

The National Consensus Formation at the First Stage of Russia’s Special Military Operation Against Ukraine (February–August 2022)

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Abstract

The article begins with a definition of some contesting views about the reality of Russian support for the “Special military operation” (SMO), hypotheses, and research approach. Then we present the substantive arguments about the attitude of Russian residents to the SMO and the reliability of public opinion polls results. After this we provide suggestive analyzes of three key understandings of the “West” in Russian public opinion. The article ends with arguing that a national consensus in Russia on the necessity and legitimacy of the SMO has really been achieved. The polarization of opinions is increasing but it is not reflected in the public sphere because of the fears that this could cause negative uncontrolled consequences for the economic situation, social and political stability in the country. As for Anti-Western sentiments, they depended and continue to depend on two groups of factors: foreign policy ones, which provoked the strengthening of these sentiments, and internal ones, which contributed to their weakening.

Keywords

SMO, Russia, West, Ukraine, national consensus

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Introduction

Today, the statement that Russians support the “Special military operation” (SMO) against Ukraine has become a commonplace.¹ The analysis of numerous opinion polls conducted by Russian polling and sociological research organizations—the pro-government Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) and All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion (VTSIOM), more independent Levada Center (LC),² the pollster agency Russian Field and others—gives reason to Western countries and Russian leaders to be sure that the population of Russia almost unanimously accepted what is happening.

But does such support really exist? Is it possible to assert that millions of individual wills have really merged in some common collective action and such unity is a political fact? In our opinion, this assumption would not be entirely correct. In fact,

few Russian citizens approve of the war as an act of violence, especially enthusiastically and rapturously. As well as the overwhelming majority of the population does not consider the SMO a natural step in building a “new Russia” and protecting it

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Correction (November 2023): There has been a minor textual change in the article since its original publication.



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from the hostile West. But at the same time, few citizens wish Russia defeat in SMO. It is this latter fact that in many ways allows Western politicians to talk about the Russians' support for SMO, "dehumanizing" them, accusing them of chauvinism, nationalism, neo-imperialism, and even considering it as their national feature. However, it is unlikely that an exhaustive explanation of this phenomenon lies in the mentality, history, and national character of Russian people. The reaction of the population to a certain kind of event depends on the specific circumstances of the place and time. Any nation whose existence is under threat, real or fictional, usually rallies to fight it. Rallying can be around dominant ethnic groups, international organizations, political parties, or leaders. It is obvious that ethnic mobilization is hardly possible in contemporary Russia: its multi-ethnic character prevents too strong politicization of ethnic feelings. International organizations have traditionally aroused distrust and skepticism among Russians. Rallying around political parties and movements presupposes the existence of a strong and developed party system, which is absent in Russia. Therefore, only one thing is possible—rallying around a political leader, which implies that the political unity of the nation is represented and embodied in some charismatic person (Schmitt, 1993). Moreover, this person should have a monopoly on this role, which in the conditions of modern Russia is reliably secured by the authoritarian nature of its political regime (Petrov, 2019): there are no influential opposition forces in the country capable of seriously harming the personalist regime and causing a crisis of its legitimacy. That's why Russian society has been able to rally around Vladimir Putin as a national leader, seeing him as the only guarantor of the stability of the state and defender against threats from both inside and outside. In this context, patriotic rallying, carried out by the government both through voluntary mobilization and through the use of symbiotic "mechanisms" for its implementation, is quite natural (Luhmann, 2003, pp. 61–64). However, this does not mean that there is no gap between the government and society in Russia. The Russian circumstances of the place and time lie in the nature of the Russian political regime as an "authoritarian hegemony" that seeks "to absolutize the concept of 'sovereignty' and tries to find new supports in the form of 'skrepy' (spiritual staples) and 'traditional values' displacing the imperatives of modernization, so that in the end ... confrontation with the West < became > the main framework of the life of the country" (Rogov, 2019). This external threat, invented and propagated by the ruling elite, which has turned into a real military confrontation, inevitably raises the question of how do Russian citizens feel about the West.

For Russian public opinion, the concept of "the West" does not have one definite meaning. This concept has three different meanings: (1) the "military-political West," which is personified by the United States and NATO, (2) the

"neighboring West," that is, the EU, which is mostly perceived as the historical embodiment of Western civilization with its basic values, and (3) the "space illegally appropriated by the West" or "part of our space, which wants to become the West (be included in the West)," that is, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia.

Key research questions are:

- Is there a national consensus in Russia on the necessity and legitimacy of the SMO?
- Is the attitude of Russians to the SMO determined by their perception of the West?

Our hypotheses are as follows:

- Firstly, there is no stable political consolidation of Russian society around the thesis about necessity and legitimacy of the SMO.
- Secondly, there are no stable anti-Western sentiments in Russian society. These sentiments depend on two groups of factors—a) foreign policy (crises in Russia's relations with the West), which provoke an increase in such sentiments, and b) internal problems (socio-economic and political crises), which, on the contrary, contribute to their weakening.

The research approach

In order to answer the questions posed, it is obviously necessary to analyze the array of sociological and statistical data. They are the key empirical source of our study. However, we are aware that the predominant focus on public opinion surveys is fraught with unbalanced conclusions and even errors. The skeptical attitude of society and researchers to the results of public opinion polls and sociological studies has long been known (Best, 2004).

In addition, as Ammar Maleki's study of approaches to the analysis of public opinion in the Islamic Republic of Iran shows, in free (democratic) societies and in authoritarian countries, the degree of reliability of survey results is different due to the difference in the choice of the sampling methods (Maleki, 2021). If, under democratic regimes, "probability sampling," implying that "the respondents are not anonymous but (feel they) are recognizable when they are approached using their phone numbers or addresses," does not harm the quality and reliability of the data obtained, then under authoritarian regimes, the opposite situation takes place (Maleki, 2021, p. 2). The self-censorship of respondents or their refusal to participate in telephone surveys does not allow to receive ingenuine answers and to adequately measure people's opinions about sensitive questions (Maleki, 2021, pp. 7–9). Therefore, as Maleki notes, in authoritarian countries, it is necessary to use "non-probability anonymity sampling," when respondents are

selected randomly, for example, passers-by on the street, shoppers in a store, or social media users. In such surveys, due to the absence of an interviewer, respondents become “more sincere in their answers,” and the level of self-censorship decreases (Maleki, 2021, p. 7). The size and composition of such a sample is unknown in advance, and this makes it possible to secure the anonymity of respondents. At the same time, the larger the sample size and the use of a set of demographic and non-demographic (behavioral and political) variables, the more reliable the results will be (Maleki, 2021, pp. 6 and 26). This reduces the risks of falsification of the data obtained and their use to legitimize the existing political regime.

