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Public Opinion and Putin's War

By Gary Langer

Whatever his prospects for winning the war in Ukraine, Vladimir Putin is at risk of losing another contest – the war for public opinion in Russia.

Like the shooting war to its west, the cards in this contest are stacked, with Putin shutting down independent media and harshly stifling debate among his country's citizens. It's all the more surprising, then, that his war's initial support among the Russian public is notably weak.

A national [survey](#) finds that 58 percent of Russians support Putin's incursion into Ukraine. That's a poor showing; publics typically rally around their leaders in the initial stages of war, even wars of choice. George Bush had 76 percent approval at the start of the Persian Gulf war in 1991; George W. Bush, 90 percent for attacking Afghanistan in 2001 and 72 percent for invading Iraq in 2002. Putin himself had 75 percent support for moving into Chechnya in 1999 and 91 percent for his annexation of Crimea in 2014. Each far surpasses his 58 percent today.

The future's unknowable; a Russian victory with less bloodshed and destruction than we've seen in the past week could preserve and even enhance the popularity of Putin's war among Russians. But when wars grind on, support typically grinds down. By 1971, six in 10 Americans called the war in Vietnam a mistake; in 2007, 64 said the same about the war in Iraq. In 2012, 66 percent said the war in Afghanistan was not worth fighting. In each case, political fallout accompanied the public's discontent.

The new Russian poll was produced by telephone Feb. 28-March 1 among a random national sample of 1,640 adults by a group of independent survey research organizations in that country. It asked the following: "Do you support or do you not support the Russian military operation on the Ukrainian territory?"

Forty-six percent definitely supported the action, 13 percent somewhat; net support rounded to 58 percent. Of the rest, 6 percent took a midpoint response – in some ways support, in some ways don't. Twenty-three percent were opposed and 13 percent had no opinion or declined to answer. (Another poll in Russia, by the government-owned polling firm VCIOM, finds higher support, 71 percent. But the full questionnaire wasn't released, making its result hard to assess, and VCIOM's ownership raises questions about its independence.)

Among the independent survey's most striking results is a division by age: Among young adults, age 18 to 24, a mere 29 percent express support for the war, with more, 39 percent, opposed. In

the next age group, 25-30, still well fewer than half support the war, 37 percent. Support grows linearly with age, peaking at 75 percent of those 66 and older.

Support is below half, 48 percent, in cities with more than 1 million population. And perhaps most ominously for Putin, it varies sharply by financial condition. Among those who say their personal finances have improved or stayed the same in the past year, 63 percent express support for the war. Among those whose finances have deteriorated, support drops to 47 percent.

This relationship between financial well-being and support for Putin's war bears close watching as sanctions shake the Russian economy. Not only as casualties rise, but also as the war's economic fallout erodes ordinary Russians' standard of living, Putin's grip may be in particular peril.

One might argue that public opinion matters little to Russia's ruler, given the predilection of the administrative state to crush dissent. Yet Putin clearly cares about public attitudes, or he wouldn't struggle so mightily to control them. A Washington axiom may yet make itself known in Moscow: In politics, hell hath no fury like an unpopular war.

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