

How strong is Russian and Belarusian resistance to Putin's Ukraine war?

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The message from Russia is that President Vladimir Putin's "special military operation" aimed at "denazifying" Ukraine enjoys overwhelming and rising domestic support.

According to a [March 24-30 Levada Center survey](#), Putin's approval rating had risen from 71% to 83% over the previous month, while 70% approved of the performance of the government, up from 55% over the same period.

There is little immediate reason to doubt these figures, as the Levada Center is not an [official or semi-official pollster](#). It is independent, and hence listed in the "registry of non-commercial organisations acting as foreign agents".

The results are unsurprising, mainly because the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) supported the war from day one. It was the one political force capable of challenging the pro-war consensus and had already opposed the Putin-backed repression of January's popular revolt in Kazakhstan.

However, its willing capitulation to Putin's invasion left party-political opposition to the war to the weak forces of anarchism and the anti-Stalinist left.

Open anti-war protesting has been repressed, to the point that even [even single protesters are whisked away by police](#).

Moreover, once independent reporting of Putin's "special military operation" [was suffocated](#), the main source of information for most Russians became state-run television, whose channels just repeat the official line.

Any Russian wanting secure access to alternative websites — such as [Meduza](#) and [The Moscow Times](#), which operate from outside the country — has to deploy a virtual private network (VPN).

There are polls ... and polls

However, this harsh repression betrays the Russian elite's concern that majority backing for Putin's war could readily evaporate with bad news from the front and deepening economic crisis.

Its potential fragility was shown by the latest release of the oppositionist survey [Do Russians Want War?](#), conducted from March 26–30.

This poll posed the question of support for the war so that interviewees had to think about what they really want from Putin's invasion.

Its main findings were that "32% of Russians want an immediate and unconditional ceasefire [while]

24% of the respondents prioritise the achievement of military objectives and capitulation of Ukraine and are against an unconditional ceasefire”.

The rest, while regarding themselves as supporters of the war, were undecided.

In addition, 55% of those who support the war “don’t know what is really going on” and the classification includes “very different people with different motivations”.

The most worrying indicator for Putin is that the war enjoys least support among those who do know something about it — the younger generation comfortable with digital media.

[According to the semi-official Public Opinion Foundation](#), only 47% of 18-to-30-year-olds support the decision to invade Ukraine, with 31% against and 22% “finding the question difficult to answer”.

Able to access alternative sources via Telegram — the country’s most downloaded app — younger Russians are also the backbone of an anti-war movement that grows steadily despite being forced into increasingly underground forms of organisation.

It is also the generation most resistant to Putin’s appeal to the still-potent mix of great Russian chauvinism and the memory of the enormous sacrifices that won the Soviet Union the Great Patriotic War against Nazi Germany.

In response, the Russian state has had to invent the offence of “telephonic terrorism”. This is applied against those disseminating whatever is judged to be “fake news” and forces anti-war networks into a [permanent cat-and-mouse game with the media police](#).

Feminist Anti-war Resistance

To date, the most active anti-war force has been Russia’s feminist movement, specifically [Feminist Anti-War Resistance](#) (FAS in its Russian initials), whose main organising tool is a [Telegram channel](#) that has more than 31,000 subscribers.

FAS, which leaped into action against the “militaristic patriarchal nightmare” on the second day of the war, claims 45 active groups across the Russian Federation, “from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok”.

Its campaigns of anonymous and decentralised “daily resistance” seek to have anti-war messages occupy as much public space as possible while minimising risk to its activists.

According to spokesperson Darya Serenko, FAS generates one million “micro-actions” every day.

The most basic are “No War” written on banknotes, anti-war stickers on public toilets and park benches, copies of or quotes from anti-war classics like *All Quiet on the Western Front* left in public places, and price tags in the big chain stores covered with anti-war labels.

