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My Country, Right or Wrong: Russian Public Opinion on Ukraine

Denis Volkov and Andrei Kolesnikov

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Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Publications Department
1779 Massachusetts Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20036
P: + 1 202 483 7600
F: + 1 202 483 1840
[CarnegieEndowment.org](https://www.CarnegieEndowment.org)

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How Reliable Are Russian Polls?

The high levels of support for the actions of the Russian military and the surge in approval ratings for the Russian leadership have provoked frequent discussions inside Russia and abroad over the reliability of Russian polls. Many critics argue that pressure on dissent and the introduction of new criminal penalties for charges of “discrediting the armed forces” and other offenses mean that people are more scared and less willing to take part in opinion polls than they may have once been. However, research by the Levada Center to measure the response rate (as per the recommendations of the American Association for Public Opinion Research) does not back up this hypothesis.⁶ The frequency of responses, communication, and refusal to respond to Levada Center polls are broadly similar to what they were back in January 2021.⁷ In other words, Levada experts have not found corroborating evidence that Russian respondents have become more reluctant to answer sociologists’ questions since the start of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The authors are, of course, mindful that the general atmosphere in Russia has grown increasingly repressive over the past decade. Either way, additional research does not back up assertions that people who do not approve of the country’s leadership are more likely to refuse to take part in a poll or that polls only represent people who are prepared to engage and answer questions.⁸

As for polling experiments that appear to show a lower level of support for the “special operation,”⁹ the results cannot always be interpreted unambiguously. Researchers who carried out a series of similar experiments looking at mass support for Putin in Russia from 2015 to 2021 warn against the unequivocal interpretation of their results.¹⁰

It’s also worth noting that the overall patterns of people’s attitudes to what is happening today are entirely in keeping with the results of polls carried out at the end of 2021 and start of 2022.¹¹ By the start of February, two thirds of the public already supported the Russian regime and its Ukraine policy in one way or another. That support grew as the conflict escalated, with most Russians laying the blame for that escalation on the West. The portions of Russian society that expressed support or opposition were more or less clearly formed, and their composition has not changed significantly. It’s also worthwhile recalling that in 2014, many observers also refused to believe public opinion polls showing high figures of support for the Russian political regime following the annexation of Crimea.¹² Over time, the expression “the post-Crimea consensus” became commonplace in analysis about post-2014 shifts in Russian public opinion. Few experts today dispute the existence of such a shift.

Notes

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