

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

UPDATED December 2023

By Nonviolence International and Nonviolence International-Ukraine

This document provides information and analysis about the sentiments of Russians towards the war in Ukraine, collected during the autumn months of 2023. It also provides recommendations on supporting anti-war sentiments in Russia. (A summary of our research methodology is found in the annex).

## 1. GENERAL TRENDS CHARACTERISTIC OF MOOD IN SOCIETY

Among the general trends noted in Russian society during this period, the following can be highlighted:

1) Society continues to adapt to war as a kind of negative but objective reality that cannot be influenced. By routinizing actions related to the war and avoiding any demonstrative decisions, such as another wave of mobilization, the authorities manage to prevent the formation of any large-scale waves of public sentiment generated by the war. This is also facilitated by the absence of major changes of the frontlines and the positional nature of the war. It was noted that for some of the people participating in the war, it was perceived as a job – a highly paid and high-risk job. A significant part of society (and, of course, the authorities) accept such an attitude. Men in uniform, as well as young disabled people, have become part of the usual landscape of Russian cities, especially at airports, train stations, etc.

2) While society is getting used to war this process is combined with an increase in negative attitudes towards war as such. There are practically no manifestations of a positive attitude towards the war, no enthusiasm about it. Yes, for many war has become a part of everyday life, but at the same time – it is a negative part of life, a kind of new “negative normality”.

3) In general, there is a tendency among the population to “avoid” discussing the topic of war. Recently, however, in some regions another trend has been noted: quite a few people become “tired of being afraid”. They begin to more openly express their views and dissatisfaction. For example an elderly women from one of Russia’s rural areas was noted openly stating: “I’ll stand up, I will do everything possible but I won’t let my children go (to war)”. Another recorded event occurred in one of Russia’s rural settlements. The head of the family was planning to volunteer in the army, his argument was: “Better me than my sons.” However, his wife did not agree with her husband’s decision. The matter ended with his wife breaking her husband’s legs with a shovel.

4) A new trend, repeatedly noted, was the growing split between the population as a whole and those who took part in the war, as well as those who become recipients of various benefits and preferences due to the participation of their loved ones in the war / SMO. Numerous cases were noted when people expressed irritation or dissatisfaction either with the behavior of war veterans, or with the fact that they and their families receive a lion's share of benefits and preferences that were previously provided to other categories of the population - for example, to families with many children (free trips to sanatoriums, budget places in universities, places in kindergartens, the right for priority service, etc.). Also noted are the increased number of road accidents involving military personnel, and the increase in domestic violence in the families of “heroes of the SMO”. Added to this is irritation by cases when these “heroes” turn out to be people with a very controversial reputation, or even yesterday’s criminals. Unlike people that were “partially mobilized” more than a year ago, former prisoners who find themselves in a combat zone receive “forgiveness of sins” and the opportunity to return to a free life after just six months spent at the front. That is, they find themselves under better conditions than those who did not commit criminal acts and were mobilized.

5) Military personnel, as well as people who came to the Russian Federation from the occupied territories of Ukraine, became a significant additional source of information about events in the “SMO zone”. Military people, as a rule, do not give general assessments of the situation, but provide information about the “mess in the army,” and often add that this is observed “on both sides.” Claims are often made that the warring parties do not receive promised payments and other benefits. At the same time, military personnel often demonstrate respect for their immediate commanders in the combat zone.

6) Various public initiatives in support of military personnel have become quite popular. They involve mainly those among the population who have loved ones at war. Initiatives aimed at supporting other categories of the population affected by the war - refugees, residents of the “new territories” - attract less support from the population than in the earlier stages of the war. Russia’s “new citizens” themselves, after arriving from Ukraine, often face numerous bureaucratic obstacles that limit their rights and opportunities in comparison with the local population.

7) There is an increase in verbal aggression in society, which is manifested, in the more harsh rhetoric of various officials, politicians, journalists and even ordinary people. At the same time, the demand for various fortune-telling, predictions and similar manifestations has grown significantly.

8) The effect of the “Prigozhin rebellion” was noted, as well as the murder of E. Prigozhin and the leadership of the “Wagner” PMC. These events clearly disoriented ardent “patriots” and played a role in some figures who had previously tried to conduct PR on the topic of war began to “deviate from the topic” to more banal issues - for example, public utilities, etc. Rumors continue to circulate that Prigozhin’s death was staged.

