



RUSSIAN PUBLIC OPINION AND PUTIN'S INVASION OF UKRAINE

Henry E. Hale
George Washington University

Policy Brief presented at the
BEAR-PONARS Eurasia Conference
"Between the EU and Russia: Domains of Diversity and Contestation"

April 29-30, 2022,
Washington, DC

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How might what we know about public opinion (both comparatively and in pre-2022 Russia) help us understand the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on domestic support for Putin? The answer is important. Perhaps the most positive actually-conceivable outcome of the war for Ukraine and the West would be a collapse in Putin's support that could trigger his regime's demise.

The social science of public opinion has developed rapidly in recent years, with much pioneering research conducted in Russia itself. Several basic insights seem relevant for the question at hand.

1. Authoritarians, with all the media and agenda-setting tools at their disposal, can be very effective manipulators of the information environment ([Guriev and Treisman 2019](#)). They do not necessarily need to block negative information in order to keep it from hurting them; it can sometimes be even more effective to frame it in ways that divert blame ([Rozenas and Stukals 2019](#)).
2. How people process new information depends heavily on prior beliefs. They tend to privilege information consistent with their worldviews and downplay information that is inconsistent with it.
3. People often "outsource" opinion formation to authoritative elites, including political leaders and media. In taking cues from elites on what to believe, people typically find those elites to be most credible who can be relied upon to supply frames that support their worldviews.
4. These processes of cueing and belief-updating frequently work through affect ([Marcus et al. 2000](#), [Taber and Lodge 2016](#)). Affective attachment to elites can greatly enhance their ability to cue public responses to events; people attached to a leader through partisanship, for example, are much more likely to respond positively to whatever that leader does ([Iyengar et al. 2019](#)). Rallying-around-the-flag can also involve a powerful affective response that bonds event, individual, society, and leader ([Greene & Robertson 2019](#); [Sharafutdinova 2020](#)).
5. Also important, though, is *generalized* affect, or the overall balance of positive and negative affect experienced by people at a given time ([Achen and Bartels 2016](#)). General senses of positivity tend to work for incumbents regardless of whether people credit them for it, just as general senses of negativity work against incumbents regardless of blame considerations. Hence findings that random negative events like shark attacks systematically depress incumbent seaside mayors' ratings while random positive events like unexpected hometown sports victories systematically elevate incumbents' public standing.

