

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

Nonviolence International

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### Explanations

Formal polling is not an option nor a preferred tool to assess and report on Russian Federation public opinion for two reasons. First, the Russian Federation has criminalized any dissent or reporting not in line with the official state narrative. Second, results of traditional polling conducted in recent weeks shows more than 50% of people contacted refused 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 reports of public 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 conclusions through analyzing data collected on the mood of Russians between late September and early November 2022. on the mood of Russians, collected from late-September to early November 2022. It should be noted that these updates reflect the dynamics of public sentiment around October - early November. That is, approximately within a month after the announcement of a "partial" mobilization in the Russian Federation, and the occurrence of the so-called "referendums on joining the Russian Federation" in the occupied territories of Ukraine.

This paper does not analyze the changes in public opinion since mid-November 2022, after the withdrawal of Russian forces from the city of Kherson and the right bank of the Dnipro river.

### 1. PUBLIC OPINION TRENDS

The main event influencing the mood of the population in the Russian Federation during the period covered in this report was the announcement of the so-called "**partial mobilization**" and implementation of relevant measures by the Ministry of Defense aimed at replenishing Russian troops in Ukraine.

It should be noted that other events of a political and military nature (i.e. announcement of the "accession to the Russian Federation" of four regions of Ukraine, military failures of the Russian troops, etc.) did not have such a noticeable effect on public opinion in the Russian Federation. The impact of these events, in many respects, turned out to be "blurred" by the dynamics of public sentiment in connection with the mobilization.

The main recorded changes in attitudes and opinions of Russian people were the following:

#### 1.1 The mobilization "**brought the war closer.**"

While, at least since May, there has been a clear tendency for people to try to avoid questions and talk about the war, after the announcement of a mobilization this changed dramatically. A significant portion of the population could no longer "hide their heads in the sand." This development clearly began to concern a much wider range of people than before.

*It is also important to note the corresponding shift in state propaganda. Previously, the state presented the war as a difficult but objective reality that one just needs to accept and go about normal life, blindly trusting the country's leadership. Now propaganda has begun to orient people towards becoming actively involved in the war, be it through direct participation in hostilities or through various volunteer activities in support of the military, residents of "newly acquired territories", etc.*

It should be noted that this "inclusion" of the population in politics has resulted in changes of public attitudes in two opposite directions.

First, faced with a real prospect of personal participation in hostilities (or such for close relatives and friends), a significant portion of society swung sharply towards searching for ways to avoid that fate. The most striking evidence of this was the **mass exodus** of Russians from the country. According to various estimates, in the first month after the mobilization was announced, **three hundred thousand to more than a million people** left the Russian Federation.

Various facts were cited about people who previously had a relatively positive or neutral attitude towards the actions of the country's leadership shifting to the side of opponents of government policies. Even some people known to be "pro-Putin" suddenly began to consult about possible "excuses" for avoiding personal participation in the war.

At the same time, the opposite trend was also observed. People who were previously critical of both the authorities and the war accepted the idea that, despite their doubts, *they must accept the duty of defending the Motherland* and that in a situation of military threat any citizen has no choice but to follow this duty. Obviously, state propaganda is actively trying to foment such sentiments, for example, by trying to draw parallels with the events of the Second World War.

When comparing these two opposing tendencies, it should be noted that the first one (the reduction in the support base for the continuation of the war) so far noticeably surpasses the opposite one. It is no coincidence that independent studies confirm a noticeable drop (somewhere within the limits of 10%) of those who support the continuation of hostilities. However, this drop is not so significant as to undermine, at this stage, the ability of the Russian authorities to continue pursuing their policies.

An important sign of social change as a result of recent events has been a sharp decline in the number of "sofa patriots" and the reduction of "Z-symbols". In a number of regions, it was noted that the latter remained practically only on administrative buildings, state and municipal transport, etc. Apparently, society is beginning to realize that it will no longer be possible to live in the usual mode of "approval without obligation."