9) Rapid depreciation of the national currency has not yet greatly affected the overall economic situation, although inflation is clearly gaining momentum, especially in a number of areas important to the population, for example, in relation to prices of drugs. In some cases, there was a decrease in product variety, for example, vegetable oil. There was an increase in domestically produced goods presented in retail chains, for example, furniture. In some regions there is an increase in construction (probably provoked by an increase in the purchasing power of war veterans, their families, etc.), simultaneous with a decrease in variety and rising construction material prices.

To maintain a benign picture and to “justifiably” reduce the level of support for other categories of the population in favor of those involved in the “SMO”, authorities are changing their approaches to assessing a person’s economic condition. For example, instead of basing decisions only on one’s current income, relevant institutions take into account factors such as the ownership of land, vehicles, total family income, etc. Thus, the procedures that a person must go through to obtain this or that assistance from the state (with the exception of veterans of the war /SMO) have become significantly more complicated.

Beneficiaries of the war are people supplying, repurchasing and reselling various goods that became in short supply, or, conversely, that turned out to be too expensive to maintain (for example - imported cars, for which it has become difficult and expensive to obtain spare parts). Some private workshops began to gain momentum -for example, repair shops - working with items that were previously easier to purchase.

## 2. PROPAGANDA EFFORTS AND THEIR PERCEPTION BY THE POPULATION

### 2.1 Basic approaches used by state propaganda

During the period under review, state propaganda was aimed at promoting the idea of the war as a “marathon” or even an inevitable, “normal” state of Russia’s existence in the paradigm of an eternal

confrontation with the “hostile West.” The tendency continued to neglect the role of Ukraine and focus on the “global”, “geopolitical” nature of the conflict. Successful defensive actions on the front line were celebrated as proof of the Russian Federation’s ability to successfully resist the military capabilities of the entire NATO bloc. Attention to events in Ukraine itself has decreased, and the conflict in the Middle East has, at least for some time, eclipsed Ukraine in propaganda shows. In talk about Ukraine there is less emphasis on “victory”, more on the heroism of the soldiers. For example, a poster where a girl saw off a guy with the words “Come home victorious!” was replaced by a more abstract one - “Glory to the heroes!”

Propaganda continues to try to put a “human face” on the war and present it as a “necessary defense” of principles and national interests. The war is presented as defensive, in response to some kind of “Western aggression” against Russia. The “intimidation” of the population by possible “horrors” in the event of an unsuccessful outcome of the war has decreased somewhat, which is probably due to optimistic sentiments after what was, in the opinion of the Russian leadership, a successful defensive operation in the summer of 2023. Propaganda in general has become very careful with regard to forecasts of the outcome of the confrontation, trying not to encourage unfounded hopes, but, on the contrary, as far as possible, to “normalize” the war in the minds of the population as something inevitable. Abstract Z-symbols are being replaced by posters with the faces of “heroes,” including those “who died heroically.” The topic of death in war is no longer a taboo; the state is trying to demonstrate a “human face” in relation to such cases, especially when it comes to ordinary citizens who are not members of various “vulnerable groups” (prisoners, guest workers, etc.). For example, the mayor of a city, together with the military commissar, go to the family of the deceased to personally inform his relatives about the tragic news.

The focus on “normalizing” the war is combined with attempts to conduct it in such a way as to avoid massive outbursts of public reaction to events related to the war. First of all, recruiting for war is carried out so as not to provoke a powerful public reaction. Accordingly, there is a constant search for those categories of the population that can be recruited to participate in hostilities without significant social consequences. Advertisements for military service are everywhere. An instruction was given to “comb through all vulnerable groups,” for example, debtors on mortgages and other loans, as well as “guest workers” and people who recently received Russian citizenship. After raids by law enforcement agencies among the “guest workers”, the latter were allegedly offered a choice: be deported from Russia or go to war, but later those who signed documents thinking that they agreed to be deported, found out that they also had been registered as “volunteers” for the war.

Due to the peculiarities of the bureaucratic system, different regions of the Russian Federation compete for “volunteers” for the SMO. Since people who decide to sign a contract have the opportunity to do this in different regions, and the amount of the initial lump sum payment to such people is determined at the regional level and varies significantly, there is a temptation to sign a contract not at one’s place of residence, but in a location where the corresponding benefits and payments are maximized, as in Moscow or Yakutia. Thus, wealthier regions are more successful in meeting their assigned targets for military recruitment than poor regions, despite the fact that in reality it is mainly people from poor, depressed regions who are sent to the front.

