

GCKN RUNNING ESTIMATE

Kremlin Conditioning: Youth Indoctrination and Mobilization



In This Running Estimate...

- Russian domestic support for Putin and the Special Military Operation (SMO) remains high, while roughly half of Russians continue to favor a negotiated end to the war.
- Russia faces a demographic crisis of a decreasing population and continued middling weak support for Putin and the SMO from the younger generations.
- In response to manpower shortages, Russian youth are being recruited to fight in Ukraine and work in factories producing war materiel.
- Putin mandated patriotic and military education for all Russian schoolchildren and increased emphasis on voluntary youth paramilitary groups to shape future generations.
- An intense domestic social media campaign targets Russian youth to support Putin and the SMO.



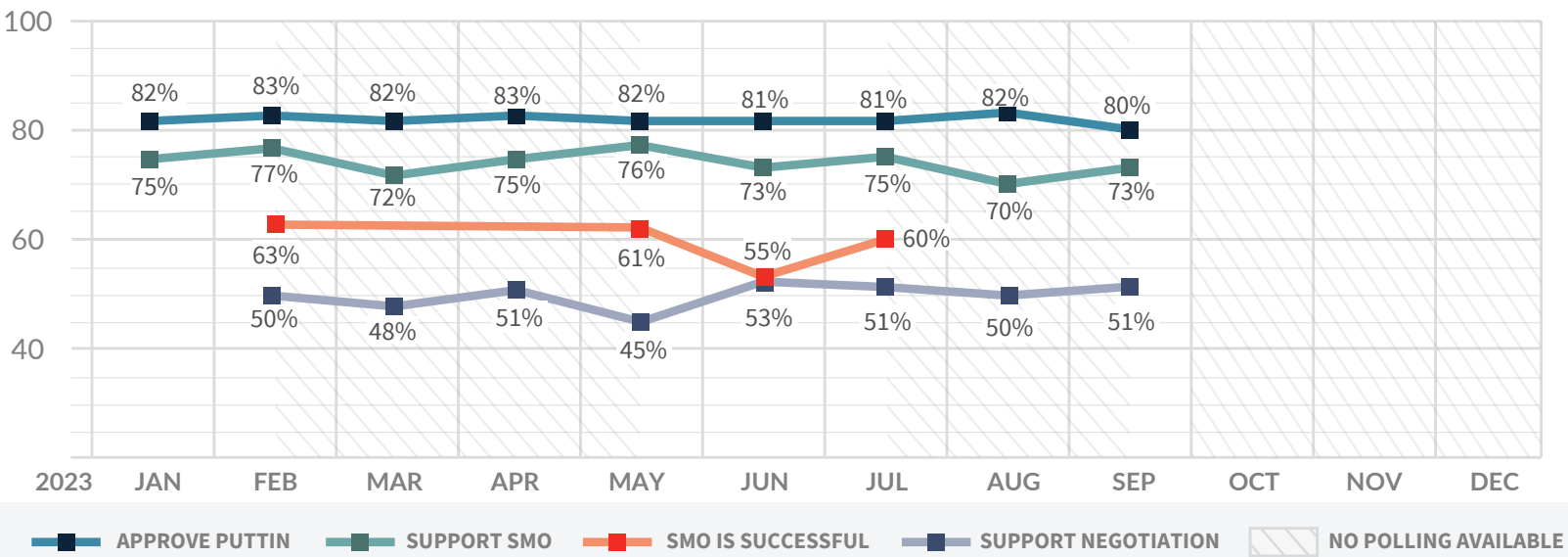
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DOMESTIC RUSSIAN PERCEPTIONS



