

Attitudes of Russian Citizens about the War/"Special Operation in Ukraine

Nonviolence International

UPDATED September 2022

Explanations

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 informal conversations with people in varying geographic, socio-economic, and ethnic circumstances, as well as monitoring social networks, and public reports of evidence (like graffiti and public protests). 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-July to mid-September 2022. It should be noted that these updates reflect the dynamics of public attitudes before they were affected by the events of the middle and second half of September (the defeat of Russian troops in the Kharkiv and Kherson regions, the announcement of a mobilization in the Russian Federation, the holding of so-called "referendums on joining the Russian Federation" in the Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories). The recommendations included in this document are also consistent with monitoring data BEFORE the events of recent weeks.

Additional considerations and recommendations related to the fundamental changes in the situation that have taken place over the past weeks are attached as a separate document.

1. GENERAL TRENDS OF SOCIETY'S ATTITUDES TO THE WAR

In general, with regard to the trends in the mood of Russian citizens in connection with the war / "special operation" in Ukraine over the two months up to mid-September, it can be stated that the situation has changed in directions similar to those noted in the monitoring for mid-July: tendency to avoid talking about the war / "special operation"; growing skepticism towards official sources of information and the growing influence of the "third information flow" - information from participants and witnesses of events; talk in the government-controlled media about a "real war" (though not with Ukraine, but with NATO or the "West"), and also about the need for mobilization.

At the same time, during the specified period, some significant features in the dynamics of the situation were recorded, as well as some new trends, including:

1.1 Decreased expectations for a successful end to the war / "SMO"¹ within a reasonable time and the disappearance of enthusiasm among certain sections of society in connection with the ongoing hostilities. The war has clearly lost public popularity, which is expressed, among other things by:

A.The decrease in "Z-symbols" / visual agitation

¹ Hereafter, the euphemism "special military operation" will be replaced with "SMO".

In particular, a decrease in the number of "Z-symbols" observed in many regions, especially on private transport and other privately owned objects, has become an important indicator of public sentiment. As for objects of state / communal property, old "Z-symbols" are there, but they are not being renovated, as seen by the state of the relevant posters. Also there is a sharp contrast between the regions in terms of visual propaganda in support of the war / "SMO" was noted. In some regions where the authorities are actively demonstrating the work of "patriotic education", they prefer to focus not on current events, but on history —for example, on the events of the first and second world wars.

True, some contrast to the above trend is provided by use of "Z-symbols" on various types of merchandize (alcohol, cigarettes, etc.). However, in our opinion, this fact does not negate the general trends in public sentiment, since: (1) there is a certain time lag between the development of advertising concepts and the appearance of new signs on goods on store shelves; (2) in contrast to visual agitation aimed at everyone, advertising of goods is designed, in most cases, for certain groups of the population, and the group of supporters of the war / "SMO" certainly exists in the country; (3) business in Russia is dependent on the authorities and thus is interested in demonstrating its compliance with the "party line."

B. Radicalization and irrationalization of the position of active supporters of the war / "SMO", as well as less activity of those who previously expressed a reserved support to the war / "SMO".

Previously representatives of the group of active supporters of the war / "SMO", when communicating with people who hold different views, usually tried to convince their opponents, and spoke the language of arguments (albeit absurd ones, such as "American biolaboratories in Ukraine"). Recently they generally refuse to engage in dialogue, avoid the language of arguments and employ accusations, threats, and insults. Similar tendencies were also manifested in some social network groups. Critical posts regarding the war / "SMO" caused a stream of "shit throwing", from both real representatives of the "Putin's Witnesses sect", and from employees of existing "troll factories". This hysterical behavior, apparently, is associated with the reaction of the corresponding population group both to the lack of expected results from military operations, and to the trends in public sentiment that is opposite to their views.

The activity of those who previously spoke out "for" the current policy, on the other hand, but did not belong to the group of its particularly zealous adherents, has significantly decreased. For example, in one "veteran" social network that unites people aged 60+, posts about the war / "SMO" have practically disappeared, although previously support for the actions of Russian troops clearly dominated. There have been cases of people who previously spoke in favor of the official line admitted their doubts about what was happening, noted that something "went wrong", etc.

