#### **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# OPEN ACCESS

# Public Opinion Research on the Politics and Objectives of the Special Military Operation of the Russian Federation in Ukraine

Romanovich Nelli Alexandrovna 1

<sup>1</sup>Russian sociologist, Professor of the Department of Political Science and Political Administration of the Russian Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA - since 2012)

Corresponding Author: Romanovich

Nelli Alexandrovna

Russian sociologist, Professor of the Department of Political Science and Political Administration of the Russian Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA - since 2012). **Email:** nelly@qualitas.ru

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# **Abstract**

The special military operation of the Russian Federation in Ukraine has split the world into two opposing camps: supporters and opponents. In this regard, the opinion of the Russians themselves about the causes and goals of the military operation that has begun is being updated. The results of the all-Russian survey presented in the article reveal the ideas of Russians about the reasons and goals of the military operation, and also clarify the degree of its support from the population. The level of loyalty to the President of the Russian Federation after the outbreak of hostilities is considered, and a hypothesis is put forward that the level of support for the special operation may increase as it is successfully implemented.

#### 1. Introduction:

It is known that history does not tolerate subjunctive moods, but with a high degree of probability it can be argued that Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, launched on February 24, 2022, could have been avoided if Ukraine had not been keen in joining NATO and had not declared its claims to possess nuclear weapons. Potential threat to its own security and commitments to protect and release for eight years of shelling by the Ukrainian side the LPR and the DPR were the officially stated reasons for the start of the Special military Operation by Russia to demilitarize and denazification Ukraine.

The population of Russia itself was extremely painful to hear the news of the start of the special operation since hatred and aggression against the former fraternal power were not imposed (unlike in Ukraine) in our country. An embittered confrontation in the real information, including virtual space, led Russian researchers to unite and take an initiative to identify the attitude of Russians to the current situation.

This project of identifying Russian attitude brought together independent researchers and research companies in various regions - Moscow, Samara, Voronezh, Cheboksary, Kazan, and others. The project participants conducted a survey of residents of the Russian Federation above 18 years of age [1]. Data collection was carried out using a telephonic survey of residents of all regions of the Russian Federation on February 28 - March 1 on a random sample. A total of 1640 respondents were interviewed. A minimum of three contact

attempts were made to each potential respondent. The final sample was compiled based on sex, age, and education.

After Russia's recognition of the independence of the DPR and LPR on February 21, 2022 (at an extraordinary meeting of the Security Council against the background of the aggravated situation in the Donbas republic), treaties of friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance were signed with the heads of the republics who arrived in Moscow. Answers to the question: "Do you support or do not support the decision of the Russian Federation to recognize the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics by Russia? "¬, show that most Russians (70%) support this decision. Only 16% of Russian citizens do not support the recognition of the sovereignty of the republics. The remaining answers: "in some ways I support, in some ways not" - 4%," "I do not know anything about this decision" – 5%, and 4% refused to answer.

By recognizing the independence of the Luhansk and Donetsk republics and signing a mutual assistance agreement with them, Russia sent an unequivocal signal to Kiev that it intends to defend the DPR and LPR in the event of an attack on them. The Kiev authorities did not pay heed to the warning and continued to shell the republics contrary to the previously signed Minsk agreements. From the Kremlin rostrum, it was stated that "there was no other way out" than the start of a special military operation. What do Russian residents see as the reasons for the hostilities?

Russians answered this question on March 11-12, during the second wave of an all-Russian survey conducted

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by a group of independent research companies in various regions - Moscow, Samara, Voronezh, Cheboksary, Kazan, and others. A total of 1600 residents of Russia above 18 years of age were interviewed by telephonic interview [2]. One of the questions touched upon the reasons for the special military operation in Ukraine.