NOTE 1: 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, GCKN.¹

APPROVE PUTIN

Despite a marginal 2-point dip in his popularity from July to September, Russian President Vladimir Putin’s approval rating remains a formidable 80%. This surge in popularity since the Ukraine invasion underscores Putin’s success in cultivating and maintaining a strongman image. Putin’s ability to maintain such high approval ratings, even in the face of rising casualties and domestic economic hardship resulting from his actions, highlights his adept use of Kremlin-controlled media and messaging to shape the narrative. This includes portraying the Ukrainian invasion as a defense of Russia and Russian-speaking populations. Notably, even the mutiny carried out by private military company (PMC) Wagner, which initially seemed to threaten Putin’s stature failed to erode his credibility or popularity. Rather, the mysterious death of Wagner leader Yevgeny Prigozhin may have further consolidated his domestic standing, effectively sidelining critics. The consolidation of Putin’s domestic power after the mutiny and Prigozhin’s demise can be attributed to the Kremlin’s skillful management of these events to minimize negative fallout.²

SUPPORT SMO

Support for the SMO fluctuated over the past months. After a 3% decline in June, it briefly rose to 75% in July before falling by 5% in August. In September, it edged up by 3%, stabilizing at 73%. Patriotic fervor remains a key driver of support for the SMO, stoked by the Kremlin’s extensive propaganda machine. The media portrays the conflict as a necessary measure to safeguard Russian sovereignty and maintain regional stability. Additionally, the impact of the Kremlin’s hardline response to criticism should not be underestimated as a factor that influences public opinion. It is noteworthy that support for the war is lowest, and has remained lowest throughout the conflict, among the 18-24 age group and highest among those aged 55 and above.³

SMO IS SUCCESSFUL

In July, public trust in the success of the SMO dipped by a significant 6% to 55%. This decline can be attributed to the tensions between the Russian military and Wagner, which raised questions about Russia's war strategy and overall coordination. The Russian government's attempts to downplay this friction may have partially backfired, leading to increased skepticism among the public. While Putin and the Kremlin seemed to regain control since July, the lack of polling data on the lingering effects of the Wagner mutiny highlights the challenges of obtaining reliable and accurate information about the sentiments of the Russian populace, especially when it concerns sensitive matters related to the military and national security.⁴

SUPPORT NEGOTIATION

In September, over half of Russians surveyed (51% of the population sample) favored negotiating an end to the conflict, continuing a trend that began in June. While Wagner's mutiny may have heightened the urgency to seek alternative solutions to the SMO, a growing awareness of the human and economic costs of the conflict, including reports of civilian casualties and the displacement of Ukrainian civilians, likely contributed to the sentiment. The lack of a clear timeline for completing the SMO also underscores the uncertainty that pervades the conflict, leaving many Russians eager for a resolution that would bring stability to the region and reduce the strain on their country's resources and themselves. Additionally, a growing knowledge of Russia's strategic, operational, and tactical blunders may have dampened earlier belief in Russia's military dominance.⁵

PUTIN'S DOMESTIC CRISIS

Russia's decreasing and aging population has created a demographic crisis for President Vladimir Putin. Russia has been suffering from a decades-long population decline for multiple reasons, including a shrinking birth rate, COVID 19, and the ongoing war with Ukraine. As a result, Russians have been incentivized to produce larger families.

- Russia's population has decreased by nearly five million people since 1994, with nearly two million of those losses occurring since 2020. COVID-19 and the War in Ukraine have aggravated the situation as over a million young Russian professionals and families fled the country and possibly hundreds of thousands of Russian soldiers have been killed.^{6,a}
- Russia is experiencing a shrinking birthrate, partially due to "birth tourism."^b More than 10,000 expectant Russians have engaged in "birth tourism" for various incentives. For example, Argentina has birth-right-citizenship, which grants automatic citizenship to babies who are born in the country. According to the Argentinian government, more than 10,000 expectant Russians have traveled to Argentina since February 2022 to ensure their children are not born in Putin's Russia. Argentina expedites citizenship for parents of an Argentinian citizen. Currently, many countries have closed their borders to Russian citizens, but 171 countries accept Argentinian passports without a visa. However, companies in Argentina and elsewhere have used this situation for profit, and Argentinian law enforcement is investigating illicit networks providing falsified immigration papers.⁷
- To counter the decline in population, Putin has been trying to incentivize the populace to have bigger families. For example, in 2019, Putin promised tax breaks for larger families. In 2020, he pledged state funding for new mothers.⁸ Fathers of three or more minor children were given deferments following the mass mobilization that same year.⁹ Putin also revived the Soviet era title of "Mother Heroine" for Russian women who birth and raise 10 or more Russian citizens. Recipients will receive a cash prize of 1 million rubles (USD \$16K+) when the 10th child reaches one year of age.¹⁰ Incentivizing multi-birth motherhood is also reminiscent of the Nazi award of the *Mutterkreutz* ("Mother's Cross") medal to German mothers who raised four or more healthy 'Aryan' children.¹¹

