

Alexey Sakhnin: What is happening to the Russian consciousness?

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The beginning of the military conflict in Ukraine came as a shock to Russian society. But even before people were able to recover, they were also informed that they supported the war almost unilaterally. For instance, the government-controlled Russian Public Opinion Research Center [published](#) a report on the 4th day of the war, according to which 68% of Russians “somewhat support the decision to conduct the special military operation.” Only 22% do not support it. Similar results were [published](#) by another large sociological center—the “Public Opinion” foundation—whose main contractor had consistently been the president’s administration.

The poll results show that the respondents don’t have a clear understanding of the Russian “operation” goals. A quarter assumed that the military is “protecting the Russian-speaking population of Donbass.” Another 20% think that the purpose of the operation is to not allow NATO bases on the territory of Ukraine. 20% believe that the operation is carried out to demilitarize Ukraine. 7% think that Russia wants to “denazify” Ukraine and change its political orientation. 6% believe the aim is to change the country’s political regime from the current unneighborly one. Finally, 4% think the idea is to split Ukraine into parts and establish their control in the country’s South-East.

Such comprehensive data about Russian citizens’ overwhelming support for the war demoralizes the war’s opponents. However, a vital correction must be made: the data does not reflect everyday experience. Indeed, some people support the invasion of Ukraine, but the number of 2/3rds is quite astonishing. If they are so numerous, why don’t we see them anywhere?

Wartime sociology

Public opinion polls in Russia are usually tools used to manipulate public consciousness. Many sociologists suggest that the number of “socially-approved answers” has grown in the past years—such are the cases when people tell the interviewer not what they really think but what they assume is expected from them. This effect has probably increased significantly since the beginning of the war campaign. Moreover, the Russian government is consciously creating an atmosphere of fear in the country. The Duma has adopted a law for harsh repercussions for spreading “fakes” about the actions of the Russian military. Even using the word “war” in the context of what’s happening in Ukraine is officially prohibited; it may be punished by a prison term of 3 to 20 years. Participants of anti-war rallies are arrested en masse. The police check pedestrians’ phones in Moscow and St. Petersburg to find some “slandorous” exchanges and traces of reading opposition telegram channels. Schools carry out political information lessons, and parents are being “talked to,” so they would not let their kids read “destructive” information sources. All of that, of course, influences the level of sincerity with which people speak their minds.

And it’s not just the conscious cunning of the respondents. Even according to the sociologists loyal

to the government, the amount of people who refuse to answer the interviewers' questions or can't come up with an answer has grown. This might affect the selection's quality. Moreover, opponents of the war are likely less inclined to answer than those who support it or have not yet made up their minds.

And finally, it's the questions used by the polling centers that matter. They are derived right from the official rhetoric of the Russian government. People are not being asked about the war, or the military intervention in Ukraine, merely about their attitude towards the "special military operation." This creates an ambiguous psychological situation, allowing people to swap the events unwrapping in reality for a less traumatic imaginary situation, even in their inner thinking. And it seems like this is a mass socio-psychological occurrence.

Doublethink

Among the endless videos dedicated to the events in Ukraine, there is [this one](#): a man from the suburbs of Kyiv calls his relatives in the Russian city of Vologda. He tells them about his experience. "They're bombing us; peaceful citizens and kids are dying," he says. But his relatives from Russia, living a thousand kilometers from the war front, refuse to believe him. "There is no war. They're only shooting the nationalists," responds an elderly woman's voice. The man gets angry. "How can you know that? I'm right here!" he screams. "We have a TV," comes a response.

It's not a coincidence that the Russian government prohibits using the word "war." It indicates a situation that can not be perceived neutrally, unlike a "special military operation," which is perceived as the continuation of complex government policy and doesn't require a personal attitude towards it from a private citizen. Government propaganda grants the people a sort of saving grace by allowing them not to accept reality.

In a country where collective memory is based upon the victory over fascism in the bloody but just defensive war, it's quite an effective mechanism. To accept that Russia has committed military aggression against the people closest to it through history and culture is virtually impossible from a psychological standpoint. It sabotages the basic perceptions Russians have about justice their core values. Many people do not have the strength to do it. So they are trying as hard as they can to avoid seeing reality, repeating the propaganda cliches: "there is no war."

Such a psychological split explains the glaring contradiction between the everyday experience and the sociologists' results. Many people who think the war is morally and politically unacceptable can at the very same time talk about support for the "Russian government's special operation" not merely out of fear but from the futile hope that the official version of events may somehow turn out to be miraculously true (at least in part). Because that would rid them of the horrific prospect of moral failure and the dire necessity to speak out against the events.

