**Headline:** Why Russians Still Support the War

**Teaser:** Despite some Western expectations of an imminent decline in Russian backing for the conflict in Ukraine, akin to the fading public support observed in recent Western conflicts, Russia’s civilians and soldiers exhibit an unwavering determination to sustain their support.

By John P. Ruehl

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**[Article Body:]**

Russian President Vladimir Putin arrived in Beijing for a two-day trip on May 15, 2024, and was greeted with a red-carpet welcome by Chinese President Xi Jinping. The two leaders pledged a “[new era](https://www.reuters.com/world/putin-visit-chinas-xi-deepen-strategic-partnership-2024-05-15/)” for the Russia-China relationship, building on their “[no limits partnership](https://www.isdp.eu/75-years-of-china-russia-relations-indeed-a-no-limits-partnership/)” struck just before Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine. As Putin’s first foreign trip since winning reelection in March, the visit showcased his and Russia’s enduring stature amid the war in Ukraine.

Despite Russia’s 2024 [election being marked by](https://www.iiss.org/en/online-analysis/online-analysis/2024/03/the-meaning-of-russias-presidential-election/) systemic repression of serious alternative parties and candidates and decades of brazen statements about Russia’s “managed” democracy, Putin captured 87 percent of the vote from a record-high voter turnout. Even with some [self-censorship](https://www.ponarseurasia.org/silence-matters-self-censorship-and-war-in-russia/) and a slight drop in approval, the Russian public still largely [backs the war](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-05-07/putin-starts-new-term-facing-little-opposition-to-russia-s-war-in-ukraine), despite a [largely static frontline](https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/ukraine-update-january-2024/), the severance of ties with Europe, [declines in living standards](https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/news/putins-failures-deliver), and the deaths and injuries of [hundreds of thousands](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/4/17/over-50000-russians-killed-in-ukrainian-meat-grinder-bbc) of Russian soldiers. The staggering number of casualties is [mirrored in Ukraine](https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/ukraine-war-russia-second-anniversary/), a nation that [Putin](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17449057.2023.2247664) and many Russians consider a brotherly nation and the mother culture of Russia.

In contrast, U.S. domestic support for the wars in [Afghanistan](https://news.gallup.com/poll/352793/americans-split-whether-afghanistan-war-mistake.aspx) and [Iraq](https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2008/03/19/public-attitudes-toward-the-war-in-iraq-20032008/) began to decline markedly a couple of years after the conflicts began, and [predictions](https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/03/putins-support-russian-society-may-decline-fast) of a collapse in Russian public support for the war emerged soon after it began. Yet although the costs of Russia’s war in Ukraine continue to escalate and it appears far from conclusion, several reasons have compelled Russian citizens to continue supporting the war and the President who initiated it.

Opposition to war in Russia faces unique challenges not encountered in the U.S., but convincing a population that war is unavoidable is essential for any government to sustain a war effort. The Kremlin has framed the nation’s military actions as a noble fight to save [ethnic Russians](https://www.npr.org/2022/03/01/1083677765/putin-denazify-ukraine-russia-history) and [Russian speakers](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/putin-casts-the-ukraine-conflict-as-a-fight-for-russias-survival-as-he-seeks-reelection-next-month) in Ukraine from a fascist regime in Kyiv—a narrative that resonates with many Russians and the country’s history in World War II. Highlighting [growing restrictions on the Russian language](https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-language-use-plunges-wartime-ukraine/32419351.html) in Ukraine furthers this message, while Russia’s excuse that they were answering cries for help in Ukraine [echoes](https://archive.kyivpost.com/article/opinion/op-ed/czechoslovakias-prague-spring-of-1968-and-russias-war-against-ukraine.htm) their 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia. Russian media also portrays their forces as [minimizing civilian casualties](https://theconversation.com/ukraine-war-how-russian-denial-of-civilian-casualties-follows-tactics-used-in-syria-179583), as Ukraine is [accused of targeting civilians](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-65751632) in Russia, and Ukraine’s failure to hold scheduled elections in 2024 has been used to [question President Zelensky’s legitimacy](https://www.yahoo.com/news/putin-calls-zelensky-illegitimate-only-174201717.html).

