

Vladimir Putin at Home

by [Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](#)

Summer 2022

Also published in Jewish Policy Center

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](#)

Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Russia's policy toward the Middle East.



Articles & Testimony

Unless the West can prod the Russian people to fundamentally reexamine their core beliefs, any notion that they will take matters into their own hands regarding Putin's Ukraine war is just wishful thinking.

When Victoria Nuland, the U.S. State Department undersecretary for Political Affairs, testified before a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing in early March, she said the war in Ukraine would end “when Putin realizes that this adventure has put his own leadership standing at risk.” At that point, Putin “will have to change course, or the Russian people take matters into their own hands.”

Nuland's statement put Russian public opinion at the forefront of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Indeed, since the invasion of the country on February 24, questions about Russian public opinion have stood if not at the forefront, then as the backdrop. Vladimir Putin has always worried about public opinion and protests at home, seeing them as threats to retaining his grip on power. Now that the war has entered its fourth month, what do the Russian people think about the war? Have these views changed over time? And what does this situation mean for Putin's grip on power?

Attitudes Prior to the War

Ironically, prior to the invasion, Putin had little reason to worry about losing control. The Levada Center, a longstanding and independent Russian pollster that the Russian government had labelled a “foreign agent,” has provided much useful data about Russian public opinion. For years, Russia analysts had debated the merits of polling results in a country where the public has a long history of acting one way in public and another way in private among a small circle of trustworthy people. And to be sure, polling results have always been far more skewed in the Kremlin's favor. But Levada is not pro-Kremlin, and although not without its shortcomings, it does provide valuable information.

According to Levada, Putin's approval rating vacillated between 61 percent and 71 percent last year. Since the opposition leader Alexei Navalny was jailed, no other serious political challenger has emerged, and no massive anti-government protests have been taking place. Prior to the invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin portrayed its actions to its domestic audience as fundamentally peaceful and defensive. State-controlled media had for months told Russian audiences that the West was pushing the country toward a confrontation, while Moscow only wanted peace and was acting with the utmost restraint, though it would defend itself if necessary. Indeed, as Denis Volkov, Levada Center's director, wrote in January 2022, it was necessary "to look not at the ratings per se, but at the entire picture of Russians' perceptions of a possible conflict with Ukraine and the West. And, to all appearances, Russian society, although fearful of such a conflict, is prepared for it internally."

In addition, Levada found prior to the invasion that the majority of Russians blamed the West for the escalation of the crisis, although this did not translate into greater mobilization of support for the Russian leadership. Such was the overall Russian public opinion landscape prior to the invasion—a certain worldview had already entrenched itself in Russian public consciousness.

Invasion, Protest, and Emigration

When Putin invaded Ukraine, the Kremlin and state-controlled media told the public that Russia acted in self-defense because it had no other options in the face of "genocide" committed by a "neo-Nazi," "Western-controlled" government in Kyiv. After the invasion, billboards appeared in the Russian city of St. Petersburg with the words: "We were left with no choice to act otherwise." As *The Guardian (London)* reported, Russian outlets can only use special words to describe the "operation" in Ukraine; it cannot be called a war, invasion or attack—indeed, doing so is an offense punishable by up to 15 years in jail. And they are only allowed to use government sources for their reports. The government also partially blocked access to Facebook and now has begun systematic efforts to suppress information about military deaths.

Even so, initially, thousands of protesters came out to demonstrate, not only in Moscow and St. Petersburg, but also in far-flung cities, such as Khabarovsk and Novosibirsk. Russian authorities predictably responded with repression, arresting thousands. Still, the protests fell far short of the reported 120,000 that made up the largest protests since the fall of the Soviet Union in response to fraudulent elections a decade ago. And in the following weeks, amid growing repression and fear, protest activity subsided, even as individual acts of protest continue to appear periodically.

To be fair, this time protest activity also moved into different, safer venues. Online petitions against the war proliferated, especially in the beginning of the war; one gathered nearly a million signatures in four days. Furthermore, groups that don't necessarily associate themselves with the Russian opposition have joined the protests, including a group of Russian scientists and science journalists who signed an open letter against the war. Prominent Russian actors, musicians and novelists publicly denounced the invasion. And in a remarkable step, retired Russian colonel-general Leonid Ivashov—no liberal and a vocal critic of NATO enlargement—publicly called on Putin to resign in the run-up to the invasion.

Still, these steps fell far short of endangering the Putin regime's grip on power. A blanket of greater repressions and fear spread throughout the country. Russian contacts were afraid to talk to their Western counterparts. What is more telling, Russians who opposed the war also began to leave the country, not simply the wealthy oligarchs but those from the middle class, or anyone in general who was able to leave. According to Russia's own official statistics, nearly four million people left the country between January and March 2022, although more recent reports indicate that some are reluctantly beginning to return due to financial difficulties in the countries to which they fled.

For comparison, approximately five million Russian citizens left Russia during twenty years of Putin's rule, prior to

the invasion of Ukraine, according to one study that used official Russian statistics. Although the Russian emigration story post-Ukraine has yet to play itself out, to date it shows that rather than challenge the regime many Russian citizens take the more passive—or perhaps as they would see it—realistic options.

