GCKN
GLOBAL CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE NETWORK

GCKN RUNNING ESTIMATE

May 2022 — Update 3

In Previous Running Estimates:

- *Russian domestic support for the Kremlin's "special military operation" in Ukraine increased over the February-March timeframe.* Early polling indicated that the majority of Russians supported Russian President Putin's actions in Ukraine at an average rate of 65%. By late March, this figure had risen to 73% in one poll, and exceeded 80% in another.
- *Age continues to be significant predictor of support*. Support for Putin and the conflict increases with age. Russians above the age of 70 show the highest level of support—at times as high as 90% in the March polls—and those under the age of 26 show the least support for the war.[1]
- *Russian diaspora—and fleeing Russians—in the "Near-Abroad" represent a broader range of perspectives regarding Putin and the Ukraine conflict.* Some diaspora communities follow the same age-related patterns of support as in Russia. In other areas, the influx of Russians has created ripple effects that portend increasing tensions.

This Running Estimate:

- *Russian public opinion has not shifted since last month*. Support for the extended war likely reflects Russian citizens anchoring "more firmly" to their initial perceptions, reinforced by the Kremlin's increasingly controlled media and manipulative narrative.
- *Hungary and Slovakia responses to Putin and the Ukraine conflict warrant a closer look among NATO and the EU member states.* Both have resisted the call to impose oil and gas sanctions on Russia, treading carefully as a result of their energy dependency on Russia.

DOMESTIC RUSSIAN PERCEPTIONS

Indications of strong domestic Russian support for Putin and the Ukrainian invasion are unlikely to waver in the near- to mid-term. Since the beginning of his February invasion, Putin has increasingly tightened the Kremlin's control over public opinion polling in order to depict a united country and to boost internal support for the war. In late April, two new polls—one national and one regional—suggest internal Russian support for Putin's actions in Ukraine remains strong.

- On 28 April, the Levada Center released its third poll since the beginning of the Ukraine conflict,[a] showing a slight decrease from 83% to 82% in support of the war.[2] The polling report noted that such support is mostly based on tolerance, including fear of repercussions.[3] Also in late April, Qualitas Public Opinion Institute released its second poll—conducted in Russia's southwest region opposite the Ukrainian city of Mariupol—which indicated 80% of Russians

a The Levada Center survey was conducted April 21-27, 2022 on a representative all-Russian sample of the urban and rural population of 1,616 people aged 18 and over in 137 settlements and 50 constituent entities of the Russian Federation. The study is conducted at the respondent's home by the method of personal interview. The distribution of responses is given as a percentage of the total number of respondents, together with data from previous surveys.

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there support Putin and Russia's actions in Ukraine.[4,b] Support was stronger among older citizens.

- In mid-April, a local Russian journalist conducted an independent investigation indicating that fear, humiliation, and grief—compounded by cognitive dissonance[c]—undergird Russian feelings about the war, particularly as they relate to graphic reports of atrocities.[d,5]
- Russia's evolving narrative for public consumption, intended to explain and rationalize its ongoing military offensive in Ukraine, is a cornerstone of Soviet-era and current Russian "hybrid warfare"[6] that leverages ethno-linguistic cleavages reinforced by a longstanding "us versus them" siege mentality. This narrative largely indoctrinates highly identified Russians against Western positions or interests, sows confusion and distrust, and fabricates justifications for war.[7]

Putin has used his crackdown on war-related polling, reporting, and dissent to shape political and public discussions of Russia's engagement in Ukraine. This reflects the Kremlin's effort to transform a "contrived" popularity of Putin's actions into a growing, "actual" popularity, even if temporary.[8] The Kremlin has effectively shut down non-sanctioned news casting within Russia, paving the way for increasingly positive reporting on the regime and the Ukraine invasion.[e,9] Putin's desire to build and maintain his base—and his power—fuels his need to convince that base of his popularity inside and outside of Russia.