Pressure on independent civil initiatives continues to grow. Authorities began to use demonstrative surveillance of “unreliable” people. “Experts” have also appeared who study a person’s individual profile on social networks and then use this profile to initiate administrative or criminal cases against a person for “discrediting the army.” Authorities are increasing the number of surveillance cameras, using them, among other things, to track participants in anti-war protests or who paint anti-war signs. There are new cases being initiated against teachers who “wrongly” spoke about current events, for example, when answering questions from their students. There are many cases where the Commissions on Juvenile

Affairs under the Ministry of Internal Affairs “work” with schoolchildren who made “wrong” statements as well as with their parents.

## 2.2 Public perception of propaganda.

The most effective current methods of influencing public perceptions in the direction desired by the authorities were:

- Mainstream media, especially the central channels, which set the main propaganda narratives;
- “Patriotic” initiatives in support of “our side”, involving a significant part of the population;
- The use of rumors and information from “trusted sources” to disseminate the messages needed by the authorities;

As for other methods (visual propaganda, efforts within the educational system, etc.) the effect of these methods is quite doubtful.

The relative success of propaganda is that a significant part of the population perceives war as a negative but objective phenomenon that does not depend on a particular person. There are still quite common sentiments regarding one’s participation in the war in the style: *“I wouldn’t want to, but if they call me up, I’ll go, I’m a man after all.”* Within such a narrative, a negative and skeptical attitude towards what is happening continues to coexist with its passive acceptance and readiness, with little pressure, for example, at the request of one’s manager at work, to participate in certain actions in support of the government’s course. This attitude is often expressed in phrases in the style: *“Starting the war was a mistake, but once we started, we must win.”* Various public actions in support of the military - weaving camouflage nets, collecting aid packages, etc. - are generally perceived positively by the majority of the population, although they do not become truly widespread (except for those organized by “voluntary-compulsory” methods).

For a significant part of the population, the “normalization” of the war reached the level where participation in it began to be perceived as work: *“My son is fine, he serves, he came on vacation, he bought an apartment”*.

Doublethink is becoming common in public consciousness, similar as it was during the late USSR. The formal acceptance of war within this framework is combined with a negative attitude towards it and with the popularity of a position “I am for peace” in informal communication. In addition, a formal “for” in relation to war / SMO is often combined with an expression of dissatisfaction with the authorities (usually local or regional rather than central) for various other reasons - rising prices, corruption, bad roads, etc. The attitude that “if not Putin, then who?” continues to be voiced, often combined with criticism of many officials, including those at the federal level. There was an interesting case when a drunk military man in a bar boasted of his wounds, saying that he would now heal and go to war again - *“to defend the Motherland from NATO and Ukrainians”*. And then he immediately added: *“I hate Muscovites”*.

People often declare that they “don’t watch TV,” but at the same time they fully reproduce official propaganda narratives, for example, that “children died in Donbass.” Rumors, various theses, which are not voiced in the official media, but come from “trusted sources” are quite effectively infecting people’s consciousness, for example: “Prigozhin was definitely not killed”, “We were 6 hours ahead of NATO”, “Alaska was leased for 200 years, the US needed the war so as not to give it back”, etc.

The ideas about different groups of people who act as “triggers” of public sentiment have changed noticeably. For example, if earlier questions like *“Who would you like/wouldn’t like to ride in the same train compartment with,”* people said gypsies, homeless people, people with HIV, etc. Now in response to such questions people include “members of private military companies” and “foreign agents” (and

with both negative and positive connotations, depending on the person's views). At the same time, however, increased pressure on the remnants of independent civil initiatives and relevant activists is not supported by society. They continue to communicate with such people, understanding the politically-driven nature of what is happening.

In the education system, the focus on "patriotic education" has been strengthened. In the new school year, relevant guidelines began to be actively introduced in preschool institutions. However, the specific implementation of such instructions depends to a great extent on the personal position of teachers, many of whom carefully sabotage them.

During the election campaign in August-September 2023, candidates from all parties (with the exception of "Yabloko" candidates who were allowed to participate only in some local elections) first actively practiced a military rhetoric (or, in the case of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, rhetoric related to support for "new regions"), but as the voting date approached they began to focus more and more on other, everyday issues - utilities, roads, etc. And after the elections, the amount of visual campaigning associated with the activities of parties in support of the war or related topics decreased significantly. The general impression is that the topic of war "does not work" as a means of increasing popularity.

There are significant differences in sentiment between different regions of the Russian Federation. For example, in the Krasnodar region the percentage of so-called "patriots" is much higher than in the regions of central Russia. Also, among the so-called "patriots" there is a considerable percentage of people economically associated with the regime - employees of state-owned companies, military enterprises, etc.