# What goals do you think Russia pursues during the military operation in Ukraine?

- Prevent the deployment of military bases on the territory of Ukraine to secure the borders of Russia -72%
- Liquidate nationalist organizations, disarm them 62%.
- Protect the population of Donbass (LPR and DPR) 61%
- Protect the rights of Russians in Ukraine 56%.
- To achieve the neutral status of Ukraine, not to allow it to join NATO – 50%.
- Disarm Ukraine, deprive the army threatening Russia 39%.
- Change the pro-Western political course of the current leadership of Ukraine – 40%.
- Return to Russia its ancestral lands 18%.
- Occupy Ukraine and annex it to Russia 8%.
- To destroy Ukraine as a state or to dismember it 6%.

The dominant answer to the question: "What goals do you think Russia pursues in conducting a military operation in Ukraine? "- turned out to be a judgment: "Not to allow the deployment of NATO military bases on the territory of Ukraine" - 72%. At the second and the third places were the answers: "Eliminate nationalist organizations, disarm them" (62%) and "Protect the Russian-speaking population of the DPR and LPR" (61%). The fourth was the opinion: "To protect the rights of Russians in Ukraine" - 5%." The following alternatives were not appreciated much: "occupy Ukraine and annex it to Russia" - 8%, "destroy Ukraine as a state or dismember it" - 6%.

Professor of Military History Martin van Creveld, in his book "The Rise and Fall of the State", believes that interstate war became a thing of the past already from the end of the XX century, since it lost its main attractive feature - the extraction of material benefits. The right of a sovereign state to wage war was nullified except for the purposes of self-defense, or "coercion to peace" [3, pp. 14-15].

Denouncing that the right of a sovereign state to wage war has now been abrogated in the public consciousness, except in cases of protection and self-defense, one can see the reasons for the legitimization of military actions by the Russians. Residents of the Russian Federation interpret the actions of their authorities as "protection" and "self-defense". Protection of the Russian-speaking population of the DPR and LPR and self-defense against the prospect of deploying NATO military bases on the territory of Ukraine. Simultaneously, there is a parallel task of the elimination and disarmament of nationalist organizations. Primarily that's how the officially announced task is projected: the demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine. Other answers fit into the framework of these two tasks.

One of the key issues was the degree of support for the special operation by Russian citizens (Chart 1).

War is always a catastrophe and a tragedy, especially if it is a war between former fraternal peoples. The fact that, in general, the majority of the population (58%) spoke in favor of supporting the military operation at its very beginning indicates a fairly high level of loyalty to the actions of the country's leadership and, if I may say so, a priori trust, since people have not yet had time to understand what is happening and develop their own opinions. Noteworthy, is that 23% of respondents did not support military actions at the end of February. But in early March, this number fell to 14%, and the number in support of decision jumped to 80%.

Answers to the question: "What do you think Ukraine as a country, or the policies of its leadership pose a danger to the Russian Federation sufficient to launch large-scale hostilities throughout the territory of Ukraine? ", showed how the number of supporters of a particular judgment has changed in the two weeks of the operation (Chart 2).

The number of those who believe that Russia was a danger to Ukraine increased from 54% to 69%. As the age bar of respondents increases, confidence in the danger posed by Ukraine increases. With an increase in the level of well-being, this indicator also increases.

Since 2014, it was obvious that the West would use Ukraine as a tool of putting political pressure on Russia. The main hypothesis of many experts today is that the war is not between Ukraine and Russia, but against the neo-Nazi regime, supported by global players in our historical territory. The manipulated and controlled civil war is gradually melting into an inter-civilizational confrontation. There is an opinion that Russia with its special operation prevents the development of events similar to Yugoslav.

