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How Has the War Reshaped Russian Views?

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Over four years of full-scale war have changed how Russians live with the conflict far more than what they believe about it. Drawing on ten waves of telephone polling from December 2022 to May 2026, this report traces a population increasingly exhausted and personally touched by loss, yet still committed to the war's underlying justification. That gap, between a rising willingness to see the war end and an unmoved conviction on why it is being fought, is the report's central finding, and the source of its central warning. Western observers should not mistake war-weariness for a constituency that is ready to demand peace or to refuse to accommodate the war. These quantitative findings are supplemented throughout by qualitative fieldwork: semi-structured and in-depth interviews with non-elite Russians, conducted by Kimberly Metcalf between 2023 and 2026 for her PhD dissertation at King's College London, which illustrate the survey findings at the level of individual lives.

The report is organised in three parts. It first sets out the evidence base and establishes the central pattern: over four years of war, Russians' relationship to the conflict has changed markedly while the beliefs that justify it have held, so that rising fatigue reflects the cost of the war's aims rather than any rejection of them. It then reads the population in two complementary ways, through fixed demographic categories such as age, sex, settlement and income, and through attitude segments that sort supporters by stamina rather than sympathy. It closes by turning these findings forward, setting out how opinion is likely to develop, what would move it, and what it cannot be expected to do, before drawing the implications for Western policy.

Key findings

- **War fatigue has risen to its recorded maximum.** Weariness with the war has reached an all-time peak since the first wave of polling in December 2022. As of May 2026, respondents are overwhelmingly tired of the war's costs: readiness to welcome an end to the war reached 81%, opposition to an end fell to 11%, and appetite for another mobilisation dropped to 11%.
- **But this is exhaustion, not a change in fundamental principles.** The beliefs that justify the war held far more steadily than the willingness to keep paying for it. Above all, the perception that the West, not Ukraine, is the war's real adversary stayed near-universal throughout (only 2–4% ever saw Russia as fighting Ukraine alone), and the belief that the war is broadly succeeding held roughly flat. Rising fatigue can be read as unhappiness at the cost of achieving the war's aims, rather than the aims themselves.
- **Even those who have paid the highest price show this split.** The share of Russians who know someone killed climbed from 18% to 69% over the series. Those closest to the losses became markedly readier for the war to end, yet no more likely to judge the war a failure. Grief raises the desire for relief; it does not appear to dislodge the conviction that the war is justified.

- **This fatigue generates no pressure of its own.** Public opinion here is an output, not a lever: a population that would welcome an end is not one that will demand or force one, because it has no channel — no elite cue, no organisational vehicle — through which to turn private reluctance into political constraint. In interviews and surveys, ending the war is treated as someone else’s problem, not a task for the people.
- **The costs fall regressively, which insulates the centre rather than threatening it.** Rural and poorer Russians bear the deaths, sparing the metropolitan, media-shaping, protest-capable population most able to mobilise.
- **The trajectory runs towards a wearier majority and a smaller, more critical, but pro-war, hardline core.** Mounting strain deepens majority fatigue, while the small hardline core grows more scathing about how the war is being waged rather than whether it should be fought. As such, rising “the war is failing” sentiment can signal both a desire to stop and a demand to fight harder. Absent a second mobilisation or a visible elite fracture, pressure from below to end the war remains unlikely.
- **Opinion enables the war; it does not drive it.** Russian public opinion is a permissive condition for state aggression, not its author. It does not demand the war, but its priors pre-authorise force wherever that force can be framed as defensive, which keeps the political cost of aggression low. The same justificatory template now attaches, largely uninterrogated, to hypothetical operations against third countries.

1. The evidence base

This paper draws on IKAR’s ten-wave CATI Russian survey series running from December 2022 to May 2026, with roughly 1,200 to 1,600 respondents per wave.¹ It is a data-only synthesis: every figure cited here is traceable to the underlying wave tables, and all directional differences between groups are associations, not causes. The series is a set of repeated cross-sections, not the same people re-interviewed, so it captures population-level shifts rather than individual change. Subgroup figures are pooled across the waves in which a question appears, so time and composition are blended.

Questions are designed to avoid placing the respondent in a difficult legal position. As such, questions like “would you welcome the war ending” measure de-escalation readiness and fatigue, not opposition to the war *per se*. Under wartime and censorship conditions, rising “hard to say” may reflect genuine uncertainty or reticence due to Russian anti-war laws; the data cannot tell the two apart. These caveats nonetheless leave the series interpretable. List experiments conducted during the war put deliberate misreporting of war support at between six to ten points; contact, cooperation and refusal rates have remained broadly stable since 2022; and the frame figures move little across waves. Like all polling in authoritarian states, the results are best read as a floor on public conformity rather than as a precise measure of private conviction.²

¹ The survey data come from the monthly all-Russia monitoring conducted by the Institute for Conflict Studies and Analysis of Russia (IKAR), an independent, Kyiv-based think tank; fieldwork is by computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI), and the series has run monthly since December 2022. See <https://ikar-thinktank.org>.

² On the interpretive difficulties of survey research in authoritarian states, including social-desirability pressure, preference falsification and the reading of non-response, see Timur Kuran, *Private Truths, Public*

The report also draws on semi-structured and in-depth interviews with 31 non-elite Russians, conducted by Kimberly Metcalf between 2023 and 2026 for her PhD dissertation at King's College London, several of them interviewed more than once across that period. They are used to illustrate the survey findings at the level of individual lives, and are illustrative rather than representative: they cannot test the quantitative results, and no claim is made about the distribution of the views they record. The sample skews urban, educated and towards those who have left Russia, which if anything runs against this report's argument, since it over-represents the constituency most likely to have revised its views. The fieldwork received ethics approval from King's College London. All interviewees are identified by pseudonyms and were interviewed on the understanding that the material would appear in academic and academic-aligned publications. Interview quotations are reproduced verbatim, in our own translations, with expletives rendered as [expletive].

These patterns do not rest on a single series. While IKAR is the only monitor to combine this particular question set with ten waves of CATI fieldwork, its central movements are echoed across the major independent trackers of Russian wartime opinion. They are also echoed, at the level of lived experience, in the interviews described above, which similarly find accommodation to the war's costs advancing faster than any revision of its underlying justifications.³ The Levada Center, an independent monitor, records much of the same coexistence foregrounded here: support for the armed forces holding near three-quarters even as readiness for peace talks climbed to successive record highs (roughly two-thirds by late 2025) and support for continuing the war fell to a record low.⁴

Russians' appetite for talks is not an appetite for reversal: Russian Field finds large majorities treating recognition of annexed territory, Ukrainian non-accession to NATO and sanctions relief as non-negotiable, and Levada finds only around a quarter would accept an end that returned annexed land.⁵ ExtremeScan's scenario studies sharpen the point: for 18 months roughly two-thirds of Russians have favoured a ceasefire through mutual concessions, and a settlement freezing the current line of contact with security guarantees outpolls one granting Russia full control of Donbas; yet only about a fifth would countenance returning any occupied territory to Ukraine.⁶

Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995). In Russia specifically, a list experiment early in the invasion found war support real but modestly inflated by such pressures, falling from 71% under direct questioning to 61%: Philipp Chapkovski and Max Schaub, "Solid Support or Secret Dissent? A List Experiment on Preference Falsification during the Russian War against Ukraine," *Research & Politics* 9, no. 2 (2022). That experiment drew on an online sample, whereas the IKAR series relies on telephone interviewing (CATI); the direction of any such bias is likely shared, but its magnitude should not be assumed identical here.

³ Kimberly Metcalf, "War is Peace: The Hidden Transcript in Russia's War Against Ukraine" (PhD diss., Department of War Studies, King's College London, forthcoming). The qualitative interview excerpts throughout this report are drawn from that fieldwork.