- In April 2020, Putin's approval rating was at its lowest level since taking office, dropping to 59% amid a struggling economy and pandemic concerns. Historically, Russians evaluate a president in three ways: economic performance, domestic order, and international standing;[10] Putin struggled in all three measures.[11]
- Since the beginning of the Ukrainian war Putin's domestic ratings have soared to record highs, possibly matching those that followed his 2014 annexation of Crimea.[12] Justifying his Ukraine invasion as a preemptive action against Western aggression—and to protect Russian speakers in Ukraine—Putin has established an influential framework enabling the regime to generate and instrumentalize more support and control.[13]

b The Qualitas Public Opinion poll was conducted in April 2022 by telephone interview. The study involved 1617 residents of the Voronezh region over 18 years old.

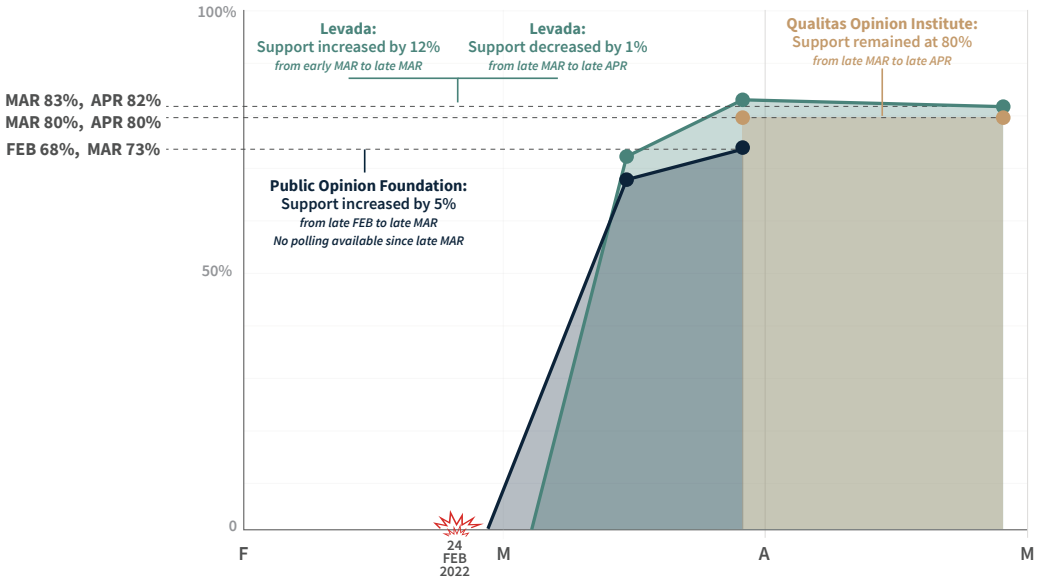
c Cognitive dissonance is a theory in social psychology. It refers to the mental conflict that occurs when a person's behaviors and beliefs do not align.

d Conducted ethnographically, the journalist spoke with fifty residents in the Moscow area and explains the results are not intended to be representative. The goal of the conversations was to get a sense of how people were feeling and to understand how they might be processing this war.

e The positive or negative nature of a message affects how it is received. Research by Lewis, Laster & Kulkari (2013) suggests that leaders understand the effects of sending overly positive messages as they may backfire with its believability and influence. Instead, leaders should consider positive, but realistic, perhaps with some downsides to garner the greatest amount of influence.

Domestic Russian Perceptions of the "Special Military Operation"

Public Opinion Polls in Russia Show Steady and High Support



*It is important to note that Russian opinion polls are immediately instrumentalized by the Kremlin, repeated by the Russian media, and used to claim that the invasion is supported by the Russian public and conducted in its name.

Figure 1. *Domestic Russian Perceptions of the "Special Military Operation" public opinion polls,* GCKN.