Although many media outlets have begun to call the special operation a war, it is not quite a war, and if it is a war, it is not at all ordinary. War is fought with the enemy, and Russia does not consider Ukraine an enemy. Moreover, the Russian military was ordered not to shoot at civilian targets and instructed to save the lives of civilians as much as possible. So, the war is not conducted, the way a special operation is conducted. The special operation is stretched beyond its limits as the Ukrainian authorities are not at all concerned about the lives of civilians. Ukrainian troops put their weapons in residential areas, near schools and kindergartens, use local residents as a human shield, do not allow them to escape from the encirclement, keeping them in basements and mined buildings. This is what the enemies do to the people they have conquered. It turns out that the Ukrainian army does not spare its own people, while it is obliged to protect and preserve them. Whereas, the Russian army, on the contrary, spares and protects the Ukrainian people to the detriment of the speed of implementation of the plans of the planned special operation. Disregard for the lives of its own people seems to be a characteristic feature of the Ukrainian authorities, which distributes weapons to everyone who desired to have without counting. The Ukrainian authorities have long been at war with their own people – and the eightyear war in the Donbas is direct proof of this. Russia acts like a doctor who intends to cut a malignant tumor from the patient's body, while preserving his life and health. The tumor itself always seeks to capture the entire body and dies with it.

But the Ukrainians themselves, possibly, may not yet understand this and protest against the doctor who proceeds to him with a scalpel. After all, there is a mental war going



against Russian civilization and the post-Soviet space, which occupies second place after the nuclear one in terms of danger. Entire people and civilizations are immersed in an artificially created reality, national self-consciousness and common historical memory are destroyed.

Based on the survey reports many Russians understand that Russian troops will face mixed attitudes from the Ukrainian population. The survey clearly projects that the Russian citizens have no illusions as to how Ukrainians will meet and treat Russian soldiers, of course not with flowers and songs (Chart 3).

The most popular answer was and remains the option of a hostile meeting of Russian troops. However, during the two weeks of the special operation, this number decreased from 41% to 29%. And the hypothesis about the likelihood of a friendly meeting increased the number of its supporters from 17% to 27%. The older the respondents, the more hope they have for a friendly meeting of Russian troops. The reason, apparently, is that the old people have not severed ties with fraternal Ukraine in their hearts and sincerely believe that Russian troops are liberating the Ukrainian people from the Bandits, Azov, Aidar and so on. At least, it is quite possible to count on a friendly meeting

on the part of the residents of the DPR and LPR, who have been subjected to shelling for the past 8 years.

In the Russian media, the term "liberation" prevails. "But I didn't ask to be released/ liberated!" – social networks explode with such remarks. Inevitable casualties are happening among the Ukrainian civilian population as well as Russians themselves.

Russian citizens have relatives or acquaintances in Ukraine with whom they can maintain a lively connection and learn not only the chronicle of "first-hand" events, but also the attitude of Ukrainians to the operation. Answers to the question: "Do you have close acquaintances and relatives living today in Ukraine?

If so, have you communicated with them through any means of communication in the last week? ", – showed that every third resident of Russia has friends and relatives among Ukrainians. Of these, 19% of respondents did not maintain contact with them after the start of the special operation, 11% of Russians contacted once or twice with Ukrainian acquaintances and relatives, and 2% of residents of our country maintain constant contact with Ukrainians close to them. Why? To comfort, to help, to calm, to support in difficult times...

Chart 1
Do you support or do not support the military operation of Russia in the territory of Ukraine?

Poll time:	28 February - 1 March	11-12 March
Of course, I support/Probably support	58%	80%
In some ways I support, in some ways I do not support	6%	0%
Primarily not supporting/of course not supporting	23%	14%
I find it difficult to answer	12%	5%
Opting Out of Response	1%	1%

Chart 2 Ukraine as a country or the policy of its leadership was sufficient for Russia to start large-scale military operations throughout Ukraine?

Poll time:	28 February - 1 March	11-12 March
Yes, Ukraine posed a danger/Possibly yes	54%	69%
Probably no/no, Ukraine did not pose a threat	28%	25%
I find it difficult to answer	17%	6%
Opting Out of Response	1%	0%

Chart 3
What do you think whether most of the Ukraine population meets Russian Troops in friendly, neutral, or hostile manner?

Poll time:	28 February - 1 March	11-12 March
Friendly	17%	27%
Neutral	11%	24%
Hostile	41%	29%
I find it difficult to answer	31%	20%



It is obvious that the emotions of the inhabitants of a besieged country cannot be positive – they are fear and pain even in the case of an initially friendly attitude towards Russia or hatred and aggression in the case of a hostile attitude towards it. The exceptions are the DPR and LPR, which are no longer Ukraine, and conduct a joint operation together with Russian troops. The population of the Donetsk and Luhansk republics, which has suffered for eight years, welcomes Russian soldiers as deliverers, although shelling of sovereign republics continues, and people continue to die. But they still have hope.

