

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

Nonviolence International

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## Research Methodology

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 conducted in recent weeks reports that more than 50% of contacted people refuse to participate.

Our research monitors 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 conclusions based on analysis of the mood of Russians, collected from early January to early March 2023. These updates reflect the dynamics of public sentiment over the above period.

## 1. GENERAL TRENDS FOR MOODS IN SOCIETY

In general, no significant new trends emerged during this period. Society has more or less absorbed the burden of mobilization carried out in the autumn of 2022, and to a certain extent has become accustomed to the new reality. There was neither a new mass mobilization during this period (despite the information about specific individuals being called up to serve into the military), nor any fundamental changes on the front lines. As a result, on the one hand, people were getting used to the new reality as the country continued to become drawn deeper into war; on the other hand, shifts in public sentiment continued. An important factor influencing attitudes in the Russian Federation was information directly from military personnel, especially from those recently mobilized. The most noticeable trend associated with this information was a gradual increase in disillusionment with the ability of the military leadership of the Russian Federation to achieve their goals and organize military operations "correctly". As a result of this, society has been influenced to a greater extent by "criticism from the right" aimed at the military and, to some extent, at the political leadership.

### **Public sentiment trends in connection with the war / "special operation" for January-February 2023:**

**1.1 War is perceived as routine and people try to avoid this topic.** The "partial mobilization" carried out in the fall and the expanded intention of the leadership of the Russian Federation to involve the population in the ongoing processes brought the war closer to the concerns of the majority of the country's population. Noted in the previous report, in Russia people avoid questions and talk about the war, especially in situations where they have little trust in the interlocutor, or when they are uncertain about his position. This trend appears associated with several factors:

- Fear of speaking out on such a sensitive issue, especially against the backdrop of a massive increase in denunciations, numerous criminal and administrative charges against those who disagree, and aggressive rhetoric in the media regarding those who "don't follow the party line";

- Perception of the situation as a negative reality that cannot be influenced and which one does not want to talk about;
- A decrease in the acuteness of the perception of the situation among those who are not directly affected by the war: fear of a new wave of mass mobilization in January did not materialize, some people who left the country in October-November have now returned, the economic situation is difficult, but not critical, etc.

### **1.2 Tensions in society, negative expectations, apathy, divisions among people due to their positions grow.**

During this period, positive expectations about future developments have practically disappeared. Even those who say “since we got involved in a war, we must win,” are not able to describe a positive image of the future as a result of “victory”.

Splits between people in connection with their position on the war (SMO) continue to deepen. There are cases where people are no longer invited to family holidays because of their position. There is also a division of people reflected in the social networks they use. Supporters of the current policy mainly communicate through “Vkontakte”, while opponents communicate on Telegram. The division even affects children, such as: “I am no longer friends with Dimon, since he is not a patriot.”

The expressions "liberal" and "fascist" are now used as curse words. This, of course, indicates a deepening split among the population and that the military agenda, despite the reluctance of many to talk about it openly, is seriously affecting people’s consciousness.

As the propaganda machine actively glorifies the military and other participants of the SMO, there are signs of tension between the military and civilians, for example, in connection with the aggressive driving of the former and their violation of traffic rules. Such tensions are exacerbated when people who have been previously convicted of serious crimes return from the war with the halo of “heroes”.

Mobilization affected different categories of the population in different ways. A disproportionately large percent of those mobilized came from the countryside. Such inequality also leads to increased tensions in society, especially as many of the promises to provide support for the families of those mobilized are not fully implemented.

As the military machine is under great tension there are reports about the accelerated graduation of cadets from military schools and about the resumed practice of conferring the rank of “junior lieutenant” on such graduates. Junior Lieutenant was previously used during WWII when military schools were unable to provide a full training course to future officers.

### **1.3 Economic trends.**

During the report period, there were no large-scale economic shocks, but the negative tendencies of the previous months continued. Active recruitment of employees for enterprises related to military production continues. Inflation continues. In a few months some foodstuffs have risen in price by tens of percentage points. Medicines and utility bills also increased significantly in January-February. Increasingly, people reported problems with obtaining various kinds of orders due to the lack of components. Still, the growth of negative trends in the economy is gradual. Negative expectations already prevail in society, society absorbs these changes. It is unlikely that economic problems, by themselves, will become triggers for mass public discontent in the near future .

## **2. PERCEPTION OF PROPAGANDA**

During this review period state propaganda:

- Justifies war as an inevitability, a move that was forced on Russia;
- Presents both the war and the situation in the country as a whole in a positive way, despite the difficulties;
- Promotes the idea of a "people's war" and threatens people with monstrous consequences if it ends unsuccessfully.

