

# The Athena Project

## Russian citizens on the “special military operation” in Ukraine - independent opinion poll

On February 24, 2022, the armed forces of the Russian Federation invaded Ukraine. Russian Government officially called it a "special military operation" (SMO). A group of independent sociologists and IT specialists came together to conduct a unique opinion poll using the best-practice phone interview methodology that protected the respondents' safety and privacy.

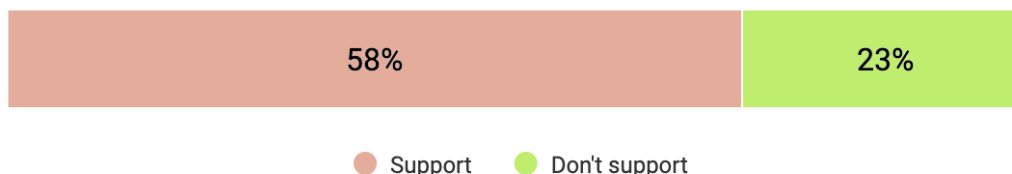
The survey was designed with neutrally-worded questions and **1,640** respondents were interviewed via professional call centers between **February 28 and March 1, 2022** (on the fifth or sixth day of the SMO), with a stratified sampling method producing **a nationally representative sample of Russian residents aged 18 and over**. The final sample was weighted by gender, age, and education. Statistical error estimates did not exceed **2.6%**, indicating that the data can be confidently interpreted.

The findings of this survey are so significant that the research team posted all the study materials (questionnaire, data set, and reporting tables)

<https://extremescan.eu>.

Background: Vladimir Putin announced the start of SMO on national TV. He delivered an extensive speech justifying his decision on geopolitical grounds. Unlike the Crimean operation, Putin took full responsibility for the operation from its very beginning, and he remained the spokesperson of SMO on TV screens for two weeks. His exposure becomes an essential basis for the perception of this historical event at its initial stage.

Responses to the survey's main question showed **58%** of the sample supporting the military operation, with **23%** opposing it and the rest undecided.

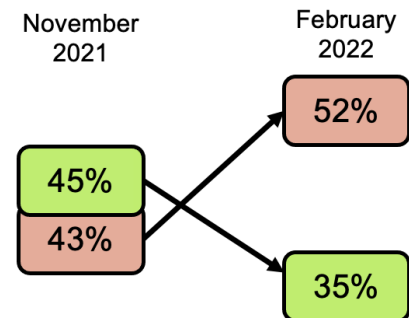


What drives this level of support for such a risky, costly decision with far-reaching consequences? It seems to be due, to a large extent, to the perceived credibility of the Commander-in-Chief, who put forward an extensive historical justification for the military operation (unusual for the Russian audiences).

Systematic psychological and political preparation for a military operation has been evident over the past several years. State propaganda used carefully selected information and opinions to convince people that the use of military force is an acceptable means of achieving national interests.

State television and other mass media were used systematically to paint Ukraine as an enemy.

According to the Levada Center (declared foreign agent), in just the last three months, public attitudes towards Ukraine changed from **45% positive (43% negative)** in November 2021 to 35% positive and 52% negative in February 2022.



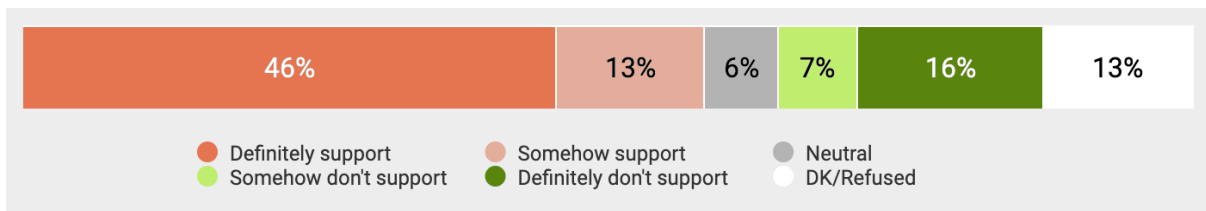
The virtual special military operation began long before the real action.

Our survey's estimate of the attitudes towards SMO in its first week may not reflect the attitudes towards the actual event and its consequences and instead may be related more closely to its representation in the official Russian mass media.

## APPROVAL OF MILITARY OPERATION

**58%** of the sample supported overall the military operation, with **23%** overall opposing it.

We discover a high level of certainty in opinion: certainly three times more supportive than certainly not-supportive (**46% vs 16%**).



## FACTORS OF APPROVAL

Russian society is showing an increasing split.

We found no significant gender differences, and little variation across geographical regions (with respondents from the Siberian Region reporting lower levels of support to SMO).