One must not forget that the Russian army also suffers losses. As the survey projected, 28% of the country's residents have military personnel among relatives and people close to them. The issue of casualties is inextricably linked to the timing of the military operation in Ukraine (Chart 4).

In early March, Russians most often believed that the war would last several months (39%). At the same time, some hoped that it would be completed in a few weeks (25%) or even in a few days (4%). But these are optimistic forecasts. The pessimists suspect that the war can last for a long time, and Russia has the danger of "getting bogged down" on the territory of Ukraine. Then, depending on how events unfold, the Russian army may face a guerrilla movement and sabotage activities paid for by Western "unfriendly" countries.

Do Russians believe in the victory of the Russian army? Answers to the question: "What do you think whether Russia will succeed or not succeed in achieving a military victory over Ukraine (surrender of the troops of Ukraine)?" ", – indicate that the majority of the country's residents believe in Russian victory (Chart 5).

The number of Russians convinced of the victory of Russian troops in a couple of weeks increased from 73% to 89%. The number of supporters of the opposite opinion has not yet changed - 5%.

The valuable relation with brotherly country makes the military operations in Ukraine much more complex. Conflicts having values attached to it are unique and complex. As a rule, nothing can replace values. Therefore, Ukrainian national battalions, supporters of Stepan Bandera, are fighting to the death, not sparing even the lives of civilians, acting in relation to them as terrorists.

Modern war is not so much the seizure of territories as much the capture the world map and manipulation with the information to an extent. Due to simultaneously ongoing information war, it is difficult to rely upon any one source. When asked about the most preferred source of information, most of the respondents depended on the following mediums for obtaining information in early March (Chart 6).

While answering this question, respondents were asked to indicate up to three main sources of information, so the sum of the answers exceeds 100%. Almost three-quarters of Russians draw information about the special operation from TV channels (73%). Mobile phones rank second as a source of information (66%). In third place are computers, Notebook, and tablets (44%). The older the respondents, the more often they make up the television audience, the younger – the sooner they use YouTube

channels and social networks through mobile phones and computers. The radio is frequently used by motorists, and the print media retained a very small audience (8%).

According to the survey on February 28 - March 1, Internet sites (including foreign ones) are used by 24% of respondents. YouTube channels are used by 12% of Russians. Every tenth respondent trusts information acquired from friends, relatives, and colleagues only (10%). Bloggers on Instagram are trusted by 7% of the country's citizens and the same number of respondents (7%) use the news of the telegram channel. Of the popular social networks, the VKontakte group (in Contact) enjoys the greatest authority (5%), Odnoklasniki (batch mates) occupies second place - 2%, and the Facebook is in the third position (1%). Only 2% of respondents do not follow a special military operation.

The question of the fairness of a special military operation is actually a question of its legitimacy. A fair war inspires soldiers who willingly accepts death, any doubts in the fairness of military operations undermine the success of the military campaign. An attempt has been made to evaluate the number of Russians united by the sense of justice of the military operation in Ukraine. (Chart 7)

It turned out that 84% of Russians consider the military campaign fair. The opposite opinion is held by 10% of respondents. It turns out that every tenth resident of Russia denies the justice of the military special operation in Ukraine. Within the framework of a huge country (145 million people), this is not so small – about 15 million citizens. What actions are they willing to take in defense of their beliefs? (Chart 8).

Some have not even heard of anti-war protests (23%), but the majority have heard and do not support such actions at all (59%). Only 3% of respondents are ready to actively protest today. Whether they take to the streets or not depends on two factors: success in the battlefield and in the information battle. The United West is waging a powerful and well-paid information attack on Russia with the aim of smearing the actions of the Russian armed forces and presenting Russian citizens as something like monsters unworthy of living on earth.