The government is trying very hard to use this moral dilemma, factually blackmailing the people by the feeling of fear. "A real Russian is not ashamed of being Russian—and if he's ashamed, he's not Russian and not with us," the president's press secretary Dmitry Peskov [announced](#).

But there is a vulnerable spot in this tenuous doublethink: it can not be preserved for long. No draconian measures of information control can shelter the citizens from the monstrous reality. First of all, around a third of Russians have relatives in Ukraine. No censorship can prevent millions of phone calls and messages between them. My phone is full of the most desperate pain. "We've been sitting in the basement for four days now." "They're bombing. The city is under a blockade. No one can enter or leave." "I spent 5 hours in line for bread today. They didn't bring any."—I can quote such messages in hundreds. And there are millions like me in Russia. This witnessing of the

catastrophe is way more persuasive than political debates. Even the most loyal Putin supporter will have a hard time explaining to themselves why an ordinary citizen should starve and freeze while air bombs explode around them.

It's perilous for us to discuss the number of losses sustained by the Russian military in Ukraine. It's the most sensitive subject for the government, and they watch over such discussions carefully. The government has officially recognized that over 500 service members have died during the "operation." Even this number is monstrously large. Over ten years of the Afghanistan war, the USSR lost just over 14,000 soldiers and officers. Today, death enjoys a greater harvest. The veto on this information makes people seek out numbers announced by the Ukrainian side (quite likely exaggerated). On the 8th of March, the Russian Ministry of Defense has admitted that there are some conscript soldiers in Ukraine—which means poorly trained 18-year-old boys. The words "cannon fodder" come up more often in messages and conversations. Women are afraid to let their sons go on compulsory military service—and on the 1st of April, the new conscription will start. Even in the official sociological polling, we see that middle-aged women are 15-20% less likely to approve of the "special operation" than men. And it's the middle-aged women precisely who had been considered the core loyal electorate for Putin. But another category of citizens that's important for the government is influenced significantly by the losses. It's the military personnel.

A revealing blunder [happened](#) in a live stream of the "Zvezda" TV channel that belongs to the Ministry of Defence. An elderly serviceman among the guests in a patriotic talk show stood up and offered to hold a minute of silence for the Russian soldiers who died while carrying out their commanders' orders. "Our guys are dying out there..." he began saying. But the talk show's host blasted out from his seat and started screaming at the veteran with order bars on his chest: "No-no-no! I don't want to hear any of that! Shut up! Don't you understand? Stop. Our guys are crushing the fascist viper over there; it's a triumph of Russian arms!" The urge of the bureaucrats and the propaganda peddlers to sheepishly conceal the events unwrapping in Ukraine has already started pushing away the government's most loyal and faithful audience—the military and the patriots.

Finally, a third factor undermines the doublethink of many Russians that's "redemptive" on the home front. As the government has blocked conventional opposition media channels, new-generation media have emerged in their place: photos of price tags in stores and lay-off announcements. The economic catastrophe that unravels has become a collective anti-war agitation machine. On the subject of the events in Ukraine and Russia, one can only cite the official channels, like the military and the government's PR services. But if you check out any regional media (100% dependant on the local administration), you will immediately know what's going on. "The price for grave digging in Yaroslavl is rapidly rising," a local website [announces](#). The anti-monopoly bureau suspects a cartel conspiracy and informs people that "Preliminary analysis has shown: it's expensive to die in Yaroslavl." In Volgodonsk, female readers of the local newspaper [are outraged](#) by the two-fold rise in baby food and diapers prices. Russian manufacturing was fully integrated into the global chains of value-added and turned out to be utterly unprepared for Western sanctions. 10 out of 14 largest auto manufacturers have already [halted](#) production; others are preparing to do it in the nearest future. At least 150,000 people will be out of their jobs; that's not counting the adjacent industries, logistics companies, and dealerships. Mcdonald's became one of the dozens of large foreign companies that announced a suspension of their work in Russia. This fast-food chain alone is responsible for 64,000 jobs. Government experts [estimate](#) the scale of impending mass unemployment at 7-10 million people.

Even for the most vocal proponents of the Russian government, the connection between the war and the socio-economic crash is quite apparent.

The dynamics

It's hard to objectively describe the speed with which changes in mass perception are happening. Liberal opposition figure Alexei Navalny's supporters have carried out an experiment. They carried out a [series](#) of four online polls. This research does not seek the merits of being representative because the politicized internet audience is very different from the nationwide selection. However, they do indicate a quick change in attitudes.

