

## GCKN RUNNING ESTIMATE

August 2022 — Update 6



### In the Previous Running Estimate...

- Russian public opinion of President Putin's Ukraine invasion dropped by 8% over a roughly three-month period, peaking at 83% in March and declining to 75% in June.
- Russia's military continues to face demographic stresses impacting force generation and logistics. Morale issues, among conscription-age males (ages 18 to 28), are a key contributor. Notably, this demographic shows the least support for the War in Ukraine.

### This Running Estimate...

- Seventy-six percent (76%) of Russia's population—mostly older generations—continues to support the Kremlin's "special military operation" in Ukraine as of July. *This is an insignificant change from the previous month, and remains part of a longer-term decline.*
- The Kremlin's Crimea and Donbas actions in 2014 spurred Ukraine's defense reform and broad public support, which bolster its fight against Russia today; *however, its troops are not without substantive challenges of their own.*
- Ukrainian troop morale remains high, but has begun to fluctuate as the war drags through its 6th month and casualties mount. *To sustain a longer war with Russia, Ukraine is seeking to balance fighting with economic stabilization.*

## DOMESTIC RUSSIAN PERCEPTIONS

**Domestic Russian support for the Ukrainian invasion remains high but still lower than its peak in March, likely indicating public weariness with the continuing conflict amid worsening economic conditions.** In March, 83% of Russians supported the "special military operation" in Ukraine, which Russia launched on 24 February. Since then, support for the war dropped monthly to a low of 75% in June and then rose slightly to 76% in July.

- On 1 August, the Levada Center released its 6th Russia-Ukraine war survey, which was conducted on 21-27 July.<sup>1</sup> Support for Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine was 76%, an insignificant change from its June survey. Support continues to be greatest among older respondents (84%) and lowest among those of 18-24

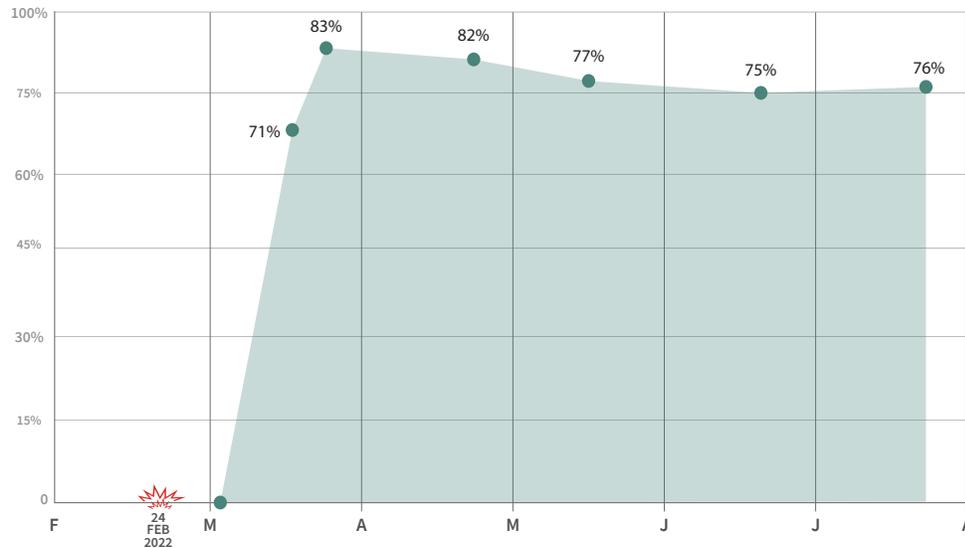
years of age (57%). The share of Russians who believe the war will last more than a year increased from 27% in June to 28%.<sup>2</sup>

- Domestic Russian attitudes on the war have pivoted from enthusiasm and adaptation in the early months to increasing levels of depression and anxiety in recent months. There are growing concerns that the "special military operation" has become a war with unclear duration and consequences. The war is creating economic challenges for Russians, with 39% of respondents experiencing decreased family incomes and 56% saying increased prices had forced them to save on products.<sup>3</sup>



