

Respondents' cooperation in surveys on military operations

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The material was written at the request of the ExtremeScan agency, based on data from surveys conducted by VCIOM, FOM, as well as groups of independent researchers.

Shortly after the start of the military operation against Ukraine, Russian lawmakers drafted a series of laws restricting the freedom of expression and opinion on the activities of various state institutions, including the armed forces.

The polls conducted after the laws had been passed showed very high support for the actions of Russian troops.

A significant number of observers and even sociological theorists have expressed doubts about the very possibility of conducting public opinion polls in wartime conditions. For example, the philosopher and sociologist Grigory Yudin directly argues: "I would forbid the conduct of polls under wartime conditions".

One way or another, experts came up with **two hypotheses**.

Firstly, the hypothesis that potential respondents refuse to participate in surveys. If this were the case, the refusal rate should have increased compared to similar surveys conducted earlier.

The second hypothesis was that a significant proportion of respondents participated in the surveys, but answered evasively, cautiously, or simply followed the social norm, repeating popular statements rather than their own point of view.

Key findings

- The number of refusals to participate in surveys conducted under the conditions of Russia's military campaign in Ukraine did not increase in comparison with the surveys conducted in 2022. The hypothesis about the decrease in the cooperation of respondents did not prove to be true.
- The influence of how crucial the topic of the survey was on the willingness of respondents to cooperate was not detected either.
- Nevertheless, the opponents of the dominant, state-approved viewpoint responded cautiously to the survey, so one must assume that the question wording and the order of the questions, the length, variability, and flexibility of the scales may have a meaningful effect on the distribution of responses to key questions.
- The opponents of military action are so shocked by the opposing viewpoint and the proportion of its supporters that they assume that the latter have been intimidated and only for that reason express support for the military operation.

Refusal dynamics

In the first case, the refusal rate in mass sociological surveys should have increased. However, the paradata collected in regular RDD surveys (using a random sample of telephone numbers), which represent the population of the Russian Federation, do not show any significant changes in the respondents' cooperation.

According to the data obtained, there is no significant increase in the refusal rate in March 2022 compared to 2021 (6-7%).

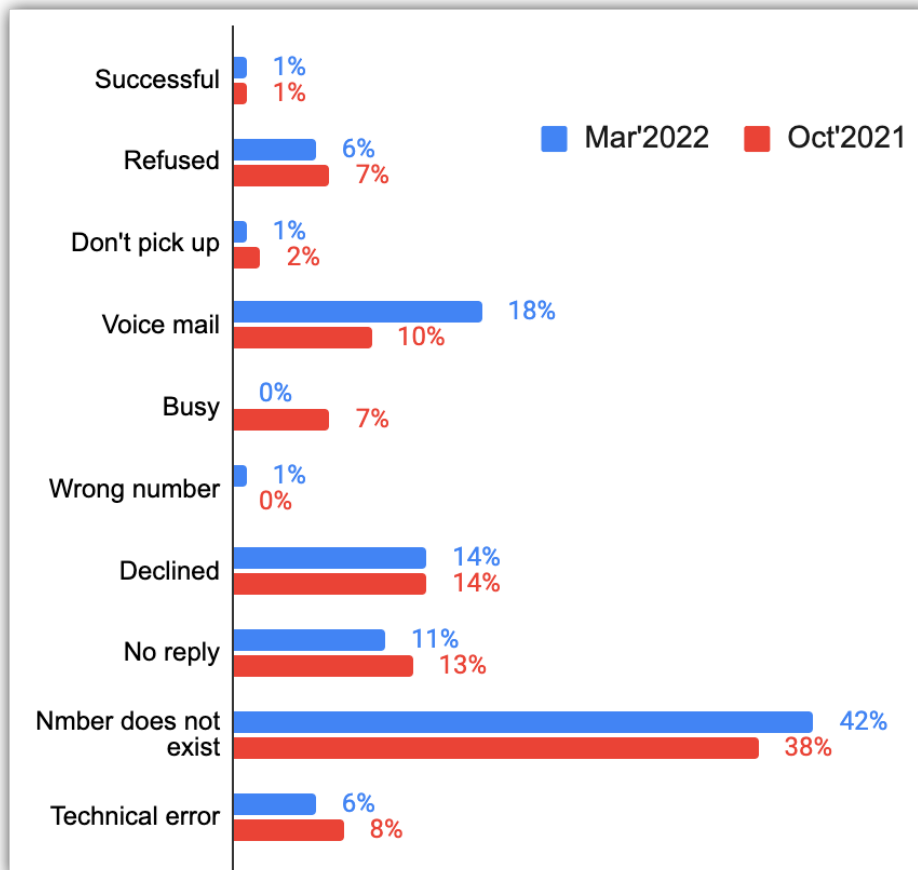


Fig 1. Dynamics of the status of attempts to contact respondents in the course of nationwide surveys in the Russian Federation (2021-2022)