We generally agree with the above considerations, but the following points should be pointed out. Firstly, under such an authoritarian regime as the Russian one, characterized by a high “atomization” of society, it is difficult to use the improbability sampling technique, including due to the indifference of the population to what is happening (Khachaturov & Polovinko, 2018). People do not express their attitude to the policies of their country’s rulers publicly, not because they disagree with them, but because they do not care about them; the majority of the population is simply apolitical (Glaser, 2019, p. 16). Those who have gone into “inner emigration” do not express their attitude because they no longer want to participate in politics and public life. Secondly, in such a large country as Russia, the territorial internet coverage is very uneven, so it is not possible to conduct a survey using the methodology proposed by Maleki everywhere. In addition, many citizens have reduced their activity in social networks after the Russian authorities recognized the Facebook network as extremist and after Twitter was blocked, while many people born in the 1960s and 1970s never used social networks at all. Thirdly, the degree of authoritarianism of the Russian political regime has changed over time. We analyzed, among other things, data from surveys of Russians in 1997–2022, when the degree of pressure on society was not as strong as after the beginning of the SMO, especially in the period up to 2014. Fourthly, in the analysis of opinion polls, we relied primarily on the materials of the LC. More and more Russian mass media, primarily those controlled by the ruling regime, avoid publishing or referring to the data and research findings obtained by this nongovernmental polling institute: the First TV Channel last mentioned them in December 2015 (Berezovskaya, 2015), NTV Channel in October 2019 (NTV, 2019), *Russia Today* (RT, 2020), and REN TV (Ren TV, 2020) in January 2020, Channel 360 in February 2020 (TV 360, 2020). At the same time, Western and Russian independent researchers, as well as foreign statistical databases, prefer primarily to use the data collected by the LC (Diec, 2022; Ozawa, 2022; Resheteeva, 2022). The methodology of its surveys includes probability and non-probability sampling. Probability sampling makes it

possible to highlight the essence of the problem under discussion and identify possible patterns, non-probability one eliminates some of the shortcomings that Maleki writes about, especially since “Respondents are more willing to take part in a personal interview format (44% home/street survey) than by phone (20%)” (Levada-Tsentr, 2022, May 31a).

Where appropriate, for the reason of comparison or to provide a more complete and comprehensive picture of the situation under consideration, we also drew on data from other Russian public opinion research institutions. The data obtained were analyzed by the process tracing method: changes in the key studied areas were identified and recorded; evidence confirming that the changes actually occurred was collected; the processes that led to these changes were documented (graphs of changes were constructed), and it was shown how intermediate changes led to more significant changes; hypotheses were formulated indicating specific events and factors confirming the hypotheses. The collected data made it possible to pass the “Straw in the Wind” test: for the first and second hypotheses, the external and internal environmental factors that influenced the beginning of the SVO and the attitude of Russians towards it were identified. The results of the analysis of data on the participation of Russians in public opinion polls allowed us to pass the “Ring” test for the first hypothesis. For the second hypothesis, this test was passed by studying sociological and statistical data on changes in anti-Western sentiments of Russians, depending on foreign and domestic policy successes and failures of the ruling regime. As a result, the necessary evidence for the proposed hypotheses was collected.

The historiography

The problem we pose has a broad dimension, since it is connected with the important question of the reaction of the citizens of the country, which is waging war, to this war and the factors that determine their reaction (Steinert, 1970). On the one hand, this reaction, as many argue (in particular, supporters of the Democratic Peace Theory) depends on the nature of the political regime existing in a country. On the other, it can be determined by the type of personality described by Theodor Adorno and his colleagues at Berkeley in the late 1940s as “authoritarian” and by Milton Rokeach as “dogmatic,” regardless of the nature of the political regime. Such a person is particularly sensitive to threats and perceives the surrounding world as hostile. Robert Bothwell and Emily Kennison, who investigated the reasons for the support of the US public opinion for the military operation in Iraq, came to the conclusion that this support came primarily from such people (Southern men, “raised by authoritarian parents,” carriers of a “paranoid worldview, which makes them sensitive to many types of threats,

including threats to national security”) (Bothwell & Kennison, 2004, p. 469). But Saba Torabian and Marina Abalakina, who studied the attitude of Iranian and American students to the war, found out that although the former were more authoritarian than the latter, their attitude to the war was more negative, since the experience of the bloody and prolonged Iran–Iraq war greatly influenced them; their religiosity and gender also played a role (Torabian & Abalakina, 2012). The attitude of young people to war, however, may differ significantly from the attitudes of other age groups; the way they were raised and their worldview remain important, although not the only factors. At the same time, although authoritarian regimes do not have a monopoly on the authoritarian personality, they provide more favorable conditions for its emergence, especially for carriers of “right authoritarianism,” which Bob Altemeyer defined as a combination of three features: (1) “a high degree of submission to the authorities who are perceived to be established and legitimate in the society in which one lives,” (2) “a general aggressiveness directed against various persons, that is perceived to be sanctioned by established authorities,” and (3) “a high degree of adherence to the social conventions that are perceived to be endorsed by society and its established authorities” (Altemeyer, 1988, p. 2). This requires special attention to the perception by public opinion of foreign policy actors whom the authorities are trying to present as national threats. In the case of Russia in Putin-era, such an actor is the “West.”

The research literature on relations between Russia and the West is huge³ and, in general, can be divided into two large groups—publications on intercivilizational relations and publications on interstate ones. The question of the attitude of Russians to the West and its evolution in the post-Soviet period lies on the border between these two research fields. This topic has already been the subject of attention of many researchers, primarily Russian ones (Diligensky, 2000; Gudkov, 2019; Guriev et al., 2008; Kandel, 2000; Lapkin & Pantin, 2002; Lukin, 2003; Pautova, 2015). Scholars were particularly interested in anti-American sentiments in Russian society (Garusova, 2010; Garusova & Larina, 2013; Gudkov, 2002; Nemirova, 2021; Popov, 2015; Tumanov et al., 2019; Volkov, 2016, 2020). At the same time, researchers’ interest in the attitude of Russians to the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and to Ukraine in 2014–2021 is recorded mainly in 2015, that is, in the period immediately following this annexation (Balzer, 2015; Malkova, 2015; O’Loughlin & Toal, 2019; Prokazina, 2015; Ushkova, 2016). Some researchers claim that the economy was a key factor influencing the attitudes of Russians towards Vladimir Putin’s foreign policy (Balzer, 2015; Snegovaya, 2022). For example, Maria Snegovaya, who analyzed the trends in Russian public opinion since 2014, comes to the conclusion that Russian society’s support for the Kremlin’s foreign policy actions directly

depended on the domestic economic situation, therefore “domestic public opinion will limit the Kremlin’s willingness to participate in foreign adventures” (Snegovaya, 2022, p. 15).

As for the events of the last 2 years, it must be stated that so far there has been no thorough research on the dynamics of Russians’ attitudes towards the West during the SMO and in particular during its first period. This is primarily due to the reorientation of scholars on the problem of Russians’ attitudes to the SMO, although significant gaps remain in this field also. There are no significant academic studies of ways and mechanisms of forming a national consensus in the attitudes of Russians towards the SMO yet. Some publications are based only on data from the very first months of the SMO (Kafura, 2022; Young, 2022). At the same time, Craig Kafura, for example, emphasizes the ambiguity of the results obtained through the analysis of public opinion polls (Kafura, 2022). Kseniya Kizilova’s conclusion that “the final and most plausible explanation for the initial polls reporting Russian support for 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,” in our opinion, simplifies the situation too much, without taking into account the whole complex of factors influencing Russian public opinion (Kizilova, 2022 p. 4). John Mueller’s attempt to assess the evolution of the Russians’ attitude to the war, extrapolating to this attitude the patterns of the reaction of US public opinion to the wars in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, also does not look convincing (Mueller, 2022). A more in-depth analysis of sociological data is conducted by Van Bladel, but he does not try to correlate the evolution of Russians’ attitudes to the war with the dynamics and peculiarities of their attitudes to the West (Van Bladel, 2023). On the other hand, the Russian authors tend to interpret the attitudes of Russians to the SMO in terms of undeserved offence, deceived expectations or the need to mobilize forces to repel the attack of destructive forces created by Western powers. For example, Andrei Skriba believes that the Russian youth was too naive when they perceived the West as a partner loyal to Russia. The SMO prompted young people “grow up” and finally understand that the West inherently hostile to Russian civilization (Skriba, 2022).

