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Not all is lost in Russia

Those shaking their heads at the current passivity of Russians' are advised to be patient and read their history books — a change is still possible

A cursory look at opinion polls in Russia on the Ukraine war seems rather sobering. A 70 per cent approval rate is often cited. But the Kremlin's increasingly totalitarian autocracy is bringing side effects with it. A closer look at Russian society reveals three distinct groups and shows that a change in mood is possible.

First is the anti-war group. According to a survey by the Kremlin polling institute VTsIOM at the end of June 2022, 30 per cent of Russians are in favour of an immediate end of the Ukraine war. The result of this survey is more telling than that of many others in Russia. That's because it was not intended for publication: it was supposed to be used by Putin's policy adjustment team, but was leaked. Despite all the problems of public opinion research in Russia, such as the fear of giving answers that are not desired by those 'above', in this case, at any rate, the focus was on obtaining a realistic picture.

The broadest basis of critical support among the population is in metropolitan areas and among younger people. Moving among urban young adults, one wonders where the vast majority of pro-war figures are supposed to be. Hardly any member of this demographic still watches conformist television programming. Emigration is an issue in this milieu, but is out of the question for the vast majority of those opposed to the war.

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The Saint Petersburg online newspaper *Bumaga* spoke with a number of opponents of the war about their future. No one wanted to emigrate, although they all expected a continuing repressive future in Russia. However, no one drew the logical conclusion that having participated in a protest that had little effect would result in being imprisoned indefinitely or having to flee the country. The only people who

immediately triggered street protests.

have fled are symbolic figures who were threatened with long-term arrest or who have a profession that can be carried on abroad. The rest have retreated into private life and are waiting for a change that they willingly want to be a part of when it becomes apparent.

To an extent Russian opponents of the war have been criticised by the Ukrainian side for the fact that their public actions have now largely come to a standstill. However, this is a direct result of massive state repression – over 16,000 arrests, for example. An autocracy's being able to halt protests with such measures is not an exclusively Russian phenomenon. In neighbouring Belarus, beleaguered dictator Lukashenko also managed to bring mass demonstrations to a standstill with sheer violence. The fact that there is still potential for action in Russia was demonstrated recently by the arrest of the former mayor of Yekaterinburg, Yevgeny Roizman, which immediately triggered street protests.

The Kremlin is aware that this segment of society is a potential threat to its rule. Restrictive mechanisms for the purpose of maintaining power were put in place to 'tame' this group of Russians, such as branding them as 'foreign agents'. This label can now be arbitrarily pinned on any private person in order to exclude them from political discourse in Russia. This measure corresponds to newly created laws according to which any statement critical of the war is a criminal offence. However, the system is not infiltrating the milieu of opposition-minded people or reducing its numbers. Its members have their own news sources and exchange forums, and withdraw into echo chambers, as political scientist Mikhail Turchenko describes it. He sees a growing polarisation and alienation between them and the state.

The 'Propaganda cheerleaders'

The second group are the supporters of the war. We should not gloss over the fact that there are many staunch supporters of the war in Russian society. These are people who trust Putin as president and who accept the autocratic ideology of the 'Russian world' as a community of Slavs under Russia's leadership that is worth aspiring to. They see such leadership as a Romantic national myth that could be realised with force and shrewd politics, as Moscow professor Alexei Levinson puts it.

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Some of these people are involved in government-related organisations that even like to see children ideologically brought into line in

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uniform. They are characterised by a traditional anti-Americanism and are proud that their country is once again defying the powerful West. They willingly swallow the torrent of information from the propaganda channels that dominate the domestic Russian information landscape. The advocates of war reinforce and escalate each other as they repel unorthodox and dissenting opinions. Andrei Kolesnikov, Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment, as a consequence of this escalation, sees an expansion of the discourse so as to include previously taboo topics. This is how such antics come about – some of which even make it into German-speaking social media – like pseudo-intellectuals fantasising about crusades making it all the way to Berlin.

'Propaganda cheerleaders' is what Kolesnikov disparagingly calls those who indulge in such embarrassing outbursts. According to one study, their performances are intended to emotionally carry Russians along and create a sentimental connection to the past or to Putin. Putin then becomes indispensable as enemies lurk everywhere who want to destroy their own country. Polish political scientist Agnieszka Legucka calls this ideology 'Frankenstein imperialism' because it resurrects historically outdated territorial claims from epochs that have been long since buried, such as the Tsarist and Soviet eras.

However, pro-war advocates are not monsters. The oppositionist Russian filmmaker Andrei Loshak describes their contradiction very well in his documentary *Разрыв связи* ('Broken Ties'), which is well worth watching. All of them are completely normal people, 'loving parents, husbands', as Loschak describes in an interview. But when they talk about Ukraine, they lose their humanity. It seems like something isn't right with them anymore, as if something has taken possession of them.

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The war supporters rally behind the letter 'Z' and patriotic merchandising. However, they do not make up anywhere near 70 per cent of the Russian population. If you drive through Russia these days, weeks can go by without you encountering patriotic symbolism. This is because there is a third large group of people in the Russian population who are currently reconciled to the war policy, but who are

neither ideologically close to the government nor generally trusting of it.