This contradicts the data provided by Russian Field, which presented its data (<https://russianfield.com/mirumir>). However, they do not provide an exact description of the data collection method (in particular, they confuse quota and random collection methods), as well as do not indicate exactly when and on what samples the arrays were collected in 2021.

Other researchers point to shifts in the structure of the final sample as a consequence of some potential respondents avoiding participation in the survey. For example, Mikhail Dymshits, drawing his conclusions from VCIOM data on Internet penetration, made the assumption that there were significantly fewer Internet users in the sample, and thus fewer young, educated Russians.

Alexei Kireev (<https://kireev.livejournal.com/1969621.html>) makes the same point, citing data from the Public Opinion Foundation (FOM).

Indeed, if we consider a longer period of time, for example, from December 2021 to March 2022, we can see significant fluctuations in these parameters.

As seen in Figure 2, the share of the youngest age group, although having fluctuated between 5% and 8% throughout the period, was 6% in other periods (December 2021).

Overall, however, while the average proportion of the youth group in the first four measurements shown in the figure, that is, before the beginning of military operations, was 7%, it remained at 6% after the outbreak of hostilities. For such large samples (1,600 for one measurement date and 6,400 for four dates), this decrease is significant at the level of 95%. In other words, it is the youngest age group that avoids participation in surveys under wartime conditions.

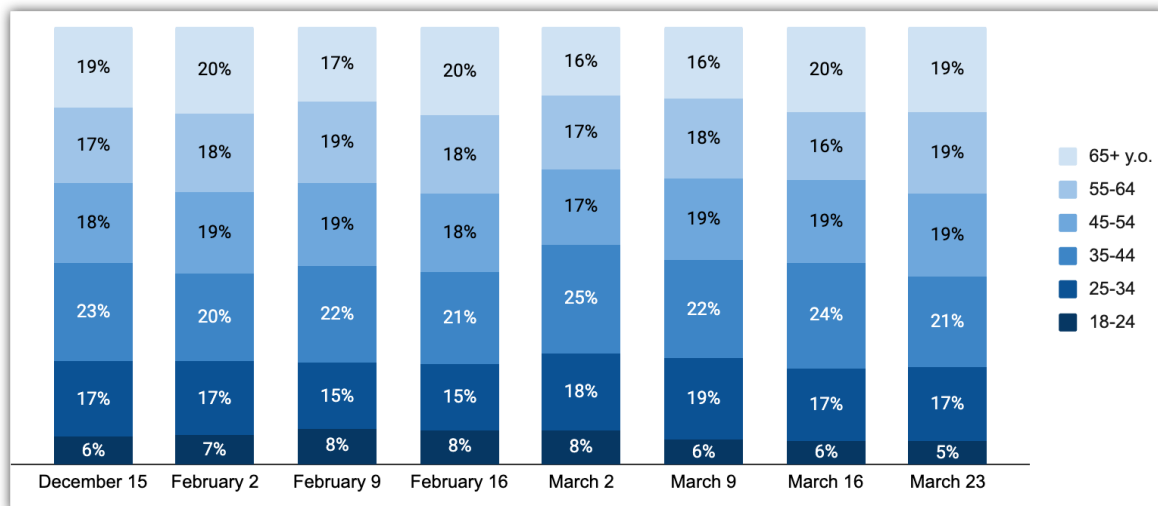


Fig. 2. Dynamics of different age groups' representation in the final sample in the Sputnik daily surveys. (VCIOM, N=1600, 2021-2022, unweighted data)

Qualitative surveys also show that it is the younger respondents who demonstrate the greatest wariness in discussing the subject of war and peace.

This is partly demonstrated by the quantitative surveys that have been conducted, in which youth groups most often give vague answers. It is difficult at this point to assert the reason for this particular group's avoidance of participation.

We can assume that for young men one important factor is the existential threat, because it is they who will have to be drafted to the front, and they prefer to avoid discussing this topic with strangers who may be affiliated with the state authorities involved in the mobilization.

