

What do ordinary Russians really think about the war in Ukraine?

Survey evidence suggests that a majority of Russian citizens support Vladimir Putin's decision to use military force in Ukraine. [Kseniya Kizilova](#) and [Pippa Norris](#) assess whether this gives an accurate picture of the views of ordinary Russians about the war.

The long-term outcome of Putin's bloody Russian invasion of Ukraine will depend on hard power (coercion, tanks and rockets versus Molotov cocktails and rifles) as well as soft power (winning hearts and minds at home and abroad). And in turn, soft power depends on cultural attitudes and information streams flowing through legacy airwaves, digital platforms, and personal networks.

Surveys conducted immediately before and after the outbreak of the Ukrainian invasion on 24 February report that the majority of ordinary Russians expressed support for the Ukrainian war and for President Putin. Overall, across the series of initial polls, a 'silent majority' – about 60% of Russian respondents – indicated that they endorsed the "special military operation" in Ukraine. But are these results reliable indicators of Russian views prior to the invasion? In February and early-March, did the majority of ordinary Russians actually sympathise with Putin's decision to declare war?

History will ultimately decide how much of the blame for initiating the bloodshed rests on Vladimir Putin alone, as well as his Kremlin acolytes, and how much responsibility rests with the tacit acceptance of ordinary Russians. It is important to determine this issue morally, to assess culpability for the conflict, and legally, to prosecute potential war crimes. Understanding Putin's soft power can also provide insights into the long-term consequences of the conflict for his leadership and for the future of both countries.

The early polls can be treated, like surveys elsewhere, as genuine signals of Russian public opinion. After all, cultural attitudes of nationalism, [patriotism](#), and support for strong leaders remain powerful forces in the world. Many Russian citizens may have no idea of what is happening in their name and judge based only on pictures from Russian state TV.

State propaganda and fake news about Ukraine "shooting its own citizens in the Donbas region" started back in 2014 and since then has been increasing in its pace and volume. Even if many ordinary Russians are badly misinformed, however, the early polls may still capture *authentic* attitudes reflecting a silent majority at home supporting Putin's actions, and thus represent the social construction of reality in modern Russia. At the same time, there are several potential arguments why the results from the early polls should be treated with great caution – or perhaps even discounted as meaningful.

State censorship and biased pollsters

One argument suggests that many Russian market research organisations like VCIOM and FOM are [state controlled](#) and far from equivalent reputable independent polls by, say, Gallup, IPSOS or YouGov. This could indeed be an issue. Yet the results of several early surveys from different polling agencies, while far from identical, appear to suggest that in the initial phase, at least, the invasion was supported by the *majority* of the Russian public.

The most reputable public opinion data available in Russia are from the [Levada Center](#), a non-governmental research organisation conducting regular surveys since 1988. Levada surveys on 17-21 February found that the majority of respondents (52%) felt negatively towards Ukraine. Most (60%) blamed the US and NATO for the escalation of tensions in Eastern Ukraine, while only 4% blamed Russia. Their polls suggest that net public approval of Putin had surged by about 13 percentage points since December, a rally-round-the-flag effect, with almost three-quarters (71%) expressing approval of his leadership by February.

These were not isolated results; even stronger sentiments were recorded in the pre-war poll conducted on 7-15 February for CNN in Russia by a British agency, [Savanta ComRes](#), where half (50%) agreed that “it would be right for Moscow to use military force to prevent Kyiv from joining NATO”. Two thirds of Russians (64%) in the poll said that Russians and Ukrainians are ‘one people’, a position taught in the Soviet era and a view that Vladimir Putin has been pushing, compared to just 28% of Ukrainians.