An apolitical majority on a tightrope

The third group are the uninvolved. In general, neither support nor opposition to the war is strongly rooted in the Russian population. Many Russians think fatalistically and see no possibility of exerting political influence, says Moscow sociologist Grigory Yudin. They deny responsibility for the war, which 'those 'up there' decided on', as Moscow-based political scientist Jens Siegert puts it. Other experts also perceive this third group in Russia as existing alongside the war supporters and the opponents. Sociologist Boris Kagarlitsky, for example, explains that many Russians are neither for nor against the war but also do not react to it at all. Most Russians are completely removed from politics.

These people see themselves as uninvolved in the war, which is why they are referred to in this way. This is not as far-fetched as it might seem at first glance. For most Russians, Ukraine is one thing above all: far away – often thousands of kilometres away. At best, they only know someone who knows someone who is fighting there. In relation to the large population, only a comparatively few Russian soldiers are deployed there.

For two decades, the Russians have been living in a state which many analysts speak of as amounting to a deal between the population and the rulers. The population lets the rulers govern and does not oppose them – in return, the rulers guarantee stability and a much higher level of prosperity than in the chaotic 1990s. Consequently, up until the war, a large uninterested section of the population had tolerated the Putin system without inner conviction. They were aware of the distance of the Kremlin's politicians from the people, and of the ongoing corruption of the bureaucracy – but this seemed to be a better alternative than the threat to their material existence and the Wild West conditions of the Yeltsin era experienced by the older generation.

The message to the uninvolved is that they can live well if they stay out of politics and stick to the rules.

This segment of the population has been massively disturbed by the war, but so far has not opposed it. This is why surveys show that they too are tending to support the war. The sociologist Lew Gudkov of the Levada Center, which is pro-opposition, speaks of an inner emotional unease as a result of the aggression against a neighbouring country without there having been an external cause.

The Russian government's propaganda machine acted skilfully; in response to this feeling, across all media channels in parallel it delivered its justifications for the invasion and the reassuring claim that it was only a limited special operation. It is intended to make it easier for barely enthusiastic supporters to say 'yes' – and thus everything will remain as it is. The message to the uninvolved is that they can live well if they stay out of politics and stick to the rules. Despite existing fears, an economic collapse has failed to materialise for the time being and everything in Russia seems to be going on as before.

However, the stability of the relationship between this large class of apolitical Russians and their leadership is currently being shaken. For example, in the wake of increasing totalitarianism, active involvement in the 'Russian world' is now expected, something that many depoliticised Russians do not particularly want. 'Keeping out' is no longer considered sufficient by the powers that be. The government itself is shaking up the status quo.

Whether the system remains stable depends on how the living conditions of the population develop further. If, in the course of the economic war against the West, the standard of living of the general population declines, the brute-force dragging along of the uninvolved will quickly turn into an equally brute-force blockade, even to the point of passive resistance. In such case, a larger part of the population can also become more receptive to views different from government propaganda as soon as the regime's propaganda contradicts the population's own living situation in the face of poverty and unemployment.

Involving the uninvolved

What conclusions can Europe draw from the mood in Russian society if the goal is a quick end to the Ukraine war but without a Kremlin triumph? For one thing, the anti-war group must not be left alone; by showing that there will be no demonisation of all Russian citizens. The uninvolved have to be shown that the times of 'stay apolitical and you're fine' are over. As for the opinion of active and ideological pro-war advocates, it doesn't matter how the EU behaves as a demonised enemy –their image of the enemy is already in place.

This seems quite general, but offers a guideline for specific issues in the current situation. For example, the discussed restrictions on travel by Russian citizens to the EU affects opponents of the war more strongly because of their greater interest in and connection to Europe. Those who are uninvolved have fewer contacts in Europe, while supporters of the war hardly have any (anymore) – for ideological reasons alone. A visa ban

would hit the wrong people the hardest. In addition, barring all Russians from the EU reinforces the isolation of Russian society and the sovereignty of Kremlin propaganda there. On the other hand, visitors from the West bring personal opinions and impressions that deviate from the radical propaganda.

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This does not mean, however, that the 'least' course of action towards Russia is always the best for ending the war. On the contrary, effective economic sanctions in key areas can have precisely the effect of shaking the very foundations of the lives of the uninvolved to the point of their rethinking their own government. Boris Kagarlitsky, for example, believes that if the consequences of the war affect family life, the job market and one's own private life, tangible protests could arise. For each topic, it is necessary to weigh up which measures will have which effects in Russia.

In the end, all those who are shaking their heads at the Russians' current passivity are advised to be patient and read their history books. Putin sees himself in the tradition of the tsars. However, the last Russian tsar left office – and life – as a result of an internal coup, since he had made faded reactionary traditions into the foundation of his rule. This need not have happened for the last time in Russian history. Putin himself is more afraid of this outcome than of the West.



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