The attitude of Russians to the SMO

Public opinion surveys conducted by the LC before the Ukrainian counteroffensive in the Kharkiv region in September 2022 show that the level of support for the SMO among Russians was quite high: in March 2022, this figure was 81%, in April-74%, in May-77%, in June-75%, and in July-76%. Its slight decline in April–July occurred primarily due to a decrease in the share of those who unconditionally

supported the SMO by 6–8 p.p. (from 53% in March to 45% in April and 47%–48% in May–July). At the same time, the share of respondents, who totally did not support the SMO, increased from 6% in March to 11% in April; by July, however, it had dropped to 8%. The share of those who rather did not support the SMO increased from 8% in March–May to 11% in June (10% in July) (Levada-Tsentr, 2022, August).

Special sociological research project of Russian political activist Alexei Minyailo “Chronicles” showed that the level of support for the war among Russians has changed over time. “In just a month from June 29 to July 5, the level of support for the war has dropped by 9% points, or 14%, reaching a historic minimum of 55% <...> 1 in 7 ‘supporters’ of the ‘special operation’ no longer ‘supported’ it, started to doubt it, or refused to answer the question” (Chronicles 6, 2022).

According to the LC, the level of support for the SMO from March to July 2022 decreased in all age groups Graph 1.

At the same time, the share of its opponents in general has increased in each age group from March to August, although since June it has begun to decline Graph 2.

It is obvious that especially sharp changes have taken place in the sentiments of the youngest group, which makes up the bulk of people of military age, while the greatest stability in attitude to the SMO is recorded among the oldest respondents who are not subject to conscription even if the general mobilization is proclaimed.

The gradual increase in negative attitudes towards the SMO goes hand in hand with the decline in public interest in it. The proportion of those who followed the SMO very or fairly closely decreased from March to August from 64% to 51%, while the proportion of those who did not pay much attention to it or did not follow it at all increased from 35% to 43%. The decrease in interest in the SMO was recorded in all age groups, although the degree of interest directly depended on age: the older the age group was, the more interest its members showed in the SMO. At the same time, the level of anxiety about events in Ukraine has also decreased (from 82% in April to 74% in August), especially sharply in two younger age groups (by 14 pp.). However, the level of anxiety in all age groups remained significantly higher than the degree of interest in the SMO (Levada-Tsentr, 2022, September).

This fact may seem paradoxical, but it reflects the natural reaction of Russian public opinion to an uncomfortable situation. In April–May 2022, 73%–75% of Russians believed that the SMO would end with Russia’s victory (65% of the youngest and 77% of the oldest citizens), and only 15% (24% in the youngest group and 11% in the oldest) assumed that neither side can win. A significant part of the population shared a sense of pride in restoring (as it seemed to them) the prestige of the nation lost after the collapse of the USSR. However, although in May 68% of respondents thought that the SMO was going well (60% of the youngest and 73% of the elderly) (Levada-Tsentr, 2022, June), by September the hope for a quick victory had weakened (Levada-Tsentr, 2022, September).

Obviously, there was a growing awareness in society that the struggle would be long and hard. In April, almost half of those who considered the course of the SMO unsuccessful (48%) explained their opinion by saying that the government failed to fulfill its promise to finish it quickly, in just one week (as it happened with the bloodless occupation of Crimea at the end of February 2014), and that now “there is no end in sight,” and 31%—by referring to the heavy losses among the civilian population and the Russian army (Levada-Tsentr, 2022, May 31b). These arguments were a direct consequence of the unexpected development of the military campaign for many Russians.

Already in March, the SMO evoked two main feelings among the Russian population: on the one hand, pride in Russia, on the other, anxiety and fear both for their own future and for the future of their country (Levada-Tsentr, 2022, April). Exactly these two feelings determined the attitudes of the majority of Russians to the events taking place in Ukraine—patriotism and fear of the negative consequences of the SMO or even its failure. How can we explain the nature of these two feelings? Traditionally, Russia has been a state-oriented country, not a society-oriented one. The cause of this is “the convergence of the governing bodies and the economic sphere of society; in the course of history the forms of their relations have changed, but even today their inseparable unity is preserved, which is directly reflected in the political life of society” (Shevchenko, 2013, p. 54). This circumstance directly influenced the fact that, despite a slight decrease in the level of support for the SMO by September 2022, it remained quite high, and patriotism and fears for the failure of the military campaign strengthened. It cannot be unequivocally stated that the deterioration of the economic situation in Russia, if it becomes obvious to its citizens, will automatically entail a decrease in support for the SMO. According to the VTSIOM survey in August 2022, “Russians’ expectations regarding the economy are not too optimistic. The dominant stance today is that ‘the economic situation will not change in the next six months’ (42%)” (VTSIOM, 2022, August 25). At the same time, 54% of respondents believed that the government would be able to improve the situation in the country in the near future and only 27% did not think so. In addition, every second respondent expected improvements in international politics in the next six months (47%) (2022, August 25). The Russian public opinion was convinced that Russia could not lose, but it also gradually began to realize that the SMO was not a television show, not a fight between two teams on a football field or hockey arena, but that the war brings death and destruction. And this is not at all what the Russians expected. The lack of clear successes on the battlefield, and rumors of losses and casualties, a tedious trench warfare prompted an increasing number of Russians to simply ignore the “Ukrainian topic.” The harsh reaction of the state to any manifestation of anti-war discourse also contributed to this.

How reliable are the results of public opinion polls about the attitude of Russians to the SMO?

After the start of the SMO, doubts about the reliability of the results of public opinion polls immediately raised among Russian and foreign researchers, Russian opposition politicians and critically minded people: they referred to the fact that those who shared a negative attitude to the ruling regime in Russia and to the SMO from its very beginning were reluctant to express their opinion about what was happening.

The survey of 1,609 respondents in eight federal districts on July 28–31, 2022 conducted by the Russian Field Research Group showed that “Russians are afraid to talk about this topic – refusals have increased, sincerity has decreased” (Russian, 2022, July). According to a survey of 1,627 respondents by the Russian Field on March 23–25, 2022, “Opponents of the military operation are more likely than supporters to be afraid to take part in public opinion polls about their attitudes to the events in Ukraine (48% vs. 28%, respectively). Supporters of the military operation reported that they are not afraid to be interviewed (61%),” (Russian, 2022, May). At the same time, according to Denis Volkov (Levada Center) and Andrei Kolesnikov (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), “there is no corroborating evidence that Russian respondents have become more reluctant to answer sociologists’ questions since the start of the Russia-Ukraine conflict” (Kolesnikov & Volkov, 2022). A sociological study “Readiness to participate in polls” specially conducted in June 2022 by the LC found that “the rate of refusals <to be interviewed> in both groups (who supported and who did not support the president in 2021) is approximately at the same level” (Agapeeva & Volkov, 2022). Moreover, the percentage of refusals to participate in interviews among supporters of President Vladimir Putin’s retention of power after 2024 exceeded it by 3 p.p. among the opponents of this idea (44% versus 41%). The study also showed that the level of unwillingness to participate in surveys was higher among young people (68% for men and 71% for women from 18 to 24 years old and 66% for women from 25 to 39 years old), among people who do not have higher education (from 57%–64% to 44%–58% among those who received it), and among residents of less urbanized areas (except for small towns, in which this share was lower than in medium and even large ones): if in rural areas it was 58%–64%, then in Moscow it was 44–57%.⁴ Therefore, the situation turned out to be very contradictory: on the one hand, the least desire to participate in interviews was recorded among young people, traditionally more oppositional towards the ruling regime, on the other hand, such a desire was more often expressed by people with higher education and residents of Moscow, where historically the level of support for President Putin was significantly lower than in the rest of Russia (Glaser &

Krivushin, 2021, pp. 72, 118–119). It can be seen that three types of opposition overlapped with each other: *age* (youth versus middle-aged and older people), *educational* (people with higher education versus less educated), and *spatial* (Moscow as the center of power versus the rest of Russia as its periphery). Respondents’ refusal to participate in surveys can be interpreted in different ways: in weakly and medium urbanized zones, fear of reprisals for articulating opinions that contradicted the official stance or unwillingness to express a point of view that did not coincide with the generally accepted one more likely had an impact, whereas in Moscow the role of this factor decreased to a certain extent due to strong protest culture. In other words, in one case, the level of opposition could be expressed in refusal to participate in an interview, in another—on the contrary, in agreement to answer questions. Thus, the explanation of the high level of support for the SMO among Russians by the unwillingness of its opponents to participate in public opinion polls may have some grounds, but such an explanation cannot be considered exhaustive.

