much more noticeable in those settlements where the percentage of direct participants of events in Ukraine is more significant.

As for the content of the information received in this way, basically, it points out the poor state of the armed forces of the Russian Federation participating in the war / "special operation", high losses, poor provision, violation of the terms of the contract, etc. That is, it is not so much the decisions of the country's political leadership that are called into question, but the ability of state institutions to successfully implement these decisions. At the same time, the “benevolent” picture of what is happening, shown in the state media, is refuted. In addition, there is more and more information about refusals to go to Ukraine by the military and representatives of other power structures.

In the official propaganda there is increasing talk about the need to announce an open mobilization and recognize that a real war is going on (of course, not with Ukraine, but with the “NATO bloc” or with the “collective West”). And although the possibilities of the current “voluntary-compulsory” mobilization of people for war are far from being exhausted, the cost of the ways to attract military personnel that are currently used as well as the quality of the recruited “human material” may in the near future become regarded as unacceptable for the state. In this case, we can expect the transition of the regime onto the path of open war with a forced mobilization of a significant part of the population.

2. PERCEPTION OF PROPAGANDA

As already noted, over the past month there has been a noticeable decline in trust in television and other official sources of information. This skepticism is often associated not so much with doubts about the correctness or expediency of Putin’s decisions, but with a negative assessment of the readiness of the state institutions to achieve the set objectives.

There is much skepticism caused by the uncertainty regarding the time when the conflict will end. However, it should be noted that there are no particular fears recorded in connection with the possibility of a military defeat of Russia. On the contrary, some opponents of the war / "special operation" expressed fears of a military victory of the Russian Federation, which would lead to the strengthening and "freezing" of the repressive regime in Russia. Having survived a certain public relations crisis in April-May, state propaganda managed to sell the majority of the population the myth of the “slow but steady” advance of the Russian troops towards their intended goals.

There are fewer manifestations of “ostentatious patriotism” on the part of pro-state public activists. Apparently, this is a reaction to a certain fatigue of the society both from the war / “special operation” itself and from its coverage in state propaganda. However, in social networks, the activity of supporters of the war / "special operation" is still very high.
Among the formal supporters of the war / "special operation", a category of those "forced to agree" was noted: "I am for it, because it is impossible otherwise", "If you cannot change the situation - change your attitude towards it". These are people who express their approval of official policy without any signs of inner confidence. These are people with a conformist attitude who find it convenient not to question the official point of view for reasons of personal well-being (for example, because of the fear of problems at work for state employees), and also because of the fear of losing a relative peace of mind when faced with an uncomfortable truth. The latter is especially true for older people, including those who have personal memories of the period of the Second World War, for whom the need to rethink the role of their country in current events can be associated with deep and extremely painful emotional experiences.

We cannot determine the percentage of people in this “forced-to-agree” category among those who express their support for the war / "special operation", but there is reason to believe that this is substantial. Also, we have documented statements that combine the theses "We are against the war" and "We support our side".

In turn, the argumentation expressed in justification of the war / “special operation” continues to evolve from specific arguments towards abstractions - “geopolitical interests”, “fight against NATO / USA”, “global chess game”, “Russia is rising from its knees” and so on. At the same time, fears began to appear in society related to “contacts with foreigners” as an echo of the adopted laws on “persons affiliated with foreign agents” and its associated propaganda campaign.

Of the more or less specific arguments periodically repeated by supporters of the war / "special operation", one still hears expressions associated with the "genocide of the people of Donbass" and the assertions that "Russia carried out a preventive strike". A recent case is that of a 7-year old child who said that Russia had attacked Ukraine, while other children in his class “explained” to him that everything was the other way around - “Ukraine attacked”.

State propaganda shows signs of a gradual change in general tone - from a desire to hide the real actions of the country's authorities and law enforcement agencies to an attempt to create a "new normality". A striking example of this was M. Leontiev's statement on V. Solovyov's talk show about "Hitler, a great strategist who made a mistake in the form of a late mobilization". Also, the word "Peace" has practically disappeared from visual propaganda. At the same time, huge efforts are being made to propagate militarism in society, especially among children, starting from a young age. As for visual agitation, "Z-symbols" in favor of the war / "special operation" - its scale varies greatly in different regions, including neighboring ones. This clearly shows the artificial character of this agitation and that it is linked to the actions of local / regional authorities, since public sentiment cannot change dramatically along the administrative boundaries of a particular region.