# Domestic Russian Perceptions of the "Special Military Operation"

## Public Opinion Polls in Russia Show Steady and High Support



**Leveda:** Since March, support for Putin's "Special Military Operation" has gradually declined.

\*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

- **Russian support for the “special military operation”** in Ukraine dropped from a high of 83% in March to a low of 75% in June and then **rose to 76% in July**, according to the Levada Center.<sup>6</sup>
- Support continues to be **greatest among older respondents (84%)** and lowest among those 18-24 years of age (57%).<sup>7</sup>
- The share of Russians who **believe the war will last more than a year increased** from 27% in June to 28%.<sup>8</sup>
- As of late June, **93% of Ukrainians believe** that their country will be able to **repel Russia’s attack**, although **57% believe** the war will **last more than six months** and likely **worsen the economic situation**, according to a survey by the Rating sociological group.<sup>9</sup>
- As of June, **97% of Ukrainians trust their military**, according to a Wall Street Journal-funded poll conducted by the NORC at the University of Chicago.<sup>10</sup>

### Other Polling

Other independent surveys show much lower levels of support for the war than the Leveda polls, including an Extreme Scan “Chronicles” survey indicating a decrease in support from 64% in June to 55% in July<sup>4</sup>—the lowest since the war began in February<sup>5</sup>—coinciding with increasing economic tensions from Western sanctions. **Though independent polls may differ in actual percentages of support, they are consistent with regard to reductions in the same timeframe... reinforcing assessed shifts in Russian domestic perspectives. Together the surveys highlight the evolving reaction to the war—from shock to euphoria, adaptation, and now depression among some—suggesting that the effects of Russian propaganda are incrementally wearing off as the war persists.**

# UKRAINIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY AND MORALE

*Russia's 24 February invasion created an existential threat that rallied the Ukrainian society and military around a national identity already bolstered in 2014 by Russia's hostile actions in Crimea and the Donbas.* A cohesive national identity, broad public support, and a largely committed population are major factors in Ukrainian troop successes against the Russian military.<sup>11</sup> This is underpinned by traditional Ukrainian national identity myths which center on self-reliance in lone fights against larger foes, with the historical collective ideal being the Cossacks—*independent warrior bands from the steppe.*<sup>12</sup>

- According to a panel of Ukrainian social scientists held by the Association for the Study of Nationalities, successful decentralized government reforms—and related progress on reducing corruption—since 2014 have “created increased public participation and increased trust in public institutions at all levels.” As a result, in the face of the Russian invasion, “Ukraine is not a divided country—Ukraine has been more unified than at any time ever before.”<sup>15</sup> However, there remain significant and concentrated areas of Russian support. Additionally, many residents, especially in the east, are influenced by Russian propaganda through television and social media.<sup>16</sup>
- Russia's targeting of population centers, even hundreds of miles away from the front lines, is creating fear effects. Attacks in these areas show the Ukrainian people that there is no place safe from the war. While the Kremlin denies targeting civilians, multiple Russian attacks on civilian areas and structures have been documented across media with little evidence of their military value. Ukrainian officials refer to the strikes as part of Moscow's campaign of terror designed to break popular will.<sup>17</sup>

- To improve and maintain morale and unity, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky broadcasts a nightly address to the nation and conducts frequent troop visits. *Zelensky's actions are effective due to the Ukrainian institutional reforms, his visible domestic leadership, and his progress in gaining international political and military support.*<sup>18</sup>

## UKRAINE AND ITS HISTORIC IDEAL OF SELF-RELIANCE AGAINST OVERWHELMING ODDS



“Home Alone” is one of the most popular Christmas movies in Ukraine, as it typifies Ukraine's historical improvised fights against dominant invaders.<sup>13</sup> In keeping with this theme, tens of thousands of Ukrainians, including members of the diaspora, have volunteered to fight or otherwise provide direct support to the war effort.<sup>14</sup>