Especially a lot of insinuations from the West are directed against the commander-in-chief of the Russian Federation. How does the Russian population perceive its President today? On March 11-12, Russian citizens appreciated the work of the head of state (Chart 9).

In general, 84% of Russians are confident that Vladimir Vladimirovich is working well as Russian President. 10% of respondents accuse the President of the Russian Federation of bad work. It can interpreted as these are the same 10% respondents, who consider this special operation unfair. But at the rallies, as the survey showed, not all of them are ready to go.

However, the problems facing the country does not always can afford to take into cognizance the troubles of ordinary people, it has its own difficulties and troubles. Therefore, the answers of Russians to the question of the compliance of the President's activities with the interests of ordinary people are relevant (Chart 10%).

If at the beginning of the military operation 59% of Russians were confident in the compliance of V.V. Putin's



activities with their interests, then two weeks later this number rose to 73%. The number of negative answers decreased not much (from 21% to 19%). Personal interests do not always coincide with the interests of the country, and this is understandable - blocked accounts, the impossibility of international transactions, canceled flights of airliners, restrictions in the field of Internet resources (as a consequence of Western sanctions) do not meet the interests of Russian residents.

However, the support of the commander-in-chief by the majority of the country's population is undeniable (Chart 11).

Most Russians want Vladimir Putin to stay in office for as long as possible. This desire increases from 55% among young people to 80% among the elderly (according to the results of the survey on February 28-March 1). And after two weeks of military operation in Ukraine, the overall indicator of the desire for the immensity of the incumbent leader jumped to 78%.

15-16% of respondents want to change the leader (this figure has not changed much in two weeks). Consequently, the share of those who support V.V. Putin has increased due to the fact that those who found it difficult to answer earlier have decided on their opinion.

Support for the special operation, like the President of the Russian Federation, depends on two factors: the success of the special operation and its transience. If the military campaign drags on, especially if it goes into a guerrilla phase, then the support of the population will become very controversial. This is warned by military theorists, in particular Martin van Creveld, in his book "The Transformation of War" [4]. He argues that since nuclear war cannot be used to resolve interstate contradictions, "low-intensity" conflicts take its place. In this kind of sluggish conflicts, there is a chance for a powerful state to lose to an incomparably weaker opponent if it "gets bogged down" in the enemy's territory. From the author's point of view, this may indicate that we are expecting changes in military strategy, focusing it on counter-guerrilla actions. In the future, according to the author, this may lead to the fact that the old norms of humanitarian law (the law of war) separating the military and civilian may become a thing of the past or seriously altered.

#### **Findings**

Russia's goal of liberating the Russian and Ukrainian peoples from the neo-Nazi regime in neighboring Ukraine has provoked opposition from our country and almost the rest of the world. The toggle switch of hatred, which

had not yet cooled down since the Cold War, easily turned on again. Russia once again became convinced that it has only two reliable allies: the army and the navy. The "empire of lies" fans aggression among its population by turning off Russian information sources. It is surprising that in the eight-year suffering, the Donbas and the blood of the murdered children did not bother the world community at all, in which the pacifists were revealed only with the beginning of the military operation of Russia.

There is no doubt, and the results of the polls prove that Russian society is divided: the majority of the population supports the special operation in Ukraine, and less than a quarter of the respondents are opposed. The confrontation began not with the beginning of the military operation, but long before it. During the eight years of the war in the Donbas, the confrontation between the Russians declared itself sometimes in latent, and sometimes in completely open forms. There have been family conflicts and even divorces for political reasons, as well as fierce confrontations in the real and informational, including virtual space. Some hotheads today are trying to sever friendly and even family ties with those who disagree with their opinions. This is a misguided tactic and a failed strategy. The truth in any case will make its way, you just need to wait.

