

Russians' perspective on the war in Ukraine: prospects of change

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Overview

A year and a half into the war ...

- Do they still do opinion polls in Russia?
- Does polling in wartime produce reliable results?
- What do the polls tell us about Russians' perspectives on the war?

Opinion polls in Russia

- ❑ Social polling in Russia is huge (government-controlled organizations poll over 3 mil. respondents / year):
 - It's not unusual for a person to be called up by a pollster
 - Lots of polling data in mass media

- ❑ War-related polls shrunk compared to first months of the war, but there's still data:
 - Monthly polls of Levada Center (F2F, probability-based)
 - Government-controlled pollsters either don't publish war-related polls (FOM) or publish what could be used by the official propaganda (VCIOM). They still publish other useful social indicators.
 - Others: occasional ad hocs; non-probability surveys ("Russian Field").

Is polling in wartime reliable? – Yes, here's why:

- No increase in nonresponse compared with pre-war surveys (by Russian pollsters and by us);
- No changes in survey demographics (when the fieldwork protocols are strictly observed);
- Changes in public moods are comprehensive: support for the war increases not only support for the government, but also affects the moods in general (perceptions of inflation, optimism etc).
- Attitudes toward the war highly vary by age, gender and socio-economic status.

Additionally...

- There is a long history of polling public attitudes during wartime across many conflicts over many decades.
- There's no evidence of differential non-response or of respondents' insincerity.
- Other evidence:
 - ICT tests by Levada showed no change in support of the war
 - Longitudinal studies By Levada showed no change in disapproval of the government (Spring '22).
 - Trust in polls not changed (Levada – May'22; VCIOM – Nov'22), people consider polls as important.

<https://www.levada.ru/2022/05/24/uchastie-v-oprosah-i-doverie-dannym/>

<https://www.levada.ru/2022/06/14/gotovnost-uchastvovat-v-oprosah-rezultaty-eksperimenta/>

<https://www.levada.ru/2022/11/01/doverie-oprosam-o-spetsoperatsii/>

<https://www.levada.ru/2023/02/10/vozmozhny-li-oprosy-v-segodnyashnej-rossii/>

<https://www.levada.ru/2022/11/15/o-nedostizhimosti-i-prervannyh-intervyu/>

<https://www.levada.ru/2023/06/23/kak-poschitat-vnutrennie-golosa/>

However: Russia-specific limitations

- 10 years in prison for “spreading misinformation” or “discrediting the Russian army.” People arrested for banners saying “*** *****” – police and courts read asterisks as “No war!”
- Polls have to use official language - “Special Military Operation,” not “War.”
- Polls can’t offer respondents anything that could be interpreted as “misinformation about the war.”
- 54% agree with the statement “most Russians are afraid to voice their opinions in polls.” (No pre-war data are available for comparison.)