Nevertheless, small fluctuations in the socio-demographic structure of the sample cannot lead to significant changes in the distribution of responses to substantive questions.

As can be seen in Figure 3, even with a significant shift in the representation of youth groups, the sample does not cease to cover the audience of active Internet users.

As we can see, the shift we have detected does not lead to a shift even in such age-dependent variables as Internet usage. And we can assume that it does not create a shift in attitudes toward the invasion either.

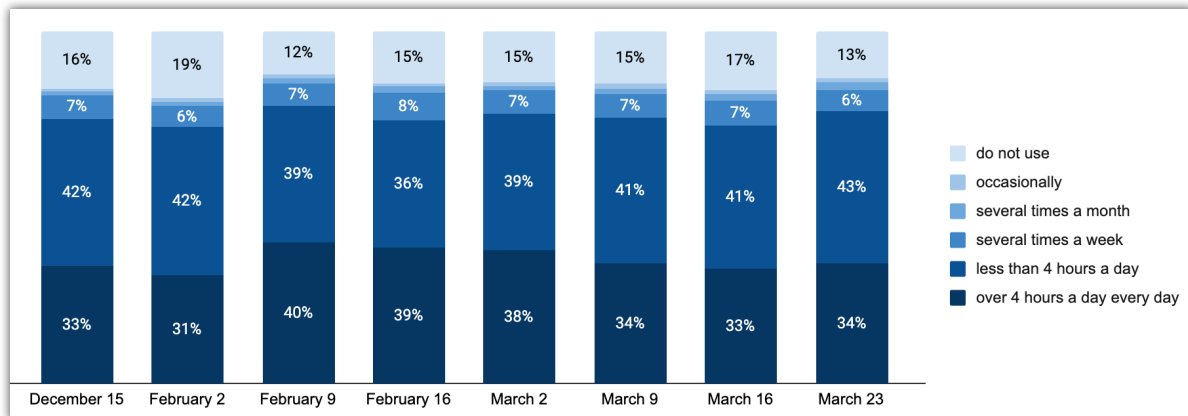


Fig. 3. Dynamics of different Internet activity groups' representation in the final sample in the Sputnik daily surveys (VCIOM, N=1600, 2021-2022, unweighted data)

The interviews in which respondents had refused to participate in the survey were also listened to. Part of potential respondents (3 out of 32 randomly selected interrupted interviews listened to) spoke about the topic of the survey (all of them were men 30-40 years old).

After the interviewer's greeting, which included introducing the topic of the survey, one person declared that "Russia will win". Two others said that "there is no military action in Ukraine". Based on the content of what the successful respondents were saying, such texts characterize supporters of the war rather than its opponents.

One can assume that if these refusers had been persuaded to participate in the survey, they would have been more likely to express support for the decision.

Of course, respondents were also able to interrupt the interview during the interview itself. First of all, it should be remembered that telephone surveys use a technical communication channel and there may be interruptions, partly due to technical reasons (the channel is not perfect).

Also, respondents can become tired, distracted, etc. In other words, interruptions do not necessarily occur because a respondent does not want to discuss the question.

The influence of the topic of the survey and the sensitivity of particular questions for respondents can be detected only where a large number of interviews are interrupted. If, however, the number of active respondents decreases gradually, we are most likely dealing with technical problems and trivial respondent fatigue (physical or mental).

The interview began with a question about the region of residence. It was answered by 2439 respondents, while the last question was answered by 1627 respondents. And almost 75% of all interruptions occurred in the first 5 substantive questions.

Most likely, it was the subject and the nature of the questions that prevented some respondents from continuing the interview, although the subject had been mentioned in the introduction. Overall, the decrease in the number of respondents during the course of the

interview in this survey did not differ from many other surveys similar to this one in terms of topic and length.

It would be incorrect to claim that refusal to discuss this topic is due to fear of some kind of penalty for giving "wrong answers". Experience shows that, more often than not, respondents do not consider themselves qualified enough to make judgments on this or that topic. Therefore, the sample population suffers the greatest losses in the first questions of the interview, when respondents decide to avoid the subject of the conversation that is of no interest to them.