⁴ Levada Center, "The Conflict with Ukraine" (monthly press releases), 2024–2025, <https://www.levada.ru/en/tag/ukraine/>. By December 2025 support for continuing the war had fallen to about a quarter, a record low, while roughly two-thirds favoured a move to negotiations.

⁵ On the conditional, maximalist character of that support for talks, see Russian Field, nationwide telephone survey, February 2026 (majorities naming recognition of annexed territory, Ukrainian non-accession to NATO and sanctions relief as mandatory terms); and Levada Center, February 2025, on the roughly one-quarter who would support ending the war if it required returning annexed territory.

⁶ ExtremeScan, "It's Time to Put an End to This': How Russians Perceive the Meaning of the War, and Russian and Ukrainian Attitudes towards a Ceasefire," 2026, <https://www.extremescan.eu/>. In scenario testing, a ceasefire freezing the current line of contact with security guarantees was acceptable to 61% (25% opposed), outpolling a scenario granting Russia full control of Donetsk and Luhansk (54% acceptable); across 18 months 64–65% have supported a ceasefire through mutual concessions. On the parallel reluctance to cede territory

The insulation of the Russian metropolitan centre is corroborated by various studies; for example, Levada's August 2025 data put Moscow's support for continued fighting at nearly twice the national rate, with Muscovites far likelier to report no personal impact.⁷ Volkov and Kolesnikov's account of "learned indifference" converges on the same core claim, namely a passive majority that distances itself from the war and waits it out without endorsing or resisting it,⁸ and the Chronicles project's "consistent supporter" measure locates the committed core well under a quarter, consistent with the small, stable Hardliner bloc identified here.⁹

In one instance, IKAR's findings sit at odds with those of other polling series. For example, IKAR's personal-loss figures sit well above other monitors', measuring 68.9% by May 2026, against Levada's 30% in August 2025. Recoding the item to Levada's exact categories (relatives, friends and acquaintances, dropping the neighbours and colleagues this battery also captures) lowers the May 2026 figure only to 65.9%, and by no more than three points in any wave; the broad and matched series are near-identical and rise on the same path. The residual gap is therefore methodological rather than definitional, most plausibly a combination of mode (telephone versus in-home interviewing), sampling, and weighting: these figures are unweighted, whereas Levada weights to Rosstat parameters (although Rosstat's own wartime demographic data are opaque and contested, so weighting to them is no guarantee of accuracy). Absolute exposure levels are consequently not comparable across series in either direction; what is comparable, and what the argument rests on, is the within-series trend, which is steep, monotonic across all ten waves, and robust to definition.

2. A change in perceptions but not underlying belief

The series reveals a contrast that Western commentary routinely flattens into a single story of a population turning against the war. In reality, two different things are at work. Russians' relationship to the conflict has transformed: fatigue has climbed to its ceiling and personal loss has become a majority experience. The interpretive frame beneath that relationship, however, has held. Russians are increasingly unwilling to keep paying for the war, yet no less convinced of why it is being fought. The central error this report sets out to correct is to read growing fatigue as evidence that Russians will actively seek to stop the war. Throughout the series, only 2–4% ever saw Russia as fighting Ukraine alone: the perception that the West is the war's real adversary is near-universal and essentially immovable. Overt scepticism that the war is achieving its goals, likewise, never rose much above a quarter (a doubt distinct from opposition, as Section 6 shows). What did move sits within the frame rather than against it. Within that boundary, the framing is abstract rather than

(about 18% in favour, 72% opposed), see the Re: Russia summary of ExtremeScan polling, "Russians Are Tired of the War, But Do Not Want to Make Concessions to End It," July 2025, https://russiapost.info/society/not_want_to_make_concessions.

⁷ "Record Share of Russians Support Peace Talks, But Many Also Approve of Russia's Actions in Ukraine," Russia Matters, September 2025, <https://www.russiamatters.org/blog/record-share-russians-support-peace-talks-many-also-approve-russias-actions-ukraine>, reporting Levada's August 2025 data: support for continued fighting in Moscow near double the national rate, and 30% reporting a relative, friend or acquaintance killed.

⁸ Andrei Kolesnikov and Denis Volkov, "Alternate Reality: How Russian Society Learned to Stop Worrying About the War" (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 2023), <https://carnegieendowment.org>.

⁹ Chronicles research project, "consistent supporters" tracking, <https://www.chronicles.report/en/dynamics>. The share simultaneously expressing support for the war, opposing a withdrawal without achieving its goals and prioritising military spending stood at about 22% (February 2023), 12% (October 2023) and 17% (January 2024).

literal insofar as it reads Ukraine as a proxy for the West, not a belief that Russia faces NATO troops directly. Indeed, that literal reading has receded, halving from 38% to 20% (see Figure 3) as the proxy reading grew. The broad “war with the West” framing, the two readings combined, stayed high throughout, between 75% and 88%, easing only at the most recent wave. Respondents’ worldview did not stay frozen so much as recompose within a stable outer boundary: the West remained the adversary; what shifted was how directly respondents believed that adversary was fighting.

This dominant framing aligns with the state-sponsored interpretation of the “special military operation” as resistance to the West’s supposed “encroachment” on perceived Russian interests, namely Ukraine, and as a step towards reclaiming Russia’s rightful position in, and veto over, the European security architecture.¹⁰ Asked directly to name Russia’s adversaries, respondents in the series’ first wave, in December 2022, placed the United States far ahead (64%), with Britain, the European Union, Germany and France all above Ukraine itself (named by only 11%).¹¹

The asymmetry and loss of Ukrainian subjectivity in this framing are echoed almost verbatim by interviewees. When asked to name Russia’s “significant Other”, ‘Grigory’, a Moscow-based interviewee well versed in psychology and philosophy, elucidated his perspective of Russian society and designated “the USA...or Great Britain as a whole,” adding, unprompted, that “we still should be concerned about China”; Ukraine did not register as an independent adversary at all. Grigory’s account of why the West looms so large inverts cause and effect: he casts Russia’s isolation – the sanctions and condemnation that followed its invasion of Ukraine – as an unprovoked act of Othering rather than as a consequence of the war Russia launched. “This war explained that we will be the barbarians for you,” he said. “It does not matter what this Russian guy can do; we will be barbarians for you. Ok, we got it, we have no objections, we will build our lives.” He frames this explicitly through identity theory: Russia needs a West to “Other” itself against. Taken at face value, the account inverts the roles of aggressor and aggrieved, and it performs a second erasure alongside the first: Ukraine disappears not only as an independent adversary but as the actual party harmed by the war, displaced by a narrative in which Russia becomes the wronged party.¹²

A core distinction that emerged from the figures is that of **accommodation** and **belief**. Fatigue is a surface phenomenon: it registers how much the war is costing and how much people would welcome relief from it. The enemy-frame is the stable substrate beneath it. A reader who assumes that a tired population is a turning one, or that mounting grief must mean mounting doubt, will misread the data. The data shows that fatigue does not convert into action, and that grief does not convert into doubt. In other words, even profound personal loss does not lead the bereaved to reject the underlying priors about Russia’s place in the world and its rights over Ukraine, the very beliefs that instigated the war and continue to legitimise it. ‘Sophia’, a customer-service manager in her

¹⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Treaty between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Security Guarantees,” 17 December 2021, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790818/?lang=en.

¹¹ IKAR, Wave 1 (December 2022), Q36, spontaneous multi-select, not read aloud, n = 1,208. The country-by-country adversaries battery, and its allies twin (Q35), were fielded only in this wave and record a one-off snapshot rather than a trend. A narrower item asking which NATO countries are hostile to Russia appears in Wave 9 (January 2025), but it differs in the population sampled (NATO members only), mode (prompted rather than spontaneous) and wording, and so cannot be trended against the Wave 1 battery. It is nonetheless suggestive: on that later measure Britain (29%) and Poland (28%) outrank the United States (25%), with NATO named collectively by 32%.