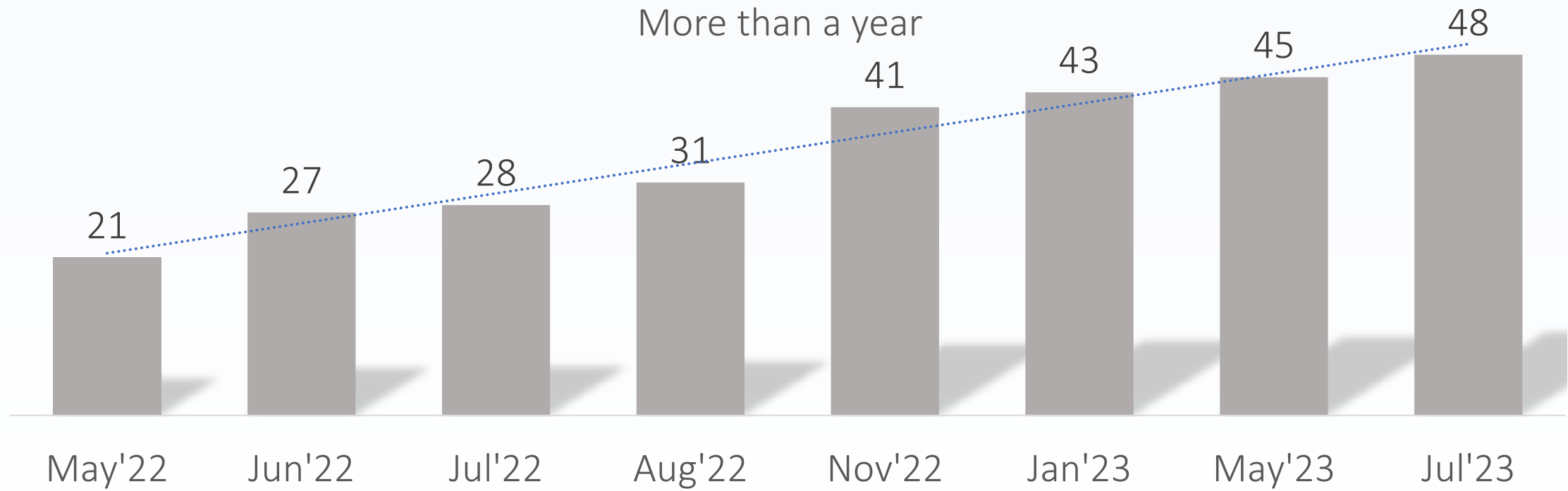
18 months of war – what's changed:

- Russians start thinking that “this will not end any time soon”
- Propaganda successfully normalized the war, it became routine
- Rally around the flag – still there
- First signs of wearing out
- No acceptable way out in sight