In their survey of 25-27 February, [VCIOM reported](#) strong support for the “special military operation” in Ukraine, with two thirds (68%) in favour, around one quarter (22%) against, and only 10% unable to provide an answer. FOM [showed](#) that 65% of respondents supported the “launch of Russia’s special military operation” in a 25-27 February survey. A private survey agency, Russian Field, [reported](#) that 58.8% of respondents supported “Russian military action in Ukraine” in polls conducted from 26-28 February. Finally, the [Washington Post](#) also reported that a poll conducted a week into the assault by a consortium of researchers again confirmed that the majority of Russians (58%) approved of the invasion while only a quarter (23%) opposed it.

Clearly not all Russians supported the war prior to the outbreak of the conflict but overall, a majority of about 60% did, according to different measures by different polls. If a common bias influences the results of all the private and state-controlled survey organisations, then this suggests it is impossible to establish any systematic and genuine evidence of Russian public opinion either for or against the war.

Self-censorship and response bias

Another potential reason for any potential bias could lie in self-censorship by respondents, generating inauthentic replies and response bias. Citizens living in repressive states may avoid expressing dissenting views in survey interviews involving sensitive issues to avoid the risk of their opinions being reported to state authorities.

This claim may also be valid. Even in Western countries it is often difficult to establish truthful views in surveys where respondents may be reluctant to express their views in direct question about certain moral topics for fear of social sanction, such as those concerning risky sexual behaviour, the overt expression of racism, sexism, and homophobia, or even their turnout to vote. Difficulties are further compounded when monitoring attitudes towards the authorities in repressive states lacking human rights and freedom of expression.

[Survey list experiments](#) are designed to detect hidden biases. Some [studies](#) using this technique to measure Putin’s popularity found only modest response biases. Others, however, detect more substantial practices of self-censorship, such as [studies in China](#). Our own (forthcoming) list experiments in the [World Values Survey](#) suggest varied degrees of bias in people expressing support for their own leader across diverse authoritarian states like Ethiopia, Nicaragua and Iran. Yet even if some Russians self-censor, it remains doubtful if even the most generous estimates of response bias could reverse the balance of public opinion reported in many of the early polls favouring the use of military force in Ukraine.

Protests and dissent

Another view suggests that a more reliable guide to ‘genuine’ Russian attitudes may be read from the exodus of dissenters and the outbreak of mass street protests and civil disobedience. Human rights groups report widespread anti-war protests in cities across the country despite harsh police crackdowns and the risks of serious injury and imprisonment. [Thousands](#) of anti-war demonstrators have been arrested to date. [Thousands](#) more Russians have fled abroad.

But the claim that dissenters express the underlying genuine views of most ordinary Russians may reflect Western hopes more than reality. Activists normally constitute an [atypical cross-section](#) of the general population in most countries, even in liberal democracies without constraints on freedom to demonstrate peacefully. The ‘silent majority’ is unlikely to engage.

Hypothetical questions and fluid opinion

Further doubts about the reliability of Russian polls may arise concerning the meaning of survey responses on hypothetical issues where public opinion remains fluid and vague. This process can generate [‘top of the head’ answers](#) ticking the interviewer’s boxes but where most people probably haven’t given the matter much thought.

The early polls are just that. Attitudes are likely to become firmer over time, although the direction of any response depends on cultural values and the attribution of blame. Whether Russian attitudes persist as events unfold currently remains an open question, particularly as soldiers come home in body-bags, economic sanctions bite even harder, personal messages flow across borders, and the strength of Ukrainian resistance becomes evident.

Dramatic shifts in public and elite opinion have occurred around the world following the historic events in Ukraine, and blanket media coverage of the heart-rending images of refugees, cities flattened to rubble, speeches by President Zelensky, and moving interviews with ordinary Ukrainians. Their impact is exemplified by dramatic policy changes in funding the military and the importance of security in NATO member states (especially Germany) and the EU.

But the impact of war coverage on domestic opinion in Russia depends on prior cultural attitudes, especially fatalism towards the authorities and the powerful forces of [nationalism](#), as well as efforts to access the available information. Even if opposition gradually grows, however, subsequent polls cannot be read backwards as an indication of Russian opinions at the time of the invasion.