The key features of state propaganda and reactions to it during the specified period are:

2.1 An attempt through propaganda to "humanize" the war, and to draw the population as much as possible, especially the so-called "deep people" into supporting it, clearly focusing on the most poorly educated, poor, dependent categories of the population:

- Instead of using abstract "Z-symbols" as earlier in the war, state propaganda emphasizes specific stories, and posts photographs of the faces of the "heroes of the SMO" throughout the country. Posters in public places, as a rule, demonstrate the faces of "heroes" who are alive, so as not to create an impression about a large number of casualties;
- With regard to those killed in action, the state pursues a dual policy. On one hand, relatives of the victims, upon receiving compensation payments, are asked not to talk about their tragedy. On the other hand, the government often trades on their memory, for example, by setting up "desks of heroes" in schools, memorial plaques, etc. The relatives of the dead military, especially widows and mothers, are used by state propaganda to promote the need to "avenge the dead", justifying further hostilities;
- Unlike during previous propaganda campaigns, there is now an emphasis on an abundant variety of phony accusations against the Ukrainians, with almost complete disregard for any appearance of their plausibility. Focus is on creating pro-SMO public sentiments by bombarding people with numerous stories, without giving any time for rationally reflecting on them. For example, phony reports were circulated that the Ukrainian special services were throwing explosive toys around Russian cities; that the Armed Forces of Ukraine prepared metal stamps to brand Russian prisoners of war; that in just one hospital in Rostov there are 50 Russian soldiers castrated in Ukrainian captivity; that back in 2014, in one of the villages of Donbass, nationalists burned 70 people alive; that Ukrainians call children when their parents are not at home and, under the guise of gas service employees, ask them to turn on the gas in the stoves, etc. Of course, previous narratives about the "inevitability" and "preventive nature" of war, biolaboratories, Ukrainian nuclear weapons, etc., continue being exploited. In addition, various "conspiracy theories", necessary "predictions", etc. are being promoted along with other false narratives through rumors, social networks and the local press;
- Even a possible defeat in the war began to be mentioned in propaganda videos as leading to catastrophic consequences for Russia. Putin himself spoke about this in one of his interviews, scaring people that the price of defeat would be the disappearance of the Russians as an ethnic group;
- In addition to the media, social networks, educational institutions, the church, and public organizations are actively used for propaganda purposes. Numerous actions and programs are being carried out to support families of the military - free breakfasts for children in schools, financial assistance, etc. Most often, the actual cost of these benefits is not very large, but the emphasis is on the PR impact of such actions;
- Many possible ways are used to involve the population in actions in support of the war or, at least, in support of the current government policy - letters to soldiers, production of camouflage nets, trench candles, etc., as well as assistance to the "new regions" and "new Russian citizens";
- Simultaneously with the propaganda support of the war itself, there is an attempt to create a generally positive attitude regarding the events taking place. For example, this year, as never before, "Maslenitsa" (a traditional holiday marking the end of winter) was actively celebrated;

- Propaganda continues to promote the idea of sending conscripts to the frontlines, and that, supposedly, they want that themselves.

2.2 Simultaneous with attempts to involve the population in the war effort, the scale of pressure against any manifestation of disagreement and deviation from the “correct course” is expanding:

- The number of denunciations is growing rapidly. Sometimes their reason may not even be a direct statement of a person, but the interpretation of his actions or words by others. For example, a report to authorities was made against a guide in one regional city, who while drawing attention to a monument to those who died in different wars, mentioned that it included empty places where new names could be written;
- The number of criminal and administrative cases for "discrediting" the army and servicemen is growing;
- Repression is intensifying against those who refuse to serve, as well as against those who try to avoid mobilization or conscription, and propaganda continues to call for more repressive measures than those provided by current practice;
- Social networks are censored, for example when deaths of military personnel are posted, “wrong” comments (those that question the correctness of their participation in the war) are deleted;
- Videos appearing on the Internet on behalf of Russian servicemen, in which they denounce the real state of affairs at the front, as well as other negative information, are presented as “fakes of the Ukrainian CIPSO<sup>1</sup>”.

We must note that repression of dissenters, although increasing, are rather more demonstrative than truly massive. Far from all denunciations are given a go, and the degree of reaction to protest actions varies in different cities and regions. For example, in one regional center there was a case when a woman was fined for simply laying a bouquet of yellow and blue flowers at an official monument to victims of political repression, while in another one, a man stood calmly in the central part of the city with the slogan: *“How can you sleep when there is a war going on and people are being killed?”*

### 2.3 Propaganda’s results.

Our research allows us to conclude that a significant part of the population holds a mixture of negative expectations about the future combined with the idea that the war still needs to be won. Fear of defeat is being promoted quite successfully, including through the constant circulation of new falsehoods, such as those previously mentioned. This “fear sale” is successful.