Demographic factors potentially influencing support ratings included having a son of conscription age, a relative in reserve, and age as a potential covariate.

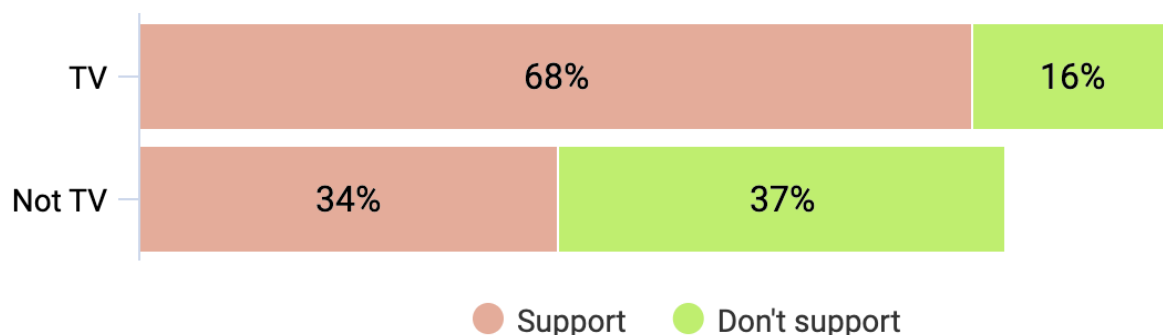
Survey data indicates no widespread fear of conscription due to Putin's promise not to use conscripts. Support for military operations may be linked to the public's confidence in the military superiority of the Russian (professional) forces, the carefully guarded lack of information about casualties, and the belief that the operation is nearing completion.

Age (generation) is a key differential compounded by the preferred information sources. This explains the hybrid nature of this SMO, with extensive media support and the desecration of all independent media.

The most decisive factor influencing the SMO perception is the channels of receiving information, television, first of all.

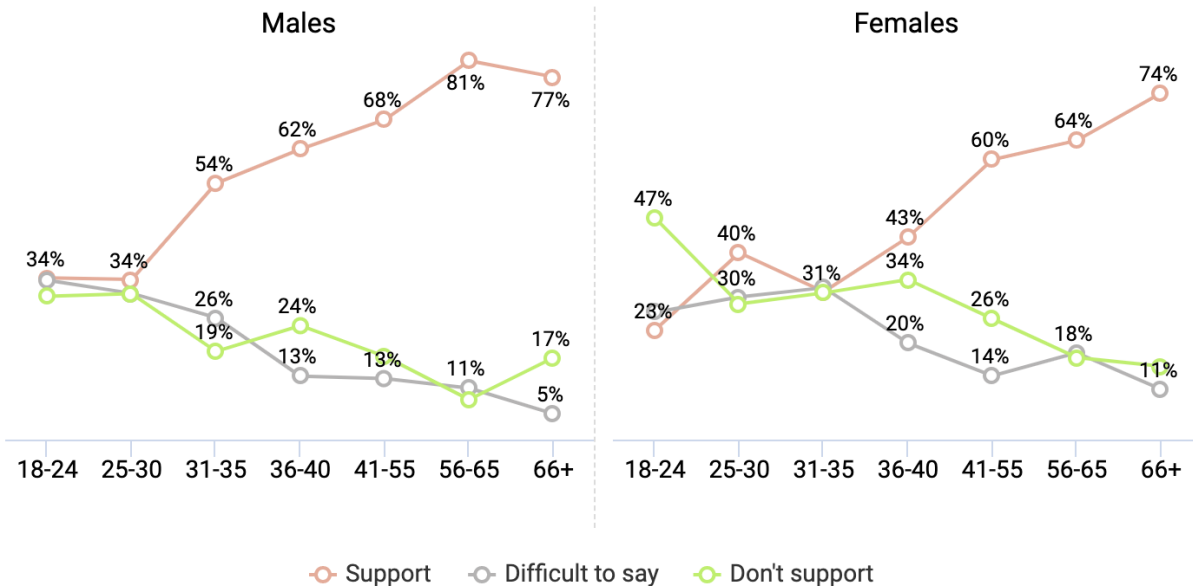
**71% use television** as a source of information, **28% do not use TV**.

A growing division in Russian society is evident, driven by the respondents' TV viewing habits. Among those reporting TV as their main news source, **68% support** the SMO and **16% oppose** it. The same proportion stands at **34% vs 37%** among non-TV viewers.



TV viewing habits correlate with age: the older the respondents the more they prefer TV over alternative sources of information.

Only **29% of 18-24-year-olds** support SMO (against **39%** of non-support), but this support gets higher with each age bracket and reaches **75% in the 66+** age group.