POLLING SNAPSHOT

Levada Center Poll (National)[14,f]

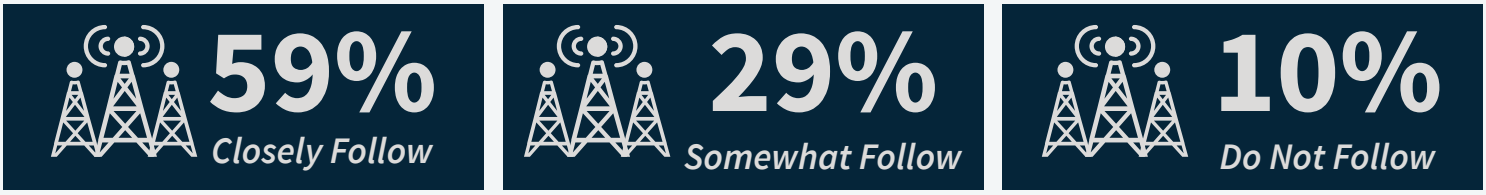
- **Support for the "special military operation"** remains high and relatively unchanged. From March to April, the Levada poll shows support at 82%.
- **Attention to the war** is beginning to fade although concern is high.
  - » 59% of respondents closely follow the situation around Ukraine. Attention has gradually declined since last month.
  - » 82% of respondents are concerned about the events in Ukraine.
    - Differentiation by age groups is also noticeable. Concern increases incrementally with age. For example, Russians age 18-24, 67% are worried and 14% are not worried at all. For Russians age 55 and older, 90% are worried, while 4% are not worried at all.
- **Support for actions of the Russian armed forces** is relatively high, although less now than in March.
- The majority of respondents **blame the destruction and death of civilians in Ukraine on the United States and NATO countries**. More than half of the respondents blame the United States and NATO (58%). 17% of the respondents blame Ukraine and only 7% blame Russia.
- The majority of respondents (68%) believe the **"special military operation" is progressing successfully**, although 17% responded with a different opinion. Consistent with general support, ages 18-24 were the least confident about success. The most positive view was held by the older generation.
- The majority of respondents (73%) also believe that the "special military operation" will **end in a Russian victory,** while another 15% believe that neither side will be able to prevail. Almost no one believes Ukraine will be victorious.

Qualitas Public Opinion Poll (Regional)[15,g]

- The March and April surveys both show **support at 80%.**
- 85% of Voronezh residents trust the head of state (50% "definitely trust" and 35% "rather trust").
- The vast majority of Voronezh residents (90%) expressed confidence in Russia's military victory.
- 86% of the population approve of Russia's decision to recognize the independence of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR).

f The Levada Center is an independent, nongovernmental Russian polling and sociological research organization. It is named after its founder, the first Russian professor of sociology Yuri Levada (1930–2006). Levada has released polling numbers in March and April. These results were released on 28 April 2022.
g Public Opinion Institute (IOM) "Qualitas" is a main research company in Central Black Earth Region of Russia conducting sociological and political studies. IOM has released polling numbers in March and April. These results were released on 29 April 2022.

RUSSIAN INTEREST IN FOLLOWING THE WAR
(Month of April)



By age group: 71% (55 and older) closely follow, 62% (40-54) closely follow, 49% (25-39) closely follow, 36% (18-24) closely follow

WHO DO RUSSIANS BLAME?

Russians blame the destruction and death of civilians in Ukraine on the United States and NATO countries.

58% *U.S. and NATO*

17% *Ukraine*

7% *Russia*

A CLOSER LOOK: HUNGARY AND SLOVAKIA

Figure 2. *Hungary and Slovakia Map,* GCKN.