¹² Interviewee 30 (‘Grigory’), (Male, 50–59), Moscow, mental health sector, abroad, interview by Metcalf (remote), 16 December 2023; follow-up interview by Metcalf (remote), May 2026.

forties who left Russia and returned to Moscow in 2026, illustrates the mechanism precisely: she cited safety, cost of living and “predictability” as her reasons for returning, while stating in the same conversation that the war can end only once Putin’s aims are met. Despite her own objections to the war (“people are dying”), she does not believe in demonstrating: “I don’t believe in protest. I don’t believe this is efficient” and holds instead that Putin himself must be the one to end it, on his own terms: “Putin has to finish it, and he has his own reasons.” Accommodation here moves independently of belief.¹³

These priors are not peculiar to this survey. The great-power self-image and the verdict that the war was not a mistake hold across the external Russian polling too, and, as the next section shows, that identity has hardened over the war.¹⁴ The same evidence bounds the claim: the committed minority is one of appetite, not identity, in other words it is the willingness to keep fighting that narrows, while the messianic register goes unmeasured. Rather than acknowledge the fallacy of the war’s objectives and chosen instruments, large parts of Russian society have been more inclined to embrace conspiracy theories as an explanation and justification for its failures. For example, on the first anniversary of the start of the full-scale war, almost three-quarters (73%) of Russians agreed with the statement that the “Special Military Operation” was in fact a US trap into which Russia had fallen, while only 17% disagreed. Moreover, 45% believed that Russia could return to its borders on 24 February 2022, and thus thwart Washington’s plans, while 36% expressed the opposite opinion.¹⁵

A domestic variant of the same exculpatory logic appeared amongst 2023 interviewees, in which ‘Danilov’, a businessman in his thirties from Sverdlovsk oblast, described Ukraine as an “arena” and the war as a “game” he did not wish to “play.” Framing Russia’s war as an “arena” diffuses Kremlin agency for the invasion; Danilov still declined to support mobilisation personally but remained in Russia.¹⁶ ‘Sergei’, who left Russia to avoid mobilisation, also leaned into conspiratorial logic. He frames the war as part of a US–Russia great-power contest rather than a Ukraine-specific conflict: “I have read the Dulles Plan;¹⁷ the US has a political plan, just like the USSR.” He argues that the US plays on a “grand chessboard” and is “equally as interested in expanding power as Russia is,” though this didn’t translate into support for the war effort, and he left.¹⁸

¹³ Interviewee 18 (‘Sophia’), (Female, 40–49), Moscow, customer service/business sector, abroad, interview by Metcalf (in person), 18 August 2023; follow-up interview by Metcalf (remote), May 2026.

¹⁴ On the great-power self-image, see Levada Center data reported in “Levada: Majority of Russians View Their Country, China as ‘Great,’ But Not US, Its Allies,” *Russia Matters*, September 2023, <https://www.russiamatters.org/blog/levada-majority-russians-view-their-country-china-great-not-us-its-allies>: the share viewing Russia as “great” rose from 43% in 2002 to about 80% in 2023; Chicago Council on Global Affairs–Levada Center survey, January 2025, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/three-four-russians-expect-military-victory-over-ukraine>: for the first time a majority (55%) said they would prefer Russia to be a great power that other countries fear and respect, against 41% preferring a high-standard-of-living country – a reversal of the 2021 balance (32% versus 66%) – while pride in the country (96%), its history (94%) and its global political influence (74%) stood at record highs.

¹⁵ IKAR CATI monitoring series, Wave 3 (February 2023), Q12 (“Do you think the United States deliberately lured Russia into a trap in Ukraine...”) and Q13 (“...can Russia thwart the US’s plans by ending the SVO and returning to the lines of 24 February 2022?”), single-answer items, n = 1,600, unweighted. Both were fielded only in this wave, timed to the first anniversary of the full-scale invasion, and therefore record a one-time snapshot rather than a trackable trend.

¹⁶ Interviewee 23 (‘Danilov’), (Male, 30–39), Yekaterinburg, Business sector, (in Russia), interview by Metcalf (remote), 27 September 2023.

¹⁷ The “Dulles Plan”, an apocryphal CIA blueprint for destroying the USSR by corrupting its culture and youth, is a post-Soviet fabrication, its text lifted from a villain’s speech in Anatoly Ivanov’s 1971 novel *The Eternal Call* and recirculated as a genuine American document from the early 1990s. See Eliot Borenstein, *Plots against Russia: Conspiracy and Fantasy after Socialism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

¹⁸ Interviewee 17 (‘Sergei’), interview by Metcalf, Rostov-on-Don (online), 13 August 2023.

3. What moved, and what did not

The war: fatigue rose to its maximum

On three independent measures, war fatigue as of May 2026 is at its recorded peak. Readiness to welcome an end to the war rose from 69% to 81%; opposition to the war ending fell from 21% to 11%; support for another mobilisation wave decreased from 24% to 11%; and only about 9% now endorse an open-ended “fight until all goals are met” timeframe. Overt scepticism that the war is succeeding drifted slightly *down*, although “hard to say” rose. Since rising non-response may reflect fear of contravening the draconian Russian law on “discrediting the Russian Armed Forces” as much as genuine uncertainty, part of that stability could easily conceal unspoken doubt that Russia will achieve its aims. The data supports only the narrower claim that expressed defeatism did not grow. As such, the clear movement is growing fatigue and de-escalation readiness.

‘Lev’, a Khakassia-born student in his twenties and the interviewee most sympathetic to the war’s premises in 2023, voiced doubt about whether Russia had delivered on its original objectives. He described himself as initially “excited to see that something was going to change” in February 2022, but turned notably more equivocal when asked directly whether he supported the special military operation: “Not really, we don’t have a specific objective, and we see there was an objective formulated, it was there.” Even from the most sympathetic vantage point in the sample, he conceded that the operation’s stated aims had gone unmet.¹⁹

By 2026, Sophia describes this fatigue through the lens of her quality of life abroad. She framed her decision to move back in terms of cost of living, apartment size, visa, residency permits and the comparative unpredictability of life abroad. Although she accommodates the risks that wartime Russia presents, the worst-case scenario as the war drags on would be if the borders close and she can’t go abroad. She elaborated: “We are already confined to Georgia, Armenia, and Serbia. Latin America is too far and too expensive.” Asked whether she would leave Russia again, and under what conditions, she explained that “busification”²⁰ would be the tipping point (because of concern for her son). “I don’t feel like this catastrophic scenario of bombing other countries and crossing borders will happen, but it could.”²¹

Fatigue in this account operates on more than one register. Socially, sustaining an anti-war position has simply become exhausting. Asked whether she still discusses the war with close friends, she said there was little left to say, since it would be strange, “for almost five years,” to keep announcing at every visit to someone’s apartment “I don’t support the war.” The fatigue extends to the war’s presence in daily life more broadly. She said that in Moscow people simply no longer talk about the war or the drone strikes on Ukraine, the subject has been reduced to background noise on the news about “the enemy.” And this general disposition turns inwards as well, into self-monitoring: “I am tired of considering everything so closely,” she said, describing a private habit of rehearsing how she would explain her own text messages if ever questioned in court, a vigilance she found tiring, in her telling.²²

¹⁹ Interviewee 24 (‘Lev’), (Male, 20–29), Khakassia, student, in Russia, interview by Metcalf (remote), 1 October 2023.

²⁰ Interviewee 18 (‘Sophia’), interviews, August 2023 and May 2026.

²¹ Interviewee 18 (‘Sophia’), interviews, August 2023 and May 2026.

²² Interviewee 8 (‘Nadia’), interview by Metcalf, Moscow (remote), 11 May 2023. Interviewee 16 (‘Anastasiya’), interview by Metcalf, Moscow, in person, 10 August 2023.