If on the 25th of February, only 29% of the poll's participants called Russia an aggressor, just a week later, on the 3rd of March, the same answer was given by 53% of the respondents. The number of those who consider Russia's mission in Ukraine "liberatory" lowered instead, from 28% to 12%. 14% blamed Russia for the conflict on the 25th of February and 36% on the 3rd of March. Meanwhile, the amount of those condemning the West or "all sides" had decreased insignificantly, and the opinion that the blame lies upon Ukraine was marginal. On the other hand, the amount of those who think that the economic consequences of the current events will be "catastrophic" for Russia has grown 1.5 times—from 40% to 60%.

"Never before in the history of our sociological service have we seen such dynamics of popular opinion. In just a few days of this war, the Russians' attitudes have pivoted drastically," the poll's organizers wrote. People who have changed their opinions in the past two weeks are pretty common.

State Duma KPRF deputy Mikhail Matveyev, who voted in recognition of DPR and LPR's sovereignty, became one of the symbols of this painful awakening. "I voted for peace, not war. I voted so that Donbass wouldn't be bombed anymore—not for bombs to fall on Kyiv", [he wrote](#) on Twitter on the 26th of February. Some politicians followed suit. But today, most of such transformations occur on a grassroots level. Someone who had supported the "special operation" from the get-go changes their opinion once mass lay-offs start in their town, or someone they know is getting conscripted and made to sign a contract that allows the military to send them to a hot spot.

Tactics

Throughout the two weeks of the war, anti-war protests took place in the streets almost every day. But the repressive-police regime handled them with ease. By the 11th of March, the police had arrested an unprecedented amount of rally participants—[13,913 people](#). In the circumstances of previously unseen fear-mongering, police brutality, and the majority of independent media being blocked, no one has been able to gather a critical mass at a street protest that the government wouldn't be able to suppress.

The liberal opposition leaders who had emigrated keep making [calls](#) for [daily](#) protest rallies "on the main square of your city." It's easy to understand from an emotional standpoint: no day should be spent accepting the war. However, ice-cold reason tells us that right now, the more important thing is not ethical posturing but careful work in mobilizing those strata that the liberal politicians had long ignored. Only "Putin's majority" from before can change the power balance and end the war. This is where the Russian left currently sees their purpose: in work with these masses.

Out of all the sociological reports dedicated to the perception of the Russian "special operation" in Ukraine, only [one](#) allows us to see the connection between social inequality and the attitude towards the war. Despite the common perception in Russia (primarily stemming from the dominance of the liberal narrative in the opposition media) that it's only the well-educated and well-heeled minority opposing Putin, while the poor majority remains loyal consumers of propaganda, polls show: it's the poor who perceive the war most critically. "People with low incomes are more anxious about the military operation because they are expecting further worsening of their material conditions in this regard," researchers observe. Among respondents with high incomes, 69% announced that they support Putin's decision (and just 17% do not support it). Among respondents with low incomes, only

49% support (and 31% were brave enough to say they don't support the invasion). Undoubtedly, the actual level of discontent with the aggression is much higher and will proliferate.

The left aims to demonstrate to the society, including its working-class and poor strata, that it's not just the pro-Western liberals headed by "middle-class opposition" who are against the war. Such a distorted picture is only beneficial to the Kremlin, which tries to present the ongoing conflict as a "civilizational" collision between Russia with the (constantly adversarial) West and its' "fifth column." It's essential to show that the Russian workers have their own reasons to fight for peace that are independent of the West. And that this peace will not mean military defeat, new national humiliation, and territorial carving up of Russia, but instead will return our country to its true owner—the working majority of the people. The left must fight the collective blame complex, which is thrust upon the people by some liberal critics of Putin. In the hands of pro-government propaganda, it becomes a very effective tool of uniting "around the national flag."

The tragic truth is that the war that Putin started is not some random venture. All 30 years of post-Soviet history have led us to this catastrophe. Tremendous social inequality became the foundation for the dictatorship because, alongside their control over property, the poor majority had lost its political voice. Shameful nationalist and xenophobic blather have been used throughout these years by most of the regimes that have come to power upon the ruins of the USSR. Pitting nations against each other, the oligarchs strengthened their power before finally leading us to war. Ultimately, within the very foundation of Russia's current nationhood lies the military coup carried out by Vladimir Putin's predecessor Boris Yeltsin in 1993 with the full support of the Western governments. Back then, the government shot at the parliament from tanks in the name of "democracy" and made the working class shut up for decades, forgetting about its collective strength. Today we're merely reaping the results of this society of inequality and exploitation.

The Russian working class will have to change their country entirely to stop this war. It's a simple truth. And yet, only the Russian left can utter it. There's no one else.

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