By portraying Ukraine as the mother culture of Russia, Putin has cast the invasion through a historical and patriotic lens. The conflict is framed as an internal matter of reasserting Russian dominance over the ancestral homeland that birthed Russian language, religion, and political origins, against an illegitimate Ukrainian government that currently occupies the country. Russian nationalism can be rallied by invoking ethnic unity, territorial patrimony, and the need to rectify Ukraine’s separation from Moscow, making it easier to dismiss Ukraine’s sovereignty.

Russia has also deflected its violations of the UN Charter against non-aggression by depicting itself as an aggrieved party, forced into war by the U.S.-led West and its vassal states, sentiment reflected [in national polls](https://www.norc.org/research/library/new-survey-finds-most-russians-see-ukrainian-war-as-defense-against-west.html), and supported by notable figures like Slovakia’s Prime Minister Robert Fico, who in January 2024 stated that Ukraine was [under the complete control](https://www.barrons.com/news/slovak-pm-says-ukraine-is-under-us-control-2a23ef57) of Washington. [On May 1, 2024](https://www.businessinsider.com/photos-show-russia-showing-off-war-spoils-nato-equipment-weapons-2024-5), an exhibition of captured Western weapons, vehicles, and equipment since the start of the war opened in Moscow—much like Kyiv’s [in May 2022](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/08/14/ukraine-war-experience-differs/) which showed captured Russian equipment. The Kremlin connects everything to the war—including the [recent attack by ISIS in Moscow](https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-ups-efforts-to-shift-blame-for-crocus-terror-attack-to-ukraine-brags-its-boosting-recruitment-for-front/). In contrast, the American public increasingly began to believe that U.S. leaders had misled them into the War on Terror, [particularly the War in Iraq](https://www.brookings.edu/articles/9-11-and-iraq-the-making-of-a-tragedy/), which it felt could have been avoided.

Russians’ support for the war has manifested as the culmination of decades of “[patriotic mobilization](https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/russianorth-caucasus/251-patriotic-mobilisation-russia)” that has taken place since Putin’s first term. The cultivation of nationalist sentiment, pervasive across media, culture, and politics, has intensified significantly since the invasion. The Russian identity is increasingly intertwined with the existential need to protect Russians abroad, shield Russia from NATO, and bolster Russia’s status as a great power.

Preparing and instilling confidence in the Russian armed forces’ ability to sustain a major conflict has been ongoing for decades. Russian forces engaged in counterinsurgency operations in Russia’s restive region of Chechnya [in the 2000s](https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/chechnya-russia/) and supported a limited conflict in support of two restive regions in neighboring Georgia [in 2008](https://www.gzeromedia.com/russia-invaded-georgia-too-and-it-never-left). Subsequently, Russian forces seized Crimea from Ukraine [in 2014](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/23/ukraines-president-pledges-to-return-russia-annexed-crimea) and supported a [limited conflict](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1060586X.2018.1452209) in support of Ukraine’s restive border region with Russia. [In 2015](https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/displaced-conflict-russias-qualified-success-combatting-insurgency), they launched a major military operation to rescue Syrian President Assad in 2015. With relative success in Syria, the significant escalation of Russia’s conflict in Ukraine in 2022 did not come as a surprise. This contrasts with the [perceived failures](https://www.cato.org/policy-analysis/step-back-lessons-us-foreign-policy-failed-war-terror) of Western military interventions in the 21st Century, causing domestic confidence in the U.S. military [to decline](https://news.gallup.com/poll/509189/confidence-military-lowest-two-decades.aspx) as well as the scale of the military’s operations.