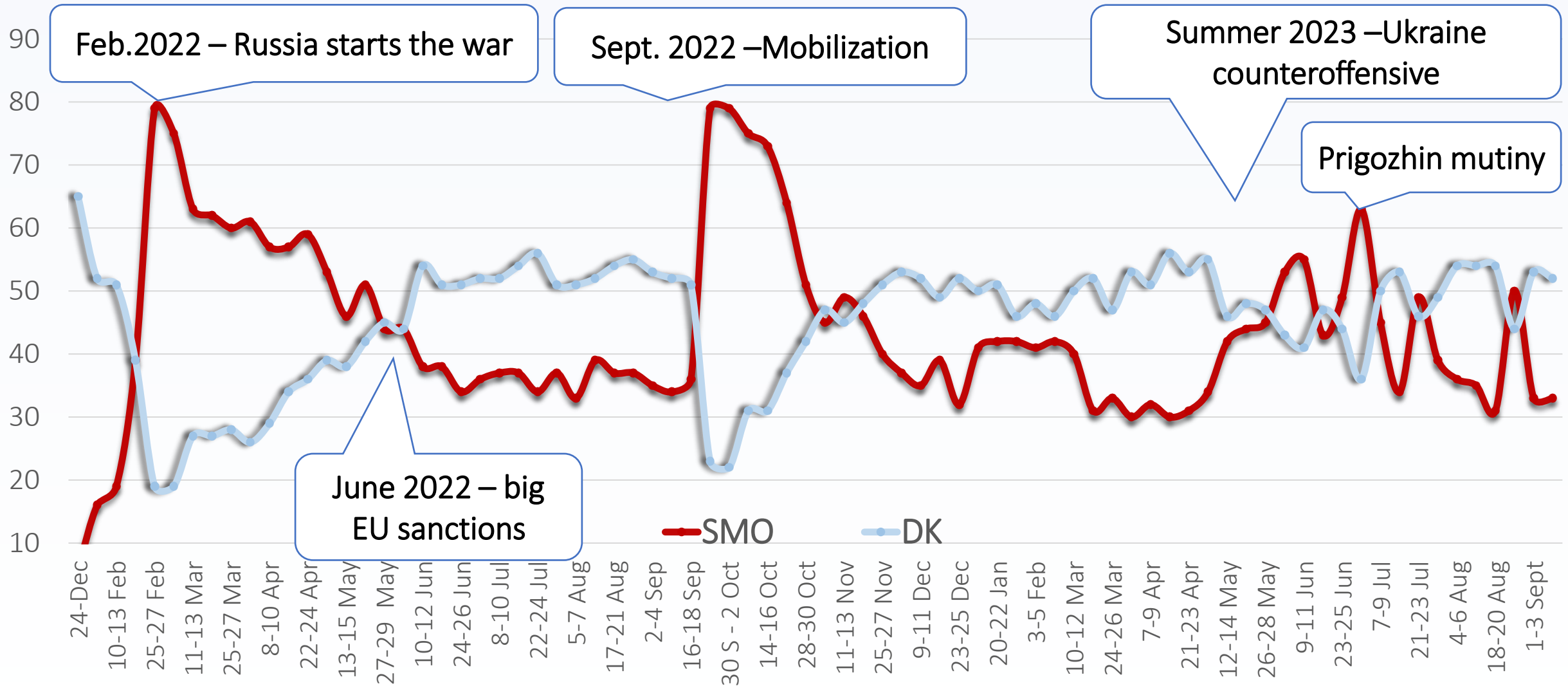
Expectations for the war's duration

Russians are getting used to the thought that the war will not end soon

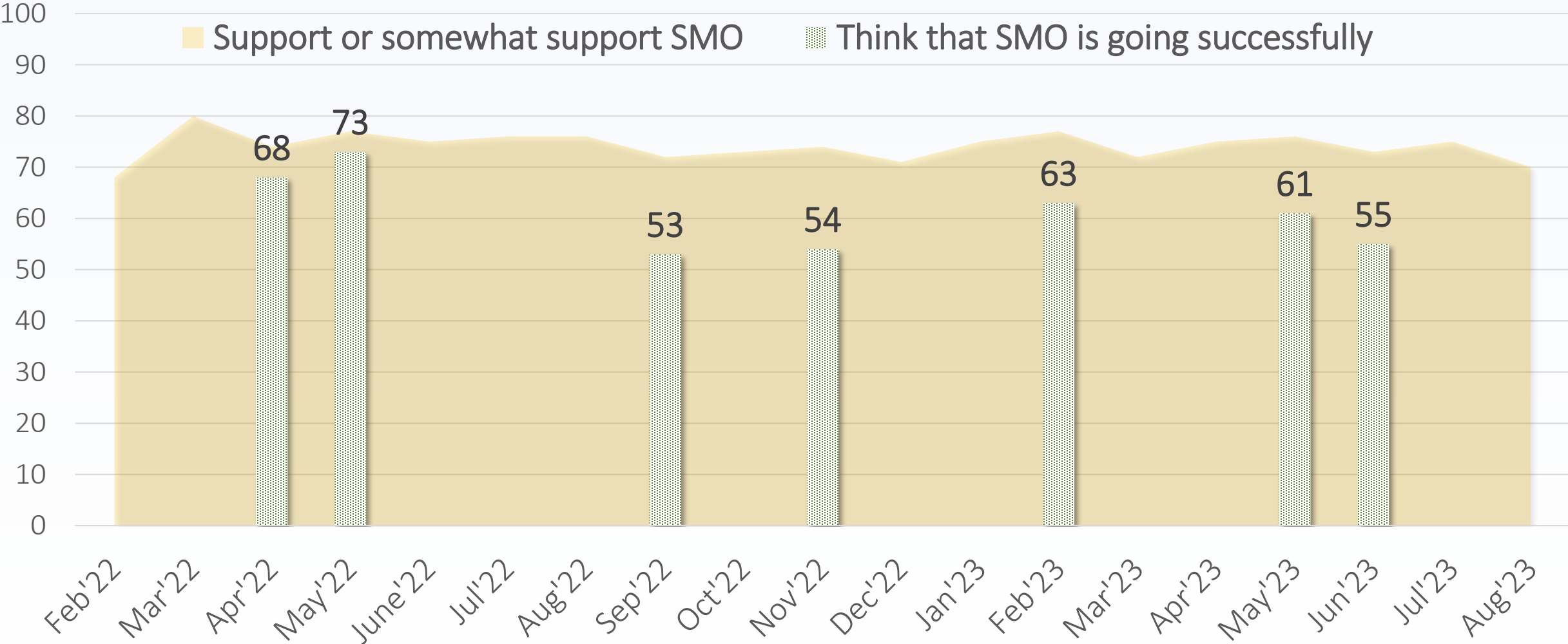
How long will the war continue?