*\*The helix (or spiral) is the universal symbol for resiliency.*

# UKRAINIAN MILITARY OUTLOOK

*Ukraine's military has undergone a marked transition since 2014—when Russia annexed Crimea and led a separatist movement in the Donbas—boosting its combat effectiveness and ultimately increasing its will to fight against Russia's invasion.* In 2014, Ukraine offered tepid resistance because of underlying institutional problems, including lack of command and control, dependence on oligarch-funded paramilitary units, procurement issues, lack of Western interoperability, the confined geography of the peninsula, and the proximity of Crimea to Russia.<sup>19</sup> Kyiv also underestimated the degree to which Russian identity in the region would be a significant influencing factor to leverage internal support for Russia's actions. In part, these

lessons-learned led to a political and military transformation, ranging from efforts to reduce corruption to addressing vexing defense procurement systems.<sup>20</sup>

- In February 2015, the Ukraine Armed Forces' inability to maintain effective command and control delayed orders and produced the resounding defeat it suffered at Debaltseve, according to a RAND study.<sup>21</sup> Ukraine's defense industry and procurement systems, particularly in the Ukroboronprom state-owned defense monopoly, were particularly weak and vulnerable to oligarch corruption. Furthermore, its focus on exports instead of local needs enormously profited the corrupt oligarchs,<sup>22</sup> resulting

in—according to *The National Interest* and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace—a “decrepit” military,<sup>23</sup> a navy in “a sorry state,”<sup>24</sup> and “an army literally in ruins.”<sup>25</sup>

- The overhauling of Ukraine’s procurement institutions and laws, which previously hampered U.S. equipment transfers to the country,<sup>26</sup> set the necessary conditions to facilitate the recent surge of security assistance to Ukraine. This not only enabled the Ukrainian military to draw on more locally produced equipment and permitted the inflow of Western equipment and training,<sup>27</sup> but it also transformed Ukraine’s military from what the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace describes as a “depleted, neglected, and underfunded”<sup>28</sup> force to a highly capable and motivated one that can challenge Russia’s scorched-earth campaign.
- Ukraine is more capable of effective resistance and inflicting damage on Russian forces because it has developed and cultivated the will to fight. Out of 38 factors that determine the will to fight, one expert found 17 that pertained to the Ukrainian military, including the existential nature of its fight, shared national identity, strong societal support (i.e., volunteerism), and effective messaging. In contrast, none of these factors significantly strengthened the Russian will to fight.<sup>29</sup>

***While Ukraine’s unexpectedly strong resistance has unearthed multiple Russian military deficits, the drawn-out conflict has caused Ukraine to face its own structural disadvantages including personnel attrition, equipment shortfalls, and a faltering economy.*** From the start of the conflict, Ukraine’s military implemented fierce resistance against Russian forces,<sup>30</sup> which boosted public belief in the Ukrainian Armed Forces’ ability to win the war and helped the military recruit fighters. However, as the war persists and attrition of personnel and equipment continues, ***Kyiv will likely perceive an intense need to counter increasing uncertainty about how the war will unfold.***

- The Ukrainian resistance strategy of total and uncompromising defense on all fronts has evolved to match Russia’s eventual shift in military strategy: from a blitzkrieg aimed at a quick regime change, to an extended war of attrition.<sup>31</sup> ***To sustain a longer war with Russia, Ukraine is now forced to balance fighting with economic stabilization.*** This includes imposing stringent taxes and reducing social spending, which may increase societal hardships, according to the Ukrainian minister of finance.<sup>32</sup>
- Since February, Ukraine has reportedly suffered high casualty levels up to an estimated 100-200 killed in action per day.<sup>33</sup> Losses are likely higher among Ukraine’s regular and Special Forces units, prompting greater reliance on the Territorial Defense Forces and reserve units.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Ukraine military units have sustained losses of up to 50% of their equipment, including some units which

are likely operating without motorized vehicle support, according to press.<sup>35</sup>

- However, as of late June, 93% of Ukrainians believe that their country will be able to repel Russia’s attack, although a majority (57%) believe the war will last more than six months and likely worsen their dire economic situation, according to a survey by the Rating sociological group.<sup>36</sup> Since Russia’s February invasion, the popular trust in the Ukrainian military has been very high, reaching 97% in June, according to a Wall Street Journal-funded poll conducted by the NORC at the University of Chicago.<sup>37</sup>

***The Ukrainian Armed Forces morale has remained relatively high since the beginning of the conflict, but has fluctuated as the war drags through its 6th month and casualties mount.***