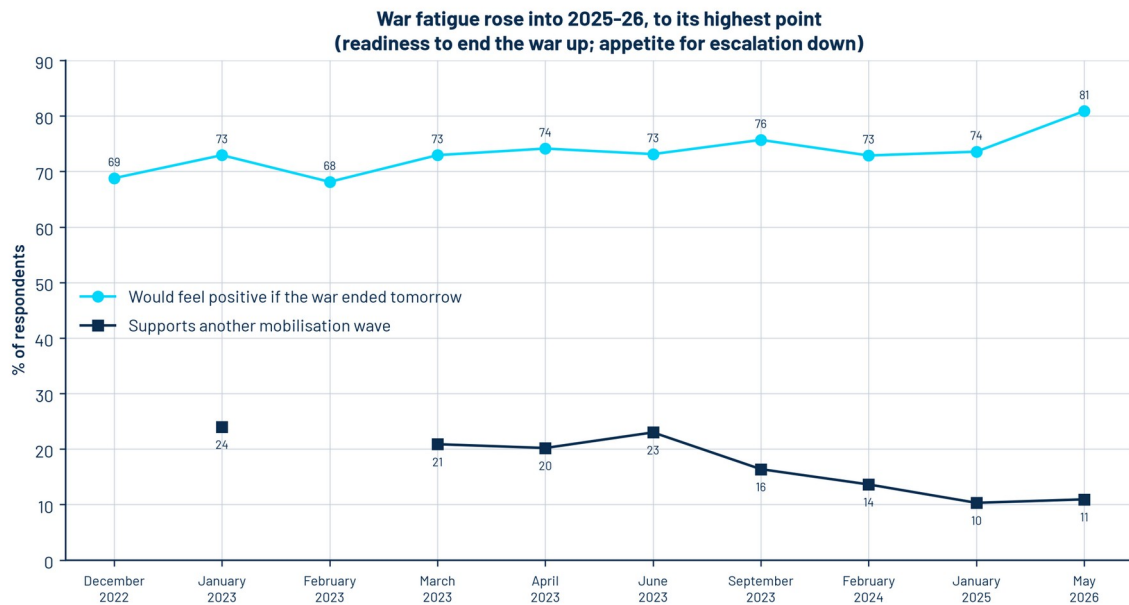


Figure 1. War fatigue across all ten waves: readiness to welcome an end rose from 69% to 81% while support for another mobilisation wave fell from 24% to 11%.

The war came home

The clearest, most monotonic trend in the entire dataset is the spread of personal loss. The share who know someone mobilised has been stable since January 2023; the share who know someone killed climbed every single wave, from 18% to 69%; and the share who have lost a close relative or friend rose from under 5% to 38%. Mobilisation proximity plateaus because mobilisation was a discrete 2022 event; death proximity keeps climbing because casualties accumulate. Alongside this, material pessimism deepened: by 2025–26, 62% expected their own finances to worsen over the coming year. Several interviewees described a suffocating accumulation of loss, propaganda, and mortality closing in from every direction of ordinary life in 2023. ‘Nadia’, interviewed in Moscow in 2023, described a friend from her adventuring circle who volunteered and was killed: “He was killed one month ago because he went to kill people, to kill Ukrainians. I was shocked... I had a lot of conversations with these people, and they wanted to kill people. And the wife supported him.” Nadia pointed to the war’s presence even in the youngest, most mundane spaces of daily life: “the propaganda was starting in kindergarten,” she said; “there was a photo of Putin on the table at the school.” Another interviewee, ‘Anastasiya’, located that same encroachment inside her own child’s school: she recalled being told that the government had built a dedicated cemetery for the Wagner Group’s dead and that her daughter’s school was taking the children there on a visit: “We understood that the war would not finish, and it was clear”. The war’s permanence was made visible not through any battlefield report but through a primary school trip to a graveyard.²³

²³ Interviewee 22 (‘Zoya’), interview by Metcalf, Yekaterinburg (remote), 24 September 2023.

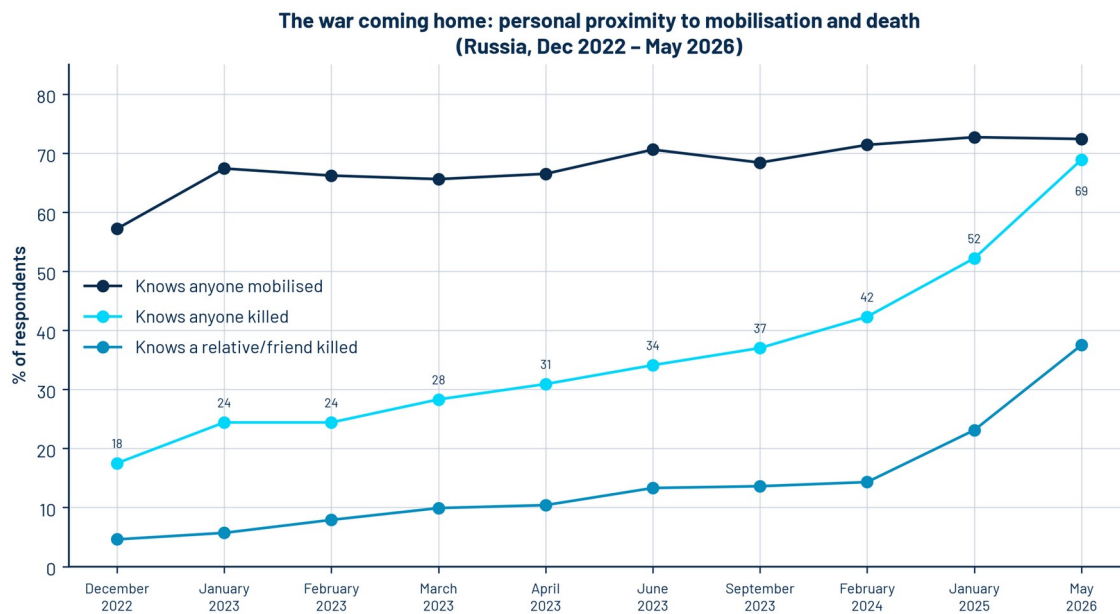


Figure 2. *The war coming home: personal proximity to mobilisation and, increasingly, to death.*

Economic anxiety stemming from the war surfaces most concretely in household arithmetic rather than in political language. ‘Zoya’, a banking-sector manager from Yekaterinburg, described the war’s first material effect in terms of her own grocery bill rather than her politics: “I saw how our prices were rising, and I saw my basket of groceries went over 30% and my salary was the same.” Zoya itemised the accumulating restrictions that followed the withdrawal of Apple Pay, Visa, and Mastercard, the loss of access to Zoom and Skype, new limits on travel and, asked to look further ahead, offered a resigned timeline rather than any expectation of relief: “I do not believe that relations will become better in 5–10 years... and we will be under sanctions [for another] 5–10 years.”²⁴

Sophia’s own experience of job-hunting reflects the same strain from a different angle: where Zoya’s testimony traces prices outrunning income, Sophia’s traces a labour market that has simply stopped absorbing workers. Amid a wave of reported layoffs across Russia, she described a year of fruitless applications despite sales experience and what she called a friendly attitude: her applications were “greeted with a ‘no’ within two minutes” or ignored outright, with no explanation offered. She was left guessing at the cause, “maybe no one needs a 45-year-old woman,” and unsure whether automated filters were screening her out, and if so, on what basis, she asked: “what are the filters for, my age, my gender, my name?” When a courier position surfaced, its terms (five to six days a week, twelve hours a day) pushed her towards informal, self-directed work instead, namely a small rental property she and her partner are building rather than a return to the formal labour

²⁴ Interviewee 18 (‘Sophia’), interviews, August 2023 and May 2026.

market.²⁵ Zoya and Sophia together capture the same material anxiety registering on two different fronts: inflation on one, a labour market that no longer clears on the other.