To alleviate domestic concern stemming from severing Russia’s historical connections with Europe, as well as distancing by other countries to comply with Western sanctions, Putin has embarked on a series of foreign trips to show Russia’s resiliency. Visits to [Belarus](https://www.yahoo.com/news/putin-visits-belarus-second-trip-140037184.html) and other former Soviet states in [Central Asia](https://thediplomat.com/2022/06/russias-putin-makes-first-trip-abroad-since-invasion-to-tajikistan-and-turkmenistan/) and the [Caucasus](https://www.politico.eu/article/putins-cold-war-alliance-gets-frosty-reception-in-armenia/) have helped stabilize its regional influence. Visits to [Iran](https://www.cnn.com/2022/07/19/middleeast/putin-iran-visit-russia-ukraine-intl/index.html), [Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/6/putin-makes-rare-trip-to-middle-east-to-meet-with-uae-and-saudi-leaders) have served to demonstrate Russia’s enduring influence in the Middle East, while Russia has also hosted dozens of foreign leaders from the Global South, as well as those of Hungary and Austria.

However, Russia’s ties with China form its most crucial bilateral relationship. Despite the power imbalance, Putin’s May visit to China reaffirmed Moscow’s strategic relationship with Beijing. Russia’s capacity to confront the U.S. and collaborate with other major powers offers reassurance that has erased much of the pain of the geopolitical decline that accompanied the Soviet collapse.

Moscow has also aimed to counter any moral superiority by the West in Ukraine by highlighting Washington’s and Kyiv’s support for Israel since October 7. Framing it as part of Russia’s confrontation with the West for a [new multipolar world order](https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/decoding-russias-position-in-the-israel-hamas-conflict/), the Kremlin hopes to legitimize its policies and broaden Russia’s appeal to the Global South. Following the Nigerien government’s expulsion of U.S. troops in May 2024 and the invitation of Russian forces, images of [Russian troops entering the same airbase](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-68949809) where U.S. military personnel were stationed further underscored Russia’s assertive struggle with the West and wider geopolitical ambitions.

Furthermore, Russian citizens have been shielded from the economic repercussions of the war through subsidized fuel, food, and other essential resources. [Russia’s substantial gold and foreign reserves](https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-crude-oil-price-sanction-ukraine-war/) have helped fund the war and prevented extended currency volatility, while [the imposition](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/12/17/world/putin-companies-economy-boycott-elites-benefit-ukraine-war.html) of hefty penalties on foreign companies considering leaving Russia has deterred many Western firms from exiting or compelled them to pay significant costs.

Russia’s major economic partners, most importantly China and India, have helped maintain stability in Russia’s exports and imports. Western sanctions have also [by design](https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/03/why-russia-has-been-so-resilient-to-western-export-controls?lang=en&center=global) not crippled the Russian economy, as preventing Russian resources from reaching global markets would cause prices to spike.

Moreover, the Russian public has also been largely spared from devastation. Ukrainian attacks within Russia have mostly been limited [to small flareups in border regions and attacks on energy and transport facilities](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/ukrainian-attacks-within-russia-challenge-putins-war-narrative), and Ukrainian forces are still restricted from using Western weapons. [Sabotage attacks](https://asiatimes.com/2023/03/why-sabotage-is-a-growing-form-of-warfare-in-ukraine/) in Russia have also risen, but the situation is manageable.

In contrast to Ukrainian citizens, no Russian civilians have been forcefully committed to fight. The 2022 partial mobilization [called up reservists](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-62981289), while [recent changes](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-04-18/war-in-ukraine-russia-to-enlist-more-hired-soldiers-to-avoid-conscription) to laws have meant Russia has been more easily able to offer generous contracts to annual conscripts soon after their training has concluded. Compared to the [forced conscription videos in Ukraine](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/15/world/europe/ukraine-military-recruitment.html), Russian media can claim it only uses volunteers and those already part of the armed forces.

