



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR  
STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

**WAR, CENSORSHIP AND PUBLIC OPINION IN RUSSIA:  
PUTIN'S STRUGGLE AT HOME AND ABROAD**

**EKA JAVAKHISHVILI**

**180**

**EXPERT OPINION**





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი  
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## **EXPERT OPINION**

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## Introduction

Russia's "special military operation," as the Kremlin calls its full-scale war against Ukraine, has been underway for the second month in a row. However, the Russian army has not been able to cope with the combat tasks as effectively as Kremlin leaders originally planned. The incredible resilience and courage of the Ukrainian nation has fascinated the world but it has become an additional challenge for the Putin regime. In addition to the fact that the Russian government had to radically change its officially declared military objectives, it also faced the need to tighten measures to maintain control over the situation inside the country. At this stage, the Kremlin has to take effective steps both inside and outside of the country in order to fulfill Putin's imperialist ambitions.

In parallel with the attack on Ukraine, Putin's authoritarian regime has been further tightened inside the country, repression against civil society intensified and censorship of the informational space was expanded. The Kremlin has traditionally used a complex combination of hard and soft power to control the situation inside the country which manifests itself in the violent persecution of opponents, intimidation and retaliation, restrictions on free expression, strengthening of state control over the media and manipulating the public with nationalist ideology and cultural values.

Even before the invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin waged a long and large-scale propaganda campaign against Ukraine and the West. After the beginning of the war, the volume of disinformation spread by the Russian state media acquired an unprecedented scale. The Russian government is making its best to limit the spread of real information about the ongoing hostilities in Ukraine and restrict the independent media. Since the start of the war, Russian government agencies have blocked access to Western social networks and the websites of numerous international media outlets and also tightened the legislation to filter information that would reach Russian citizens.

It should be noted that Kremlin officials used to reference the results of Russian public opinion polls to strengthen pro-government positions. However, considering the repressive environment in the country, data on real attitudes in Russian society are virtually unavailable.

In Russia, loud anti-war calls are no longer heard, nor is the prospect of a mass protest movement. The Kremlin's narrow circle of decision-makers, which includes mainly the heads of the state secret services and law enforcement agencies, also accept Putin's imperial intentions without criticism. Representatives of the Russian political and business elite do not dare to publicly criticize Putin's military adventure and limit themselves to a few moderate statements. The silence of the majority contributes to the stability of the dictator's position inside the country.

### **Extremist Social Networks, Banned Independent Media and State TV Propaganda**

For the past two decades, during Putin's rule, the Russian government is constantly striving to take full control of the flow of information that the population receives through traditional media and the internet. Consequently, the pressure on the free media is gradually increasing and access to Internet resources is being restricted every year. The Kremlin considered the internet as its threat back in 2011 when social media played a key role in mobilizing and coordinating protests during rallies to protest rigged parliamentary elections. Later, the Kremlin elaborated a law on foreign agents and forced critical media outlets to receive the label of "foreign agents" which had connections and funding from abroad. In November 2019, the Sovereign Internet Law entered into force that obliged internet service providers (ISPs) to install the network equipment known as Deep Packet Inspection (DPI) which is capable of identifying the source of traffic and filtering content. It allowed the Federal Service for the Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media, abbreviated as "Roskomnadzor" in Russian, to fully control the activity on the internet.

Following the invasion of Ukraine, a high priority among the tasks of the Kremlin was given to monitoring the informational space in order to prevent the expected criticism and the public protest from the very beginning. On February 24, the day of the invasion of Ukraine, Roskomnadzor obliged media outlets to spread information about the "special military operation" in Donbas only based on official Russian sources.<sup>1</sup>

Later, the Russian State Duma passed amendments to the Criminal Code on March 4 which provide for ten to 15 years in prison for spreading "unreliable news" about the Russian armed forces and a fine of RUB 700

thousand to 1.5 million, depending on the severity of the crime.<sup>2</sup> There is a ban on calling the ongoing hostilities in Ukraine a “war;” on the contrary, the Kremlin has dubbed this a “special military operation.”