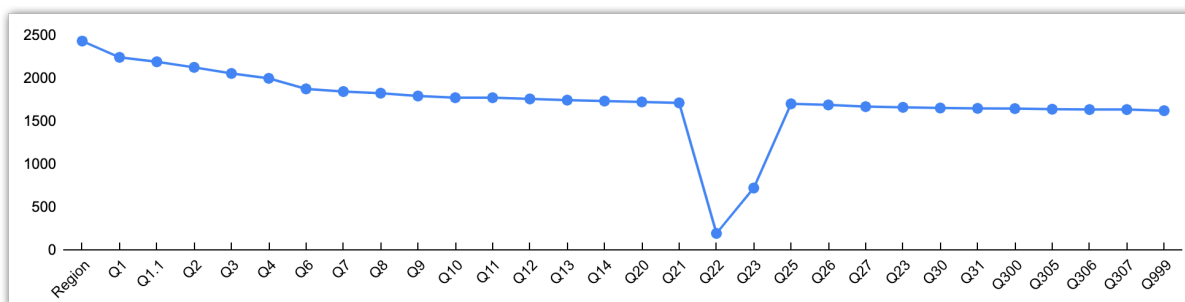


Fig 4. "Shrinking" of the sample volume in a telephone interview from the first question to the last one, ExtremeScan (Project Experiments, March 2022. Questions Q22-Q23 were asked only to a part of the respondents' sample).

Respondents' sincerity

Let us now consider a second possible cause of a shift in the conducted survey: the insincerity of the respondents already involved in the interview.

After the interview, the interviewers rated each respondent's cooperation on a three-point scale. If at the beginning of the operation the percentage of respondents who were withdrawn and spoke warily was 8%, after a month the percentage was 7%.

Most likely, we are witnessing either a washout of wary respondents from the sample, or an additional inclusion of those who are enthusiastic about the topic into the sample.

	28.02-1.03	18-20.03
Wary respondents	8%	7%
Cooperative respondents	67%	63%
Enthusiastic respondents	25%	30%

Table 1. Dynamics of **respondents' evaluations of cooperation** in surveys regarding the military operation. (ExtremeScan, "Athena", "Experiences")

The ones that are the most enthusiastic about the interviews are the older generations of Russians. Their willingness to answer questions is most often noted by the interviewers. On the contrary, university and college students are the most likely to respond with caution.

There are significantly more respondents who are afraid to respond among those who do not support the military actions of the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine (10% vs. 4% among supporters), and among those whose social environment either does not support the military

actions, or in whose social environments the shares of supporters and opponents of the war are roughly even (10% and 12%, respectively).

There is also a high level of wariness in interviews among those who distrust the Russian state media (14%), those who distrust Vladimir Putin (10%), and those who are certain that Russia is currently on the wrong path (12%).

The proportion of those who are afraid to respond is higher among supporters of peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine (7%), with the West (7%), the cessation of hostilities and the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine (9%).

As we can see, opponents of the current course of the Russian leadership are most often afraid of an open and sincere conversation, so researchers should now take into account this shift within the sampling frame when analyzing the data collected. This also indicates that the opponents of the current policy of Russia in general and of military confrontation with Ukraine, in particular, are obviously more reticent in presenting their personal point of view.

	All respondents	7%
Age	18-29	10%
	30-44	7%
	45-59	7%
	over 60	3%
Personal support for the operation	Do not support	4%
	Support	10%
Support for the operation in the social environment	Support	2%
	Some support, some don't	12%
	Do not support	10%
Trusting the programs of Russian TV channels	Trust the Russian TV	3%
	Trust in some things, don't trust	7%
	Do not trust the Russian TV	14%
Is the country going in the right direction or the wrong one?	Right	4%
	Wrong	12%
Continuation of military actions until the complete surrender of Ukraine	Agree	3%
	Do not agree	11%
Withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine	Agree	9%
	Do not agree	3%
Cessation of hostilities and commencing peace negotiations	Agree	8%
	Do not agree	3%

Table 2. Percentage of **reticent respondents** among different social groups. March 2022. (ExtremeScan "Experiences")

Assessment of a potential aggression

Any military confrontation is emotionally poignant and sensitive for the population involved, even for those involved only partially.

In discussing the subject, people may feel not only elated by unity with one another, but also fearful of possible aggression from those around them who have a different point of view. It does not matter whether or not the point of view is shared by the majority, aggression can also come from someone representing the minority.

Slightly more than a quarter (27%) of Russians believe that people around them are afraid to express their views about the war in Ukraine. By contrast, almost two-thirds (62%) believe that those around them speak openly without fear.