C. There are cases of people, in private conversations, directly refuting their official position.

Some people who take and openly demonstrate a position in favor of the "party line", for example, civil servants, representatives of businesses working on government orders, etc. admit, in informal conversations, that they think completely differently. In one case, the prosecutor, participating, on behalf of the state in a lawsuit aimed to recognize a civil activist as a "foreign agent", admitted this doubt, which however, did not prevent this prosecutor from continuing to defend the official line in court.

The same trend is noticeable among "guest workers", mainly citizens from Central Asian countries working in the territory of the Russian Federation. For obvious reasons, they, if necessary, declare support for the authorities, and are used at propaganda events. In confidential conversations, however, they talk about their negative attitude towards the war / "SMO"

D. People abstain from talking about the war / "SMO". The continuing trend of avoiding talk about the war / "SMO" among a wide range of the population does not confirm the popularity of the policy pursued by the country's leadership. The palette of options for avoiding a conversation on the relevant topic is wide such as "falling into suspended animation", a sharp refusal - "I'm tired of talking about it", claiming that "everyone is to blame, the sides don't know how to negotiate". These options do not demonstrate support for the war / "SMO".

E. Features of the September 11 "elections" to local and regional authorities.

It should be noted right away that "elections" in Russia is a very conditional concept, far from what is usually understood by this word. As a rule, real opposition politicians are simply not allowed to participate in this process. The struggle is between the so-called "systemic candidates". In these conditions, almost all candidates, during the pre-election period, noted their support for the official line. Even so, they focused not so much on the military aspect as on humanitarian issues, such as assistance to refugees, supporting residents of the Donetsk and Luhansk "Republics", etc. The military was also mentioned most often in the context of being a recipient of collected aid, "we don't leave our own", etc.

Moreover, with the complete dominance of "correct" rhetoric during the pre-election period, in those rare cases when more or less real opposition activists, people who spoke out, even very carefully, not in favor of war / "SMO", managed to participate in elections, albeit at the lowest level, this led to a significant increase in turnout and to positive results for such candidates. (it should be borne in mind that the standard turnout in elections of this level is just over 20%, and most of the typical voter turnout is composed of older people and state employees.)

F. Restraint in implementation of relevant government directives in educational institutions.

Education authorities have taken measures to strengthen the so-called "patriotic education" in the new academic year. In addition to formal moments such as the raising of the flag, the performance of the national anthem, etc., a new lesson called "Conversations about what's important" was introduced into the school curriculum, to be conducted by teachers – "class managers". However, according to information collected from different regions, during these lessons teachers try not to talk about the war / "SMO", but about other issues, for example, about security and rules of behavior in emergency situations. And in some situations, there is "quiet sabotage" of these lessons, for example, due to a lack of study hours, such classes are replaced by lessons in a particular subject. A significant part of parents also oppose these "conversations". Recommendations are distributed in social networks about how to free your child from these lessons or get them replaced with something useful.

G. Criticism of the actions of the authorities "from the right" has appeared in public discourse.

During this period, several cases were recorded when people sharply criticized the war / "SMO" not because of doubts about its justification or fairness, but with focus on its incompetent conduct on the part of the political and military leadership. Such criticism in the style of Mr. Girkin-Strelkov, however, from people who are not so ideologically motivated. So far, a small number of such cases has been recorded, but it can be stated that a certain group in the population has formed, though relatively small, which opposes the authorities from the radical imperialist right. Similar notes began to sound in the Russian mass media.

Regarding Russian Society's evolving attitude to the war, in sum, we can say that while the ongoing monitoring of attitudes in the Russian Federation does not allow quantitative assessments, it seems, based on the summary of the collected data, that the number of people who are skeptical about the war / "SMO" is probably no less than the number of those who enthusiastically or moderately support the Kremlin's official policy toward Ukraine.

1.2 Increased hostility to the Ukrainian people as a whole, which contrasts with active campaigns to help refugees, etc.

This trend has increased among certain groups of the population. Negative attitudes towards Ukrainians as a people have increased, including irritation from, even relatively neutral Ukrainian national symbols, has been recorded.

Among children games about fighting against Ukrainians is more common (which, unfortunately, was to be expected in this situation).