Passive Support and Cognitive Dissonance

Protest aside, according to the Levada Center, many Russians have bought into Putin’s narrative. When he invaded Ukraine, Levada found that the number of those who disapproved of the United States, NATO, and Ukraine grew. Sixty percent, for example, considered the U.S. and NATO initiators of the escalation in eastern Ukraine. And approval of Putin and the Russian parliament increased slightly. Over the following weeks, polling found continued support for the actions of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine, in varying degrees—a slim majority “definitely” supported them, and smaller minorities showed moderate support.

To be sure, there are caveats to these ratings. As Vokov noted, unlike the Russian public support post-2014 Crimea annexation, current Russian public support has been mixed with anxiety and incoherence. “This time, you do not see this [post-Crimea] euphoria,” Vokov said in one interview, adding that now “people understand that this is serious...But at the same time, many say that they’re supporting, and some people even say that they should support, because it’s an international conflict and they have to support their government.”

In other words, the public’s support is passive, perhaps mixed with a sense of obligation rather than sincere approval. Moreover, Levada found in late May that the Russian public’s attention to the so-called “special military operation” is slowly waning even as a majority still express “concern about what is happening” and support for actions of the Russian military remains high.

Even with all these caveats, the fact that many of the Russian people express a certain support for their government’s actions in Ukraine is hard to ignore. Indeed, studies such as so-called “list experiments” found that by and large, Russian polls do not show significant bias even on sensitive issues. List experiments aim to provide respondents with additional protection by allowing them to avoid expressing their opinions directly. One example is a recent study by Russian sociologist Philip Chapkovsky, who attempted to shield the respondents from the fear of responding to a question they did not want to answer by giving them a choice of four options, only one about Ukraine.

Chapkovsky set out to show that Levada polls exaggerated the percentage of support for the war effort, but his own study found that 53 percent support the war. Chapkovsky highlights that direct questions show a much higher figure of support—68 percent. Still, looking at his findings, it is hard to escape the fact that they still reflect a majority support, even if it is by a slimmer margin.

Absence of Information?

It is always tempting to credit propaganda for public support for an official state narrative, and propaganda is massive and effective in Russia. Yet it is also not the full story. Russian citizens in Putin’s Russia have more access to information than during the Soviet era, when the country was completely closed. Unlike China, Russia could not entirely close off internet access. Prior to the invasion, internet penetration in Russia stood at 85% in January 2021. Nearly 60 million Russian citizens (almost half of the country’s 145 million population) had access to social apps such as Instagram.

In March, a month after the invasion, use of VPN and other internet tools in Russia reportedly surged in an effort to circumvent growing government censorship. Internet censorship continued to tighten over the following weeks—though it is still not complete—but more to the point, at a time when the Russian public already had an entrenched view, access to information was not entirely restricted. And even now, Russians still have access to WhatsApp and other mobile app tools.

The issue rather is not only one of access then, although that is important. But it is also about whether or not Russian citizens will actively seek alternative information and then whether or not they will believe it.

Here the example of Russian public support for Joseph Stalin is illustrative. In spring 2019, Levada polls found that approximately half of Russian citizens approved of Stalin. These findings were part of a growing trend. As Konstantin von Eggert, a prominent Russian journalist and Putin critic said at the time, the majority who approved of Stalin had no excuse, given all the information that had been available about Stalin in Russia for decades. That Kremlin propaganda helped drive these results is, of course, a major contributing factor, but it cannot account for the full picture.

There is also the issue of cognitive dissonance—disbelief of information that is too contradictory to the worldview the person holds. Cognitive dissonance helps explain why, for instance, some Russians thought images of children killed in Ukraine were fake, and others did not believe their own family members in Ukraine when told not only that Russian soldiers are killing innocent civilians, but that a war was taking place to begin with.

Conclusion

Levada's findings about growing lack of interest within the Russian public toward the war is also important. When it comes to issues that directly affect their lives, such as sanctions, Russian citizens sought out information because it directly impacted their bank accounts and access to consumer goods. But when it comes to more removed and abstract ideas, it is easier to accept the state narrative.

Moreover, many Russians fled Russia only to find they cannot make a living elsewhere with a Russian passport. Their experiences may entrench feelings of bitterness and resentment toward the West, rather than increase active opposition toward the Russian government.

The task for the West, then, is to find a way to genuinely reach the Russian people. To truly open their eyes to reality will require more than the presentation of information; it will require a fundamental reckoning with, and revision of, their core beliefs. Only then may the notion of the Russian people taking matters into their own hands be grounded in more than wishful thinking.

Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow in The Washington Institute's Diane and Guilford Glazer Foundation Program on Great Power Competition and the Middle East. This article was originally published [on the Jewish Policy Center website \(https://www.jewishpolicycenter.org/2022/07/07/vladimir-putin-at-home/\)](https://www.jewishpolicycenter.org/2022/07/07/vladimir-putin-at-home/). ❖

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Prospects for an Iranian “July Surprise” During Biden’s Gulf Trip

Jul 11, 2022

◆
Michael Eisenstadt

(/policy-analysis/prospects-iranian-july-surprise-during-bidens-gulf-trip)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Libya Could Make or Break Biden's Middle East Oil Diplomacy](#)

Jul 10, 2022



Ben Fishman

[\(/policy-analysis/libya-could-make-or-break-bidens-middle-east-oil-diplomacy\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[What Biden and Lapid Have in Common](#)

Jul 8, 2022



David Makovsky

[\(/policy-analysis/what-biden-and-lapid-have-common\)](#)

TOPICS

[Great Power Competition \(/policy-analysis/great-power-competition\)](#)