Due to the restrictions, major international media outlets temporarily suspended their activities in Russia while some left the country altogether, including the BBC, CNN, Deutsche Welle, Bloomberg, Radio Free Europe, Voice of America and others. Roskomnadzor has shut down or blocked independent and critical media outlets operating in Russia for a variety of reasons, including the Echo of Moscow radio station, which has been broadcasting in Russia since 1990, as well as Dozhd TV, Meduza, the Russian-language website of Euronews, etc. Amnesty International was the first international human rights organization to have its local language website blocked by Roskomnadzor. The international investigation website, Bellingcat, which focuses on uncovering evidence of human rights abuses, was also blocked.

In order to avoid repression, some local media outlets were forced to delete materials about Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and mention it as a “special military operation” instead of the “war” in Ukraine (for example, *Novaya Gazeta*). According to available data, at least 150 journalists left Russia in the first two weeks of the invasion.

From the beginning of March, along with traditional media outlets, the Russian government has gradually restricted access to Western social networks where it was available to access current real-life news in Ukraine. The decision of a Russian court to officially ban Facebook and Instagram in the country came as a surprise to no one. However, the reason the Kremlin gave for blocking Western social networks sounded strange. On March 21, based on the appeal of the Prosecutor General’s Office of the Russian Federation, the Moscow District Court declared the Meta Platforms Inc. company (owner of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp) as “extremist” and banned it from operating in Russia.<sup>3</sup> The basis for banning the company was the fact that Meta temporarily changed the rules of political expression and allowed the publication of posts with violent content against Russian troops invading Ukraine. Meta clarified it relaxed its rules against violent speech only for people inside Ukraine and only in the context of the Russian military invasion of Ukraine. It does not permit any calls for violence, harassment or discrimination against the Russian people. The company also said it does not allow calls for assassinating heads of state as

claimed by the Russian side. Interestingly, the court ban did not apply to the WhatsApp app owned by the same company for the reason that it is a means of communication and not a source of information.

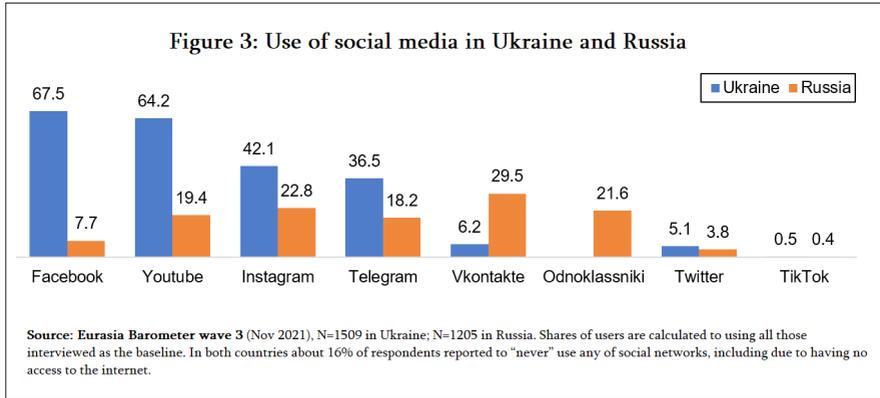
Before the ban on Western social networks in Russia, Facebook itself restricted the activities of the Kremlin's propaganda media (*Russia Today, Sputnik*) on its platform. Roskomnadzor then said that 26 cases of discrimination against the Russian media by Facebook had been revealed since October 2020 which is a violation of the rights and freedom of Russian citizens and led to a partial restriction of Facebook.

YouTube's video hosting, which is the most popular in Russia among Western platforms, is still functional in the country where the media outlets blocked by the authorities have moved. However, warning messages towards YouTube are heard more often. Roskomnadzor rebukes the YouTube administration for its involvement in "terrorist activities" that could "endanger the lives and health of Russian citizens." This refers to ads on YouTube calling for the disruption of railway communications between Russia and Belarus.<sup>4</sup> The regulator also demands YouTube lift restrictions on Russian media resources (RBC, NTV, TNT, REN TV, etc.).<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, the Russian government is trying to replace Western applications with local analogues and redirect the population to Russian social media and messaging services (VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, Rossggram as the Russian clone of Instagram). These platforms are required by law to cooperate with the country's secret services. Consequently, the Kremlin will find it even easier to control the activity of its users.