## 1.2 Perception of annexations - "accessions" of Ukrainian territory.

As already noted, against the background of the news about the mobilization, other news related to Ukraine have faded. The authorities' hopes for a new "Crimean consensus" after the announcement of the "accession" to the Russian Federation of four regions of Ukraine has

clearly failed. True, some representatives of the older generation spoke positively about the approval of the "return of historical lands", as well as of how good it would be to "live together like in the USSR", but *there were no traces of mass enthusiasm* around the decisions announced by the authorities. According to information from different cities, the public rallies that were held in connection with the "new territorial acquisitions" were organized through purely administrative methods and irritated a significant portion of the participants (especially young people). There were examples of statements by people who had not previously espoused a critical attitude towards the authorities, in the style of "*what do we need more territories for?*"

### **1.3 Reaction to Russian military defeats**

This report reflects a snapshot of public sentiment prior to the withdrawal of Russian troops from Kherson and the right bank of the Dnieper. As for the serious defeats of the Russian army in the Kharkiv region, in the public consciousness, the effect of these events turned out to be overshadowed by the news about mobilization and thus practically did not manifest itself clearly. Although, of course, these events contributed to the overall decline in the popularity of the war.

### **1.4 Economic implications of the government policies**

While previous studies showed that Russian society, for the most part, has so far absorbed the economic losses from Western sanctions policies, the announcement of mobilization dealt an additional blow to the economy especially to small businesses. It resulted in a reduction in the workforce, both directly as people were mobilized and by creating an exodus of people (mostly men of working age) avoiding mobilization. Moreover, at the moment, the second factor seems to be more significant in terms of its economic consequences. Many qualified specialists have left the country and, most likely, the number of those who've left the country exceeds the number of those mobilized.

At the same time, the value of work in industries related to the military-industrial complex has significantly increased in public perception as it has been declared workers in such industries will not be mobilized.

However, although it is not yet possible to say with certainty how ready society will be to absorb a new wave of deterioration in the economic situation due to this negative trend, based on past experience, we can assume that, most likely, it will not, in itself, lead to profound changes in public sentiment.

### **1.5 General mood**

It can be stated that the events of the last two months have had a significant negative impact on the dominant moods in society. Almost everywhere, people noted an increase in general tension, fear, the dominance of negative expectations, and aggressiveness. To a certain extent, this results in a desire to avoid talking about the topic of war, similar to a tendency noted in previous studies, only against the background of even deeper negative expectations and anxieties. Additional anxiety in society is created by the fact that the media periodically probes public opinion about the possibility of using nuclear weapons in the course of this war.

## **2. PERCEPTION OF PROPAGANDA**

The period under review was characterized by another sharp change in the direction of state propaganda. Previously its emphasis was focused on pumping up public confidence in the authorities, hushing up the negative consequences of the war for ordinary people, and creating the image of victories. During this period discourse began to change dramatically. Suddenly, the war in Ukraine was positioned as a “nationwide cause” almost like a “second Great Patriotic War.”<sup>1</sup> All efforts are now aimed at ensuring society accepts the concept of this war as a difficult but necessary reality that requires significant effort and sacrifice from every citizen. Propaganda began to mention that the “path to victory” would not be easy, and that failures were possible along the way. At the same time, however, the very concept of victory is still missing. Neither the authorities nor propaganda dare to present society with any meaningful understanding of what should await Russia at the end of this “long and difficult path.”

In the absence of any positive image of “victory,” the bulk of the propaganda efforts are aimed at creating negative motivation. So far not so much through fear of defeat, but as a loosely connected set of arguments “against what we are fighting.” This includes talk about the dangers of “LGBT propaganda,” “revenge for the Crimean bridge,” or in general “revenge for the dead,” and talk about a fight against the “anti-Russian West”, etc. Propaganda continues to actively use the thesis of the “preventive” nature of the war. Information and video footage of people dying from shelling in the Donbass and other occupied territories is commonly used. Interestingly, many old narratives, such as those about “biological laboratories”, “poisoned birds”, etc. have been practically forgotten.

As for the very common indignation in society about how the process of mobilization actually goes, here propaganda works according to the typical concepts of “fighting individual excesses” and “a good tsar with bad boyars.”

As for the perception of this propaganda by the population, different trends have been observed.

On the one hand, even among the supporters of the war/“Special Military Operation” or “SVO” in Russian, irony is manifested in relation to the language used by authorities, a skeptical perception of military reports about “regroupings,” etc. In addition, even in government-loyal publics, there are quite a few questions in relation to the very process of mobilization, its arbitrary nature, the terrible provisions of those mobilized, non-payment of promised funds, and more.

On the other hand, a significant part of society still continues to buy the idea of a “patriotic duty,” and the need to put aside criticism of the authorities at such a “difficult moment” in the style of “I don’t like Putin, but we must defend our Motherland.” Just as before, the older generation is seen as more receptive to propaganda theses, partially due to the psychological fear of a possible collapse of their view of the world for the second time in their life span. However, there are many examples that such propaganda theses are accepted by a significant part of the population including middle-aged people and young people. The position “if necessary, I will go” regarding possible mobilization is not uncommon among young people. Moreover, in the first weeks after the mobilization was announced, there were cases of people

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<sup>1</sup> The term used in the USSR and Russia, referring to the Soviet-German war as part of WW2

voluntarily going to the military registration and enlistment offices (as well as to various private military companies, since it was believed that they offer better conditions and better training).