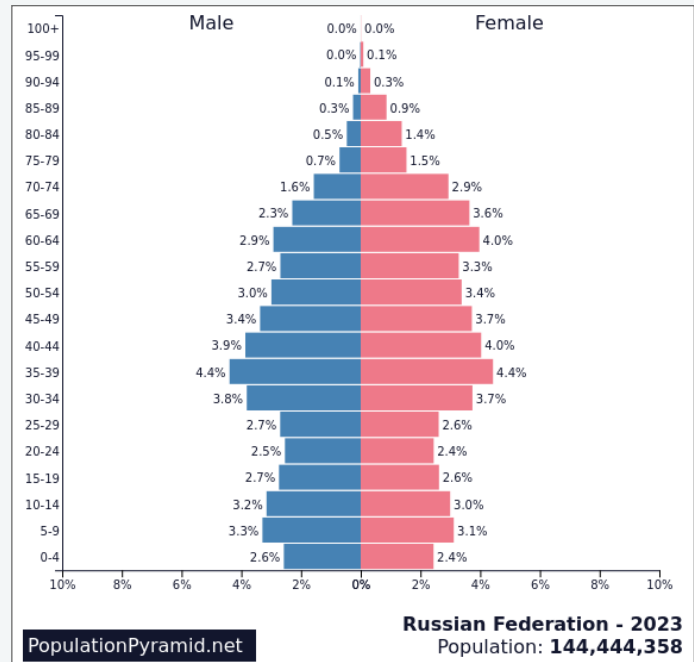


Figure 2: Comparison of the populations of Russia.
SOURCE: PopulationPyramid.net¹²

a The Center for Strategic International Studies estimates that Russia has suffered roughly 200,000 to 250,000 casualties—personnel killed, wounded, or missing—since the Kremlin invaded Ukraine in February 2022, with 60,000 to 70,000 of those reportedly dead. SOURCES: Seth G. Jones, Riley McCabe, and Alexander Palmer, "Ukrainian Innovation in a War of Attrition," CSIS, February 27, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/ukrainian-innovation-war-attrition>; Julius Lasin, "'Unprecedented' casualties for Russian troops," USA Today, February 28, 2023, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/nletter/ukraine-russia-crisis/2023/02/28/ukraine-russia-crisis-unprecedented-casualties-russian-troops/11365763002/>

b Birth tourism is the practice of traveling to another country to give birth so the baby acquires citizenship in that country. SOURCE: CIS, "Birth Tourism: Facts and Recommendations," *Center for Immigration Studies*, January 23, 2020, <https://cis.org/CIS/Birth-Tourism-Facts-and-Recommendations>

DOMESTIC YOUTH (18-24 YRS) PERCEPTIONS

The Kremlin has invested heavily in patriotic youth programs since at least 2002 to create a young generation loyal to Russia, Putin, and national interests.¹³ However, the effectiveness of such programs is questionable given the disparity in support for the SMO between the 18-24 demographic and those over 55. The younger

generation's global exposure, access to diverse information sources, and perhaps skepticism towards state narratives might explain lower levels of support for the SMO. In contrast, the older generation's deep-rooted Soviet-era indoctrination plays a significant role in their perspectives.