The refusal of respondents to participate in surveys could also be dictated by a feeling of inability and impossibility to change anything in what was happening and therefore a sense of meaninglessness to answer the interviewer’s questions, as well as a lack of understanding of the significance of sociological research. Nevertheless, the most likely explanation for refusing to participate in public opinion polls was the fear of reprisals for expressing officially or socially disapproved attitudes towards the SMO and the West, especially when these surveys were conducted by polling institutions recognized as “foreign agents,” and particularly since the adoption of the law on March 4, 2022, which established criminal liability (up to 15 years in prison) for spreading “fake news” about the Russian army and its actions (“Federal’nyj zakon,” 2022).

There is reason to believe that a mechanism for unwinding the spiral of silence has been launched in the country as a whole: “...in changeable circumstances in which the individual is witness to a struggle between conflicting positions and has to consider where he stands.... he may find that the views he holds are losing ground; the more this appears to be so, the more uncertain he will become of himself, and the less he will be inclined to express his opinion” (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, p. 44). This is exactly how the socially and politically motivated hypocrisy of the majority of citizens is born, when the fear of being isolated and physical repression forces them to approve of what is happening. Thus, the illusion of the approval of the SMO by the majority of the population gradually arises.

“Military-political west”: NATO

The negative attitude of Russians towards NATO was recorded even before the start of the SMO: in March 2018, it

was shared by 76% of those polled by the LC. After the start of the SMO, it began to intensify: in March 2022, 78% of respondents negatively assessed NATO, in May—82%. This was, of course, caused by an increase in military assistance to Ukraine from NATO countries as the scale of the military confrontation expanded. Concurrently, the share of those who assessed NATO positively decreased from 11% in March 2018 to 7% in May 2022. Also in May 2022, 60% of Russians believed that Russia had reason to fear those Western countries that were members of NATO.

However, public opinion polls indicate that over the past 11 years the share of people who thought so has decreased from 63% in March 2011 to 52% in November 2021. That is, fears about NATO have gradually weakened, although Russia's relations with NATO, on the contrary, have worsened ("Rossiya i NATO," 2022). At the same time, the share of those who did not see a threat to Russia from NATO countries reached a record high level (44%) already in January 2020 and did not change till the end of 2021, approaching quite close to the share of those who recognized that this threat was real (the difference was only 4 p.p.).

Obviously, the SMO played a role in the sharp increase in Russians' fears about NATO, comparable only to the Russian–Georgian war of 2008,⁵ while the Russian–Ukrainian conflict in 2014 had no much impact on these fears. Despite the constant discussions in the Russian media and in the official discourse of the problem of Ukraine's accession to NATO, the data obtained indicate that in reality, the prospect of Ukraine becoming a part of the "NATO space" hostile to Russia was perceived by Russians as a real threat only during the SMO period.

The reason why the Russian–Ukrainian conflict of 2014, unlike the Russian–Georgian war of 2008, did not increase Russians' fears about NATO, is that they perceived it quite differently from the events of 2008. If in 1997–2008, 57%–65% of respondents believed that Russia did not pose a threat to NATO, that is, they considered their country peaceful and non-aggressive, then in March 2014 this share decreased to 45%, by only 1 p.p. exceeding the share of those who had the opposite opinion. That is, the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 provoked a sharp increase in the feeling that was recorded among 51% of Russians also eight years later—a *sense of pride for Russia, which has proved its military and political strength and which its Western opponents should be wary of* (Levada-Tsent, 2022, April). This mechanism played a particularly important role at the beginning of the SMO, when, after a period of weakening of great-power sentiments in 2015–2021,⁶ the share of those who believed that NATO countries had no reason to fear Russia dropped sharply and for the first time turned out to be significantly less than the share of those who recognized Russia as a real threat to them (34% vs. 60%). The figure of 60% was the highest for the entire period of surveys since 1997.

Thus, the attitude of Russians towards NATO after the start of the SMO was based on two main positions: on the one hand, the recognition of NATO as a threat to Russia, and on the other, the recognition of Russia as a threat to NATO. In other words, NATO is a serious military opponent of Russia, but Russia is also capable of effectively countering NATO. It is in this context that we should interpret the growth of the share of Russians who expected the conflict in Ukraine to escalate into a conflict with NATO (in March 2016, such people accounted for only 20%, in May 2022—48%). Moreover, in May 2022, 34% of respondents expressed the belief that Russia could be the first to launch a nuclear strike, and at the same time, 29% said that they were only a little scared at such a prospect (Levada-Tsent, 2022, June). This shows, on the one hand, the recognition of the connection of Russia's great-power status with its possession of weapons of mass destruction, and on the other, the weakening of fear of the "military-political West."

"Military-political West": USA

Public opinion polls by the LC show that since November 2021, the negative perception of the United States among Russians has significantly increased. The share of those who treated this country badly has grown from 42% to 75%, and the share of those who treated it well has fallen from 45% to 14%. This can be explained quite convincingly by the foreign policy context and the sharp deterioration of US–Russian relations in late 2021—early 2022. However, the widespread hypothesis that negative attitudes towards the United States gradually increased under the influence of official propaganda during all the years of Vladimir Putin's rule is not confirmed by the results of sociological research.

Firstly, until 2014, except for five small periods (first half of 1999, first half of 2003, March–April 2007, second half of 2008–early 2009, and autumn 2013), the positive perception of the United States in Russian public opinion prevailed over the negative one. The two biggest drops were recorded in April 2003 (27% vs. 66%) and in September 2008 (23% vs. 67%). Nevertheless, after each drop in pro-American sympathies, a period of their strengthening invariably came. Therefore, it is possible to define Russia in the period up to 2014 in general, as a pro-American country: particular crises in bilateral relations have not formed a general negative trend.

Secondly, even the Russian–Ukrainian conflict of 2014 did not make this trend irreversible. In May 2014, a sharp deterioration in the attitude of Russians towards the United States was indeed recorded: the share of positive assessments decreased to a record level of 18%, and the share of negative ones exceeded 70% for the first time. In the following months, the attitude towards the United States deteriorated even more, reaching the "bottom" in January

2015 (12%). However, after that, a gradual, albeit nonlinear, strengthening of pro-American sympathies began.

In September 2018–May 2019, the positive attitude towards the United States was at the level of 31%–33%, in August 2019–August 2020 at the level of 42% (with the exception of a sharp jump up in November 2019 to 47%), and in the first quarter of 2021 at the level of 40%. Thus, it can be concluded that, in general, Russians' attitudes towards the United States tended to improve in the context of weakening foreign policy tensions, and each surge of anti-American sentiments was accompanied by its gradual fading.

Thirdly, even during the first period of the SMO, negative attitudes towards the United States did not reach the level of January 2015 and did not exceed 80%. Moreover, after falling to 14% in May 2022, by August pro-American feelings had risen again to 19%. Anti-American sentiments in Russia resemble a person who periodically tries to climb to the top of a mountain, but constantly breaks down.