Military personnel, as well as former military personnel who returned from Ukraine and were accustomed to seeing the enemy as Ukrainians, and all who were subjected to the most powerful propaganda treatment with stories about the atrocities of Ukrainians in relation to prisoners, to the corpses of Russian military personnel, etc. are affected. While the stories of people who have returned from Ukraine are often perceived by people with confidence, as eyewitness accounts, in reality, in many cases these persons only retell various propaganda stories that were instilled in them during their service. Russian propaganda makes the most of any real, or at least partly real, cases of ill-treatment of prisoners by members of the Armed Forces of Ukraine or other power structures of Ukraine. In such stories, further, there is a "mirror effect", when people who themselves violate the norms of humanitarian law, and even commit war crimes, as a psychological self-justification, convince themselves that the other side is committing similar or even more heinous acts.

We note cases of extremely negative statements about Ukrainians in connection with their ongoing struggle against Russian troops, apparently caused by fear for loved ones who may end up in the war.

Negative statements were recorded regarding refugees receiving "exorbitant" assistance from the state and society, while the difficulties faced by Russia's own population are ignored. The same statements were recorded in relation to efforts to restore infrastructure in the occupied territories.

1.3 Growth of general tension in society, narrowing of people's planning horizons, growth of aggressiveness, etc.

Many interviewers noted not only the unwillingness of most people to talk about the war / "SMO", but also a clear increase in tensions in society, a feeling of depression, a small number of smiling people, a small number of carefree conversations. In one of the cities located near the border with Ukraine, it was noted that groups of idle military-age men disappeared from the streets, but there were noticeably more disabled amputees.

Also, it was noted that when discussing the subject of the war / "SMO" on the street, people began to fall silent when passing by other pedestrians.

People have clearly narrowed their horizon in planning their lives, the majority are focused on practical, everyday issues, and make very few plans for the future.

1.4 Against the background of generally very negative economic trends, some beneficiaries from changes in the situation have emerged.

Russian society, for the most part, absorbed the first wave of economic losses and restrictions resulting from the unleashed war and the economic sanctions that followed. A landslide drop in the standard of living of the population is not observed. However, unemployment continues to grow. There is a

significant increase in prices in certain sectors, in particular - fish products, animal feed, services. The cost of sending a child to school has increased dramatically, according to some estimates, almost twice. There is a decrease in the quality of products, however, at the same time, prices for a number of products have stabilized or sometimes even decreased, as part of "promotions" in labor class chain stores.

In addition, people began to face unexpected aspects of economic problems that they had not previously experienced. For example, many people who tried to actively cultivate private land faced a deficit of seeds or sowing material of proper quality, which, in turn, reduced the effectiveness of their actions.

Some categories of beneficiaries have emerged from the changed economic conditions, primarily from the deregulation of business and less restricted entrepreneurship: individuals who are able to establish alternative channels for the supply of certain products and materials (sometimes in the style of "shuttles" of the 90s); military-industrial complex workers, including relevant scientific institutions; beneficiaries of various government programs, etc.

2. PERCEPTION OF PROPAGANDA

During the period under review, almost all the trends recorded in the previous monitoring report continued: a noticeable decrease in trust of television and other official sources of information; growing doubts about the correctness of the course being pursued; a decrease in visual agitation and an increase in the number of people who formally approve of the current policy, but declare otherwise in confidential conversations.

At the same time, there has been a tendency for people themselves to begin to look for psychological justifications for what is happening, apparently and implicitly afraid of the enormity of the realization of the complete senselessness of the war. In particular, thanks to such internal psychological attitudes, the thesis that "Ukraine would have attacked anyway", that "this was a pre-emptive strike", etc. is widely spread. It is especially difficult to recognize the senselessness of what is happening for those who have already lost loved ones in the war or for those who personally suffered in it. Propaganda is able to take advantage of this psychological phenomenon, the population's demand for rationalization of what is happening allows it to sell the population ever new versions of justifications for the policy being pursued.

As in the previous period, the argumentation expressed to justify the war / "SMO" continues to change. During this period, the main propaganda theses perceived by the population were about "the fight against NATO / the USA", as well as the one that "Russia prevented an attack" (either on the LDPR, or on itself). Even entertainment channels are used to promote propaganda theses about the "evil West", for example, Match-TV. Despite the growth of skepticism, such arguments continue to be accepted by much of the population, including those who are skeptical about the policy of the authorities. More than once opinions were recorded in the style: "I am against the war, but still - there were reasons, we could be attacked ...". Also, propaganda has formed many expectations that everything will change in the winter, when "Europe will freeze" and will be forced to compromise.