What events / news reported by mass media attracted your attention last week?



Support for SMO: still a wide majority

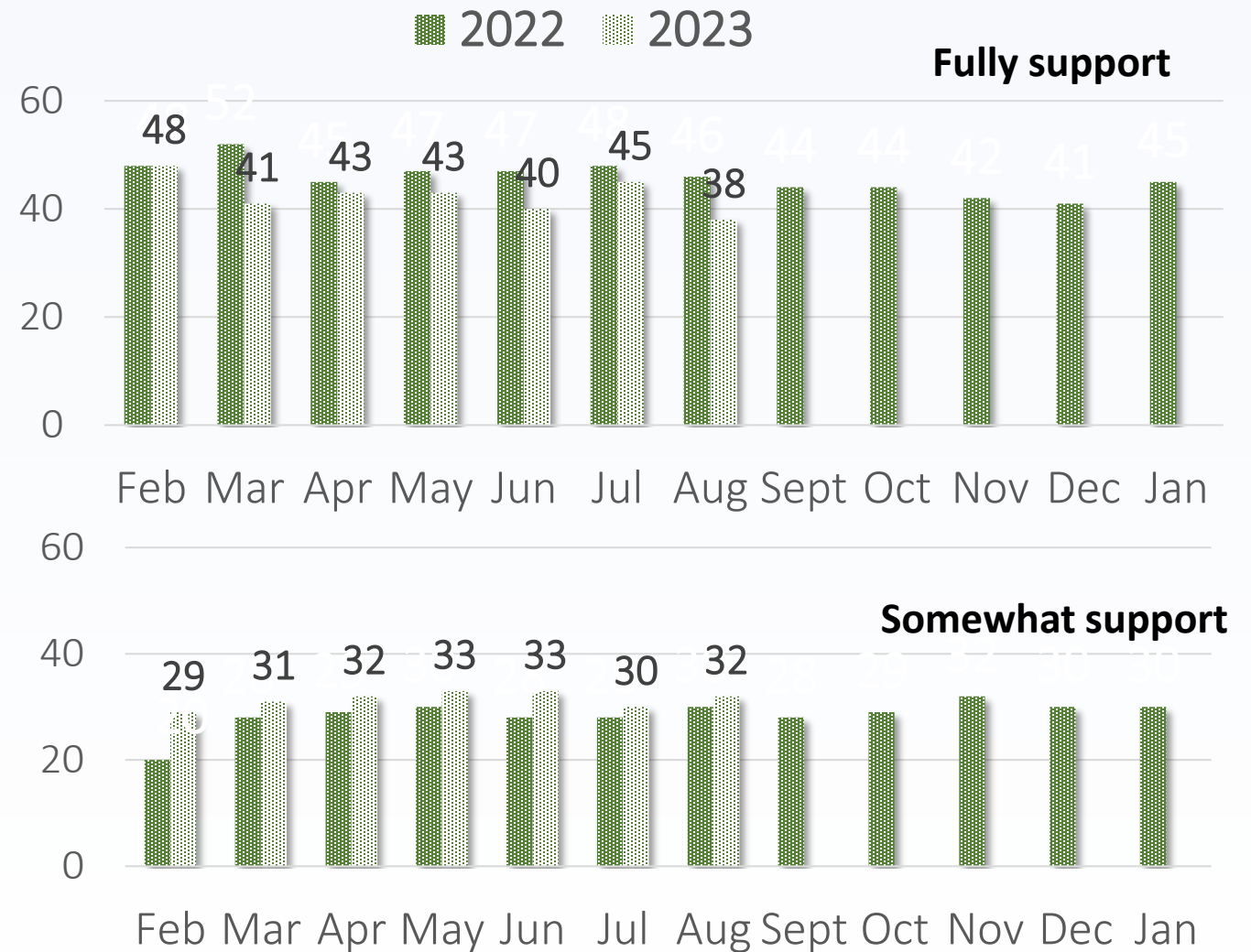


Levada, F2F, n=1,600, <https://www.levada.ru/2022/04/28/konflikt-s-ukrainoj-i-otvetstvennost-za-gibel-mirnyh-zhitelej/>

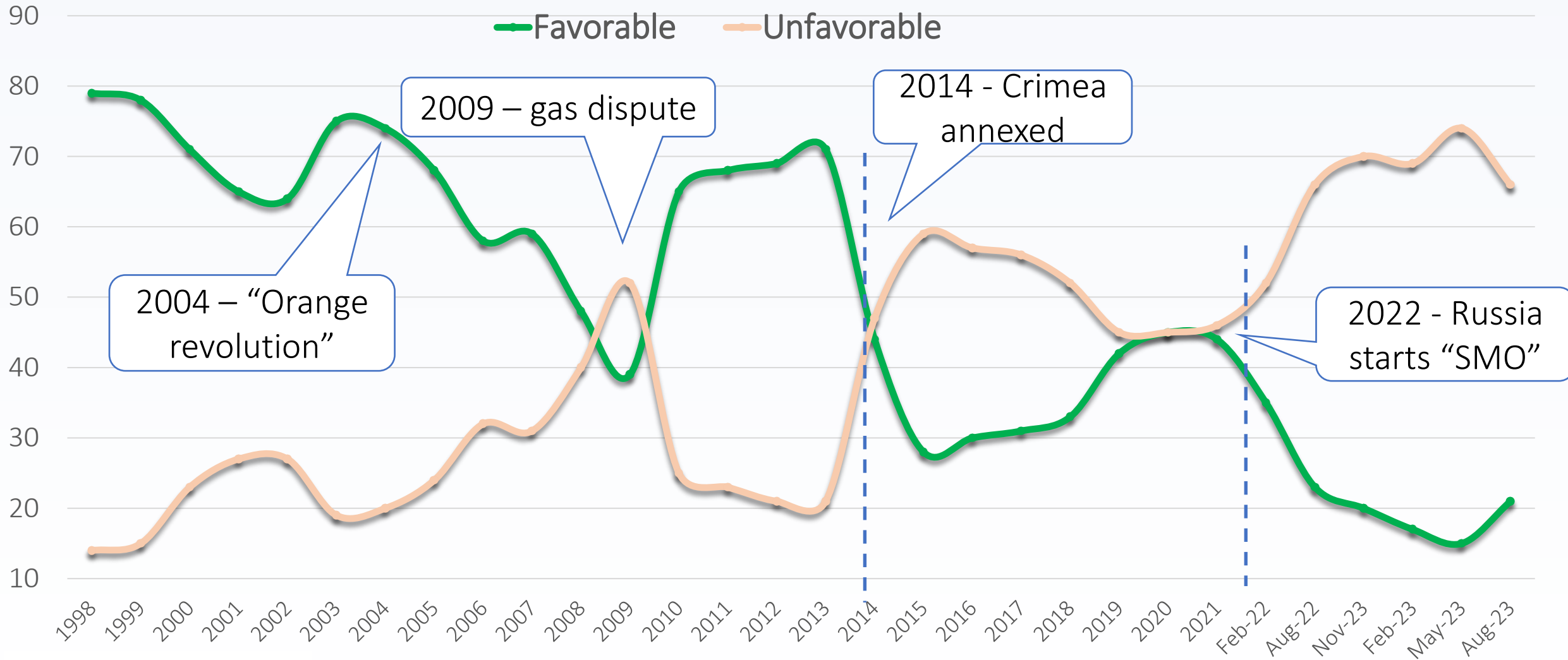
Support for SMO

Total support ~75%, no change, minimal fluctuation

Slight change in moods – “fully support” goes down, replaced by growing “somewhat support”