Views of the World: A Stable War Against the West

The framing of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine as "really a war with the West" is among the most stable attitudes in the data. At no point do more than about 4% see Russia as fighting Ukraine alone. What shifts is the emphasis rather than the frame: the share who believe Russia faces NATO troops directly has almost halved, from 38% to 20%, while the broad view of fighting "Ukraine backed by the West" stayed dominant. Direct fear of a NATO attack is a minority-to-plurality view and is easing, not rising.²⁶

What the frame requires is an adversary, but not necessarily a specific one. In December 2022, the United States stood alone at the head of the list, named by 64% of respondents and far ahead of any European state. On a narrower item fielded in January 2025, asking which NATO countries are hostile to Russia, Britain (29%) and Poland (28%) placed above the United States (25%). The two measures cannot be trended against each other – they differ in the population sampled, mode and wording, and the later one offers only NATO members as options – so the juxtaposition is suggestive rather than probative. If hostility can redistribute towards London and Warsaw at a moment when Russian state media were portraying Trump as amenable to Moscow, then what is durable is not any particular judgment about the United States but the structural requirement for a Western antagonist. This framing did not wait to be disappointed: the slot was refilled in anticipation, and the media supplied the replacements.²⁷ The trended data shows the same movement from a different angle: the literal reading, that Russia faces NATO troops directly, halved while the broad framing held. The outer boundary is fixed; its interior is not. That is what makes the frame portable – it can survive the defection of its central antagonist by promoting another.

²⁵ One qualification worth flagging for future waves: the combined "against the West" framing edged down at the most recent wave, to 75%. This is not in itself a sign of the frame weakening – it reflects the continued fall of the literal "NATO fights us directly" reading and a rise in "hard to say", not any move towards seeing the war as against Ukraine alone, which holds at its roughly 4% floor. That floor is the measure to watch: were the "Ukraine alone" share to climb from it, the frame would genuinely be eroding; a decline in the combined measure driven instead by the literal reading would be recomposition within the frame, not defection from it.

²⁶ See, for example, BBC News, 7 November 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1mlp5p4lvko>.

²⁷ Levada Center data reported in Russia Matters, September 2023: the share viewing Russia as "great" rose from 43% in 2002 to about 80% in 2023.

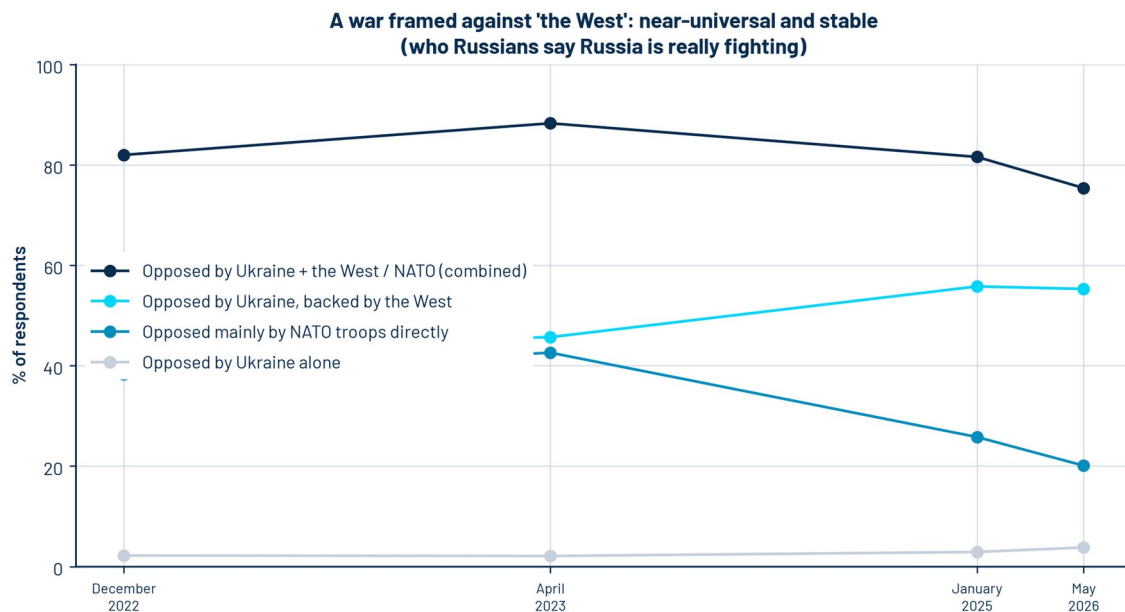


Figure 3. Who Russians say Russia is really fighting. The reading that the West is the real adversary (Ukraine as proxy plus direct-NATO combat, combined) holds around 75–88% across the series; within it, the literal “NATO fights us directly” view falls from 38% to 20%, while only 2–4% ever name Ukraine alone.

Beyond this series: the wider prior-structure

The broader beliefs that make the war intelligible to its supporters, or accommodators, are tracked by other Russian pollsters, and the war has not dislodged the central premises. Russians’ sense of their country as a great power is durable and, over the longer term, has risen, standing at around 80% by 2023.²⁸ More directly relevant here, the judgment that launching the war was not a mistake has held firm: roughly two-thirds of Russians decline to call it a mistake, even as a comparable two-thirds agree the country is paying too high a price for it.²⁹ That pairing, costly and yet not-a-mistake, is the accommodation-versus-belief structure of this report registered in a second, independent dataset. The self-image itself has hardened rather than merely held. Pride in the country reached record highs by early 2025: 96% of Levada respondents declared they were proud of Russia – 94% of its history, 74% of its weight in world politics and, in a genuine reversal, a narrow majority now say they would rather Russia be a great power that other countries fear and respect (55%) than a prosperous country that is not among the strongest (41%), where the same Levada question had run 32% to 66% the other way in 2021.³⁰ The great-power identity strengthened even as the willingness to keep paying for the war fell.

Greatness, for ‘Kira’, an education-sector professional in her thirties from north-west Russia, is inseparable from scale and defensive strength rather than from any specific policy or leader.

²⁸ Levada Center, “Conflict with Ukraine: Estimates of the End of 2023 – Beginning of 2024,” March 2024, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2024/03/27/conflict-with-ukraine-estimates-of-the-end-of-2023-beginning-of-2024/>: about 64% did not consider launching the operation a mistake (a share that rose over 2023), while roughly two-thirds agreed Russia was paying too high a price for it.

²⁹ Chicago Council on Global Affairs–Levada Center survey, January 2025, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/three-four-russians-expect-military-victory-over-ukraine/>: for the first time a majority (55%) said they would prefer Russia to be a great power that other countries fear and respect, against 41% preferring a high-standard-of-living country – a reversal of the 2021 balance (32% versus 66%) – while pride in the country (96%), its history (94%) and its global political influence (74%) stood at record highs.

³⁰ Interviewee 25 (‘Kira’), (Female, 30–39), NW Russia, education sector, abroad, interview by Metcalf (remote), 4 and 10 October 2023.

Asked about her sense of Russian identity, she located her pride squarely in the country's size and stature: "I could never be from a small country. We have so many resources. We don't have to squeeze ourselves... Greatness, exceptionalism, prestige... it is still remarkable to think about the shared experiences of being from great countries." That conviction, notably, does not translate into uncritical support for Putin himself, she faults him for weakening the very strength she prizes: "Putin said he wanted the country to be strong, but he made it weak. But on paper, we say we want to be strong, and we should be strong and able to defend ourselves. Any normal patriot should be strong and able to defend."³¹

Despite such continuities, there is little evidence that Russians have internalised the full maximalist or messianic programme the Kremlin articulates. Breadth of belief is not depth of commitment even if an identity is widely shared. The director of the state pollster VCIOM has even conceded that no more than 10–15% of Russians actively and enthusiastically backed the decision to invade, and that committed support is strongly age-loaded, running well over half among the oldest cohort and around a third among the youngest.³² Independent segmentation by the Chronicles project places committed "core" support near 22%, against an almost equal core of consistent opposition.³³ The more esoteric proposition sometimes attributed to Russian opinion, including a specifically messianic sense of national mission, is not cleanly measured by these trackers, and so cannot be asserted from them in either direction.