The study demonstrates the support of the majority of the Russian population for the military operation in the first two weeks from its start. At the same time, many who have not decided on their position are also revealed. Their opinion, like the opinion of the rest of the population, will depend not only on the preponderance of forces in the information war. Numerous fakes, as well as other information tosses, give a short-term effect that is erased by memory behind everyday worries. Mainly, the support of the population will be determined by the success of the operation (not only militarily, but also in relation to the savings of the Ukrainian population), as well as its transience. In modern wars, there is a risk of "getting bogged down" on the enemy's territory if the conflict becomes sluggish. One thing is certain - ending a war is immeasurably harder than starting it. Today, the slogan has become very common: "The war has not begun, it is ending!".

Current hopes for an end to the war are clouded by the anxiety of the possibility of a local military operation escalating into World War III with the use of nuclear weapons.

Chart 4
How long do you think the military campaign that began on February 24 will last?
a few days, a few weeks, a few months or will Russia get involved in a long war?





# Chart 5 Do you think That Russia will or will not be able to achieve in a military war -victory over Ukraine?

Poll time:	28 February - 1 March	11-12 March
I am sure that it will succeed, Russia will win/Possibly will be successful	73%	89%
Perhaps, it will not succeed /I am sure that it will not succeed, Russia will not win	5%	5%
I find it difficult to answer	21%	5%
Opting Out of Response	1%	1%

#### Chart 6

Over the past seven days, have you used the following sources to get news about the hostilities in Ukraine?

Television – 73%
Radio or car radio – 22%
Computer, Notebook or Tablet – 44%
Mobile phone – 66%
Print newspapers or magazines – 8%
Some other way – 2%
I find it difficult to answer – 1%

#### Chart 7

## Do you think Russia is waging a fair or unfair military campaign in Ukraine?

I'm sure fair/rather fair – 84% Possibly not fair/sure not fair – 10% I find it difficult to answer – 6% Refusal to answer – 1%

#### Chart 8

In several cities, people dissatisfied with the hostilities in Ukraine took to the streets to protest. Have you heard of this and are you ready to protest the war yourself?

- Did not hear anything about the protests 23%
- Heard about the protests, but do not support them 59%
- I have heard about the protests, and I mentally agree with them, but I will not go to the street myself 11%
- Would be ready to join the protesters or have already participated in protests against the war 3%
- I find it difficult to answer 4%

#### Chart 9

### Do you think Vladimir Putin is doing a good job as President of Russia or bad?

Good – 58% Possibly good – 26% Rather bad – 5% Bad – 5% I find it difficult to answer – 4% Refusal to answer – 1%

#### Chart 10

### Do you think that the current activity of the President of Russia meets the interests of people like you?

Poll time:	28 February - 1 March	11-12 March
Definitely it doesn't respond/rather doesn't respond	21%	19%
Rather answers/unconditionally responds	59%	73%
I don't know anything about his activities.	7%	0%
I find it difficult to answer	9%	7%
Opting Out of Response	3%	1%



Chart 11 How is it better for Russia if Vladimir Putin remained at the head of the country as long as possible, or is it better for a new leader to stand at the head of the country?

Poll time:	28 February - 1 March	11-12 March
It's definitely better to stay as long as possible/stay as long as possible.	66%	78%
Rather, you should look for a new leader / certainly you need to look for a new leader	16%	15%
I find it difficult to answer	14%	6%
Opting Out of Response	3%	1%

Nuclear weapons currently remain a key deterrent to military confrontation. The likelihood of its use is reduced by reason of the sanity of the rulers who have such weapons at their disposal. Nuclear weapons can provide a country with absolute protection, but it is not possible to wage wars between powers that possess nuclear weapons, because in such a war there will be no winners, but only victims. Therefore, the nuclear powers agreed, not paying attention to the presence of nuclear capabilities, to conduct conventional wars with high-precision weapons. Russian leaders have repeatedly stated that they do not plan to use nuclear weapons in the course of a military operation. Moreover, Russia in every possible way protects the Zaporizhzhya nuclear power plant from Ukrainian shells that arrive at the station, despite the presence of the IAEA. In the event of a direct hit to a nuclear reactor, a catastrophe of a European scale is possible. The Russian government hopes that the world community will pay attention to Ukraine's provocations and will contribute to their cessation.

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