Attitudes toward Ukraine

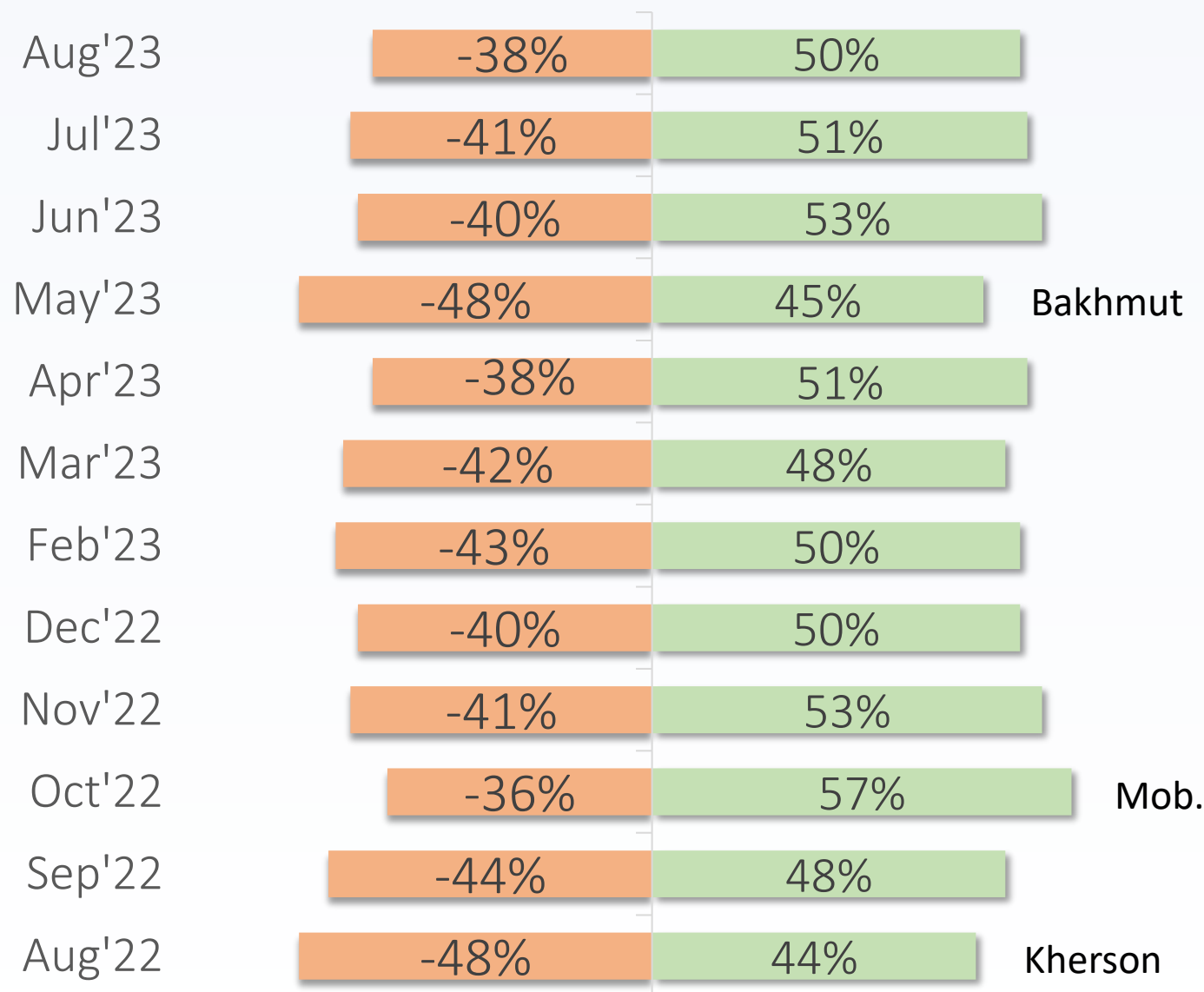


Signs of change?