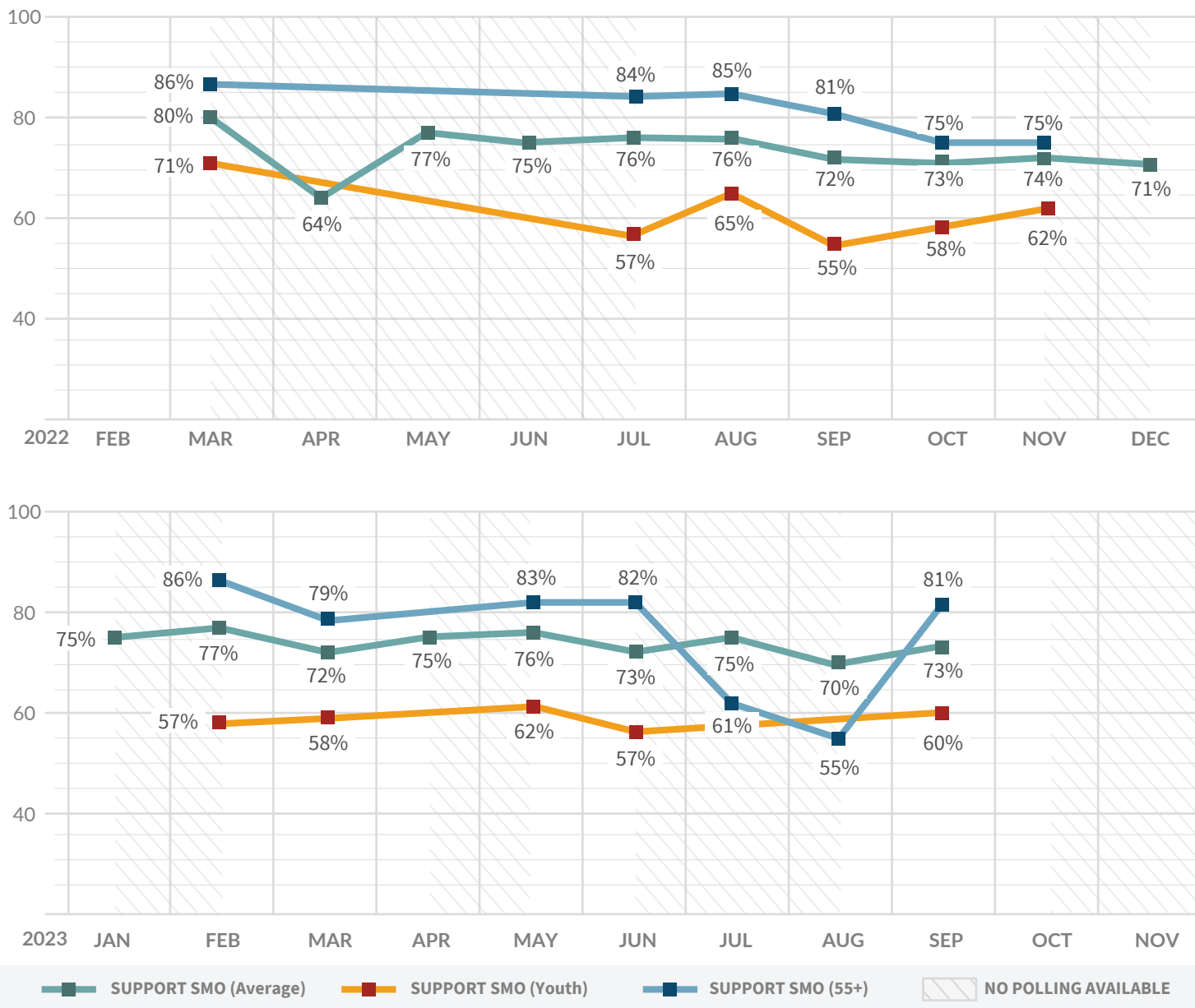


Figure 3: Domestic Youth (18-24 yrs) Perceptions, GCKN.¹⁴

“KREMLIN KONDITIONING” OF KIDS

Challenged by lagging Gen Z and Millennial support for the SMO and the demographic crisis of an aging population, Putin has increasingly aimed to mold and leverage ideological perspectives of Russian youths to solidify his power into the future. By inculcating patriotism and a deep-seated loyalty to the state, the Kremlin seeks to create a resilient citizenry prepared to defend Russian domestic and international interests. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has seen a resurgence of Russian youth programs aimed at fostering patriotism, supporting the Kremlin’s ideologies, and preparing the youth for potential military service. Youth indoctrination endeavors range from broad national paramilitary programs (further described below) to educational initiatives emphasizing Russian military achievements and heroes. However, these programs do not appear to be achieving the desired effect. Russian adults younger than 30 have consistently been reported to be the least supportive of the SMO since early in the conflict.¹⁵ According to Denis Volokov, Director of the independent Levada Center, polling indicates that only 10% of Russians under age 30 strongly support the SMO. Many of the more than one million Russians who have left the country since the invasion are part of this demographic.^{16,c} The divergence in support among various demographics poses an immediate challenge to the Kremlin’s efforts, making it imperative to understand the nuances of youth programs and their implications for the current geopolitical situation.

Putin’s “Patriotic-Military Upbringing” Campaign: Education

Putin mandated patriotic and military education for all Russian schoolchildren to garner more reliable support from the next generations. While the curriculum frames the Ukraine conflict as a natural extension of Russia’s historical military might, the younger generation’s exposure to global narratives and digital platforms offers them alternative perspectives, often in stark contrast to state-sponsored narratives. This juxtaposition could lead many to question the version of events they are taught in schools, rendering the indoctrination less effective