Among the supporters of the war / "SMO", representatives of groups, beneficiaries of the new economic situation, began to come across. There are also people who "successfully" took part in the war / "SMO", returned, earned good money, solved some of their problems, and are considering going to the war again.

Among the motivation of military personnel, the argument of "revenge for comrades" often becomes apparent. For example, it was recorded when the inscriptions were visible on military equipment: "For Sanya", "For Kolya", etc.

As previously, people often mentioned that some kind of a "higher power" was responsible for what was happening, that everything is a result of some sort of "geopolitical games", etc. Interestingly, in this regard, for the first time, a case was recorded when people, not opponents of the regime, but people trying to distance themselves from the situation, spoke about the possibility of Russia losing in this fight, and it was said that in this case, nothing terrible will happen. Previously, the option of losing the war was sounded only among people who were sharply opposed to the regime, and quite rarely even among them.

In addition, even before the start of the successful Ukrainian offensive in the Kharkiv region, there were fears among people critical of Putin's policies, about the fate of people in Crimea after the liberation of the peninsula. Although during the reporting period such sentiments were recorded only once, it should be taken into account that immediately after the liberation of the Kharkiv region, the Russian propaganda began to actively speculate on the topic of the persecution of pro-Russian-minded people in this territory, and used this to justify the need for "protection" of the population on the territories of Ukraine remaining under Russian control. This was in addition to the old propaganda discourses about "Nazi atrocities", mockery of prisoners, and so on.

During the reported period, efforts to restrict access to the Internet continued, as did the work of numerous "troll factories". In fact, access to resources that demonstrate an alternative view of the war / "SMO" is possible in Russia only with the use of VPN services. Also, work continued on finding legal means to pressure people and businesses. For example, the law on territorial defense, adopted in 1995 was used. It was dormant till this day. After radical changes in legislation in the second half of September, the old norms, most likely, will again cease to be relevant.

From people who provide assistance to refugees from Ukraine, information was received about the high effectiveness of state propaganda in working for that audience. It was noted that after a certain period of staying on the territory of the Russian Federation, most of the newcomers already showed interest in further integration into Russian society. This was especially true for older people.

3. FEARS / ANTI-WAR MOODS

3.1 Concerns/difficulties

As already noted, skepticism in relation to the war / "SMO" continues to grow in society. Judging by the available data, skepticism is beginning to dominate. Skepticism also manifests itself in the commentaries to the personal posts of various state propagandists, for example, M. Simonyan.

In addition to the questions that people have about the very course of the war / "SMO", about its unclear prospects, there is bewilderment about the facts of the persecution of people that express critical or anti-war statements. For all the tolerance of the "deep people" toward the use of force against political opposition, persecution for anti-war statements and symbolic actions is perceived by many as "too much." During the monitoring, it was noted that a significant part of those who are used to "go with the flow", who usually don't think much about the content of the information flow in which they live, are sincerely surprised when, unexpectedly for themselves, they encounter alternative points of view or facts of people suffering for their views. At the same time, there is a radicalization of a group of active supporters of Putin, leading to a growing number of denunciations and persecution of people for their anti-war position.

In addition, during this period, even before the Ukrainian counter-offensive near Kharkov, cases began to be recorded of people commenting on the possibility of Ukraine's victory.

The growth of skepticism about the war / "SMO" is significantly influenced by the "third information flow" — information from the direct participants in the events, or from their close acquaintances. Information of this kind is usually very critical of the authorities and the military leadership of the Russian Federation, and often this is criticism "from the right", from positions close to that of Mr. Girkin-Strelkov.

While, in general, the younger generation is much more skeptical about the war / "SMO" than the older one, opposite cases were also recorded during this period — when elders expressed concern about their grandchildren who were under the influence of "patriotic" propaganda. This case was noted in St. Petersburg, which is probably not an accident, since the elderly people who grew up in this city were brought up on a much less romantic and glamorous understanding of war than residents of other regions and younger generations.