Material incentives for servicemen are also of some importance. For example, there was a case when, on the train, a group of men, clearly heading for the war, said that “we must urgently acquire more loans so that they will be written off.”

Many people are quite effectively influenced by the spread of relevant rumors, for example a “medal for the capture of Rostov”<sup>2</sup> captured in Ukraine, as well as by unfounded expectations, for example that “Europe will freeze and refuse to support Ukraine.” In general, as before, propaganda actively uses the people’s psychological tendency to rationalize what is happening and to fear of admitting that they (their country) is on the “wrong side”

Among the various methods of influencing people, and gradually drawing the country into the war, utilizing the concept of “revenge” also remains quite effective: *“terrible Ukrainians, they killed so many people”*.

Propaganda is also extremely effective at utilizing various statements, especially from famous people, that can be interpreted as directed against Russians as an ethnic group, or against Russian citizens in general, as a nation. In particular, such expressions are used to discredit the voices of those who oppose the war within Russian society

Two factors are also clearly working for the goals of the authorities: the traditional detachment of the majority of the population from “politics”, and the lack of a true understanding of the realities of war among a portion of the population. During the first month after the mobilization was announced, cases of bravado were still recorded: “Let’s go, we’ll beat the Ukrainians,” as well as cases of frivolous attitude: “Ok, my husband will go fight for a little while...”

At the same time, there are no signs of any enthusiasm or fervor among the population in support of the current policy. There was a very weak reaction to various “volunteer actions” in support of the troops, with the exception of cases where the focus was providing assistance to one’s own relatives and friends. It is interesting that the new school lesson “talking about important things,” conceived as an element of propaganda, practically does not work in this capacity. As a rule, it is used by teachers simply as an additional hour of history or another humanitarian subject. Various campaigns, such as “letters to the front” are implemented according to certain templates and do not have a real impact on the mood of young people.

In sum, it can be noted at this stage propaganda efforts have led to an intermediate state in Russian society. On the one hand, a significant part of the population accepted the premise that the war is some kind of objective necessity and, at this point, is ready to obey related demands of the government. In this regard, propaganda continues to successfully use theses associated with the position of removal: “Ukraine is a bargaining chip.” To this effect,, the authorities have so far been able to implement their plans for mobilization. The protests in society are directed, to a greater extent, not against the war nor even against mobilization but rather against the way this process is handled. On the other hand, there are no signs that people really perceive the war as their own business, as a “people’s war.” Russian citizens do not “live on messages from the frontlines” nor do they have any “image of victory”. As a result, the possibility of rapid changes in public sentiment in an opposite direction remains.

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<sup>2</sup> A city in Russia, not far from the Ukrainian border

### 3. FEARS / ANTI-WAR MOODS

The main fear associated with the war during the period covered in this report, was undoubtedly the fear of mobilization. The result was mass exodus of the population from the country at the level of many hundreds of thousands (according to some estimates even millions) of people. To a large extent, those who left represent the more successful and educated groups of the population. Initially state propaganda tried not to notice this process, but then began to stigmatize such people in every possible way. But at the same time, no common negative attitude towards such cases has been recorded so far. Rather there is regret associated with the consequences of such an exodus, mainly due to the fact that this is a blow to the economy and especially to small businesses. It is interesting that there were cases when a negative reaction was caused not by the fact of the departure of people, but when other countries did not let these people into their territory.

In addition, the mobilization led people again to begin talking about what was happening. Despite the ever-increasing repressions, the theme of the war began to sound more generally among people and not only among closed groups of acquaintances.

As a result of the changes that have taken place, society has a certain “window” within which it is relatively safe to discuss what is happening and criticize the authorities. These are criticisms of how the process of mobilization is organized, the arbitrariness that occurs in its course, how the mobilized are provided for, how their training is organized, and so on. Moreover, the authorities show a certain flexibility. In various regions there were cases when some of those mobilized in violation of relevant norms were released back. As a rule, this happened precisely in cases where a real “struggle” began for a particular person on the part of his relatives, lawyers, and human rights activists. Thus, the authorities try to prevent the growth of social tensions around particular cases. Most likely this also explains why at the moment no serious steps have been taken to close the country's borders to prevent people eligible for mobilization from leaving. At this stage, the decision was made to leave certain "safety valves" open so as not to endanger social stability and governance. At the same time, it should be noted that those who have been mobilized are mainly those who initially were inclined to resist such a fate. In the future as the supply of this contingent is exhausted it should be expected that the mobilization will be associated with more and more problems, and that the authorities will increase their emphasis on coercion and use of force.