than intended. Putin established whole-of-government responsibility for the “military-patriotic upbringing” of Russian youth at the local, regional, and national levels beginning in 2002. The initiative integrated a variety of school-based programs designed to infuse students with a profound sense of national pride with the more traditional academic curriculum. Using the Great Patriotic War as a cornerstone, this initiative aimed to underscore Russia’s military valor and achievements.¹⁷

- The annexation of Crimea in 2014 stirred a swell of patriotism in Russia.¹⁸ Schools and youth programs were quick to capitalize on this, emphasizing the necessity of national unity and the protection of Russian-speaking populations abroad.¹⁹ In 2020, the Russian Duma approved amendments to the country’s education law requiring schools to inculcate in students “a sense of patriotism and civic consciousness, respect for the memory of the defenders of the Fatherland and the achievements of the heroes of the Fatherland.”²⁰
- Currently, school children from grades 1 through 11 participate in a weekly class called “Important Conversations,” which stresses patriotic duty to Russia, protection against Ukrainian terrorist attacks, and that the purpose of the Special Military Operation (SMO) is to defend the motherland.²¹ Grades 5 through 11 receive additional patriotic classes, including *Security and the Defense of the Motherland* and *History of Russia*, which justify the SMO by claiming that Ukraine attacked Russia.²²
- Some teachers and parents have resisted the new mandatory patriotic curriculum, citing Article 13 of the Russian Constitution, which bars a coercive ideology. Despite several court wins, those who push back against the Kremlin’s mandatory lesson plans have reportedly faced retaliation including surveillance, harassment, firing, and even arrest.²³ Furthermore, the adults who have been groomed under this curriculum since 2002 are the groups least supportive of Putin and the SMO, most critical, and most likely to evade military service.²⁴

c Also see GCKN War in Ukraine Running Estimate Update 2, April 2022, at <https://community.apan.org/wg/gckn/m/running-estimateproducts/415576>

Putin’s “Patriotic-Military Upbringing” Campaign: Youth Groups

To provide an extracurricular and more militant extension of the long-standing “Patriotic-Military Upbringing” in Russian schools, Putin instilled his own versions of the Soviet-era Komsomol and Young Pioneers to mobilize and militarize Russian Youth.