The sympathies for the United States remained the most widespread in the group the youngest Russians: even in March and May 2022, they were at the level of 26% (although the share of those who had a negative attitude towards the United States among them increased from 60% in March to 64% in May). Before the start of the SMO, it was in this group that the strongest pro-American sentiments were recorded. In the first quarter of 2021, the share of Russians sympathizing with the United States reached 58% in January, and 65% in March. During the same period, their share was 35–49% among people aged 25 to 39, 29%–37% among people aged 40 to 54, and 30%–40% among the oldest group; only in the last two groups, the share of those who perceived the United States positively was inferior to the share of those who perceived this country negatively. In general, it is obvious that the negative attitude towards the United States depended on the age of respondents (the older the group, the higher it was), and this became even more obvious after the start of the SMO.

Even in March 2022, among all age groups, the proportion of those who believed that Russia should be open to cooperation with the United States remained quite significant: from 38% in 45–54 year-old group to 27% in the group of those over 54. This reflected the recognition by a considerable part of Russians of the role of the United States in the international arena (in May 2022, 34% of respondents admitted that the United States was respected in the world) and the hope that the United States would treat Russia as a superpower. On the other hand, the proportion of those who believed that the growth of US military power posed a danger to Russia has not changed since 2017 (82%) (Rossijsko-amerikanskije otnosheniya, 2022).

Some experts tend to explain the dynamics of the attitude of Russians to the United States by changing the priorities of Russian citizens in “calm” and “crisis” periods. Political

scientist Alexey Makarkin stated that the cause of the improvement in the attitude towards the United States in May 2019 was “the refocusing of interest <of Russians> on domestic political problems”: “they are more concerned about prices and salaries, and not what is happening in the world” (Levada-Tsentr, 2019). In our opinion, however, such an explanation is not fully relevant: it can explain the stabilization of anti-American sentiment at one level or another, but not the increased positive perception of the United States. It is true that the dynamics of changing attitudes towards the United States were influenced by domestic economic and political problems, but the mechanism determining it was different from what sociologists believe. It depended on the dynamics of Russians' attitudes towards Vladimir Putin's policy and the state of affairs in their country [Graph 3](#).

The [Graph 3](#) shows that although there was no strict correlation between the dynamics of attitudes towards the United States, on the one hand, and the dynamics of attitudes towards Vladimir Putin's policy and perception of the situation in Russia, on the other, however, some of their inter-dependence can be identified. For example, the simultaneous growth of pro-American sympathies, negative perception of the situation in the country and Putin's disapproval rating in March 2009 (Institut sotsiologii RAN, 2016, p. 3, p. 3),⁷ after Russians began to feel the impact of the financial crisis, is obvious: in February 2009, for the first time since 1999, retail trade turnover dropped by 2.4%, although the decline in household incomes and the rise in unemployment began already in 2008 (Kuvshinova et al., 2009). GDP in the first quarter of 2009 decreased by 9.5% compared to the first quarter of 2008 (Interfax, 2009), and industrial production—by 14.3% (RBK, 2009). Inflation in March reached almost 14% (“Tablitsy inflyatsii,” 2022).

The sharp increase in the share of Russians negatively assessing the situation in the country in July 2010–July 2011 from 29% to 43% (Institut sotsiologii RAN, 2016, p. 3, p. 3)⁸ and Putin's disapproval rating jump in November 2010–January 2012 from 19% to 34% coincided with a period when pro-American sentiment exceeded 50% (September 2009–November 2011), sometimes even 60%. And it was in 2011 that the incomes of the population practically did not increase compared to 2010 (an increase of only .5%) (“Rosstat, 2018), and at the end of the year, a massive opposition movement against electoral fraud and for political democratization began.

If in January 2013–January 2014, the US approval rating was between 41 and 55%, while Putin's disapproval rating and the share of negative assessments of the situation in the country was quite high (34%–37% and 39%–43%, respectively), then in the spring of 2014, a sharp decline was recorded, on the one hand, in the positive attitude towards the United States, and Putin's disapproval rating and negative perception of the situation in the country, on the other. Until May 2018, Putin's disapproval rating remained below 20%,

according to the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IS), in October 2014–March 2016 it was even below 10%, although there was “a decrease in the share of those who unconditionally support the activities of V. Putin as President of the Russian Federation, and an increase in the share of those who express conditional support for him” (Institut sotsiologii RAN, 2016, p. 22).

At the same time, the level of negative perception of the situation in the country in May 2015–July 2016 clearly had a general upward trend (from 23% to 37%) (Institut sotsiologii RAN, 2016, pp. 3, 5–7). The IS’ analysts concluded that there was “the accumulation of psycho-emotional negativity in <Russian > society” (Institut sotsiologii RAN, 2016, p. 8) and that “by the spring of 2016, the crisis situation has disrupted the <socio-economic> balance and led, albeit to a slight, but dominance of a negative socio-psychological state among the population” (Institut sotsiologii RAN, 2016, p. 6).

On the other hand, in January 2015–January 2017 pro-American sentiments were gradually (albeit non-linearly) increasing (overall, from 12% to 37%). In July 2018, after the pension reform bill was submitted to the State Duma (Russian parliament), there was a sharp increase in pro-American sympathies, negative perception of the situation in the country, and Putin’s disapproval rating.

After that and before the onset of the SMO, the level of pro-American feelings and Putin’s disapproval rating did not fall below 30%, and the negative perception of the situation in the country until November 2021 was shared by about 40% of respondents or even more. Since the beginning of the foreign policy crisis in December 2021, and especially the SMO, a sharp weakening of the positive attitude towards the United States and of the negative attitude towards Putin was recorded, as well as a decrease in the proportion of those who assessed the situation in the country as bad.

It can be concluded that the attitude of Russians towards the United States to some extent depended on their assessments of the situation in the country and the domestic and foreign policies of Vladimir Putin. Growing sympathy for the United States during periods of economic and political turmoil in 2009–2011 and even after 2014, despite the sharp deterioration in US-Russian relations due to Russia’s annexation of Crimea and support for separatists in the Donbass, especially since the second half of 2018, was not so much a result of the reorientation of Russians towards domestic problems and the prioritization of such concerns, but rather a reflection of *the strengthening of opposition sentiments towards the ruling regime*.

The West as “neighboring Europe” (EU)

Russians’ attitude to “neighboring Europe,” that is, to the EU, was of a different nature than their attitude to the

“military-political West,” because the Union was perceived to a much greater extent as a cultural and economic entity. That’s why this attitude was more positive: never in the XXI century has the US approval rating, with the exception of one case (March 2017), exceeded the EU approval rating.

Before the Russian–Georgian war of 2008, the proportion of those who had a positive perception of the EU was at least 60%. The sharp weakening of pro-European sympathies in September 2008 (to 45%) turned out to be very short-lived, and already in November they began to strengthen again. In March 2009 the level of pro-European feelings reached 62%. From that time until July 2013, they almost invariably remained at about 60% and above.⁹

After the summer of 2013, a period of weakening of pro-European sentiments began, accelerated after the annexation of Crimea: the share of those who had a positive attitude towards the EU decreased from 64% in July 2013 to 51% in January 2014 and reached the bottom in September 2014 (19%), almost equaling the level of pro-American sentiment (17%). However, later pro-European sympathies began to strengthen again: the share of those who had them increased from 25%–29% in March 2015–September 2016 to 45%–52% in August 2019–November 2021.¹⁰

In the period from November 2021 to May 2022, the pattern recorded during the second half of 2013–2014 was actually reproduced: the EU approval rating decreased in November 2021–February 2022 from 48% to 37%, and by May 2022 to a historic low of 16% (“Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya,” 2022). It should be emphasized that the attitude towards the EU, as well as the attitude towards the United States, depended on the age group: the younger the respondent was, the more pro-European he was.