The natural dynamics of armed conflicts draws society deeper into war. As the number of victims and destruction increases, people are less motivated by the common goals of their side, than by their personal desire to avenge their comrades, etc. There were cases when the military men, after being wounded, sought to return to their units, “to be with their guys.”

At the same time, it is important to note that the topic of a "people's war" has not yet been widely accepted by the vast majority of the population. Still, even those who buy into the propaganda about the forced nature of the war and the need to win it do not show any noticeable enthusiasm, elation, etc. Almost all "popular actions" in support of the troops are organized either in response to requests from government agencies, or in response to requests of relatives and friends of those mobilized. In general, a significant part of society see the war as an inevitability, but they don’t express signs of “co-ownership” of it with the government.

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<sup>1</sup> “Center for Informational and Psychological Operations”

During this period, signs of a change in attitudes towards the country's "top man" appeared. Forced to react to the war's negative course, propaganda tries to shift responsibility for what is happening from the president. This, in turn, leads to a certain de-sacralization of his image, since a leader, by definition, cannot refuse responsibility. If responsibility is removed from him, then he becomes irrelevant. It was noted that the media, speaking about the president of the country, began to use the pronoun "he", which had not been noticed before. It's not been possible to detect any reaction at all to his speech before the Federal Assembly and other public appearances. People rarely refer to them in social networks.

### 3. FEARS / ANTI-WAR MOODS

**3.1 Concerns and skepticism.** Despite the propaganda and the entire state machine effort to draw the population into the war, skepticism in society is growing, both in attitudes towards the war as a whole and in terms of assessing the prospects for its "successful" end. Bravado and enthusiasm about the war's immediate and longer-term prospects have virtually disappeared. Annoyance and negative expectations continue to grow in connection with the war. So does the search for individual strategies for existing in a new reality, including:

- People are looking for different places to settle to avoid mobilization. There is *less* talk about leaving the country. A significant part of those who counted on this option have already left; the rest are looking for other opportunities for themselves: working in places where staff is exempt from mobilization, documenting restrictions due to health, etc. Managers, directors of enterprises, educational institutions, are also searching for such opportunities: trying to get "reservations" for their personnel from mobilization or even attempting to return mobilized employees from the military registration and enlistment offices. In peoples' congratulations on holidays, anniversaries, etc., wishes now appear in the style: "We wish that that your son stays in the family";
- Despite the growing repression and aggressive propaganda against the opponents of the war or those who left the country, a loyal attitude towards those who are looking for various ways to avoid mobilization prevails in society. For example, the thesis that "it's better to serve time in jail than at the frontlines", although not yet widespread, no longer causes a sharp negative reaction from most people. When faced with the risk of being sent to the front, many begin to seriously think about the "army or prison" dilemma;
- The rise in prices for Russian-made products and materials (gasoline, fuels and lubricants, vegetables, etc.) is especially annoying, because it is difficult to explain these price increases by "enemy sanctions";
- The hypocrisy of people who, in public space, declare their support for state policy has become more noticeable. For example, an entrepreneur, speaking about her full support for the war effort, declared that her husband really wanted to go to the front, but could not do so because of his illness;
- Propaganda efforts sometimes do not lead to the intended results. For example, after officials labeled a number of popular performers as "foreign agents" due to their anti-war position, this "stigma" has lost its meaning for the majority of young people. The "horrors" of potential defeat are also not always as intimidating as intended. For example, there was a case when two elderly women calmly discussed who would acquire the Far Eastern territories of the Russian Federation after the war – China or Japan.

**3.2 Growing criticism from the right.** "Criticism from the right" of the political and military leadership of the Russian Federation, as well as the spread of relevant theses among a significant part of the population, is growing. For example:

- Ministry of Defense official reports are distrusted, even by advocates for the war / SMO. Significant information from those who were mobilized, from people who deal with the consequences of the war,

for example, personnel of military hospitals and from "military correspondents" penetrates society, often contradicting the positive tone of official propaganda;

- Statements were recorded around the topic that "Putin is a weakling, he does not allow the military to win the war", "the military act indecisively", even that the president is someone's agent;

- There were cases when the mobilized, who called their relatives from the front, were asking for information about how things are in general in the war. There were also examples when military veterans from previous "hot spots" were outraged by the government's failure to provide them with the promised benefits.