‘Brainwashing’ through media censorship, state propaganda, and disinformation

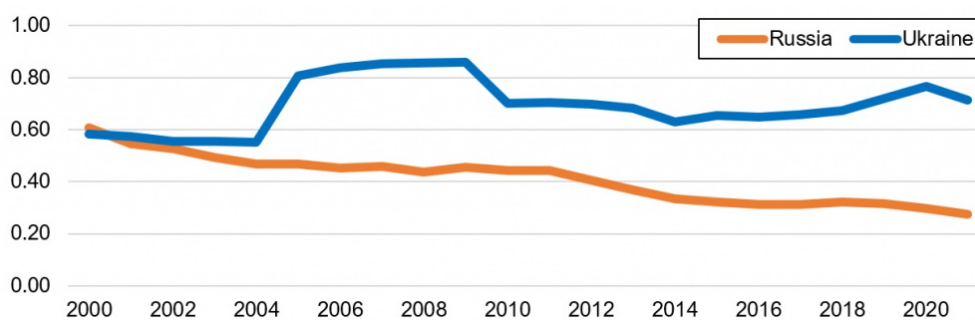
The final and most plausible explanation for the initial polls reporting Russian support of the war lies in the manipulation of public opinion through state control of communication channels, and the widespread use of censorship, propaganda, and disinformation at home and abroad.

[Reports](#) suggest that Russians have dismissed the word of friends and relatives living in Ukraine with first-hand experience of the war. Instead, Russians suggest that the Ukrainian army attacked its own population in ‘false flag’ operations to blame Putin, following the orders of the Ukrainian government consisting of “neo-fascists”, “nationalists” and “drug-addicts”. This “official” account of the events, formulated by Putin’s regime, has been widely disseminated via [state TV](#). Information shared in Ukrainian or international media is labelled as “fake”, while graphical images of flattened Ukrainian cities are described as “manipulated”.

State control of the media has grown for many years under Putin, a process sharply accelerated in recent weeks. The [Varieties of Democracy](#) project publishes a freedom of expression and alternative sources of information index which reflects how far government respects press and media freedom. Since 2000, the index has steadily plummeted in Russia and by comparison it has been higher in Ukraine.

The latest crackdown has greatly tightened Putin’s censorship, for example a [new law](#) means that journalists providing military information deemed false by the state could face jail sentences up to 15 years, many international news corporations like CNN and the BBC have suspended operations, and the remaining independent media outlets in Russia, like the newspaper Novaya Gazeta and the independent TV channel Dozhd, have been shuttered. Even before these events, in 2021 Russia ranked 150th lowest out of 180 countries worldwide in press freedom, according to [Reporters without Borders](#).

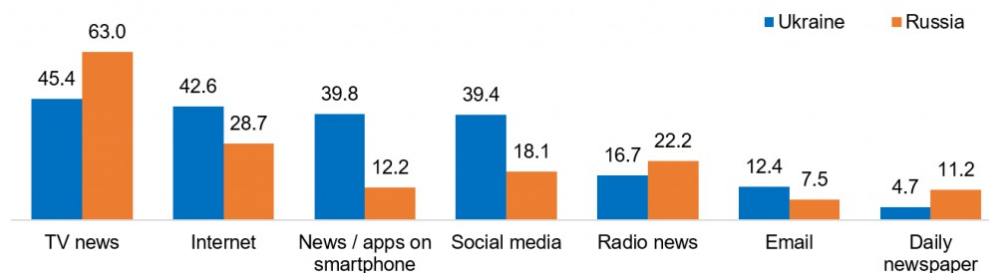
Figure 1: Freedom of expression and alternative sources of information index scores for Russia and Ukraine



Source: Varieties of Democracies dataset 2021.