Heavy casualties, supply issues, delays in weapons deliveries, often poor communications, and older Ukrainian commanders relying on Soviet-style tactics have eroded morale.<sup>38</sup>

- As fighting is becoming more static—with trench lines and artillery bombardments—the front lines resemble “the closest thing I’ve ever seen to hell,” according to an American volunteer soldier. ***Lately, however, morale has been greatly boosted by deliveries of High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) and other Western military arms and equipment.***<sup>39</sup>
- Ukrainian adaptation of mission command and the development of a strong Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) corps through Western security assistance is aiding in military success and maintaining morale throughout many parts of the country’s armed forces. The Ukrainian military’s ongoing prioritization of training is enabling flexibility and quicker decision-making by field and company-grade leaders, thereby increasing mission effectiveness.<sup>40</sup>
- Nevertheless, Ukrainian military morale may suffer from the poor quality of some recent recruits. According to a July report in the New York Times, the sometimes “chaotic,” “secretive and arbitrary” Ukrainian recruiting process has led to an influx of troops who are unwilling to serve, damaging unity within the ranks, and eroding morale which is already slipping as the war continues into its sixth month. There are concerns among a number of Ukrainians that the country’s bureaucracy turns away some who want to fight and drafts those who do not want to participate.<sup>41</sup>

## UKRAINE'S VOLUNTEER FIGHTERS

In 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and led a separatist movement in eastern Ukraine, Ukraine's military was largely outdated and ineffective. However, it rebounded from this situation largely with the help of volunteer fighters. According to the chairman of Ukraine's parliament, Andriy Parubiy, "volunteer battalions saved Ukraine's independence." These volunteers, who defended Ukraine and fought bloody battles in the east, signed-up on contract and were never mobilized into the army.<sup>42</sup>

Estimates of the number of volunteer fighters range from 15,000 to 40,000, organized into approximately 50 units including the Azov, Donbas, Dnipro, and Tornado units. Many of these units emerged during the Euro-maidan uprising and fought effectively against the separatists and Russians in the Donbas but were never fully absorbed or integrated into the regular army.<sup>43</sup> Ukraine's struggles with the integration of volunteers led many politicians and oligarchs to use these units as private armies—for settling political and business scores—while other volunteers turned to criminal activities. However, a few of the volunteer units such as the Azov regiment, which helped to recapture Mariupol in 2014, were fully integrated into the Ministry of Interior.<sup>44</sup>

In the current conflict with Russia, Ukrainian civilians and volunteers have been crucial to the country's resistance—a significant factor that was underestimated by the Kremlin. ***Ukraine's current mobilization is built on the legacy and strength of the volunteer movement that fought Russian forces during the 2014 invasion, highlighting the significance of civilian support in maintaining Ukraine's resistance momentum.***

Approximately 11,000 civilian volunteers are serving with the armed forces and the Ukrainian Territorial Defense Forces—a civilian guard organized to protect individual cities. Civilian groups like the Phoenix Wings and Come Back Alive, which were active in the 2014 conflict, have mobilized and are collecting and delivering supplies, including thermal imagers, body armor, and first-aid kits to fighters.<sup>46</sup>

## UKRAINE'S MILITARY REFORMS

Following the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution, Russia's annexation of Crimea and its longer-term actions in the Donbas exposed the shortcomings of Ukraine's military.<sup>47</sup> Kyiv subsequently conducted a comprehensive review of its security and defense establishment, identifying key issues that hampered combat performance. These issues included an inability to counter cyber-attacks, a poor medical system, rampant systemic corruption, failure to pay troops, inefficient logistics and command, an inadequate defense budget, and incomplete integration of volunteers into the regular army.<sup>48</sup>

To remedy the problems, Kyiv ordered sweeping reforms in 2016 to address command and control, planning, operations, medical, logistics, and professionalization of the force. Kyiv's Strategic Defense Bulletin of Ukraine set an ambitious 4-year timeline to complete these reforms. Concurrently, Ukraine forces were fighting intensely with Russian-backed separatists in the Donbas, based on fear that Russia might attempt to take all of Ukraine.