Divided society

- While the majority is for negotiations, the share of war supporters is consistently high.
- War support peaks when military successes are demonstrated (Aug '22 – Kherson, May '23 – Bakhmut)
- Support for peace peaks when perceived personal threat goes up (Oct '22 – after mobilization announced)

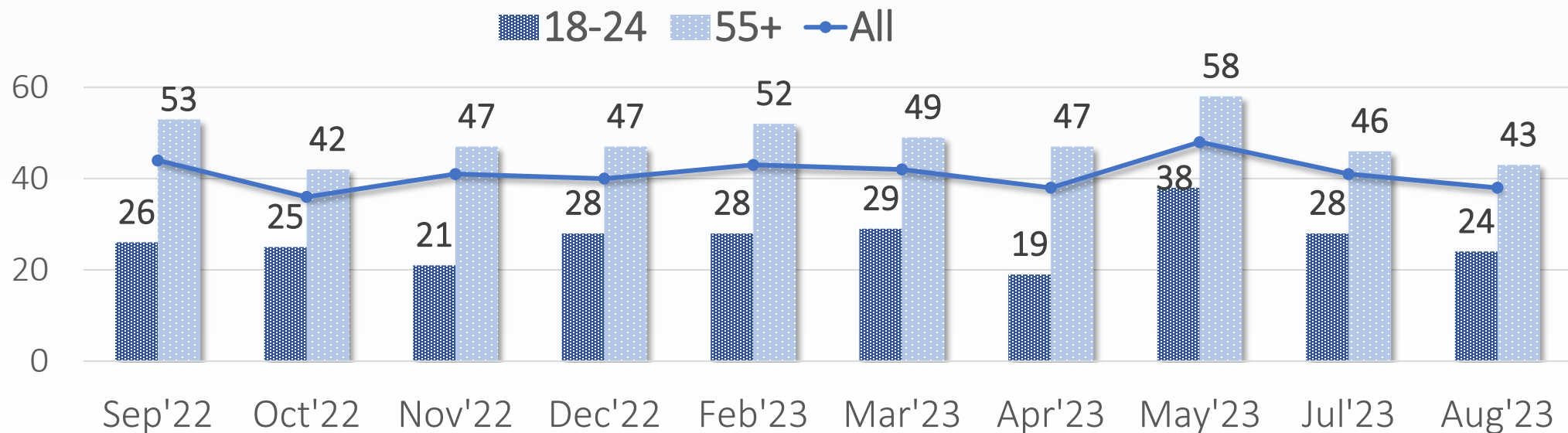
Russia should
 ■ Continue SMO ■ Start peace negotiations