The “Neighboring West” was the only one of the three types of the “West” with which some Russians sought to identify themselves. However, from September 2008 to February 2021, the share of those who considered Russia a European country has almost halved: from 52% to 29%. The same trend was recorded when respondents answered the question whether they viewed themselves as Europeans, although the decline here was not so significant—from 35% in August 2008 to 27% in February 2021 (Levada-Tsentr, 2021).

According to VTSIOM, “the Western world has ceased to be accepted by Russians as a source of guidelines and vectors of development” (VTSIOM, 2022, August 23). However, to varying degrees for different social groups. “Young people are among those who remain loyal to the West, among 18–34-year-olds, attitudes that the West is necessary for Russia or can give a lot of good (55%–50%) dominate, after 35 years, opposing views intensify and reach a maximum in the 60+ group, in which 70% consider Western values irrelevant and disastrous” (VTSIOM, 2022).

In addition to the generational gap, differences in education and place of residence also played a role: “the smaller the size of the settlement, the higher the level of negative sentiment; with the growth of education, loyalty to the West grows. Among citizens with incomplete secondary education, 17% are loyal, among people with higher education, the figure is 2.4 times higher (40%)” (VTSIOM, 2022, August 23).

Opinion polls conducted by the LC show that the more respondents considered Russia a European country, the less positive they were about the EU and vice versa. This is explained by the different meanings that respondents put into their answers: the refusal of younger people to view Russia as part of Europe and even themselves as Europeans reflected their more negative attitude to the political situation in Russia, while older respondents identified themselves not just as “Europeans,” but as “real Europeans,” bearers of those “best European values,” which the Europeans themselves have already lost. This symbolic “appropriation” of Europeanness is explained by their desire (sometimes unconsciously) to be part of the “civilized world,” but “on our terms”—a desire that generally corresponds to the aspirations of current Russian leaders.

The West as an “alienated space” (Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine)

A particularly painful topic for Russian public opinion was the transformation of part of “our space” into “alienated space.” The key criterion of Russians’ self-identification through the comparison of Russia with the West made the most sensitive the question of those parts of the post-Soviet space that sought to integrate into the EU—Moldova, Georgia and especially Ukraine, since it is the latter, from the point of view of the influential tradition of Russian geopolitical thought (whose origins date back to the 1670s), that is considered as part of the triune Russia, a space consisting of *Velikaya Rossiya* (Great Russia), *Belaya Rossiya* (White Russia), and *Malaya Rossiya* (Little Russia), which conditionally correspond to the modern Russian Federation, Belarus and Ukraine.

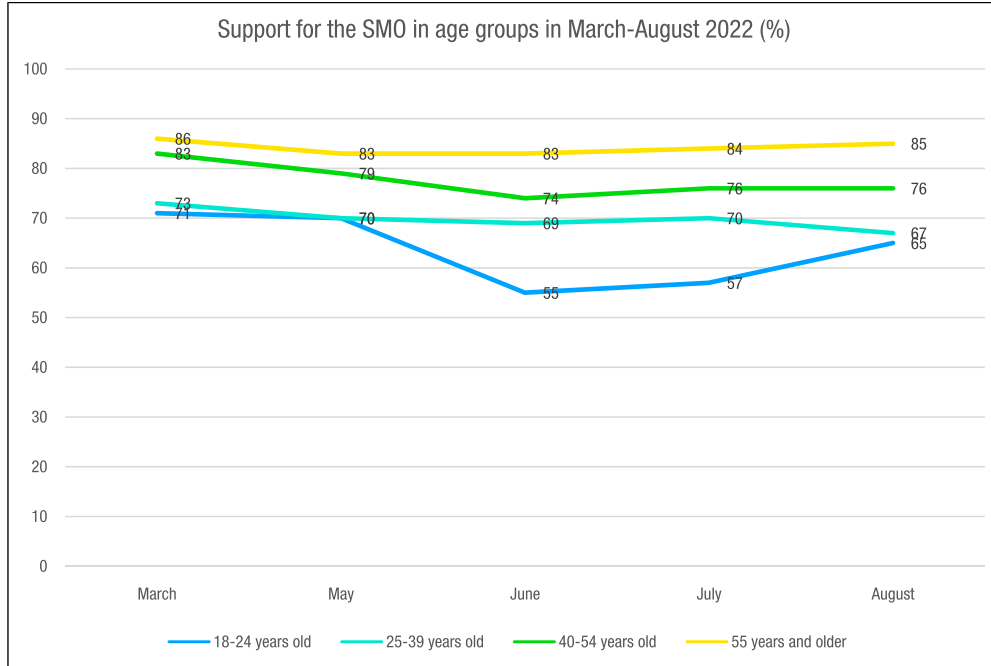
In the Russian political discourse, the perception of Ukrainians as “others” who are opposed to “us,” Russians, and Ukraine as “another space” or “the space stolen from us” has been formed. However, such “otherness” needs explanation. In Russia, people did not consider Ukrainians as different ethnically. There were too many mixed Russian-Ukrainian families, purely Ukrainian families living in Russia, families with Ukrainian surnames, families with relatives in Ukraine, etc. Even despite the efforts of pro-government media, it was impossible to cause a total rejection of Ukrainians by

Russians. But it was possible to provoke a shift in the perception of Ukrainians in Russian public opinion by presenting Ukrainians as a historically and culturally not an independent nation, secondary to Russian one. Proponents of this view especially often referred to the linguistic argument. According to Matthew Luxmoore, the Wall Street Journal’s reporter, the Ukrainian language is still considered by many people to be a derivative of Russian, a parochial one, “the language of uneducated villagers,” many Ukrainian words are perceived as comical versions of Russian analogs (Luxmoore, 2022). The same shift occurred in the perception of Ukraine itself: from a fraternal state to a state that voluntarily accepted the ideology of fascism, an enemy or puppet of Russia’s more powerful enemies—the United States, NATO, the West as a whole. As a result, Russian public opinion became more and more hostile towards Ukraine, which increasingly sought to incorporate into the Western world.

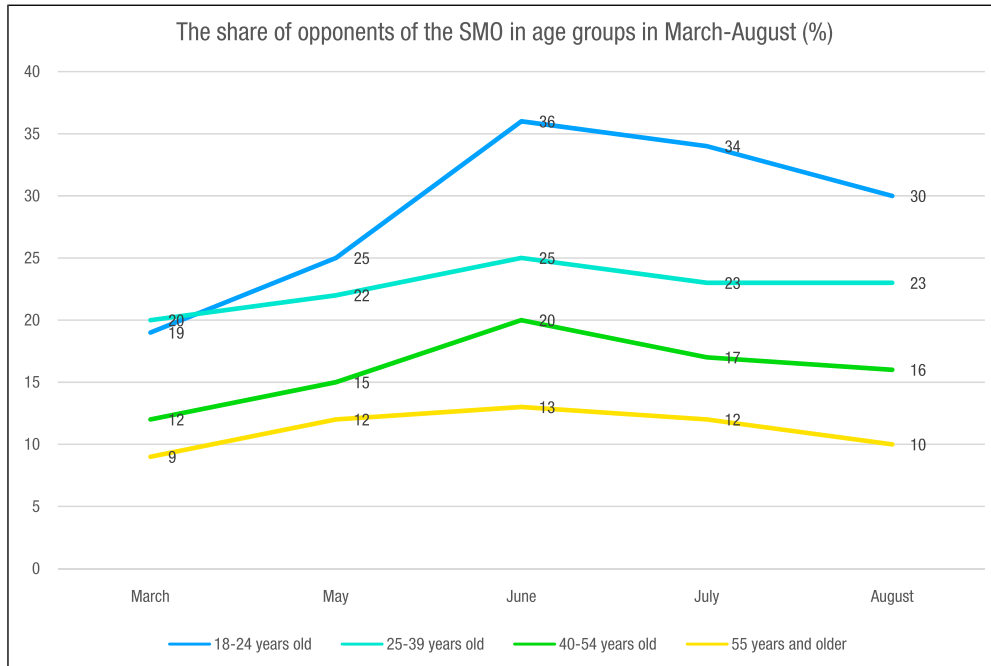
The share of Russians who have a positive attitude to Ukraine, until autumn 2008, consistently exceeded the share of those who have a negative attitude to it. Its first sharp drop below 40% was recorded in September 2008 (37%); in January 2009 their share decreased to 29%. However, later the pro-Ukrainian sentiments began to intensify rapidly: from May 2009 to July 2010, the proportion of those who positively perceived Ukraine more than doubled (from 34% to 70%). From March 2010 to March 2014, it did not fall below 60%, reaching a record figure (since November 2004) of 77% in July 2013.