Roskomnadzor also blocked the social network Twitter and threatened the online encyclopedia Wikipedia with fines.<sup>6</sup> The regulator asked Wikipedia to remove a page containing "unreliable socially significant materials" about its operations in Ukraine which they believe is intended to provide misinformation to Russian consumers. It said it could fine Wikipedia up to RUB 4 million, or nearly USD 50,000, for failing to remove those materials which are illegal under Russian law.

Figure 3: Use of social media in Ukraine and Russia



Due to the tightening of online censorship, the number of VPN (Virtual Private Networks) users in Russia is growing daily. It is encryption software that hides the user’s unique IP address and location and thus makes it possible to access blocked websites. According to the company Top10VPN, after the blocking of Western social networks, the daily demand for VPNs increased by 2000%.<sup>7</sup> On March 15, the Kremlin banned 20 popular VPN services in Russia although the population still has access to dozens of alternatives.

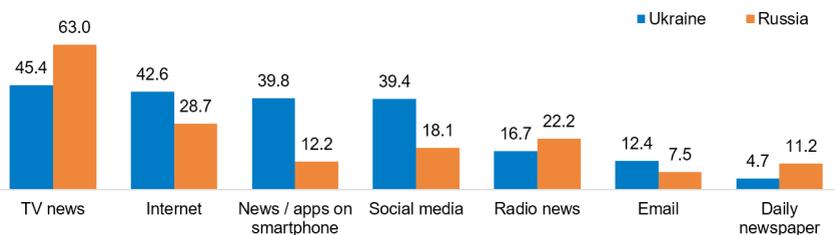
According to the report of Top10VPN, more than 741 domains relating to the Ukraine invasion have been banned since February 24 and the list of banned sites is growing daily.<sup>8</sup>

### TV Propaganda

While the war in Ukraine is undergoing, many people in Russia hear and see a completely different narrative through television. A big portion of disinformation comes from the state media while alternative sources of independent information are gradually becoming inaccessible. Even before these events, Russia ranked 150<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries in the world in terms of press freedom in 2021 according to Reporters Without Borders.<sup>9</sup>

For most Russians, television is still the main source of information. According to various research studies an average of 63% of the Russian population receives news about the war from state channels while the majority of those who watch TV news completely trust the information received.

Figure 2: Information sources used on a daily basis to learn what is going on in your country



Source: World Values Survey wave 7 (2018-2021), N=1289 in Ukraine; N=1810 in Russia.

What kind of information does an ordinary Russian citizen receive from state television stations? These are completely misleading stories - as if the war is going only in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine where Russian “liberating” forces are happily greeted, as if the Ukrainian army is bombing its own cities to accuse Putin of “false flag” operations and as if Russian soldiers do not harm civilians while the cruelty of the Russian aggressors towards the civilians shocked the world. For a visible example, the mass killing, torture and abuse of Ukrainian civilians by the Russian occupiers in the Ukrainian city of Bucha are enough. In response, Russia launched a full-scale state propaganda machine to deny the accusations against the Russian soldiers. The Kremlin dismissed footage showing dead civilians in the town of Bucha as “fake” and a “provocation.” On Russian federal television, Kremlin propagandists have called the Bucha tragedy a provocation by the West and Ukraine. The Russian Defense Ministry claimed that no residents of the city suffered any “violent actions” while the Russian troops were there.<sup>10</sup> To make it more convincing, the Russian authorities requested a UN Security Council meeting over “criminal provocations by Ukrainian soldiers and radicals” in Bucha.

Russian state media and Kremlin propagandists regularly discredit Ukraine, portraying it as a Russophobic state ruled by a “Nazi regime” and repeatedly calling for the country to be “denationalized” and “demilitarized.” Kremlin-hired “experts” are also demonizing the West and NATO as if their goal is to destroy the Russian nation. Such propaganda and persuasion techniques seem to have been successful for the Kremlin to mobilize the public around Vladimir Putin. According to a study by the Eurasia Barometer, a correlation was found between political attitudes and sources of information. Receiving daily information on television was reflected in an increase of trust in Putin

while the use of the Internet and social media was reflected in a decrease of trust in Putin.