- Originating at the beginning of the Soviet era and rooted deeply in the fabric of Soviet society, the **Young Pioneers** and **Komsomol** were more than mere youth organizations; they were instruments of ideological molding.²⁵ The Young Pioneers was organized for boys and girls ages 9 to 14 to “grow up as steadfast fighters, capable workers for the future, and good communists.”²⁶ *Komsomol* targeted the older teens and young adults, preparing them for their civic duties while nurturing them to be the future torchbearers of Communism.²⁷ This formative exposure created a generation, now in their mid-50’s and older, with an innate loyalty to the state’s objectives. Their unwavering support for Russia’s actions in Ukraine can be traced back to this ideological upbringing, where they perceive the SMO not just as a geopolitical maneuver but as a reaffirmation of Slavic bonds and a rightful reclamation of what once was Soviet territory. In stark contrast, the 18-24 age group, devoid of this indoctrination and raised in a post-Soviet, more globally connected era, tends to approach the situation with a different, often more critical, lens.²⁸
- Launched in 2005 as a direct response to the color revolutions in some former Soviet states, **Nashi (“Ours”)** was a youth movement that aimed to counteract the appeal of Western-style political movements and ideologies among Russian youth by promoting pro-Kremlin narratives. Through large-scale marches, events, and campaigns, *Nashi* aimed to cement Putin as the beacon of Russian resurgence.²⁹ *Nashi* alumni, now in their late 20s to 30s, probably view the SMO through the prism of Russia’s stance against Western influences. However, *Nashi*’s effectiveness in ensuring absolute allegiance is debatable, given the evolving geopolitical landscape and changing information paradigms.

- In 2016, the Russian Ministry of Defense established **Yunarmiya (“Young Army”)**. Part of Putin’s “military-patriotic upbringing” campaign, Yunarmiya is described as a “hybrid version of the [boy] scouts and a reserve officers training program.”³⁰ Patterned on the Soviet Young Pioneers and open to Russian citizens ages 8 to 18, *Yunarmiya* seeks to instill a deep-seated respect and admiration for Russia’s military heritage with activities ranging from basic combat drills to patriotic education sessions. Stated objectives of *Yunarmiya* include:
 - » Promote “the authority and prestige of military service in the society.”
 - » “[P]reserve and enhance patriotic traditions.”
 - » The “formation of youth readiness and practical ability to the fulfillment of civic duty and constitutional responsibilities for protection of the fatherland.”
 - » “[C]ombat extremist ideologies, develop a sense of responsibility, and form a moral basis founded upon Russian traditions.”³¹

Yunarmiya boasted membership of over 718,000 members across the Russian Federation (RF) and in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Moldovan autonomous region of Transnistria, and even the United States.³² In early 2023 chapters were established in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine (TOT).³³ The experiences of these youths within the *Yunarmiya* vary. Many of them may find the chasm between controlled military drills and the grim realities of the actual war in Ukraine too vast. The initial youth engaged in *Yunarmiya*, now in their late teens or early twenties, might view the Ukraine conflict as a justified defense of Russian interests. Many of them may have already served in Ukraine with some probable casualties. Yet, while the structured environment of *Yunarmiya* promotes a particular narrative, real-world experiences and wider access to diverse viewpoints may challenge this perspective, leading some to question the merits of a prolonged conflict. Furthermore, a prolonged conflict with its attendant consequences—potential losses, economic repercussions, and international criticisms—can lead to disillusionment, even among those who initially favored the war.