Russian soldiers [who are injured](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/some-wounded-russian-soldiers-find-compensation-elusive-despite-putins-pledge-2022-07-29/), as well as the families of Russian soldiers who died in service, [receive substantial compensation](https://www.newsweek.com/ukraine-russia-troop-losses-putin-poverty-war-1818238). Though payment is often delayed, the modest backgrounds of most Russian soldiers mean that these funds can be life-changing. The [use of prisoners](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/04/world/europe/russia-prison-wagner-ukraine.html) in particularly perilous military operations has also shielded regular Russian soldiers, with Ukraine only considering this practice [earlier this year](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/17/world/europe/ukraine-convicts-zelensky.html).

Nevertheless, tens of thousands of Russian soldiers have been killed and hundreds of thousands more seriously wounded. This tests the [casualties hypothesis](https://academic.oup.com/ijpor/article/22/2/256/667868), which states that the public’s willingness to remain engaged in a military intervention declines as casualties mount. The Soviet Union’s 10-year war in Afghanistan saw [15,000 Soviet troops killed](https://www.npr.org/2021/09/30/1040536017/afghanistan-withdrawal-russia-soviet-afghan-war-veterans) and eventually helped lead to the downfall of the country, while the deeply unpopular Iraq War saw [4,500 U.S. soldier deaths](https://topclassactions.com/lawsuit-settlements/military/iraq-afghanistan-war-soldiers-died/) and saw the Bush administration’s popularity decline considerably.

Undoubtedly, the Russian government distorts [official casualty figures](https://apnews.com/article/ukraine-troops-killed-zelenskyy-675f53437aaf56a4d990736e85af57c4). Yet it is crucial to contextualize Russia’s losses in Ukraine within the context of recent history. The COVID-19 pandemic claimed more than [400,000 Russian lives](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1060586X.2018.1452209), far surpassing the casualties in Ukraine.

Furthermore, the Russian public’s stomach in the face of such significant losses may be influenced by the large number of deaths of prominent Russians since the beginning of the war. Across Russian media, the war and its repercussions have shown that even the country’s most influential individuals can be killed and have their assets stripped, contributing to a sense of collective sacrifice amid the conflict.

Amid the chaos of the war, [dozens of Russian oligarchs and political figures](https://www.wsj.com/world/europe/russians-keep-turning-up-dead-all-over-the-world-6acc8990) have been killed in suspicious circumstances both in Russia and overseas, in a public settling of scores, opportunism, and punishment from the Kremlin for disobedience. A day after Russian forces entered Ukraine, the body of [Alexander Tyulyakov](https://www.rferl.org/a/lukoil-subbotin-dead-oligarchs/31841615.html), a senior executive of Gazprom’s corporate security, was found hanging in his garage. [Ravil Maganov](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/01/business/ravil-maganov-russia-lukoil-dies.html), chairman of the board of Russia’s oil giant Lukoil, allegedly fell out of a Moscow hospital window in [September 2022](https://www.euronews.com/2022/09/01/ravil-maganov-russian-oil-executive-dies-after-plunging-from-6th-floor-hospital-window). In December, businessman [Vladimir Bidenov](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/deaths-russian-lawmaker-pavel-antov-vladimir-bidenov-investigation-india/) died of heart problems at the Hotel Sai International in India—two days later his business associate and deputy in the Legislative Assembly of Vladimir Oblast, Pavel Antov, fell out of a window at the same hotel.

While the deaths of oligarchs and politicians may offer some solace to ordinary Russian soldiers serving in Ukraine, there has also been a significant loss of high-ranking military officials. Some, like Lieutenant General Vladimir Sviridov, were also killed in suspicious circumstances. However, the [necessity for high-ranking Russian military officials](https://abcnews.go.com/International/russia-suffered-loss-extraordinary-number-generals/story?id=84545931) to remain near the frontlines, owing to a more top-down decision-making military structure and the risk of electronic eavesdropping by Ukrainian and Western advisors, contributes to their higher casualty rate.