Finally, among the population, the active dissemination of information about the “atrocities of the Ukrainian military”, including stories about the castration of prisoners of war, mutilation of bodies of Russian military personnel, etc., continues. Such rumors are becoming one of the key arguments expressed by people in favor of continuing the war / "special operation".

3. FEARS / ANTI-WAR MOOD

3.1 Concerns, fears, and difficulties

As already noted, a gradual increase in skepticism in relation to the war / “special operation” is noticeable in society. At the same time, there is a decline in trust in official sources of information. Despite the fact that many people try to avoid discussing this situation, in those cases when informal, confidential conversations are started among people on this topic, people more often use the term “war” rather than “special operation”. At the same time, it was noted that many are ready to listen to
the opinions of the other side. This, apparently, is related to the desire to maintain friendly relations with friends and relatives despite the polarization of opinions.

At the same time, the growth of skepticism in connection with the war is very often associated with the "third information flow" - information from the direct participants in the events, or from their close surrounding. The messages that come out in this way are basically that Ukraine is “hell”, that the military operations are poorly organized, the troops are poorly trained, the supplies are terrible, the terms of the contract are violated, and so on. In addition, there is information about numerous “refuseniks” and about various measures of pressure used by the armed forces in relation to such persons, as well as about pressure on conscripts who are encouraged and pressured to sign a contract with the military. Since such information is more disseminated in small towns from which, primarily, people were recruited to join the military, in the future, this may lead to the fact that the focus of recruiting activity will shift towards large cities, where such information is less common, and where even among some of the skeptical youth there is an opinion about the requirement "to pay back the debt to the Motherland", "finish the work of their grandfathers and great-grandfathers", etc.

3.2 Anti-war sentiment and action

Despite the gradual growth of skepticism towards the war / “special operation”, no noticeable increase in anti-war manifestations was noted during the reported period. Of course, the seasonal factor affects this, the significant fear of reprisals, as well as the fact that the war / "special operation" gradually became “normal” part of the daily reports while there are no significant changes on the front lines. At the same time, it can be said that anti-war activities have shifted to the sphere of interpersonal communication. In particular, in conversations with people who are negative about public policy, some people mentioned that they managed to change the attitude towards the war of some of their acquaintances, and in some cases, that they managed to prevent a person from signing a contract with the armed forces.

Although open manifestations of an anti-war position in society are almost unnoticeable, at the same time a case was recorded when a random participant in online conversations, who was opposed to the war, mentioned the “Freedom of Russia” legion in a positive way. Also, there is information about the measures taken by the authorities against the surrender of Russian soldiers, as well as about the fact that the government announced that a 20-year prison sentence will be imposed for switching to the opposite side during the war. It can be noted that among a certain part of society there is a quest for various forms of active struggle against the regime. This is also evidenced by the fact that some of the people - opponents of the war, clearly want not just peace, but a victory for Ukraine.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ANTI-WAR MOVEMENT

Apparently, the most promising method of disseminating anti-war messages and narratives at the present time is interpersonal communication between people who are open for confidential communication. It is this way of disseminating information that possible anti-war narratives and arguments should be developed for. It is also necessary to prepare specific guides on how to talk about the war with family and friends, to demonstrate examples of such communication on YouTube, TikTok and other similar platforms.

As information from direct participants in the events gradually spreads in society, the task of recruiting people for war will gradually become more difficult. There are already examples of non-traditional methods of recruitment - for example, when a person in a bar is provided various “tempting” offers. In
It is necessary to actively disseminate information about a different opportunity to avoid recruitment or conscription into the army. In addition, a package of recommendations should be prepared in advance for those who may be tried to be called up for military service in the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in the event if a general mobilization is announced.

It remains extremely important to disseminate information that destroys the notion of Ukrainian atrocities against captured or killed Russian servicemen. Today, this is one of the key factors contributing to anti-Ukrainian and pro-military sentiment both in Russian society as a whole and directly motivating Russian soldiers stationed in Ukraine. Mutual bitterness can significantly raise the price, expressed in the lives of the soldiers of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, which will have to be paid for the liberation of the occupied territory. It is important to: (a) Carry out an objective journalist investigation by third country media, possibly in cooperation with the International Committee of the Red Cross, on the situation of prisoners of war on both sides of the conflict and make its results available; (b) take tough measures to prevent violations of the norms of international humanitarian law by the military personnel of the Armed Forces of Ukraine; (c) use all available opportunities to disseminate information about the real situation of Russian prisoners on the territory of Ukraine.