Thus, for every one person who is afraid of aggression from others there are more than two people who are not afraid of such aggression. At the same time, the share of those who are against the invasion was almost twice lower in March - 15%.

There is no basis for claiming that people express a different viewpoint than their real one, and that therefore we should attribute to them less support for the operation than they expressed. But we can, however, investigate whether there is a connection between fear of speaking outright and being in opposition to the government's decision.

One can assume that by talking about the fears of others, respondents imply a threat of aggression to themselves from other participants of communication. Those who are afraid to speak are those whose own point of view does not coincide with the point of view of their immediate environment.

A high rate of expectation of aggression indicates the groups that feel most alienated from the majority.

In order to simplify the description of different groups we will use the 'potential aggression index' - the ratio of the share of those who are afraid of aggression to the share of those who are not afraid of it.

This indicator being equal to one indicates the balance of those who fear aggression and those who do not, the closer it is to one, the more often its representatives feel threatened. On average it is equal to 0.44 in the Russian Federation.

(See the table on the next page)

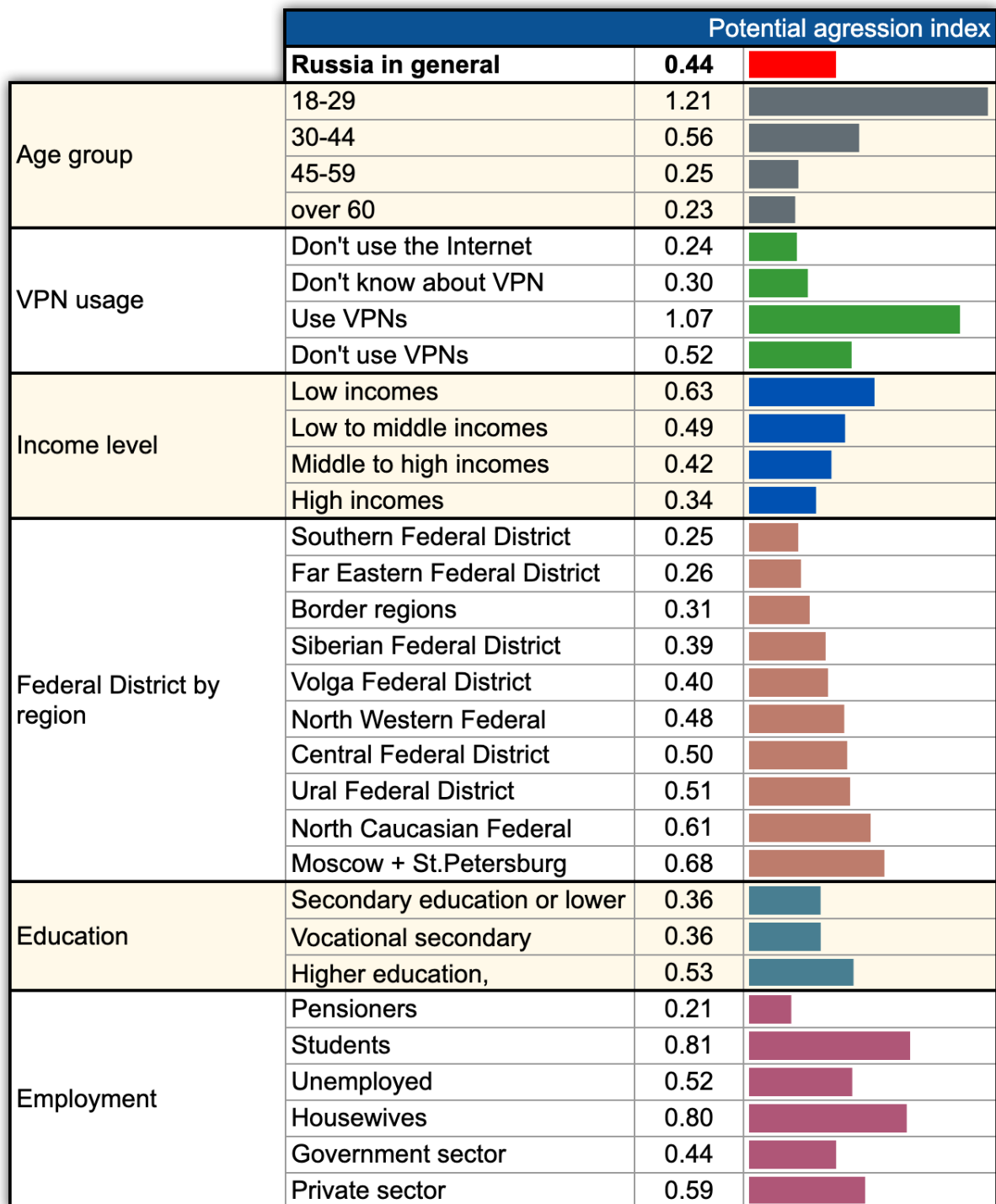


Fig 5. 'Potential aggression index' in different social groups. ExtremeScan, project "Experiences", March 2022