Age divisions in support for the war

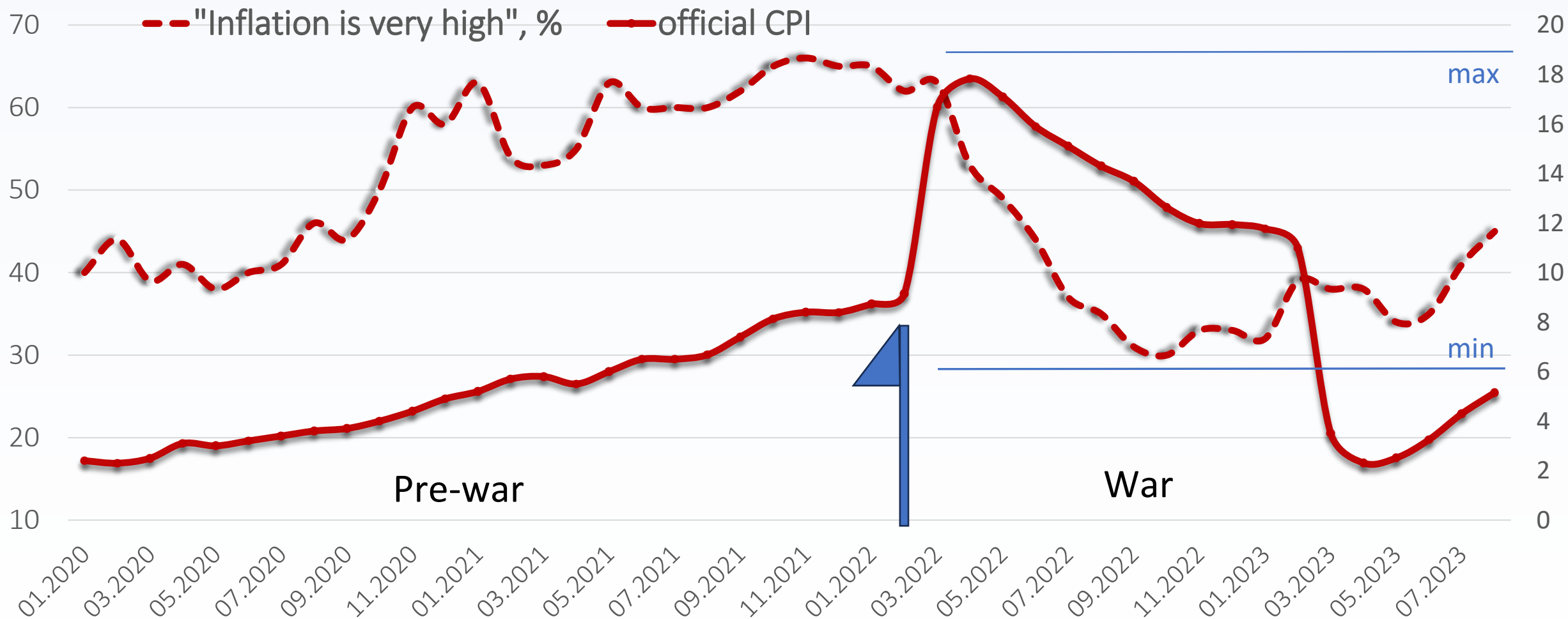
Support for the war grows with age; consistent gap between the youngest and the oldest

The peak of support among both groups – May'23, when “victory at Bakhmut” was advertised



The war and consumer prices

How's been inflation in the last month or two: very high, moderate or low?



Where's a way out?

The main argument for continuing the war (32%) is “there's no way out”.

60% - think that the Russian Army is successful (July; range 53-73%)

73% - Russia should make no concessions to Ukraine

Acceptable peace conditions: ceasefire, captive exchange

“Absolutely unacceptable” peace conditions: return of Zaporizhia and Kherson (68%), return of Luhansk and Donetsk (76%), Ukraine joining NATO (76%) (Aug'23 Levada)

71% expect that the war end with Russia victory (Jan'23, Levada)

Takeaways

Factors for continued support of the war:

- Identity– it’s “us” against “them”. The Kremlin successfully explained that “them” is NATO, not Ukraine. Sanctions help this argument.
- The war is sold to the public as prompted from outside, not a choice.
- Controlled media-environment: no knowledge about the victims on both sides. Cultivated belief that “All lie”.
- The public is prepared for the long war. This sets a higher tolerance for economic hardship and can be used as a convenient explanation.
- Imperial post-Soviet mindset: “image of great power”.

Takeaways

Possibilities for eroding support:

- Increased hardship, news about casualties, dramatic events. Problem – the other side can be blamed for a long time.
- A vision of better alternatives. Problem – it's the Kremlin that controls the media.
- The support for the government is passive. There are big divisions among groups. New elites can change the picture.

Thank you!

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