The defensible reading is therefore firm on its own terms. What held, and in places hardened, is the interpretive frame and the identity that respondents espouse: Russia as a great power, the West as the war's real adversary, and the war as not-a-mistake. What is shallow, and thinning with age, is not that identity but the appetite to make increasing sacrifices in its name. What remains genuinely beyond the evidence is the specifically messianic register. It is the broad frame, not a deep and demanding programme, that the accumulated fatigue has left intact and, in the case of the great-power self-image, even reinforced.

Views of the State: No Durable Shift?

Stated willingness to express disagreement is high in principle, at around 60 to 70%, although it vacillates with no consistent relationship to the war's course. Naturally, a stated, hypothetical propensity, such as whether a respondent says they would be willing to voice disagreement, does not equate to observed protest behaviour, nor to opposition to the war itself. A respondent can be willing in principle to express disagreement while fully endorsing the war's aims (many military bloggers frequently criticise the state, or the way the war is being managed, while remaining supportive of the war); the measure speaks to the perceived permissibility of dissent, not to its content or to the likelihood of dissent occurring. The gap between stated willingness and lived practice is visible amongst the interviewees: in 2026, Sophia described self-censoring even her

³¹ On the shallowness and age-skew of committed support, see "How Strong Is Russian Public Support for the Invasion of Ukraine?," Atlantic Council, January 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/how-strong-is-russian-public-support-for-the-invasion-of-ukraine-2/>; VCIOM director Valery Fedorov put active, enthusiastic support at no more than 10–15%, and Levada records unconditional support far higher among the oldest cohort (over half) than the youngest (around a third).

³² "Nuance in the Fog: Plumbing for Honesty in Russian Opinion Polls," Christian Science Monitor, April 2023, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2023/0424/Nuance-in-the-fog-Plumbing-for-honesty-in-Russian-opinion-polls>: the Chronicles project places "core" war support near 22% against an almost equal core of consistent opposition (about 20%).

³³ Interviewee 18 ('Sophia'), interviews, August 2023 and May 2026.

private messages: “I am tired of considering everything so closely... should I message [Metcalf]? Should I reply?” At the same time, she noted that a Kyrgyz taxi driver in the same city voiced open contempt for the war: “the war is bullshit,” apparently without fear, an asymmetry interviewees attribute to differing exposure and stakes rather than a uniform climate of permissibility.³⁴

In the first two years of the full-scale war, willingness to discuss politics (amongst those interviewed who remained in Russia) split along relationship lines rather than collapsing into blanket silence. Asked when she discusses politics, ‘Valentina’ answered simply: “Never.” For her, avoidance was total.³⁵ Zoya, the Yekaterinburg banking manager, was more selective than silent: “My dad is for Putin; my mum is neutral about politics. I can discuss with my brother, but as a rule, I prefer not to discuss with family. And my friends are not immersed in the political sphere, and we have other interesting things to discuss.”³⁶ Dmitry drew the same line at his father, specifically, “I don’t speak about politics with my father because we have different views. I talk about politics with friends and [my] grandma,” treating the avoidance as a matter of one difficult relationship rather than a general fear of the subject.³⁷ Boris mapped his whole household by political temperature and chose silence with the two most political relatives not out of fear of the state but to avoid a recurring, unwinnable argument: raising it with his father and grandmother meant “we don’t talk for several weeks.”³⁸ Across all four, the throughline is that remaining in Russia did not produce uniform silence as much as calibration: family conversations were narrowed or closed, while friendships, where politically compatible, remained open.

Since December 2022, the war has not produced any durable movement in generalised protest or regime-direction sentiment. This flat reading should be set in context: the sharpest turn towards repression came in March 2022, when the “discrediting” of the armed forces was criminalised, and many of the most dissenting voices emigrated that year, so the series measures a population already narrowed by exit and constrained by law.

4. Why more death does not produce “this was pointless”

This mechanism is psychological before it is geopolitical. To lose a son is agonising; to accept that he died for nothing, when the alternative on offer is that he died a hero, is unbearable. The bereaved can therefore regret the death, and cool on continuing the war, without ever conceding that it was a mistake, following a pattern of dissonance-reduction and effort-justification familiar from the psychology of costly commitment.³⁹ The data illustrates this split: those who know someone killed

³⁴ Interviewee 3 (‘Valentina’), interview by Metcalf, Saint Petersburg, 4 May 2023.

³⁵ Interviewee 22 (‘Zoya’), interview, September 2023.

³⁶ Interviewee 21 (‘Dmitry’), interview by Metcalf, Yekaterinburg (remote), 21 September 2023.

³⁷ Interviewee 27 (‘Boris’), interview by Metcalf, Yekaterinburg (remote), 5 October 2023.

³⁸ On the psychology of this asymmetry, see the work on cognitive dissonance and motivated reasoning: to concede that a costly, irreversible commitment was mistaken generates acute dissonance, which people typically resolve by revaluing the commitment rather than accepting the loss. Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957); Ziva Kunda, “The Case for Motivated Reasoning,” *Psychological Bulletin* 108, no. 3 (1990): 480–98. The effort-justification variant – that the more one has sacrificed for a cause, the more one values it – is most directly at work here: Elliot Aronson and Judson Mills, “The Effect of Severity of Initiation on Liking for a Group,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 59 (1959): 177–81.

³⁹ On the search for meaning after loss, see Crystal L. Park, “Making Sense of the Meaning Literature: An Integrative Review of Meaning Making and Its Effects on Adjustment to Stressful Life Events,” *Psychological Bulletin* 136, no. 2 (2010): 257–301. Terror-management theory supplies the existential mechanism: heightened mortality salience intensifies defence of the cultural worldview that confers meaning and buffers

are more ready for the war to end (77% against 71%), more willing to voice dissent, and more economically pessimistic; yet they are **no more likely** to say the war has failed to achieve its goals – a verdict that stays within the flat 16–24% band the Wave-9 segmentation records across every group (see Section 6). Personal loss tracks with wanting the war over, not with a changed verdict on whether it has failed.

This split is not a demographic artefact. Those who know someone killed differ only marginally in composition from those who do not. There is no difference by sex (a null 0.5-point gap in exposure) and only a weak one by age: exposure peaks among prime working-age respondents and falls among the over-60s, consistent with the dead being overwhelmingly of fighting age, so that mid-life networks are the most exposed. The readiness gap survives this: within every age band the bereaved are more ready for the war to end – by three to six points, and by the widest margin among the over-60s – and age-standardising the comparison leaves a bereavement effect of 4.6 points, roughly four-fifths of the raw 5.8-point gap, the remainder reflecting the bereaved group's slightly younger profile. The failure-verdict, by contrast, is flat across age and sex alike, so the bereaved's undiminished belief that the war is succeeding cannot be attributed to their personal loss. Grief tracks with wanting the war over; it does not track with judging the war a failure.

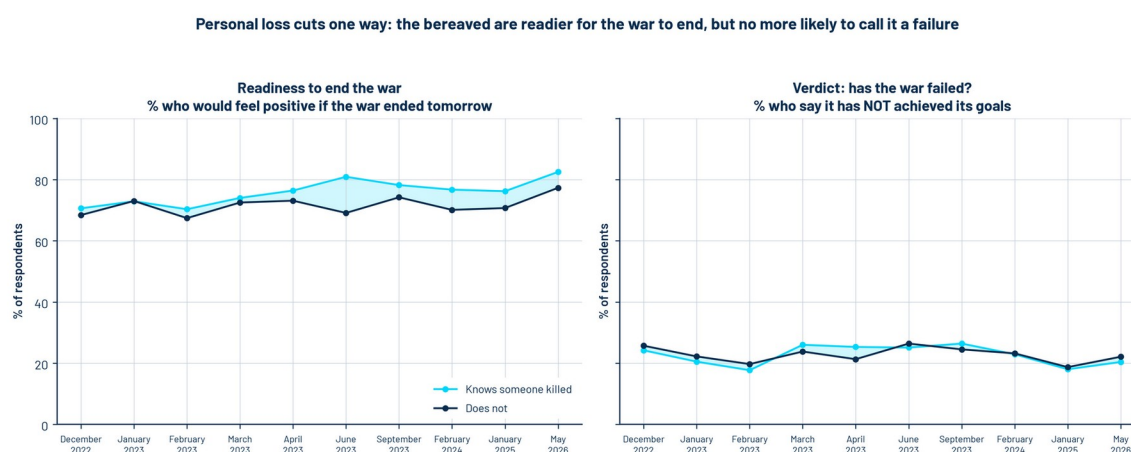


Figure 4. Those who know someone killed are consistently more ready for the war to end, yet no more likely to call it a failure.