Thanks to the large-scale propaganda by the Kremlin, various results of Russian public opinion polls point to an unprecedented rise in Vladimir Putin's rating with huge public support for Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine. These data should be interpreted with great caution as they do not fully reflect the real mood in Russian society.

### **Public Sentiments Before and After the Invasion of Ukraine**

Even before February 24 when Russia invaded Ukraine, Russian public opinion polls showed that the majority of Russian citizens (on average 60%) supported the launch of a "special military operation" in Ukraine. Whether the surveys were conducted by companies loyal to the Kremlin or by independent organizations, they all yielded approximately the same results:

- Public opinion polls conducted on February 25-27 by the largest sociological research organizations operating in Russia, VCIOM (ВЦИОМ-Всероссийский центр изучения общественного мнения) and FOM (ФОМ - Фонд Общественное Мнение), showed strong support for the "special military operation" in Ukraine (68% and 65%). Russian officials often cite the results of the surveys of these companies as VCIOM is a 100% state-owned company and the main customer of FOM is the administration of the President of Russia.
- According to a poll conducted by Russian Field (Private Research Agency) on February 26-28, 59% of respondents supported the "Russian military action in Ukraine."
- According to a poll conducted by the British news agency Savanta ComRes in Russia on February 7-15, half of the respondents (50%) agreed with the opinion that "it would be correct if Moscow use military force to prevent Kyiv from joining NATO."
- A survey conducted by the independent research organization Levada-center (Левада-центр which is labeled as a "foreign agent" by the Kremlin for having foreign funding) on February 17-21 showed that the majority of respondents (52%) had a negative attitude towards Ukraine. The majority of them (60%) blamed the US and NATO for escalating tensions in eastern Ukraine while public support for Vladimir Putin increased by 13% (up to 71%) after December 2021.

Consequently, it can be said that the Kremlin had already well-prepared the ground for the invasion of Ukraine by the end of February. What has changed a month after the start of the war? Support for the “special military operation,” as well as President Putin’s personal rating, has increased even more. According to surveys conducted in the last week of March, Putin had the highest rating in the last five years (VCIOM - 81%) while the president’s performance was positively assessed by an average of 80% of respondents (Levada-center -83%, VCIOM - 79%).<sup>11</sup> According to VCIOM, 76% of Russian citizens support the decision to start a special operation in Ukraine which is an increase of 11% after February 25. This decision is also approved by 73% of FOM respondents which is 8% higher than the February results.<sup>12</sup> In addition, 69% of Russians polled by the Levada-center think the country is moving in the right direction (17% higher than in February).

According to VCIOM, respondents’ perceptions of the goals of “the special military operation” have remained unchanged over the past three weeks. The majority of them name the following goals: defense of Russia, the demilitarization of Ukraine and the prevention of the deployment of NATO military bases on its territory (42% of respondents).<sup>13</sup> A total of 71% of FOM respondents name similar goals.

The Russian authorities are well aware that real information about the war with Ukraine could provoke mass protests in Russia and so they are “selling” this war to the Russian people, not against the Ukrainian people but against NATO forces and “Ukrainian Nazis.” Putin has repeatedly said that the Ukrainian units fighting the Russian armed forces are not regular troops but neo-Nazi formations.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, in the above-mentioned polls, respondents name the same goals of the “special operation” as Kremlin officials repeat in the media every day - defending Russia, demilitarizing Ukraine and preventing the deployment of NATO military bases on its territory.

### **What Do the Survey Results Show?**

What do the surveys results show in a society where the country is ruled by a repressive regime, political opposition is virtually non-existent and freedom of speech and the media are restricted? As sociologists point out, the numbers in support of the war do not fully reflect the reality given the repressive environment in Russia because, first of all, the people are afraid to express their opinions out loud.