Hungary

Budapest's past efforts to deepen economic and ideological relations with Moscow have created friction within the European Union's anti-Russian strategic alignment. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU has vigorously condemned Putin's regime and has increasingly imposed sanctions against the Kremlin and its allies. The EU's proposals to ban Russian oil and gas[16] have motivated political-economic pockets of resistance within some EU states, including Hungary,[17] Germany,[18] and Slovakia.[19] Russia has been supplying 40% of the EU's gas, 26% of its oil imports, and has earned 47 billion euros from EU oil and gas sales since it invaded Ukraine.[20]

- On 3 April, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, whose government has pursued close business relations with Russia for over a decade, swept to power for a fourth consecutive term, partly on a pledge to preserve security of gas supply for Hungarian households.[21] Orbán, in a recent public display of cooperation with Russia, told a news conference that Hungary would pay for gas in rubles if Russia requested it.[22] Orbán's prevarication is supported by the 30-40% of his Fidesz party which is strongly pro-Russia.[23]
- On 8 April, the European Commission announced the fifth package of restrictive sanctions against Putin's regime in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Together with the four previous packages, the sanctions aim to undermine the Kremlin's ability to finance the invasion.[24]
- As of 2 May, the EU was preparing sanctions on Russian oil, with possible exceptions for wary countries, according to Reuters.[25] The news of the EU's sixth package of sanctions triggered Hungary and Slovakia to announce on 3 May that they will not support them, because they are too reliant on Russian energy with no immediate alternatives.[26]

Slovakia

Unlike Hungary, Slovakia's reticence to support robust anti-Russian sanctions stems almost exclusively from energy concerns, and less from Bratislava-Moscow political connections. Slovakia is one of the countries most energy-dependent on Russia, from which it receives 96% of its petroleum products, according to the International Energy Agency.

- A NATO and EU member since 2004, Slovakia is attempting to walk a careful line between supporting Ukraine and not angering Russia. ***Russian threats to disrupt oil and gas to Slovakia present potentially calamitous economic and political outcomes for the country.***
- Slovakia has provided more overt aid to Ukraine, whereas Hungary has publicly refused transit of materiel to Ukraine through or over its territory.[33] Ukraine has praised Slovakia for its assistance, especially in regards to Ukrainian refugees, trade, arms, and support of EU sanctions.[34]

A BRIEF GLIMPSE INTO HUNGARY'S POLITICAL HISTORY

Although Hungary was one of the Axis powers that fought alongside Nazi Germany in World War II and participated in the invasion of Russia in 1942, following the war it became a Soviet satellite state and was one of the founding members of the Czechoslovakia Pact. In 2010, after Orbán's successful re-election, Hungary strengthened its relationship with Russia—politically, economically, and ideologically.

While Hungary joined NATO under Orbán's premiership in 1999, he has sought much closer relations with Moscow since his 2010 re-election. Initially coming to power as a progressive, pro-West leader, Orbán and Putin are said to have similar stances on "strong leadership" and conservative values.[27]

Hungary and Russia have developed close economic ties in recent years. In 2021, trade between Hungary and Russia increased by 51%—substantiating Hungary's heavy reliance on Russia for energy.[28] Currently Russia supplies Hungary with 60% of its oil and 85% of its gas.[29]

On 1 Feb 2022, Orbán traveled to Russia describing it as a "peace mission." Orbán was one of the last foreign leaders to meet with Putin before Russia's invasion of Ukraine began.[30]

HUNGARY'S ORBÁN

Viktor Mihály Orbán is a Hungarian politician who has served as prime minister of Hungary since 2010, previously holding the office from 1998 to 2002. In April 1993, Viktor Orbán became the first leader of the Fidesz political party, replacing the national board that had served as collective leadership since its founding.

Over time, Fidesz has changed its ideological position. At its inception as a student movement in the late 1980s, the party was positioned center-left and advocated for liberalism. In 1994, as the political landscape changed following the fall of communism, Fidesz moved to the right. It became the most liberal-conservative political force in Hungary by the time Putin was elected in 2000. By the early 2000s, Fidesz had adopted nationalism, national-liberalism, and Christian democracy into its sociopolitical system and was positioned on the center-right. The party has moved even further to the right since that time.[31]

Orbán and other Fidesz politicians have prominently described their model of government as a Christian illiberal democracy. Orbán listed Turkey, Russia, China and Singapore as successful illiberal states.[h 32]

h An illiberal democracy describes a governing system in which, although elections take place, citizens are cut off from knowledge about the activities of those who exercise real power because of the lack of civil liberties; thus it is not an open society. Singapore, Turkey, Russia and China are suggested to be examples of an illiberal democracy.