But modern well-educated middle-class Russians, particularly tech-savvy younger generations, have not yet become as isolated and rigidly controlled as populations living in Turkmenistan, Eritrea, and North Korea. To counter censorship, Russians can still use [Virtual Private Networks \(VPNs\)](#) to gain access to international news – and demand has surged. But access takes effort and technical know-how. Evidence from the latest [World Values Survey](#), conducted in Russia in 2018 and Ukraine in 2020, indicates that two-thirds of Russians still use television as their primary source of daily news and only a minority rely on the internet. By contrast, in Ukraine, for example, an almost equal number of people now use the internet as well as TV news.

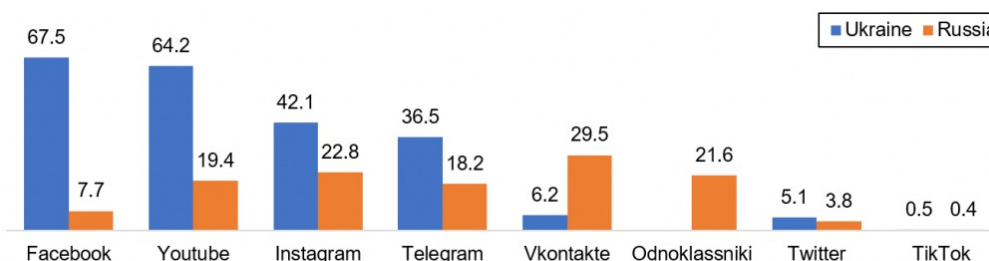
Figure 2: Information sources used on a daily basis to learn what is going on in your country



Source: World Values Survey wave 7 (2018-2021), N=1289 in Ukraine; N=1810 in Russia.

Among Russian internet users, even before recent [state bans on international platforms](#) like Facebook and Twitter, many relied on domestic sources. According to Wave 3 of the [Eurasia Barometer](#) (EAB) conducted in November 2021, VKontakte and Odnoklassniki, both Russian social media platforms, were widely used at home. Ukrainians also used Western/international social media far more than Russians.

Figure 3: Use of social media in Ukraine and Russia



Source: Eurasia Barometer wave 3 (Nov 2021), N=1509 in Ukraine; N=1205 in Russia. Shares of users are calculated to using all those interviewed as the baseline. In both countries about 16% of respondents reported to “never” use any of social networks, including due to having no access to the internet.

Most importantly, we find that use of TV and the internet predict Russian political attitudes, *but in divergent directions*. The [Eurasia Barometer](#) survey, founded in 1989, provides one of the most authoritative and reliable sources of academic data. The survey monitors trust in the President and assessments of Russia’s influence on the world. In general, in November 2021 the role of Russia in the world was regarded positively by about 81% of respondents in Russia and only 14% in Ukraine. Trust in their own leader reached 59% in Russia and just 35% in Ukraine.

Table 1: Media sources and political perceptions in Russia

	Trust in the President (4 pt)			Russia's influence on the world (6 pt)			
	Beta	Std. Beta	Sig	Beta	Std. Beta	Sig	
MEDIA SOURCES							
TV news	0.405	0.196	***	0.316	0.147	***	Main source of information: yes (1)/no (0)
Internet and social media	-0.334	-0.150	***	-0.383	-0.165	***	Main source of information: yes (1)/no (0)
Daily newspapers	0.327	0.064	**	-	-	-	Main source of information: yes (1)/no (0)
Radio	-	-	-	-0.256	-0.054	*	Main source of information: yes (1)/no (0)
CONTROLS							
Socioeconomic status	0.098	0.172	***	0.067	0.112	***	Subjective SES: 10 pt
Age	0.007	0.127	***	0.004	0.062	**	Numeric variable (18-99)
Sex (male)	-0.119	-0.057	**	-	-	-	Male (1)/Female (0)
Education	-	-	-	-0.045	-0.080	**	Education: 10 pt
Adjusted R ²	0.178			0.121			

Source: Eurasia Barometer wave 3 in Russia (N=1205; November 2021).