The Strategic Defense Bulletin mandated broad and sweeping reforms across the defense establishment with the goal of producing a force capable of performing up to NATO standards by 2020.<sup>49</sup> Over the next six years, Ukraine reformed its military with the help of Western advisers, trainers, and equipment, and by the 24 February Russian invasion, Ukraine had built a more professional force that is capable of challenging Russia's military in many areas except size.<sup>50</sup>

# RESEARCH TEAM

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# ENDNOTES

- 1 The Levada Center conducted the survey on 21-27 July with a representative all-Russian sample of 1617 people aged 18 and older across rural and urban communities in Russia.
- 2 Russia Matters, 2022. "Levada: Nearly 1/3 of Russians Are 'Not Very Afraid' Their Country Will Use Nukes." Russia Matters Levada: Nearly 1/3 of Russians Are 'Not Very Afraid' Their Country Will Use Nukes | Russia Matters.
- 3 Kolezev, D. 2022. "Support for the war among respondents in Russia fell to 55%." Extreme Scan, 14 July 2022.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 The Extreme Scan "Chronicles" survey is a research project undertaken by sociologists, analysts, and big data specialists. The "Chronicles" have conducted six waves of research on the Russia-Ukraine war with the present one conducted from 29 June to 5 July with 1823 Russians aged 18 and above, with the sample weighted by sex, age, and type of settlement. See Kolezev, D. 2022. "Support for the war among respondents in Russia fell to 55%." Extreme Scan, 14 July 2022.
- 6 <https://www.russiamatters.org/blog/levada-nearly-13-russians-are-not-very-afraid-their-country-will-use-nukes>.
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- 9 Ratings—a group of sociologists—conducted the survey from 18-19 June with 1,200 Ukrainians aged 18 and older in all oblasts except Russian-occupied Crimea and Donbas and territories without Ukrainian mobile connection at the time of the survey. Ratings weighted the results using current data from the State Statistics Service of Ukraine. The survey sample is representative by age, sex, and type of settlement and the survey method was Computer Assisted Telephone Interviews (CATI) with a 0.95 confidence level.
- 10 WSJ/NORC Ukraine Poll June 2022, conducted by Info Sapiens, a local Ukrainian polling organization, collected the data in Ukraine from 9-13 June 2022 using a random sample of 1,005 Ukrainians aged 18 and older who own a mobile phone number with one of Ukraine's mobile service providers. The sample frame covered people from the areas of the country under Ukrainian control prior to February 24, and excluded Crimea and the separatist-controlled parts of Donbas where Ukrainian providers are not used. The sample included Ukrainians with local mobile numbers who relocated abroad and those from the areas occupied by Russian forces after February 24, although both subgroups are estimated to have been underrepresented in the sample by 3 percentage points each compared to their actual share of the population.
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- 12 What Vladimir Putin misunderstood about Ukrainians-The Economist.
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- 16 As Ukraine's war grinds on, soldiers are outgunned and injuries are rising-NPR.
- 17 Russia hits Ukrainians far from front lines, striking entire nation's morale-NBC.
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- 19 "Lessons from Russia's operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine." Rand, 2017.
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- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Ratings—a group of sociologists—conducted the survey from 18-19 June with 1,200 Ukrainians aged 18 and older in all oblasts except Russian-occupied Crimea and Donbas and territories without Ukrainian mobile connection at the time of the survey. Ratings weighted the results using current data from the State Statistics Service of Ukraine. The survey sample is representative by age, sex, and type of settlement and the survey method was Computer Assisted Telephone Interviews (CATI) with a 0.95 confidence level.
- 37 WSJ/NORC Ukraine Poll June 2022. Info Sapiens, a local Ukrainian polling organization collected the data in Ukraine from 9-13 June 2022 using a random sample of 1,005 Ukrainians aged 18 and older who own a mobile phone number with one of Ukraine’s mobile service providers. The sample frame covered people from the areas of the country under Ukrainian control prior to February 24, and excluded Crimea and the separatist-controlled parts of Donbas where Ukrainian providers are not used. The sample included Ukrainians with local mobile numbers who relocated abroad and those from the areas occupied by Russian forces after February 24, although both subgroups are estimated to have been underrepresented in the sample by 3 percentage points each compared to their actual share of the population.
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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.