- Where an oil embargo against Russia is concerned, Slovakia would lose nearly 2/3 of its oil supply. The EU is considering offering exemptions and/or a phased approach for Slovakia in order to blunt the damage to its economy.

The war in Ukraine has significantly eroded Slovak trust in Putin, especially among older citizens. Slovakia culturally bridges Eastern and Western Europe, has a historical suspicion of Western influence, and maintains substantive approval of Putin since he came to power. However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has raised concerns among previous Kremlin supporters.[35]

- A 2019 Pew poll indicated that Slovaks aged 50 and older were more likely to hold favorable opinions of Russia than younger generations. However, pro-Russian attitudes among Slovakia's older generation appears to have moderated recently, as the Ukraine invasion echoes the 1968 Prague Spring Soviet invasion and its aftermath.[36]
- 2020 polling indicated that up to 55% of Slovaks approved of Putin, and one survey showed that 53% believed the

United States threatened Slovak identity and values.[37] Today, Slovak perspectives have shifted. A January 2022 poll by Slovak pollster FOCUS revealed 35% of Slovaks held Russia responsible for escalating tensions over Ukraine. By the end of February this number had climbed to ~62%—with only ~33% believing that the war was NATO's fault.[38]

- A public opinion poll released in late March shows that 34% of those polled believe NATO deliberately provoked Russia into starting the war in Ukraine, and 28% believe Russia is fighting to disarm and de-Nazify Ukraine.[39]

Russia has repeatedly exploited cultural differences between Slovaks and the West to weaken support for NATO through a disinformation campaign. Slovakia has long been the target of Russian disinformation, which may explain such high pro-Russia numbers despite Western/NATO reporting and influence.

- Many Slovak opposition politicians have supported Russian anti-American and anti-NATO positions in the past. However, after the Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Slovak officials have cracked down on Russian disinformation media sites, and opposition figures have not been as vocal. Despite this shift, several think tanks have forecasted that Russian disinformation will eventually swing public opinion back towards Russia and against Ukraine, its refugees, and NATO.[40]
- A recent example of the Kremlin's divisive efforts in Slovakia includes a Russian relative deprivation narrative that Ukrainian refugees receive more benefits from the Slovak government than Slovaks, especially the elderly.[41]

A BRIEF GLIMPSE INTO SLOVAKIA'S POLITICAL HISTORY

Czechoslovakia was formed at the end of World War I when the Austro-Hungarian Empire collapsed. Occupied by Germany during World War II, Czechoslovakia fell within the Soviet occupation zone after the war. In 1955, Czechoslovakia became one of the principal members of the Warsaw Pact—the USSR's[i] answer to NATO. Czechoslovakia was ostensibly allowed to govern independently of the Soviet Union until 1968, when Soviet leadership deployed Red Army forces to crush pro-reform dissent seen by the USSR as pro-Western. Czechoslovakia split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1992, following the collapse of the USSR in 1991.[42]

Bordered by Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Ukraine, Slovakia considers itself historically and culturally as "a bridge between east and west." Despite its reluctance to join NATO and its wariness of Western influences, Slovakia became a member of NATO on March 29, 2004. At the time, in an effort to deter former Warsaw Pact members from joining, Russian disinformation proponents argued that entering into a Defense Cooperation Agreement with the United States would translate into weakened Slovak sovereignty.[43]

Although Russia is only Slovakia's 9th largest trading partner, 96% of Slovakia's petroleum products come from Russia.[44]

i The Soviet Union, officially the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was a collective Communist state that spanned much of Eurasia from 1922 to 1991.

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ENDNOTES

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Image Content

Figure 1. Susan Littleton, *Domestic Russian Perceptions of the "Special Military Operation" public opinion polls,* infographic, GCKN, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

Figure 2. Susan Littleton, *Hungary and Slovakia Map,* map, GCKN, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

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