In connection with the mobilization there was growing interest in alternative sources of information, especially among young people. Informal networks began to emerge among those who are searching for ways to avoid such a fate. For example, the popularity of the Belarusian opposition telegram channel NEXTA has significantly increased in Russia.

Another indicator of public sentiment was the unexpected popularity of the virtual meme: *“The future has come. To shit.”*

An important but so far largely untapped resource for anti-war sentiment is the growing skepticism about state propaganda. There is an increase in skepticism and irony both in relation to official statements of the authorities about the war and to numerous propaganda talk shows.

***In sum, we can say that over the indicated period anti-war sentiments have seriously expanded in society.*** So far they are being converted either into general skepticism and disappointment, or into individual strategies for avoiding participation in the war. In a number of cases, oppressive moods spill over into collective actions, focused not on the war or mobilization itself but on the forms of its implementation.

An exception to this was active protests in several regions, primarily Dagestan and the Chechen Republic. Inhabitants of these regions have participated in the war/“SVO” from the very beginning significantly more than people in other regions of Russia. For example, in Dagestan, despite the active position of the authorities in support of the war and numerous visual agitations, among the population opposite moods clearly dominate, judging by informal observations. As a result, in these regions the mobilization campaign was actually "launched on the brakes."

#### 4. RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ANTI-WAR MOVEMENT AND MOODS

The announcement of mobilization in the country suddenly brought the war closer to the bulk of the population and thus created new opportunities for promoting anti-war messages. Interest in the topic of the war has grown significantly, and accordingly, the demand for various sources of information on this issue has also grown. Any available means should be actively used to convey anti-war information, including those to which attention has increased in recent weeks.

Based on the situation as of mid-November 2022, two key factors can be identified determining the ability of the Russian authorities to continue the war and to expand the involvement of their own population in it:

- The slow weakening of parts of the population through the realities of what is happening (such as the injustice, the senselessness and futility of the war, the level of deprivation and the monstrous degree of risk for those who get involved in it, etc.)
- The concept of one's "duty to defend the Motherland," through which it is possible to achieve the tacit consent of many for mobilization or other actions necessary for the government to continue its policies.

Accordingly, it seems important to build anti-war messages in such a way that they help overcome these factors.

As for the first factor, the awareness of reality, it can be accelerated by drawing maximum attention to the realities in which the mobilized find themselves.

On the one hand, one should directly use harsh terminology that destroys the “blissful” picture that the authorities are trying to create, something in the style of: *“Before you leave, prepare a grave, it’s hard to dig in winter”* or *“Leave your wife money for a funeral”*. On the other hand, it is possible to use the "window for criticism" that the authorities still leave for "fighting excesses" and "correcting certain shortcomings." It is important to bear in mind that even criticism seeming not to be directed at current policy but at the forms of its implementation has two important consequences. Firstly, it expands the possibilities of "feedback", allowing for talk about the realities in which the mobilized find themselves (both before going to the front, and

after). Secondly, successful collective action—even if a first not directed against war but violations by individuals representatives of the authorities—can still be realized over time in a different plane when justification of government policies in general is called into question.

The second factor, the perception of participation in the war as a "duty to defend the Motherland," requires a whole range of efforts to overcome relevant stereotypes. Of course, it is important to convey to people that stopping the war does not mean the collapse of the country or their own lives, and that the prospects for a successful future are not associated with a mythical and initially unattainable victory<sup>3</sup> but with the war's end and with a change in state policy.

Since the idea of duty to the Motherland is deeply rooted in society it makes sense to emphasize that this war is by no means a war of the Motherland, but a war of Putin. Further, to Putin, unlike to the Motherland, people don't have any debts that have to be paid with human lives.

When there is an opportunity for this, it is useful to turn to the personal experience of people, to draw their attention to what times in their lives they perceive as successful. There is no doubt that in most cases these will be times associated with peaceful development, freedom of action, and so on. We should try to show that it is the war with Ukraine and confrontation with the most developed countries of the world making it impossible today to exist under such conditions.

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<sup>3</sup> Here one can use the very propaganda theses that speaks about Russia fighting not Ukraine but all of NATO