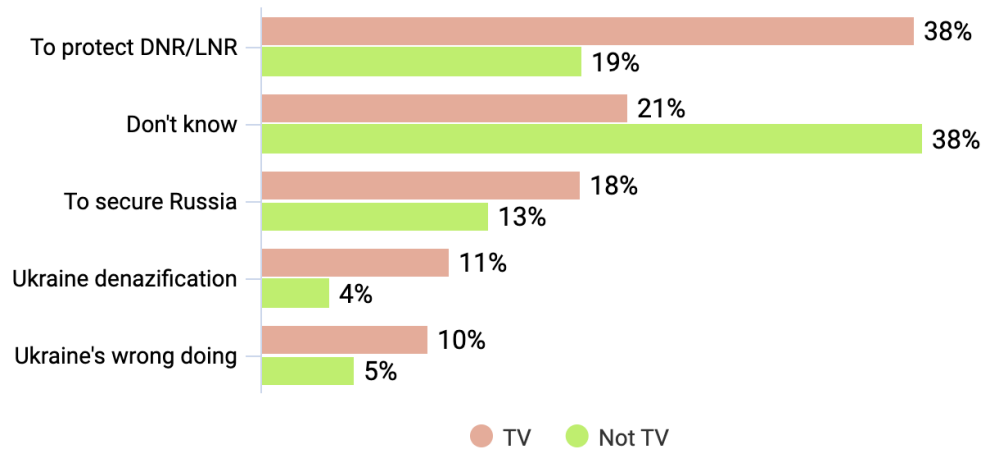


## OBJECTIVES OF THE OPERATION

**65% of TV viewers** believe that Ukraine poses a threat to Russia, while only **18% of non-TV viewers** agree.

However, many respondents (**21% of TV viewers** and **38% of non-viewers**) reported being confused by the Government's objectives for the SMO. The initially declared goal of the SMO (to protect and assist the DPR/LPR) worked best of all, with **38%**

of TV viewers supporting it and **19%** of non-TV viewers opposing it.



## DYNAMICS OF THE RHETORIC

The official rhetoric of SMO has changed dramatically in less than two weeks.

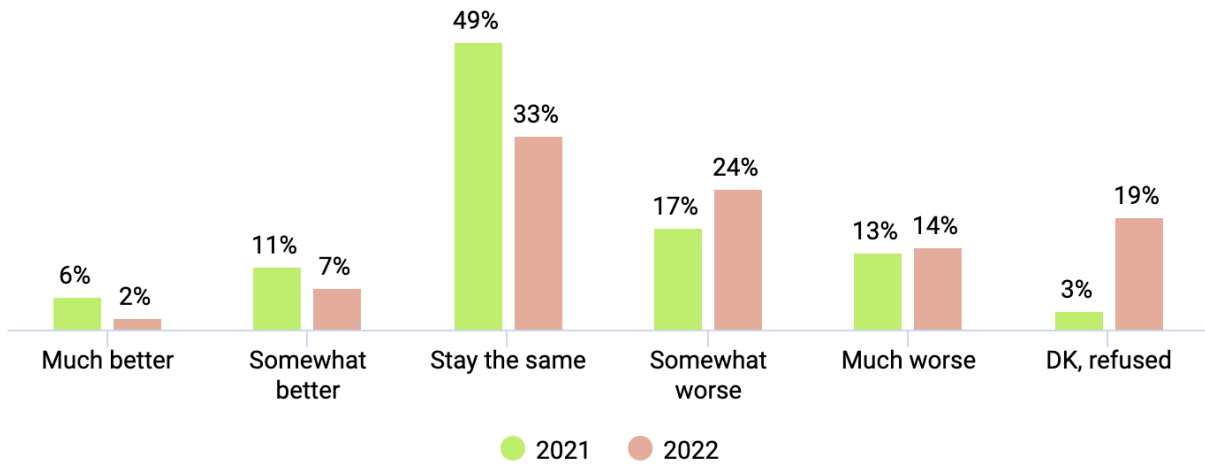
Protecting the Russians in the DPR/LPR as the main reason for recognizing the republics was replaced within two days for a grand geopolitical claim of restoring historical justice, "demilitarisation and denazification", resulting in the announcement of SMO.

Despite the catchy semantics of the new terms "demilitarisation and denazification", they have not gained popularity among the human population who are more supportive of the peaceful goals of protecting Donbas and Russia's security (**32%** and **17%** support, respectively).