Putin's "Patriotic-Military Upbringing" Campaign: Youth Military Training

In early 2023, Putin mandated youth military skills training in all schools. This could indicate that the long running "Patriotic Military Upbringing" curriculum, even bolstered with the re-created Soviet era youth paramilitary organizations, was not sufficient to create a new generation of loyal Russian nationalist warriors and ensure future military strength and support. To potentially strengthen Russian militarism into the future, the country recently mandated military skills training programs for children from age four through secondary education.³⁴ In 2022, The Education Ministry announced the return of compulsory military training in Russian high schools.³⁵

- In mid-2023, the Russian Ministry of Education ordered Russian children as young as age four to undergo basic military training, including tactics, weapons, drones, basic first aid, and nuclear, biological, and chemical (NBC) protection. The Kindergarteners also participate in military exercises in the guise of dress-up role playing in scenarios based on actual frontline situations.³⁶
- The Kremlin's "patriotic-military education programs" specifically target schoolgirls with nuclear, biological, and chemical (NBC) training as well as instilling patriotism and duty to Russia. This is similar to Russia's ally Belarus, where pageant contestants are recruited for military training to "Glamorize" military service and attract more female recruits.³⁷
- Schools across Russia have been ordered to teach students between the ages of 12 and 15 how to assemble, program, and operate drones, with significant funds allocated to purchasing training drones.³⁸ Even religious schools have followed this directive; in Krasnodar Krai, a priest teaches Orthodox school children how to fly, program, and design drones.³⁹

Kremlin Youth Social Media Campaign

The Kremlin has engaged in intense social media campaigns targeting Russian youth to gain their support for the SMO. Polling has consistently shown that Russians ages 18-24 are the least supportive of the SMO.⁴⁰ To generate support within this demographic, Kremlin-supported and pro-Kremlin online groups such as "REAL Ukraine," "Antiterror Z," "Z for Victory,"^d "The Russian Spring," and "Strength in Truth" have been promoting Putin's narratives for the Russian war effort and against the Ukrainian government. These posters often push unsubstantiated conspiracy theories against Ukraine and the West, targeting young people, in line with the type of messaging Russia used during U.S. and other Western elections.⁴¹

We will strive for the demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine.

-Russian President Vladimir Putin⁴²

- Themes include Ukraine is run by Nazis, Western decadence will destroy Russian traditions and values, God sent Putin to protect Russia, and Russian soldiers killed in Ukraine are martyrs for Russia. The Kremlin has even resurrected the Soviet theme of *borba za mir* ("battle for peace").⁴³ This campaign has traction based on the number of posters repeating and adding to these themes on VK, Russia's version of Facebook.⁴⁴

I hate them. They're bastards and freaks. They wish death on us Russians. For as long as I live I'll do everything I can to make sure they disappear.

-Former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev⁴⁵

^d The symbol "Z" has become synonymous with Russia since its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Media has shown numerous images of Russian military vehicles emblazoned with a large painted "Z" on their sides, as well as Russian and allied troops sporting "Z" patches, and pro-war demonstrators waving "Z" flags. The meaning of the symbol is still in doubt. One claim is that it stands for *Zapad* ("West"), which originally may have supported the cover story for Russia's pre-invasion buildup on the Ukrainian border, as Zapad is the name of a regularly scheduled exercise with Belarus. Another explanation was that "Z" markings were meant to distinguish between Russian and Ukrainian vehicles since both countries largely use the same military equipment. Yet another explanation is that "Z" is actually two linked number 7's, one of which is upside down. "77" represents the 77 years since the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany, linking the Great Patriotic War (WWII) to Putin's campaign to "de-Nazify" Ukraine. Regardless, "Z" has become a popular Russian symbol for victory in the war. SOURCE: Jeff Dean, "The letter Z is becoming a symbol of Russia's war in Ukraine. But what does it mean?" *NPR*, March 9, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/09/1085471200/the-letter-z-russia-ukraine>; Brendan Cole, "True Meaning Behind Russian 'Z' Symbol Finally Revealed," *Newsweek*, April 19, 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-ukraine-z-vremya-symbol-may-day-victory-1698904>