The usual explanation – that a besieged-fortress worldview, an ontological picture of what Russia is and who it truly faces, simply armours people against doubt – is insufficient here, because that frame is general: it applies to the bereaved and the untouched alike, and so cannot explain why *loss specifically* fails to move the verdict. The better account separates supply from demand. **The demand for meaning is universal and human:** grief generates a need for the loss to have been for something, and any bereaved parent, in any country, reaches for it.⁴⁰ This impulse is hardly specific to Russians; what is specific to Russia, and what the Kremlin controls, is the **supply:** which meanings are pre-stocked and culturally ready to hand, and which alternatives have been removed. The besieged-fortress ontology provisions the shelf with a single ready-made narrative, namely

death anxiety, so proximity to death tends to strengthen rather than loosen attachment to a sacralising frame. Jeff Greenberg, Tom Pyszczynski and Sheldon Solomon, "The Causes and Consequences of a Need for Self-Esteem: A Terror Management Theory," in *Public Self and Private Self*, ed. Roy F. Baumeister (New York: Springer, 1986), 189–212.

⁴⁰ Interviewee 17 ('Sergei'), interview, August 2023.

sacrifice against an existential Western threat; yet it is grief that reaches for it, even among those who, on a naive account, would have most reason to reject it.

That sacrificial framing is not simply supplied from above; it is variously inherited, contested, and refused by the interviewees who live inside it. Sergei described absorbing the logic through WWII family memories even while resisting its state-mandated performance: “The great sacrifice for my life, for my life, for my parents. I heard a lot about this from my relatives. It was a big sacrifice for my future, and I am glad that my relatives persevered through this... But I don’t think that celebrating every year in such style is such a good idea.” When he left Russia, he feared rejection from his family, that they might see him as a “coward.”⁴¹ Grigory rejected the logic outright, in the starkest terms in the sample: “We were given an unbelievable choice, a ‘Jesus Christ’ choice... If you are a benevolent Russian, then you will die. What is the result? [expletive] nothing. Why should I die for nothing?... I am not Jesus Christ, and I will not die for no result. Navalny sacrificed himself, and we got nothing from the world.”⁴² And in Sophia’s account of a friend’s relative, the logic reproduced itself entirely intact: a formerly unemployed man who volunteered for the front “got in good physical shape,” sent photographs home, and, in her words, “feels like a man now” — a sacrifice recast as personal redemption rather than waste.⁴³

Across these four responses sits the same sacrificial vocabulary the Kremlin itself supplies: inherited, criticised, refused, and reenacted, sometimes by the same person. That is the supply constraint in operation. Even Grigory, who rejects the account outright, must borrow its terms in order to do so; no rival vocabulary is stocked with which to make an irreplaceable loss mean something else. The strategic implication is that messaging which stresses the war’s original futility does not merely bounce off a propaganda frame that facts might puncture; it can assault the only account under which an irreplaceable loss remains survivable, and is likely to be defended accordingly. Under motivated reasoning, such messaging may harden conviction rather than erode it, although the strength of that response will vary with individual and circumstance. Greater exposure to the war’s reality can therefore pull in two directions at once: it raises the desire for the war to end, because it is unbearable to keep losing sons, while it may strengthen the defence of the war’s meaning, because it is unbearable that they died for nothing. Where this holds, cost-tolerance and legitimacy move in opposite directions under the same stimulus.

5. Where populations differ

A single generational gradient organises most war attitudes: the young are markedly more fatigued, feel little threat, and are less hawkish; the old report feeling more threatened and more willing to back escalation. The gap between youngest and oldest on welcoming an end to the war is around 25 points (87% of 18–29s against 62% of the over-60s). The exception proves informative: Lev, the youngest and most Kremlin-aligned interviewee of the 2023 fieldwork, was too young to remember the 1990s and was largely indifferent to the prospect of his own mobilisation (“I didn’t care at all... I still can be drafted”). Arguably, such attitudes could be attributed to recklessness of youth and to

⁴¹ Interviewee 30 (‘Grigory’), interview, December 2023.

⁴² Interviewee 18 (‘Sophia’), interview, August 2023.

⁴³ Interviewee 24 (‘Lev’), interview, October 2023.

growing up entirely within Putin-era myth-making rather than to active enthusiasm for the war itself.⁴⁴

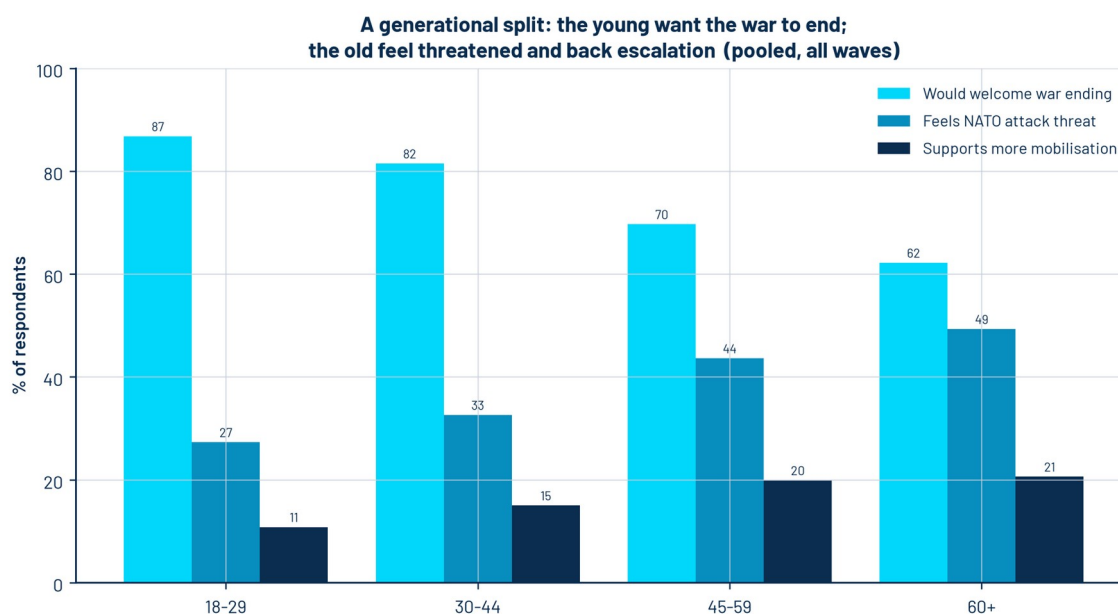


Figure 5. A generational split: the young want the war to end; the old feel threatened and back escalation.