The group most alienated from the majority of the Russian population is young Russians, that is, primarily those for whom all this was conceived, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, those who will have to implement this idea on the battlefield.

Those who use VPNs, a service that allows them to bypass the restrictions imposed by the state on information exchange on the Internet, i.e. those with whom the Russian state is

already waging an information war, feel an equally acute discrepancy in their ideas about war and peace with the majority.

Significant differences can also be seen between the employed part of the population, especially those employed in the private sector, and non-working pensioners. The most income-earning groups of the population still feel closer to the majority. On the contrary, those whose incomes are low believe that their point of view differs from that of the majority.

Residents of the capitals and the North Caucasus feel that they are on the periphery of support for the special military operation, while residents of the border regions which are, in fact, frontline regions (the Bryansk, Kursk, Belgorod, Voronezh, Rostov regions and the Republic of Crimea), as well as the South Federal District, feel unity with those involved in combat operations.

Obviously, those who are afraid to discuss a socially sensitive topic are those whose own point of view does not coincide with the point of view of their immediate circle. Depending on whether a person's point of view coincides with the point of view of the majority of their circle, we have categorized the population of the Russian Federation into six groups.

In Table 3 (below), we provide data on the 5 groups, because the 6th group included respondents who found it difficult or refused to answer the corresponding questions. There were 7% of such respondents.

It might be assumed that those Russians whose environment is divided more or less equally between supporters and opponents of the war are the most wary of speaking out.

Indeed, in a mixed environment the assessment of aggression is higher (51%) than on average (27%), and much higher than in an environment of unanimous support (14%). The absolute maximum, however, is reached in the unanimous disagreement group, at 75%.

As we can see, it is not those who live among their opponents, but those who live among their supporters, while disagreeing with the majority, who express fears of aggression from those around them.

It can be assumed that those who, together with their circle, oppose the war are trying to find explanations for the low prevalence of their point of view, and find them in attributing aggression towards their supporters to the opponents of their point of view.

They are so shocked by the opposing viewpoint and the proportion of its adherents that they assume that the latter are intimidated and for that reason alone express support for the invasion, when in fact they oppose military action.

	Speaking openly, without fear	Afraid to speak out
Support/disagreement with military operation		
Unanimous support (66%)	76%	14%
Unanimous dissent (7%)	25%	75%
Opponents in social environment (2%)	34%	59%
Supporters in social environment (0.3%)	50%	25%
Mixed social environment (18%)	37%	51%

Table 3. The proportion of those **afraid of aggression** within groups of different support for the invasion (ExtremeScan, Athena).

Post Scriptum

1. The hypothesis that it is specifically the opponents of the war who refuse to take part in the polls in the first place does not prove to be true.
2. The feeling of potential aggression is highest in the group where, at first glance, it should not exist. It arises in the group of those who disagree with the military operation, those who encounter the same unanimous dissent around them. The ideological separation from supporters of the operation and the confidence in the prevalence of their position is rationalized in the form of crediting the high level of support for the military operation to the fear of potential aggression.
3. Quantifying the attitudes toward the war is undoubtedly influenced by the fear of its opponents to speak out clearly and consistently. There is an influence, it is empirically confirmed and statistically significant. However, for responsible researchers a direct calculation of the "real" share of supporters of the war on this basis does not seem possible.

We do not yet understand the entire mechanism of how the public opinion on this, unprecedentedly critical, topic is formed. We can only model these shares and continue research to develop our and the public's understanding.

To be continued.

I am infinitely grateful to Vladimir Zvonovsky for having studied the research materials and for preparing this text, which is an important contribution to understanding sociological research at a time of extraordinary events in the life of the country. I am glad to hear his independent and substantiated assessment of the basic possibility of conducting such research.

E.Koneva