### 3. CONCERNS/ANTI-WAR SENSITIVITY

Despite all the efforts of the state machine, and the fact that society, for the most part, has accepted the war as an objective inevitability, there continues to be a gradual increase in negative attitudes towards war in Russia, as well as skepticism about how it is carried out. The gradual growth of discontent, covered by various justifications for what was happening, leads to a sense that Russian society approached the state of the society of the late USSR, about which there was a joke that "everyone is dissatisfied, but everyone votes in support".

The conditional "normalization" of the state of war in which society finds itself is, among other things, associated with accepting, as an inevitability, the constant flow of victims of war. This is especially noticeable in villages and small towns, almost all of which have received war casualties (especially considering that it is from such locations that a significant portion of the armed forces are recruited). The result is that even among the population that demonstrates loyalty to the current policy, the demand for an end to the war is growing.

Even among the population that demonstrates loyalty to state policy, to the "SMO" as a whole, there is significant dissatisfaction associated with the growth of everyday problems, corruption (or perceptions of it), and talk about the ineffectiveness of the state. Similar sentiments are supported by the stories from direct participants in the war. The state's appeal to the "glorious past" often brings mixed results, as the past (usually the period of the Second World War) is presented in the context of a mythical "tough but effective" state, which is poorly associated with today's realities. There is the case of a man walking around with a patch in the form of Stalin's profile and the inscription "*This never happened when I was in charge*".

People directly associated with the war (the military personnel themselves or their immediate relatives) are dissatisfied claiming that the state does not fulfill its promises. In one case a woman complained

that her husband did not receive the promised payments for enemy tanks, which he allegedly destroyed. There are also complaints that military personnel do not receive the promised 200 thousand rubles a month, but only 70 - 90 thousand, etc.

Though society has largely accepted the war, its “enthusiasts” have practically disappeared. Those who support it do so not from the perspective of possible gains and benefits that it can bring, but from the position of justifying it as a necessary measure. Putin’s support is also associated not with the prospects of victory, but with the fact that he is a “guarantor of stability”, “brought the country out of the 90s” and that “it will be worse without him.”

Public sentiment has changed in the tone and content of social networks about those killed in the war. The percentage of statements about the “heroism” of the dead has decreased and the percentage of statements in the style of “*When will this all finally end?*” has increased significantly. Moreover, quite critical comments began to appear, in the style of “*why did he go there?*”

Similar changes are taking place within the regional/local press. In regional and local media, in general, less attention is paid to events related to the war / SMO, and when it is paid, the neutral tone of the messages is maintained much more often (fewer terms “heroic”, etc.).

Among the population that is not directly connected with the war, there is growing dissatisfaction with the behavior of former war participants, as well as with the fact that they are provided with various benefits at the expense of other categories of the population. This is aggravated by numerous examples of boorish behavior on the part of “veterans”, as well as decisions that “protect” the latter in relation to the fulfillment of their obligations towards other people. For example, payments received by war participants for injuries cannot be used to collect alimony obligations, since they are considered “protected” articles of one’s income. The artificial elevation of poorly respected people who have become “heroes of the SMO” also causes sharp rejection.

Society remains fearful of another wave of mobilization. Statements in the style of “*we are for victory, but only without mobilization*” were recorded.

Some government efforts to impose its propaganda narratives backfire. This is especially evident in the field of education, where imposed guidelines for “patriotic education” and efforts to once again “rewrite history” often irritate teachers, students, and their parents. Moreover, the imposed “pro-imperial” version of history is clearly at odds with both the recent, “conditionally liberal” interpretation of it, and with its former Soviet version. This irritates teachers of all ages. Some people do not like the glorification of the Stalinist period and the silencing or justification of the communist terror. Others find it unacceptable to present the Narodnaya Volya members, Emelyan Pugachev and Stepan Razin, as enemies of the fatherland, spies and traitors. As a result, a “soft sabotage” of the corresponding instructions are widely used. The school curriculum may be so overburdened there is not enough time for the classes focused on “patriotic upbringing”, or the main content of “patriotic” classes become the study of one’s region, native land, etc. Among the teachers you can hear muttering: “*We used to sing about smiles, about mom, about love, but now – everything about Russia*”. Further irritation is caused by the involvement of SMO veterans with a dubious past. Demonstration of weapons handling skills is further perceived with ambiguity.

An example of teachers’ real attitude to government guidelines was a case when an art school teacher was fired for demonstratively tearing down a “patriotic” poster, declaring that “*this school is to teach arts, not propaganda*”. Colleagues informally expressed sympathy to this person, while expressing regret not for the essence of his action, but for its demonstrative form (in the key: “*What are you doing, don’t make yourself a fool*”). The leadership of the school, soon after the man’s demonstrative dismissal, called him back again. People in a different region demonstrated a similar reaction when a media campaign was launched against a civil activist known to them in the dacha cooperative.