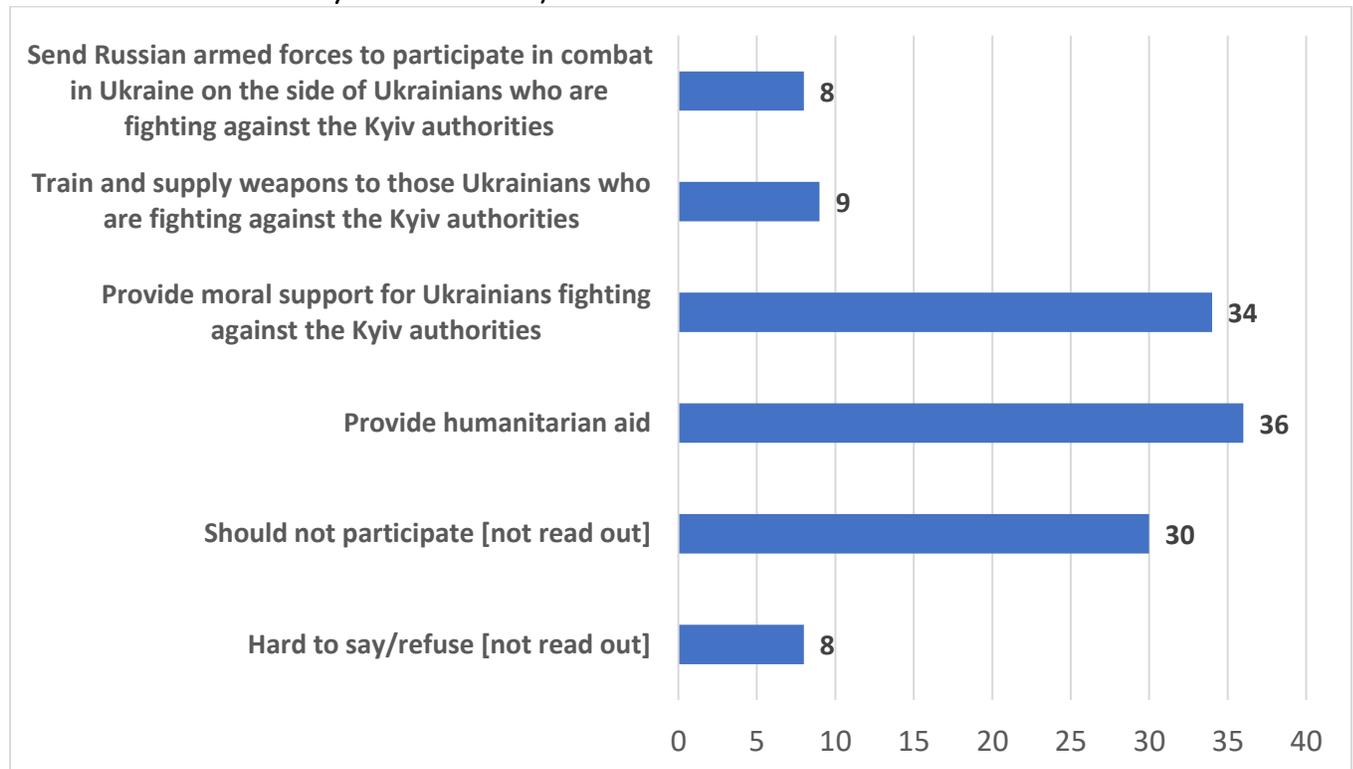
6. Major events like war are rife with social pressures to conform, and individuals respond to such pressures in complex and diverse ways. Thus while straightforward “rallying around the flag” involves people elevating their support for the leader because they approve of an event like an invasion (Mueller 1973) or encounter less criticism in media (Brody & Shapiro 1991), others might: (a) oppose the leader for it privately but falsely claim to be supportive (*compliance*, or what Kuran 1995 calls *preference falsification*; Hale 2021); (b) adjust their opinion to what they believe to be the opinion of those around them because they (i) derive information about the truth from witnessing what they take to be the revealed preferences of others (Lohmann 1993, Buckley et al. 2022) or (ii) seek to fit in, including joining in a shared affective experience (Greene & Robertson 2019, Sharafutdinova 2020).

7. Rallying-around-the-flag typically lasts just a few weeks in democracies, but too few studies of rallying have been conducted in authoritarian environments to draw strong conclusions there.

What do we see in Russia now?

To begin, it is important to recognize that the public was hardly clamoring for Putin to do what he did on February 24. Figure 1 shows this in about as direct a way possible.

Figure 1. What should Russia do in the war in Ukraine? You may choose several answers. (% Russian population, N=3,245, December 2021 Russian Election Studies (RES) Survey, conducted face-to-face by Levada-Center)



Some might point to a CNN poll published the day before Russia's new invasion as indicating popular support for war ([Allen 2022](#)). But conducted by a little-known survey firm with an online sample, its question was much less clear and direct, asking people only if they thought a vague "use of force" would be justified to "prevent Ukraine from joining NATO" or if Russia "feels threatened by foreign activity in former Soviet countries" at some undefined point in the future. While these are concerning numbers, it is a stretch to take this as a popular upswell of support for invading right away.

Moreover, in supporting Putin, people leading up to 2022 did not generally think they were supporting someone who would launch an unprovoked invasion of Ukraine. While polls consistently showed Russians viewed the West (NATO, USA) as threats and believed the West was treating Russia as a rival or enemy, Russians also consistently made clear they wanted Russia to treat the West better than it was treating them. In fact, Russian Election Studies (RES) surveys have repeatedly found that: (a) majorities throughout the Putin era wanted Russia to treat the West as an "ally" or "friend" instead of as a "rival" or "enemy," and (b) this moderation was what Putin himself stood for.

Russian media narratives of events leading up to February 24 were largely in line with this longstanding Kremlin positioning of Putin as the cool head of reason in the face of Western rashness and aggression. Predictions that Russia would invade Ukraine were outright ridiculed as typical Western hysteria.