After controlling for standard background characteristics, watching TV news was positively linked with Russian trust in Putin, and positive perceptions of Russia's role in the world. By contrast, using the internet and social media in Russia produces the reverse pattern, with less trust in Putin and more negative views of Russia's influence. Radio and newspaper use are more mixed. This process is likely to work as a ['virtuous circle'](#); both self-selection of news sources, and the effects of exposure, link the correlation connecting use of the media with political attitudes.

The impact of online resources and social media diverge sharply in both countries. In Russia, state propaganda on television and censorship of independent social media has isolated the country and successfully brainwashed numerous citizens to obediently repeat the narratives "as heard on TV". It requires an effort for Russians to obtain and compare information from various sources. It requires far more sacrifice for ordinary citizens to stand up and express any public dissent with the authorities.

It is easiest for us all to blame Putin, his Kremlin acolytes and the security forces for the carnage, rubble, and bloodshed in this war of choice. But even passive public support expressed in polls for Putin's decision to invade Ukraine means that, as with Hitler's ['willing executioners'](#), some broader culpability for the subsequent catastrophe in both countries is shared among the silent majority of ordinary citizens in Russian society.

In Ukraine, by contrast, the flood of real-time videos across Facebook, Telegram, Twitter, WhatsApp and other social media networks has become a [major source of information](#) about the cruelty of Putin's ruthless actions towards their country and exposed Moscow's propaganda, both at home and abroad. The direct voices of the Ukrainian people, not least through interviews with numerous fluent English speakers, refugees, and official spokespersons, have been heard all over the world.

All Ukrainian settlements share constantly updated live information through several Telegram channels and WhatsApp groups about the ongoing shelling and fire alarms, gains and losses among Ukrainian forces and the civilian population, the schedule for pharmacies and supermarkets, available humanitarian and medical help, and much more. Thousands of videos of the conflict are disseminated on a daily basis. Social media has thereby helped to coordinate Ukrainian defence, evacuation, and humanitarian activities at home, while the whole world watches the conflict live and in real time.

In an attempt to curb this process, Moscow has sought to export its [well-established fake news and disinformation practices](#) into Ukraine. In early March, [TV towers were attacked](#) in Kyiv and Kharkiv. The broadcasting tower was seized by the Russian invaders in [Kherson](#), with local TV and radio channels switched to Russia-promoting video and audio messages. The Russian-appointed new "acting mayor" of Melitopol has urged that local people [switch to Russian TV channels](#) for "more reliable" information. These strategies are designed to enforce a false narrative around Russia's invasion into Ukraine, as well as revising the whole history of Ukraine-Russia relations.

Lessons from the information wars

Therefore, several polls from diverse polling organisations have reported that the silent majority of Russians – roughly 60% – initially favoured the use of force in Ukraine and polls have also registered rising support for Putin. Many factors may potentially help to explain these results.

Putin's domestic control rests on hard power, namely harsh coercion over opponents, like the imprisonment of Alexei Navalny. But it also depends on soft power, notably prior cultural values and feelings of nationalism reinforced by state control of television news and newspapers, following the gradual crackdown on the free press during recent decades, and accelerated by recent draconian restrictions on independent channels. Official censorship has aggressively throttled independent sources of news about Ukraine. Self-censorship is likely to have reinforced a [spiral of silence](#) in society, with perceptions of majority support amplifying official propaganda while silencing critics.

The Ukrainian conflict, like other modern conflicts, involves a complex combination of 'hard power' military force and 'soft power' information wars. So far on the world stage, following the unprovoked attack on a sovereign nation, the moral clarity of Ukrainian refugees, and the bravery of the resistance, Ukraine has achieved an overwhelming 'soft power victory' worldwide. This is exemplified by the almost universal condemnation and call for unconditional withdrawal expressed by member states in the [UN General Assembly](#).

But unless that message also penetrates hearts and minds at home throughout Russia, sparking active dissent and domestic outrage against a war that is wrecking both countries, it is powerless to challenge Putin's rule. In the interim, while the free world watches in horror, hard power continues to turn Ukrainian cities into rubble.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Karina Kegy](#) on [Unsplash](#)