An interesting case was noted when an elderly couple, critical of the current policy, began to actively study the works of V.I. Lenin. Some people who at one time received Soviet humanitarian education showed an increased interest in Russia's historical events during the times of World War I.

Russians who actively, at risk to themselves, oppose the war, declare their civic position, often become upset and discouraged when in a situation where colleagues from Ukraine refuse to distinguish between different positions of people inside Russia, "cut everyone under the same brush." While, rationally, people understand the reasons for such attitudes, encountering it has a demotivating effect.

3.2 Anti-war sentiment and manifestations

The noticeable increase in skepticism to the war / "special operation" in society has so far not been converted into an intensification of visible anti-war actions. The symbols of Free Russia, in particular, the white-blue-white flag, which has become a symbol of opposition to the invasion, have become quite widely known among the youth. For example, in one of the national republics in the Volga region, during a youth camp, its participants were asked to paint the wall of a construction trailer with spray paints. As a result, the teenagers drew the WBW flag. Interestingly, the adults did not react to this in any way, apparently not being aware of the meaning of this symbol.

Examples of anti-war inscriptions, the use of the colors of the Ukrainian flag, etc., are rare. During the last elections, there was a case when a criminal case was brought against a person for writing on the ballot, "Russian warship ... off". It seems that the person deliberately threw the ballot into the box in such a way as to be captured on camera.

Anti-war sentiment is still expressed mainly in interpersonal communications, when people share a high level of mutual trust.

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

The most promising means of disseminating anti-war messages and narratives currently is through interpersonal communication between people who are open to such interaction. It is necessary to focus on such communication and "word of mouth" when developing anti-war arguments. It is also necessary to develop specific instructions on how to talk about the war with family and friends, and demonstrate examples of such communication on YouTube, TikTok and other platforms.

At the same time, it should be recommended to civil activists, and others who oppose the war, to avoid being too categorical in relation to people with a different point of view (do not break off interpersonal contacts, do not "ban" them, etc.). It should be assumed that the wider the circle of people who have access to your point of view, the better. Even if some react emotionally and negatively.

As for the groups to which anti-war messages can be sent, they may well include those who, it would seem, should defend the state line (teachers, prosecutors, judges, policemen, etc.), taking into account the fact that some have already quite openly begun to demonstrate their doublethink. When addressing such groups, it is important to offer examples of "silent sabotage", to demonstrate ways to slow down the implementation of official directives. For example, disseminate the experience of how teachers conduct lessons, conversations about "what's important" without propaganda regarding the war / "SMO".

Consideration should also be given to utilize the criticisms of the regime from the "right", especially in the light of the announced mobilization in Russia. In this case, one can ignore their ideological positions, but actively use information and specific quotes from them about the deplorable state of the army, incomplete and incompetent command, corruption, etc. Well-chosen references to such quotes by various Girkin's and Prilepin's, that is, people who cannot be accused of "working for NATO" or "selling out to the West", etc., can impress precisely those layers of the "deep people" who are under the narcotic influence of television.

When working with the left, especially with an age audience nostalgic for the USSR, it is possible to use certain quotes from the works of V.I. Lenin, especially from the period of the First World War. Now Russian propaganda accuses Ukraine, among other things, of turning its back to the past, to our common history, of carrying out decommunization. Meanwhile, there are quite obvious analogies between the current events and the events of 1914-17. So why not use, in working with the Russian audience, especially with its older generations, such slogans as "Transferring the imperialist war into a civil war", the article "On the national pride of the Great Russians", etc.?

It is important to adequately highlight and emphasize the importance of resistance to the war within Russia. At the same time, it is worth paying attention not only and not so much to those methods of resistance that are demonstrative, but ineffective in the current situation — demonstrations, pickets, etc., but to cases of sabotage, arson of military enlistment offices, demonstration of Free Russia symbols and Ukrainian symbols, etc.

It is important to disseminate information that destroys the notion of Ukrainian atrocities against captured or killed Russian servicemen, as well as about threats to the population of the liberated territories by the Armed Forces of Ukraine and Ukrainian law enforcement agencies. After the start of successful counter-offensive actions of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Russian propaganda began to actively inspire people that the liberation of the territories of Ukraine poses a threat to almost all the inhabitants of these places. This may have a negative impact on the liberation of Ukrainian lands.