But of course Russia did invade. And this means that, to be consistent with its own longstanding narratives and the priors of those attached to Putin, the Kremlin has to convince and continue to convince people of a big lie. According to the Kremlin, then, what is happening is not an invasion, not a war—claims now actually enforced by law. Instead, it is a "special military operation," and one linked to another longstanding Kremlin media narrative: that Ukraine has been run since 2014 by a literally fascist junta installed by the West to do its bidding. By these lights, Russia is simply restoring legitimate constitutional order and fending off threatening Western advances.

Here we see the Kremlin's "informational autocracy" at full throttle. Answers to the "why now" question fling to the wall like so many strands of spaghetti: Ukraine was about to go nuclear; U.S.-Ukrainian labs had created a bioweapon tailored to the Russian genome that would be flown to Russia from Ukraine by migrating birds...; Negative consequences either would have happened anyway (to hear Putin, Western sanctions would still have come even had Russia done nothing), or are a duty that all must accept. And crucially, careful attention has been paid from the very beginning to inoculating people against the truth with such claims as: "Nazis" routinely use civilians as human shields; Ukrainian secret services force people in Ukraine to post falsehoods on social media; Reports of atrocities are obvious fakes; You cannot believe anything you hear from outside sources. And nonstop televised "debate" shows keep anxiety, fear, anger, and outrage at a high boil, privileging the imperatives of patriotism and duty to one's country.

By now, a number of public opinion surveys by independent and state-run organizations using different methods all point in the same direction: Russians' support for Putin has risen, closing in even on post-Crimea levels.

While it is common to hear polls have become meaningless, Levada-Center reports that underlying indicators of survey validity have not significantly changed since 2021, including response rates and rates of refusal. And the patterns of actual responses look familiar. Before Russia intervened in Syria, only a minority supported it, but public opinion swung quickly to support after the Kremlin did it and sold it. It is hardly a surprise that Putin can lead opinion, especially when a Kremlin media operation is in full swing. And even less is it surprising that people are rallying around the flag as their country goes to war.

The key questions, of course, are what these survey responses mean and how whatever they mean may change over time. The social science on rallying indicates some of Putin's newfound support will be real, while some of it will be preference falsification. A fast-moving [team](#) at LSE confirms at least some preference falsification through a list experiment, though they studied only attitudes toward the war, not Putin.

Equally interesting and important moving forward will be to explore the spaces in between straightforward "sincere" and "insincere" support. Responses like, "my country right or wrong" or "I disapprove of the invasion but support the troops." Or the ways in which people outsource their own opinion formation to others, including those in their social groups, or engage in what Jeremy Morris [recently](#) called "defensive consolidation," a way of dealing with the cognitive dissonance provoked by events like the one in question here.

Even insincere support can sustain regime stability for decades, so what might the future bring in the case of Putin's Russia?

Vladimir Vladimirovich certainly has the resources to sustain the current rally for longer than the few weeks typical of rallies in democracies. But the social science would also lead us to notice certain differences from Russia's last major rally, the Crimea effect, which experts frequently estimate lasted about four years. Arguably the most crucial difference is that the Crimea rally involved the dominance of positive affect, even euphoria and joy, whereas the current rally grows out of negative affect, especially anxiety, fear, and anger.

Heightened emotional states are hard to sustain for long periods, and after some time there is bound to be a certain sobering up, or at least the return of a dryer indifference. While the Kremlin will try to stoke up the fire selectively as needed in the future, the general sense of negativity is likely to continue so long as the Kremlin is denied a clean and clear victory of some kind. And while Western sanctions can be blamed on the US and can be used as a convenient excuse for poor post-war economic performance, weak economies also tend to be general affective downers.

In the longer run, the generalized negative affect that the war is raining upon Russia is likely to take its toll on Putin's support much like shark attacks hurt incumbent mayors. Exactly how soon this will occur will likely depend heavily on how the war plays out, including how many Russian soldiers fail to return home. Whether this will translate into the regime's demise is another question, though there is good reason to think that it could well do.