The Russian–Ukrainian conflict in 2014, however, led to a sharp reduction in the share of pro-Ukrainian Russians (from 65% in late 2013–early 2014 to 24% in January 2015). But, it is important to emphasize that the approval rating of the EU and the US by January 2015 decreased even more. On the other hand, from November 2018 to September 2019, the level of pro-Ukrainian sympathies doubled (from 28% to 56%), in January 2020 it exceeded 40%, and in February 2021 it reached 55%. Thus, despite the constant tension in Russian–Ukrainian relations in 2014–2021, a significant proportion of Russians, especially in the second half of 2019–2021, sympathized with Ukraine.

Since the beginning of the foreign policy conflict in December 2021 and especially after the start of the SMO, the positive perception of Ukraine has begun to weaken again: from November 2021 to May 2022, the share of Russians who felt positively about Ukraine almost halved—from 45% to 23%, although the share of those who sympathized with the EU or the US decreased even more (from 48% to 16% and from 45% to 14%, respectively). As for various age groups, the attitude towards Ukraine, as well as towards the USA and the EU, generally depended on the age of respondents.



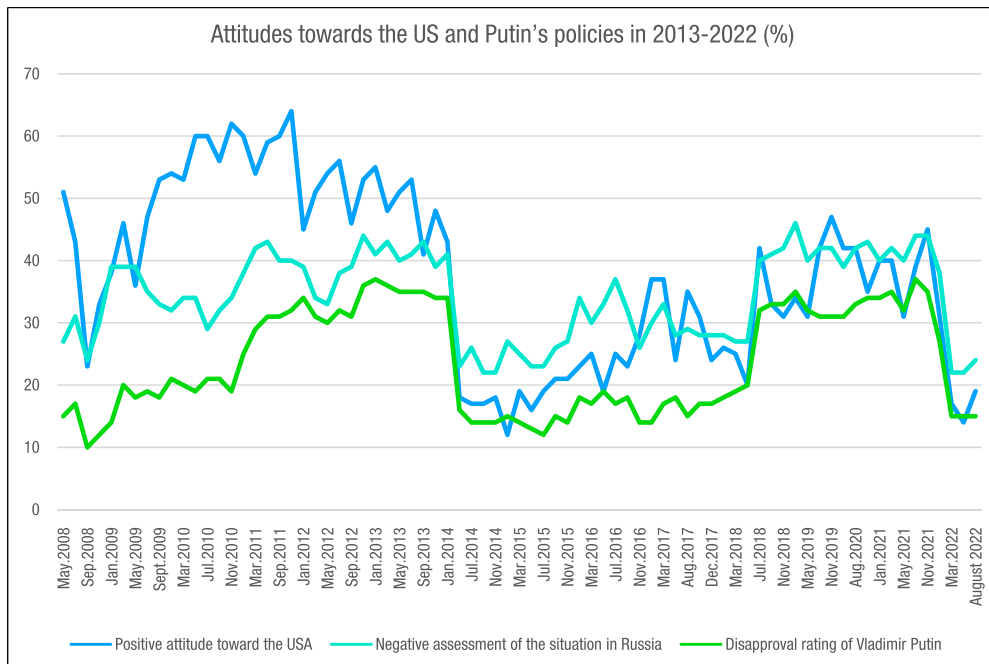
Graph 1. Support for the SMO in age groups in March–August 2022 (%).



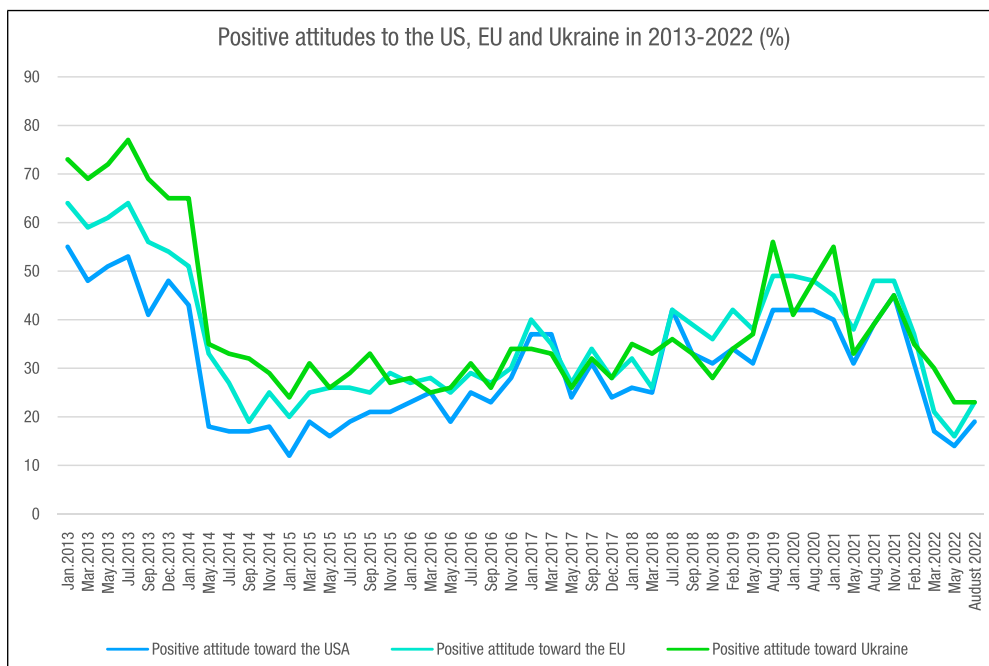
Graph 2. The share of opponents of the SMO in age groups in March–August (%).

In general, from the beginning of the century until the end of 2016, the level of sympathy for Ukraine in Russian public opinion was higher than that for the United States (with the exception of October 2001, October 2002, January

and February 2006, the whole 2009 and January 2010). Since 2017, their ratio has become less stable. Periodically, the level of positive attitude towards Ukraine dropped to the level of the approval rating of the United States. This reflects



Graph 3. Attitudes towards the US and Putin's policies in 2013–2022 (%).



Graph 4. Positive attitudes to the US, EU and Ukraine in 2013–2022 (%).

a gradual shift in the perception of Ukraine from a “fraternal” to “another” and even a “hostile” country.