The given results indicate how problematic it is to study public opinion in an authoritarian state, especially during a state of war. During war-time, public discourse is shaped by strong emotions and gets polarized. In an autocratic state, respondents do not always openly express their attitude towards the government for fear of repression and prefer to give answers that are in line with the official government position.

Russian sociologists note that when citizens are afraid to express their political views, they do not trust the interviewers whom they perceive as “government agents.” That is why they often refuse to participate in the survey. Consequently, critics of the regime are less likely to participate in polls and this has a significant impact on the final results of a study.

It is also very important how the questions are formulated - for example, if the interviewer asks respondents about their opinion on the “special military operation” or the “war” with Ukraine. This wording indirectly pushes the respondent to a biased answer because everyone knows to whom the term “special military operation” belongs. At the same time, support for Putin’s decisions does not mean unconditional support for a “special military operation” but VCIOM and FOM skillfully ask this all in one question – “Do you support the president’s decision to conduct a ‘special military operation’ in Ukraine?” And they push the president’s supporters to agree to a military operation. Consequently, this question unites the category of people whose answers will be summarized in favor of government support.

Several studies show that the attitude of Russian citizens towards the Putin regime is largely due to what they see as a prevailing consensus in society. Speaking about the results of the surveys with inflated support for the government’s actions can further deepen the effect of the social desirability bias and make regime critics feel that they are in the minority. It also pushes people who have no established opinion to take a majority or, in this case, a pro-government position.

### **Public Protest Mood**

It is to be noted that the Russian military aggression in Ukraine was not followed by large-scale protests inside the country and the small demonstrations that took place in some cities across the country were severely suppressed by the police. As a rule, law enforcement agencies

intimidate Russian citizens and hinder them from expressing their protests. Russia's Investigative Committee and the Prosecutor General's Office have repeatedly warned citizens of the potential criminal liability for participating in unsanctioned demonstrations. The independent human rights media project OVD-Info reports that police detained 15,409 people including more than 170 minors between February 24 and April 6 due to the protest against the war. Protesters are often accused of discrediting the actions of the Russian armed forces and violating the procedure for holding a public event in the form of a rally.<sup>15</sup>

As for measuring the protest mood in numbers, this issue is just as biased as in the other cases mentioned above. The VCIOM report states that as of March 17 this year, only 18% of Russians believe that a mass protest rally is possible to hold in their district, although in such a case, 85% of respondents do not intend to take part in it.<sup>16</sup> According to the March 20 FOM survey, similarly, 77% of respondents did not express a desire to participate in the demonstrations.<sup>17</sup> As for the data of the Levada-center, the latest poll was focused on the anti-war protests that have already taken place which revealed several interesting factors: 41% of respondents have not even heard of these rallies where their main source of information is state television and the press. Among the most informed are young people (18-24 years old) for whom the Telegram channels are the daily source of information.<sup>18</sup>

The young generation is the potential protest force that could shake Putin's chair in the future. Numerous studies show that support for the Putin regime is waning most rapidly among the younger generation who actively use the internet and Western social media. Consequently, the Kremlin's restriction of social networks and internet resources is largely related to the "dangerous" sentiments of young people.

It is expected that public opinion in Russia will soon be significantly affected by the results of Western economic sanctions which are not yet sharply felt today. According to macroeconomic forecasts, the Russian economy will face a deep recession in 2022 with a 10% reduction in the country's GDP and an increase in inflation of more than 20%. This will inevitably affect the income and social status of ordinary Russian citizens as well as their attitude towards government decisions.

## **Conclusion**

The Russian government's decision to censor independent media and block Western social networks is another step toward a total information blockade of the public. The Kremlin seeks to minimize channels of communication that run counter to the state narrative and shape public opinion in favor of the government. Beyond the "digital curtain," the myth of the invincibility of the Russian army is being shattered every day, military losses are increasing and the plan to punish and subdue the Ukrainian government is failing. It can be said that Russia is losing the war outside the country but it is winning the struggle carried out inside the country against its own society. It is expected that in order to maintain the regime built over the last 20 years, the Kremlin will further strengthen its levers of control. However, repression and information blockades as a mechanism for stabilizing the Putin regime may be counterproductive in the long run.

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