



Parsing Russian Support for Putin's War

February 20, 2023 **Ilan I. Berman** *The Hill*

Related Categories: Intelligence and Counterintelligence; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Warfare; Russia; Ukraine

Just how solid is the domestic backing for Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine? For months, Western observers have pondered the question, amid signs that — despite an expanding array of onerous sanctions and restrictions imposed by the U.S. and Europe — internal backing for the “special military operation” initiated by Russian President Vladimir Putin last February remains high.

Estimates of exactly how high, however, have been frustrated by the notoriously unreliable nature of Russian polling. That industry was already enormously problematic prior to the war because of the political pressure exerted by Russia's accelerating authoritarian drift in recent years, which dramatically skewed the nature of Russian responses — and consequently the West's understanding of what was really happening inside Russia. Since the start of the current conflict, amid a raft of repressive measures being implemented by the Kremlin to squelch internal dissent, Russia's pollsters have reverted to being reflections of elite, and officially approved, opinion.

Even so, it is possible to discern some significant trendlines taking shape within Russian society. Writing recently for *Mozhem Obyasnit*, a Russian opposition media portal, former Putin speechwriter Abbas Gallyamov attempted to parse public opinion data for the past year from the Levada Center and ZIRCON, two of the country's least problematic surveyors. Gallyamov, who has been designated a “foreign agent” by the Kremlin, came up with some notable — and hopeful — conclusions.

According to him, the 43 percent of Russians who oppose the war can be broken down into the “opposition core” (roughly 8 percent), which has been staunchly against the conflict throughout, the “opposition periphery” (some 25 percent), encompassing those who are dissatisfied with the regime but less likely to mobilize against it, and the “semi-opposition” (approximately 10 percent), who no longer accept Kremlin propaganda but can still, in theory, be convinced to support the Russian government under certain conditions.

The 40 percent of Russians who support the war, meanwhile, include a staunch ideological core (10 percent), and an additional 20 percent belonging to the “power periphery,” whose members tend to agree with Kremlin rhetoric but increasingly reject its heavy-handed methods — and among whom the “demand for change” is “maturing.” Ten percent more are “half-loyalists,” who evince general dissatisfaction with the state of affairs within the country and might be persuaded to join the opposition depending on domestic events.

The final ideological group of note, Gallyamov writes, is made up of those who are “hardly interested in politics,” a cohort that makes up roughly a fifth of the country's electorate.

Where does all this leave Russia? Here, Gallyamov offers some useful thoughts. At the beginning of the conflict a year ago, he notes, an “unstable balance” existed in the country — one in which “neither supporters nor opponents of the regime had a clear advantage.” Since then, however, the course of the war and the systematic repression of dissent by Russian authorities have skewed the internal balance of power in favor of the Kremlin.

Yet this situation is inherently temporary in nature. As Gallyamov notes, there has been no “unambiguous victory” by Russian authorities in the battle for public opinion, even within Russia. Indeed, Kremlin messaging about things like the need to “de-militarize” and “de-Nazify” Ukraine don't seem to be having much impact inside Russia itself (let alone in the West). Moreover, he points out, the Russian government's ongoing battlefield stumbles and inability to wrap up what was supposed to be a short and decisive military offensive “contributes to the gradual blurring of the regime's support base.”

In other words, as has long been the case, nothing succeeds quite like success. And the surest way for the West to bring about the change in Russia that it so desperately desires — in the form of a sustained, powerful internal opposition to Vladimir Putin and his regime — is to ensure that Ukraine keeps winning.