Conclusion

At the beginning of the article, we posed the question: how does the population of a state that is waging a war react to this war? This reaction is determined by several factors, among which are the nature of the political regime, the type of personality, the experience of threat perception, and determined by the history of the country. Russians often considered the West to be such a threat. Our study of the attitude of Russians to the SMO in its first phase shows, firstly, that, taking into account the phenomenon of frequent refusal to participate in public opinion polls, it cannot be stated that a national consensus in Russia on the necessity and legitimacy of the SMO has really been achieved. It is obvious that not all Russians shared the political ideals that the ruling regime proclaimed (etatism, paternalism) and approved of its foreign policy. This was especially true for young people, people with higher education, the metropolitan and megalopolitan residents. The polarization of opinions about the SMO and dissatisfaction with the way it was going were increasing, although these polarization and dissatisfaction were weakly manifested in open public discourse. The reasons for this were not only, on the one hand, exalted patriotism, and on the other, fear of repression, and political apathy of citizens but also the concern of some *Russians about the possible negative and even uncontrolled consequences of Russia's military defeat for the economic situation and social and political stability in the country*. It is here that one can find the difference between the support of the war in Russia and in other countries, and this explains the essence of the reaction of Russian public opinion to it and the dynamics of the attitude of Russians to the West.

Secondly, anti-American, anti-Western, or anti-Ukrainian sentiments were not a permanent characteristic feature of Russian public opinion in the era of Vladimir Putin. The increasingly accentuated opposition of Russia to the West in the Russian historical and political discourse over the past two decades has not led to the penetration of negative attitude towards the West in all strata of Russian society and its gradual strengthening over two decades Graph 4. The degree of rejection of the West and Western values by many Russians, even during the SMO, turned out to be insufficient for the fact that the clash of two opposing worldviews or socio-political ideals became fundamental for Russian society and even more so acquired an existential character for Russia, as Russian propagandists claimed Graph 4.

The model that we can identify is as follows: anti-American, anti-Western, and anti-Ukrainian sentiments in Russia depended on two groups of factors: foreign policy

ones (crises in relations with the West and Ukraine), which provoked the strengthening of these sentiments, and domestic ones (socio-economic and political crises), which, on the contrary, contributed to their weakening. In 2009–2021, pro-American, pro-Western, and pro-Ukrainian sympathies were largely generated by protest tendencies in Russian society. The more the Kremlin's foreign policy acquired an anti-American, anti-Western, and anti-Ukrainian character, the more these sympathies became a way of expressing dissatisfaction in various segments of the Russian population with the socio-economic and domestic political situation in the country. That is why the level of these sympathies was the highest among younger age groups, more oppositional to the ruling regime.

Even in February 2022, on the eve of the start of SMO, the share of those who believed that the West treats Russia with respect and sympathy was the most significant among the youngest respondents (31%) and people aged 25 to 39 (23%), while in the middle age group it was 15%, and among the older it was 17% (Levada-Tsentr, 2022, March 18). And six months before that, in August 2021, when opposition sentiments were on the rise, 71% of people aged 18 to 24 and 59% of people aged 25 to 39 said that Russia should treat the West as a friend or ally, while among the older age groups their share was 53%–54%. This means that in the future, the attitude of Russian society towards those whom the authorities now call the “main enemies of the Russian Federation” will depend not only on the outcome of SMO but also on the fate of the ruling regime and the degree of its public support.

The instrumentalization of SMO in order to achieve not only external but also internal political goals poses significant risks for the regime, as evidenced to a certain extent by the “rebellion” of Yevgeny Prigozhin in June 2023. The use of great-power nationalist rhetoric to mobilize patriotically minded citizens around the president Vladimir Putin, as the dynamics of the attitude of Russians towards the alleged “enemies of Russia” shows, can only have a fairly short-term effect.

However, this patriotic segment of the Russian population continues to exist. As Menyailo's project shows, a year after the start of the SMO, in February 2023, “groups of consistent war supporters and opponents are almost equal in size: 22% versus 20% <...> 25% spoke out in support of V. Putin, 21% expressed criticism” (Chronicles 9, 2023). According to the LC, the level of support for the actions of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine in July 2023 amounted to 70% (Levada-Tsentr, 2023, September).

This happens not only because people are driven by fear of repression but also because they are influenced by state propaganda. The latter, through the “Third-Person Effect,” skillfully affects even apolitical Russians (Boumans et al., 2023, pp. 3 and 6). Although many of them consider foreign policy issues unimportant and uninteresting, nevertheless,

their behavior is influenced by information from the media they trust, primarily from TV, that many other people, on the contrary, consider these problems to be important. “Respondents who trust TV are also more likely than others to support the actions of the Russian army in Ukraine” (81%)” (Levada-Tsentr, 2023, September).

Playing on patriotic feelings and a sense of national pride, on the topic of anti-Russian sanctions and “Russo-phobic policies” of Western countries, news reports and numerous talk shows form a “narrative of indignation towards the West” and encourage Russians to resolutely support any actions of the authorities. This narrative is reproduced even in the Russian academic community. For example, the authors of the collective monograph “The stage of a special military operation in Ukraine. Anatomy of the anti-Russian policy of Europe” (Gromyko, 2022), state that the “collective West” has long been implementing the strategy of a collision of two worlds, hoping to emerge victorious from it. But Russia’s capabilities (resource, human, spiritual, etc.) far exceed those of the economically more developed countries of the West. Therefore, this collision is disastrous primarily for the Western countries.

However, over time, the population begins to feel tired and irritated by the exaggerated media attention to foreign policy issues, especially when the socio-economic situation is getting worse and the difficulties of everyday life are escalating. In addition, the government can turn its foreign policy success into domestic political success only when this success is obvious, that is, if it was achieved easily and quickly. That is why both the victory over Georgia in 2008 and the annexation of the Crimea in 2014 became a factor in the sharp increase in the popularity of the ruling regime and the weakening of opposition sentiments.

It is likely that in February 2022, Vladimir Putin counted on a quick and easy victory. However, the transformation of the “blitzkrieg” into a long-term positional war is fraught with the risk of discrediting the policy of the ruling regime. Although the absolute majority of Russians continue to support the war and President Putin, this support is increasingly determined not by the euphoria of military victories, but by the hope that the government will be able to find a way out of a situation when the SMO is becoming a protracted and bloody military campaign that will require significant human, material, and reputational sacrifices from the population. Such a change in the motivation of Russians’ support for the President and his policies narrows the possibilities for political maneuvering for the authorities, who are faced with an unforeseen foreign policy situation that threatens to turn from a means of strengthening the regime into a stone around its neck.

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Notes

1. Euphemism proposed by the Russian authorities to the population of Russia in order to avoid using the term “war” with all its negative ideological and legal implications.
2. The LC was recognized in September 2016 as a “foreign agent.”
3. The most recent publications, see Donaldson & Nadkarni, 2023; Elmuradov, 2022; Hedlund, 2023; Hess, 2023; Tsygankov, 2023.
4. We calculated the share of refusals not among all those with whom the sociologists of the LC tried to contact (as representatives of this service did), but only among those with whom they managed to contact. In our opinion, this approach gives a more accurate idea of the distribution of public sentiment in the period of SMO.
5. In April 2006, it was only 23%.
6. In 2015–2019, the share of those who considered Russia a threat to NATO was 37%–41%, and in 2020–2021 it decreased to 35%–36%.
7. According to the IS, the share of Russians who considered the situation in the country catastrophic by March 2009 increased to 14%, that is, twice as compared with 2007 (7%), and the share of those who viewed it as tense and in crisis increased from 2006 by 19 percentage points (from 48% to 67%).
8. However, the IS records, on the contrary, an increase in the level of positive perception of the situation in the country in 2010–2011 from 16 to 23%.
9. Exceptions: March 2009 (57%), January 2012 (56%), and March 2013 (59%).
10. With the exception of May 2021 (38%).

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