Alongside hundreds of other high-profile deaths, Russia has confirmed that seven general officers had been killed in Ukraine [by 2024](https://taskandpurpose.com/news/russian-generals-ukraine-killed/), with Ukraine claiming more than 14 had been killed by early 2023. The last time a U.S. general was killed in combat was [in 2014](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/military/death-two-star-army-general-harold-greene-rare-killing-n173436) when an Afghan serviceman opened fire on NATO personnel in Kabul; prior to that, no American general had lost their life in combat since the Vietnam War. With this backdrop of sacrifice and solidarity among Russian elites, Russia’s “rally-‘round-the-flag” effect may sustain itself longer than expected.

Russians appear to believe time and demographics are on their side. According to a [March 2024](https://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/insights/polls-show-record-low-number-russians-willing-permanently-move-abroad) poll by Russia’s Levada Center, after decades of emigration, the share of Russians expressing a desire to move abroad hit a record low, partly in response to many of those wanting to leave having already done so. Nevertheless, Finion, a Moscow-based relocation firm, stated that [40 to 45 percent](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-05-02/russians-who-fled-war-return-in-boost-for-putin-s-war-economy) of Russians who fled abroad had since returned, driven by factors such as cracking down on remote work, visa issues, reduced fears of conscription, and a general desire to return.

And while tens of thousands of Russian soldiers have perished, along with thousands more ethnic Russians in occupied parts of Ukraine, [millions of those living in those occupied territories](https://jacobin.com/2023/04/russia-ukraine-war-putin-demographic-crisis-social-reproduction-biopolitical-imperialism) have already been incorporated into the Russian Federation’s pre-existing [144 million citizens](https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/russia-population/). Conversely, Ukraine, with 37 million people before the war, has faced a [population exodus](https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2023-07-11/ukraine-face-a-demographic-catastrophe) compounding already challenging [demographics](https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/ukraines-deepening-population-challenge).

By early 2024, the prevailing sentiment was that [Russia had gained a fragile upper hand](https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/ukraine-russia-beginning-compound-advantages). Victory, though potentially pyrrhic, appears increasingly likely, if loosely defined, in Russia. Yet, as the conflict drags on, sustained by a Russian economy increasingly [geared toward](https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/russian-economy-war-footing-new-reality-financed-commodity-exports) the war, the pursuit of victory may wane as casualties and other costs mount. The Kremlin’s anxieties are now focused on [Western nations](https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-ukraine-russia-war-western-weapons-politics-eu-international-law-territory-polish-defense/), led by the UK, France, and Poland, allowing Ukraine to use Western weapons in Russia, which would further bring the war home to Russian civilians and internal infrastructure.

While projecting an image of composure to the public, tensions are unquestionably simmering in the Kremlin. Estimates regarding Russia’s capacity to sustain the war in its current state typically hover around [two to three years](https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-sustain-war-effort-two-three-years-defense-study/). Yet unwavering support for Putin, coupled with the absence of viable alternatives, may extend his strong personal commitment to the war indefinitely. While Russia appears capable of and determined to continue the war, its uncertain future will continue to test the Russian public’s tacit enthusiasm for it.

Putin’s willingness to continue the war is seen as something to exploit in the West. Western policymakers have witnessed Russia increasingly commit its domestic resources to the conflict, as well as [recently shift](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/22/russia-is-in-a-state-of-war-in-ukraine-kremlin-says-for-the-first-time) from calling it a “special military operation” to a war. Steadily increasing Ukraine’s technical capacity to fight a war of attrition will continue to wear down Russia’s Soviet arsenal and deployment of arms abroad, demonstrating the feebleness of Russia’s production and advanced weapons systems. By provoking a Russian defeat, it is hoped a second major convulsion across the former Soviet Union will further reduce Moscow’s geopolitical influence. Russia’s protracted military campaign and the West’s strategy of prolonging the conflict through escalation management will keep exacting a catastrophic toll on Ukrainian lives and infrastructure.