- Another Russian social media theme targeting Russian youth depicts Ukrainians as subhuman (the ‘other’). This is a common tactic to justify war, akin to demonization of an enemy to assuage guilt over killing other human beings. Ironically, and potentially confusing in his messaging efforts, is that Putin has repeatedly stated the opposite—that Ukrainians are, in fact, ethnically, historically, and culturally Russian. Sameness is Putin’s argument for Russkiy Mir (Russian World), a foreign policy concept that all Russian-speaking people are Russian, regardless of citizenship and individual expressed identities, and so Russia is responsible for them and their welfare. This policy has been used as justification for numerous Russian actions in the Near Abroad over many decades, including incursions into Georgia, interventions in the Nagorno-Karabakh and Kazakhstan, and interference in the Baltics.⁴⁶ Themes promoting counter narratives could be problematic in increasing ideological influence.

REFLEXIVE CONTROL

Russia employs the Soviet propaganda concept of “Reflexive Control” to instill its narratives in target audiences. “Reflexive Control” is “a means of conveying...specially prepared information to incline [a target audience] to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action.” Reflexive control involves a cyclical repetition of the message. It is the Soviet/Russian version of the “Big Lie”—if you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it—although the Soviet/Russian application of Reflexive Control is not limited to big lies, but is used to propagate Kremlin narratives, including those concerning the SMO.^{47,e}

^e See “GCKN Running Estimate: Russian Global Influence Efforts - Update 9,” Global Cultural Knowledge Network, December 2022, <https://community.apan.org/wg/gckn/m/running-estimateproducts/429265>

Recruiting Kids for Putin’s War

Russia has been recruiting and registering youth in the Russian Federation for military service as casualties and demographic pressures mount. Putin has ordered the recruitment of students as young as 16 into the Russian armed forces. Some of these students have reportedly been wounded or killed in Ukraine.⁴⁸

- Prior to the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin, Wagner conducted a recruiting campaign in high schools and youth sports clubs, capitalizing on the Kremlin youth militarism campaign. They focused on Wagner heroism during Ministry of Education career guidance lessons and promoted the *Wagneryonok* (“little Wagner”) youth group and summer camp in Crimea.⁴⁹
- Putin militarizes and recruits Russian school children for war unless their parents are part of the elite. A month before his death, the late Wagner Boss Yevgeny Prigozhin warned that Putin could face a 1917-style revolution if children of elites continued to avoid service in Ukraine, while sons of ordinary Russians came home in coffins or missing limbs.⁵⁰ An example is prominent pro-war influencer Vladimir Solovyov, who is known for his hardline support for the SMO and strident calls for young Russians to fight. However, his son has not served, but instead is, (in Solovyov’s words) “living a difficult life of an average young person” in Moscow.⁵¹

RUSSIA'S YOUTH LABOR CAMPAIGN

Putin has turned to child labor to compensate for labor shortages and strains on the economy due to the war effort and sanctions. Putin has reportedly signed an order allowing children as young as 14 to perform “temporary work.” The intent is to help defense enterprises cope with an extreme labor shortage in Russia caused by the September 2022 mobilization order and the flight of working age adults trying to avoid the draft.⁵²

- According to the Gaidar institute, the Russian labor shortage is the highest it has been since 1996, with 42% of businesses reporting unfilled jobs. The Ministry of Industry and Trade reported a shortage of 660,000 workers.⁵³ In Crimea, mobilization has created a “significant labor shortage,” including 77% of agriculture jobs.⁵⁴
- To compensate for labor shortages, the Russian region of Tatarstan is reportedly seeking to change its labor code to allow minors aged 16-18 to work hazardous jobs under fixed-term contracts.⁵⁵
- The Kremlin has leveraged Vo-Tech schools to cope with the labor shortage. Russian forces are forcing Vo-Tech students to repair damaged Army equipment, according to the Ukrainian General Staff.⁵⁶ Alabuga Polytechnic in Tatarstan has been repurposed by the Russian government as a “dual programme” work-study drone factory, using students to assemble Iranian Shaheed drones. Studies have reportedly been abandoned and the now-former students are hourly wage workers in the factory.⁵⁷

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ENDNOTES

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