3.3 Anti-war sentiment. In general, the slow growth of anti-war sentiments continues, mainly due to those groups of the population that for a long time could not decide on their position. This is especially noticeable among people who are accustomed to a certain level of economic independence, such as small and medium-sized businesses. This is happening despite the fact that many of the relevant leaders are forced to publicly demonstrate their support for the authorities in various official events. This applies even to those enterprises that receive orders in connection with the war and, should have benefited from the situation. In practice, however, the conditions of the orders are such that their fulfillment creates enormous stress for such enterprises, or even creates threats that they may be closed or taken away from the owners. Defense industry executives were shocked by orders that they should take care of the air defense of their facilities themselves, despite the fact that they were not offered any technical or economic support for such a task.

Anti-war-minded groups of the population begin to expand their horizons of possible courses of action, focusing not only on the possibility of leaving the country or looking for other ways to avoid mobilization, but are generally inclined to try to exclude the state from their lives as much as possible. This includes the transition to "gray" economic schemes, avoiding taxes, etc. Some people with a similar position show disappointment that the prospects for a military victory by Ukraine seem rather distant.

Among people opposed to war, there is a significant demand for communication between themselves. Some people seek out former acquaintances with whom they had not spoken for a long time (but whose anti-war position they knew about) in order to communicate, "take a fresh breath". At the same time, opponents of the war expressed their disappointment by the fact that the world does not see their efforts and the position of adequate Russians.

Opponents of the war are citing examples of their individual successes, for example, when they managed, after a long conversation, to convince their relative to change his/her opinion, or when, using the fact-checking method, they manage to stop the spread or discussion of some regular anti-Ukrainian propaganda on a social network.

Finally, an important resource for spreading anti-war messages in Russia is the Russian diaspora, including those Russians who were forced to leave the country due to war and mobilization. Naturally, among the many citizens of the Russian Federation who left, there are people with different moods, but observations show that the clear majority of those who left are opposed to their government. For example, a scene was observed when Russians on their own initiative shouted anti-Putin slogans in one of the café's in Tbilisi, Georgia.

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

Negative expectations and growing skepticism both in relation to the war, as such, and in relation to Russia's ability to win it, creates conditions for successful anti-war messaging. As noted in the previous report, in Russia, despite the high level of militaristic propaganda, there is a huge demand for peace, for a return to "normality".

Unable to ignore this, the state is trying to channel it in a direction useful for itself, claiming that a return to peace is possible only through military successes and intimidating the population with the possible consequences of defeat. In order to promote anti-war messages, it is necessary to direct the disappointment, irritation and anger of the population to the real source of trouble - their own government.

Our observations during the indicated period allow us to make general recommendations regarding development of anti-war sentiments in the Russian Federation, and to make some practical proposals on this issue.

General recommendations:

The most suitable environment for the perception of anti-war messages in the Russian Federation are groups of the population that are relatively independent from the state - representatives of small and medium-sized businesses, self-employed, etc. Anti-war sentiments are already quite widespread among them. Therefore, in the appropriate messages for these groups of the population it is possible not only to expose the falseness of state propaganda, but also to give specific recommendations on actions that can be taken in a given situation, for example, on how to more effectively conduct a dialogue about ongoing events with relatives and friends;

Steps should be taken to demonstrate that Ukraine and other countries do see the part of Russian society that is opposed to the war. The moral support of those Russians who are ready, in one form or another, to oppose the policy of their state is very important for the anti-war movement to manifest itself more actively.

Based on the collected data, it is possible to formulate the following practical proposals:

1. The experience of activists engaged in fact-checking in social networks should be stimulated and disseminated. Competently composed materials that document the lies and misinformation of propaganda (in the form of an objective examination of why this or that statement cannot be true) will be difficult to classify as "defamatory information";
2. Hold discussions in the virtual space about methods of talking with relatives, friends, acquaintances about the war. Discuss both difficulties and successful cases (when it was possible to influence a person's opinion). Taking into account the existing risks, such discussions can be carried out with the observance of precautionary measures (the anonymity of the participants, the use of relatively safe programs for communication, etc.)
3. Trying to drag the population into the war, propaganda tries to "humanize" it, for example, instead of the abstract "Z-symbols", it uses posters with photographs of "heroes of the SMO". At the same time, the photographs are of living soldiers. It is likely that by the time these posters appear on the streets of Russian cities and villages, the corresponding "heroes" may be among the 200's or 300's<sup>2</sup>, perhaps also among the prisoners. If the relevant information is widely disseminated, then it is possible, to a certain extent, to use the propaganda itself to convey to the audience messages completely different from those intended;
4. Materials / information should be disseminated showing the relationship of growing economic problems directly to military operations;
5. Increasing criminalization of society should be noted in antiwar messaging. Since there are already signs of tension in society related to the behavior of the military or former military, including cases when criminals with serious offenses were pardoned and returned as "heroes" after taking part in the war, materials on relevant cases should be distributed.

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<sup>2</sup> The abbreviation used by the military for those killed or wounded in action