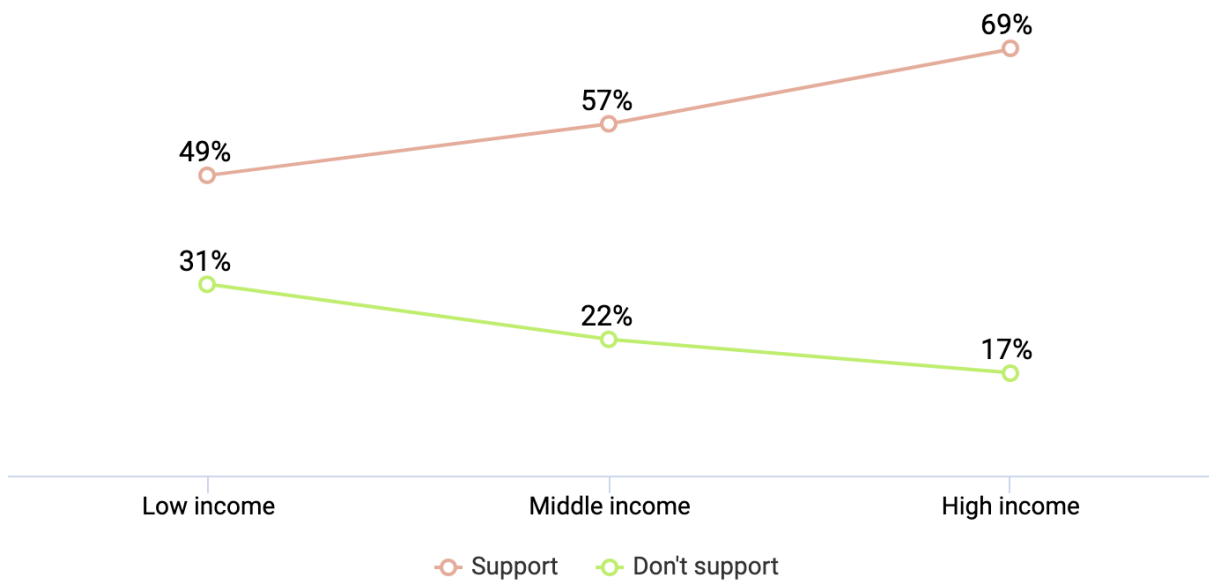
## FRIDGE VS TV

**41%** of the sample expect their family finances will deteriorate, while **9%** remain optimistic.

We compared the change in the self-estimation of the family **financial status in 2021 and expectations in 2022**.



Further analysis is required to understand why lower income correlated with less support for SMO: **49%** versus **69%** in the high-income group.



More pessimistic low-income people are anxious about the state projects requiring new public spending.

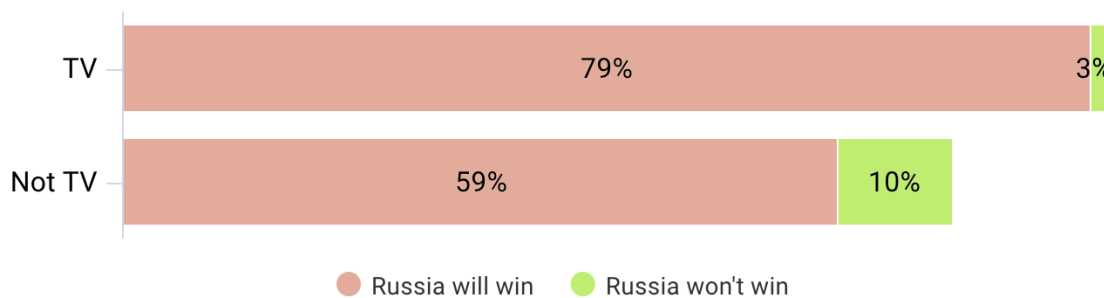
## EXPECTATIONS OF SUCCESS

The speed with which the initial goal to protect the citizens of the DPR/LPR transformed into forcing a complete surrender of the Ukrainian troops is perplexing.

Even more so is the ease with which the public has accepted this shift: **73% expect a military victory soon** (87% among those who support SMO and 50% among those who do not).

	Total	Support Invasion	Don't support Invasion
Russia will win	73%	↑ 87%	↓ 50%
Russia won't win	5%	↓ 2%	↑ 18%

**18%** of those opposing SMO do not believe military victory is possible, with only **2%** of SMO supporters sharing that view.



## WHAT'S NEXT

We expect more questions addressed once we complete the analysis of the current survey data.

More realistic attitudes may materialize once the rapidly unfolding events stabilize over the ensuing weeks and months. The inevitable human losses will become known, the economic situation will change dramatically, and people will realize the gravity of their losses and future deprivation.

Current events, no matter what their immediate results within weeks, are likely to produce the most challenging period in the post-war history of Russia. Despite the propaganda machine working overtime to blame external factors, the Russian public's attitudes towards SMO cannot escape serious reality checks.

That is a matter of the future work of sociologists.

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