Individual FAS activists have adopted other “micro-actions”: wearing discreet anti-war jewellery; publicly reading newspapers with fake front pages denouncing the war; rewording Russian Orthodox prayers along pacifist lines; leaving children’s clothing in playgrounds with messages about child deaths in Ukraine; and setting up pro-peace birdseed houses in public parks.

Growing risk

Even these “low intensity” activities have proven dangerous. Artist Alexandra Skolichenko [presently faces up to ten years jail](#) for “spreading fake news” by replacing price tags in a St

Petersburg supermarket with information about the bombing of the theatre in Mariupol and the number of civilians killed in the besieged city.

The next level of risk exposure comes in the campaign to set up anti-war memorials in public spaces — cemeteries, parks and alongside monuments (especially those commemorating the Great Patriotic War).

Despite the danger, FAS claims that in implementing its #Mariupol5000 campaign its activists had managed by April 16 to set up 850 memorials across Russia to mark Ukrainian civilian deaths in the city.

More dangerous still is the single protest, as in the Women in Black demonstrations held every Friday (often outside military establishments where arrest is certain) or in recent street “die-ins” recalling the Russian army’s Bucha massacre.

Serenko says that because of the network’s actions at least 100 activists have already suffered government harassment, including violence in Brateevo (Moscow) police station.

Filling the information vacuum

The other important activity for FAS is filling the information vacuum created by government censorship: especially regarding army losses and desertions, the degree of destruction of Ukrainian towns, acts of resistance, sabotage and mutiny on the Russian side, and the galloping rise in poverty brought on by the economic crisis.

The network’s Telegram channel carries this information under thematic headings like “voices of Ukraine” and “voices of Russians”, where correspondents provide eyewitness reports of the war’s catastrophic human impact.

FAS also helps other networks providing legal and psychological attention to the war’s victims: 20-year-olds wanting to do civilian rather than military service; Ukrainians driven into exile in Russia; parents opposing their school-age children having to write “letters from home” to soldiers in Ukraine; and workers sacked for expressing anti-war opinions.

FAS activists suffering from stress and burn-out also receive attention.

The network calls on its followers to participate in anti-war actions initiated by other platforms and networks. An incomplete list includes the initiatives of Students Against War (with its Books Not Bombs campaign), Anti-war Sick Leave (aiming at coordinating “sick-leave” strikes against the war) and the Movement of Conscientious Objectors (promoting a “How Not to Join the Army” campaign).

The FAS channel lists 13 specifically anti-war platforms, including Queer for Peace! (a grassroots movement covering Belarus and Ukraine), Appeal to Conscience (a coalition of lawyers and human rights experts) and the Socialists Against War Coalition.

An inevitable spin-off of such effort is a growing anti-war culture and discussion, one that is already rediscovering past anti-war mobilisations, from the suffragettes to the movement against the Vietnam War.

Points of reference for FAS include Bolshevik feminist Alexandra Kollontai and German philosopher Hannah Arendt. The group has reproduced Kollontai’s 1915 pamphlet [Who Needs War?](#) and Arendt’s 1964 essay [“Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship”](#).

Conclusion

This surge of anti-war activity still falls far short of that needed to stop Putin, as contributors to the FAS Telegram channel themselves acknowledge.

Promoters of a fund to support anti-war strikes in Russia [attribute](#) this shortfall to the weak state of organised labour: “Even though many workers were ready to do it, the devastating economic crisis has left them living barely from hand to mouth.”

In seeming contrast, organised labour is not asleep in neighbouring Belarus. In early March, [the Executive Committee of the Congress of Democratic Trade Unions of Belarus \(BKDP\) stated](#): “We wish to assure you, dear Ukrainians, that the vast majority of Belarusians, including workers, condemn the reckless actions of the present Belarusian regime in tolerating the Russian aggression against Ukraine.”

This statement was followed by a rash of sabotage of railway operations, leading to a purge of “unreliable” railway workers in late March. On April 19, [the BKDP leadership itself was arrested](#).

Will this Belarusian example be contained, or will it spread to the Russian Federation?

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