This “understanding” attitude towards people who declare their anti-war position is often demonstrated by representatives of structures that, formally speaking, should implement state policy. For example, Commissions on Juvenile Affairs that examine cases of anti-war statements by young people usually limit themselves to formal warnings. Many judges try not to be “overzealous” in sentencing for relevant administrative cases (when these cases do not receive significant public attention).

The informal position “I am for peace” is popular and is shared, perhaps, by the majority of the population. At the same time, it may well be combined with approval of steps aimed at “supporting our men” and with a general acceptance of the policies pursued by the state as a kind of sad inevitability. In a discussion of the qualities of one musical group, for example, one of the complaints against a musician was the thesis “he is for the war”, apparently due to the latter’s participation in some official events, then his colleagues begin to defend him - “no, he is against.” That is, the very negative attitude towards those who were “for” was perceived as something normal. In informal conversations, cases were recorded of people that just met saying “I am against war” and receiving a positive reaction from others.

Statements were recorded when people, irritated by certain everyday problems, made comments in the style: “*Yet it was necessary to start a war*”, “*There are more and more graves*”. There were also cases when people who previously held the position “not everything is so simple”, justifying the government policies gradually changed their views becoming against the war. In various places people noticed a general increase in skepticism about the war. For example, during the elections to a local council in the Ryazan region, only one polling station had a candidate from Yabloko, a person that was known to be skeptical about the war/SMO, and this candidate won in his location. Another example: a man stood on the street wearing a T-shirt with the inscription “*hug me if you are for peace*”. Many came up, hugged him, and positively commented on his position.

As for the situation of people with an active civic position, it is extremely complicated by the conditions of the repressive regime. There is a feeling of impasse; people often do not know what can be done without negative consequences. On the one hand, people are oppressed by the fear of possible consequences for “wrong” statements or actions. Moreover, the opinion was expressed that the level of fear of possible consequences in big cities is higher than in other places. On the other hand, there is a growing demand to openly communicate about serious issues, to express one’s feelings, albeit through various relatively safe forms, for example; by organizing cultural events, songs with a guitar, etc. There is a direct request for legal advice on the topic - how to behave so as not to risk repression.

For Russians who consistently hold an anti-war position, international recognition of their existence and of a differentiated attitude towards Russians are extremely important.

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

Despite official statistics, in Russian society there is a large (so far, unfortunately, mostly latent) demand for peace and a “return to normality.” Thus, it seems useful to promote those messages and support those actions that would reveal this latent demand and transform it into a serious factor in the political process.

Since the state does not have a logic to somehow meaningfully respond to this request, it tries to feed its population a thesis about the “eternal civilizational confrontation between Russia and the West,” etc. With repressions and other state efforts, such propaganda has a tactical effect, ensuring a more or less passive acceptance of the war by the majority of the population. Strategically, the focus on “normalizing” war as a “natural” form of Russia’s existence is clearly not working, as underlying tensions in society and the demand for peace continue to grow.

“Being against”, “thumbing one's nose behind their back” is again becoming “fashionable” in Russian society. The key question is how to transform these sentiments into real actions. For example, among Russians residents it is very important to disseminate practical recommendations on how to communicate relatively safely with other people about current events. Russian citizens who are relatively safe on the territory of other states could become a source of more specific information on how to avoid being drawn into the state’s military efforts, and what are opportunities to put a spoke in the wheels of the regime in a wide variety of circumstances.

The uncertainty of the future, attempts to ignore the real demand of society for a return to peaceful life, and the absence of a more or less clear image of victory create opportunities for the spread of anti-war sentiment and narrowing the political regime’s base of support. When the state refuses to provide citizens with the image of a “light at the end of the tunnel,” instead offering existing negative realities as the norm of existence, this is an opening to present an alternative future. It is possible to remind people of the relatively successful years of the first decade of this century, when the improvement in the lives of the majority of citizens of the Russian Federation took place against the backdrop of constructive relations with Western countries.

The dissatisfaction among educators should be exploited. In Russia, teachers have traditionally been perceived as one of the pillars of the political regime, ensuring that young people are educated in appropriate narratives and that elections are organized in the “correct” way. Today, the loyalty of the teaching corps (as well as education workers in general) is subject to serious challenges, since the system often puts them in confrontational relationships with students, and at the same time with their own ideas about how to properly educate young people.

### **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.