Sex is the next axis: women are consistently more fatigued, more threat-perceiving and more economically anxious, while men are more hawkish but also more openly sceptical that the war is succeeding. That last point matters for interpretation as it suggests that “the war is not achieving its goals” is not a doves’ statement. A hawk who thinks the war is failing wants more effort, not less, so that flat one-fifth-to-a-quarter figure cannot be read as latent opposition. This split by sex recurred within a single household in the qualitative fieldwork: the female partner voiced fatigue over job losses, mobilisation scares and the burden of self-censorship, while her male partner responded to the same events with statistics and probability estimates, and was the more openly resigned to further escalation, including the possibility of nuclear use. Across the wider sample of interviews, the pattern recurred structurally: of those who left Russia around the 2022 mobilisation, the women interviewed most often cited a partner’s or son’s safety as their reason for leaving, while the men interviewed more often cited risk to themselves.⁴⁵

Settlement and income shape *exposure* rather than attitude. Rural and poorer Russians are substantially more likely to know a war death; there is roughly a ten-point gap on both settlement and income. The poorest are also the most economically pessimistic, yet neither settlement nor income moves war-fatigue or goals-scepticism much; those are structured by age and sex. Place and class, in other words, determine who pays the war’s costs; age and sex determine how people feel about it. Interviewees situated in poorer or more remote regions describe this exposure directly: Danilov, speaking of the industrial city of Nizhny Tagil, which he described as marked by low wages and “lots of criminality,” recounted acquaintances who accepted military contracts for

⁴⁴ Interviewee 18 (‘Sophia’), interviews, August 2023 and May 2026; Interviewee 30 (‘Grigory’), interviews, December 2023 and May 2026.

⁴⁵ Interviewee 23 (‘Danilov’), interview, September 2023; Interviewee 11 (‘Mikhail’), (Male, 20–29), Omsk, tech sector, abroad, interview by Metcalf (in person), 31 July 2023.

the signing bonus, while wealthier, Moscow-based interviewees more often described purchasing medical exemptions or relying on IT-sector draft protections.⁴⁶

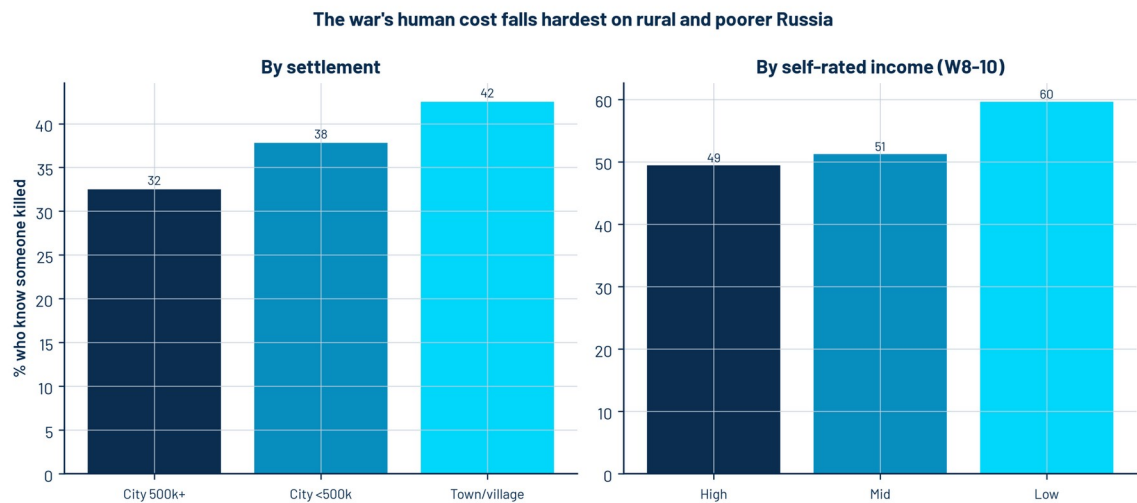


Figure 6. The war's human cost falls hardest on rural and poorer Russia.

This distribution is best read not as a fuse waiting to catch but as a map of where the regime has chosen to absorb the war's human cost. The regressive geography places the losses where political pressure is hardest to organise and cheapest to absorb, and insulates the metropolitan, media-shaping, protest-capable centre from them. It is a finding about regime design, not about impending unrest.⁴⁷

6. Attitude segments: a dissenting minority and a stamina spectrum

The previous section read the population through fixed demographic categories. A complementary question is how it divides by attitude to the war itself. The answer comes in two steps. There is, first, a genuine line of division between those who oppose the war and those who support it; the more consequential structure, however, lies within the supporting and acquiescent majority. This second line is one not of support versus opposition but of stamina: how much cost, and how long a war, people will bear for aims they broadly share. The groups below should be read as tendencies rather than hard factions; they overlap heavily, as is normal for attitudinal survey data.

A first cut: opposition, ambivalence, support

The genuine anti-war constituency inside Russia is neither trivial nor a majority. When the war-attitude items are set alongside questions on regime approval and system confidence, a bloc of roughly one in six separates out: people who disapprove of the country's direction, doubt the war is succeeding, and are the most willing to voice dissent. This is the closest thing in the data to genuine disaffection. It should not be confused with the larger sixth-to-a-quarter who, across every segment, say the war has failed to achieve its goals (the belief-check table below): as Section 5

⁴⁶ Caveat to the data: self-rated income exists only in the waves seven to ten, the late high-casualty period, so the absolute "know someone killed" levels in the income panel sit above the settlement panel. Only the relative gradient, whereby poorer people are more exposed than richer people, is interpretable.

⁴⁷ Kimberly Metcalf, unpublished doctoral fieldwork tables ('Political Preferences & Economic Background,' Annex III), non-elite Russian interviewees, May–December 2023.

notes, that doubt is spread evenly and includes hawks who want the war fought harder rather than stopped. The dissenting bloc here is narrower and different in kind, defined by disapproval of the regime and of the country's direction rather than by doubt about the war's progress alone. The exact size should not be over-read; but its existence, and its rough order of magnitude, are clear enough. The qualitative fieldwork referenced in this paper, which includes a significant sample of Russians who had left the country and therefore is not representative of the national population, nonetheless shows a comparable structure: of 31 non-elite interviewees whose political orientation was recorded in 2023, roughly a third identified as liberal, anti-war or oppositionist, while the remainder described themselves as apolitical, undecided or declined to state a position.⁴⁸

Identifying this dissenting minority also sets the scope for the rest of the analysis. The remaining five in six are not expressing anti-war positions at all. Across every wave, a large majority of them hold the beliefs that underwrite the war: that it is broadly succeeding, and that the real adversary is the West rather than Ukraine. For this majority the question is therefore not whether they endorse the war's aims but how much they will bear in pursuit of them. It is to that population, the supporters and the ambivalent among them, rather than the dissenters, that the rest of this section applies.

The stamina spectrum

Within that supportive majority, the dividing axis is stamina. To track it over time, the authors used a transparent rule-based typology built on the two items asked in every wave: whether a respondent would welcome the war ending (stance) and how long they think it should last (resolve). This yields five mutually exclusive groups, named for stamina rather than sympathy. Hardliners oppose the war ending and want it to run for years or until all its goals are met. Other maximalists want it prolonged but do not oppose its ending – including those who would be glad if it ended yet insist it must not stop until the goals are met. Together with the Hardliners they form the maximalist bloc. Conflicted respondents are committed on stance but not maximalist: they oppose ending the war yet want the conflict to be over within a year, or would welcome an end but give no view on how long. Weary supporters would welcome the war ending and want it over within a year. Non-committal respondents say “hard to say” about the ending and are not maximalist.

Because “hardliner” is a constructed category rather than a survey response, this report separates two nested measures. The wider is maximalism, a position on the war's aims: asked how long the war should last, those choosing several years or no limit at all ran at roughly 18–26% through 2023 and early 2024, peaking at 26% in February 2024, before falling to 14.5% by May 2026. About 9% would set no limit at all. Inside that constituency sits the hardline core, a position on the war's continuation rather than its aims: those who both want it prolonged and would not welcome its ending, running at roughly 7–11% across the reliable waves and 4% by May 2026. The spectrum below shows both: the hardline core as the base band, with the rest of the maximalist bloc directly above it.

⁴⁸ (The December 2022 Hardliner figure is inflated by a Wave 1 anomaly in the time-limits question; across the more reliable Waves 2–10 the share falls from ~8–11% to 4%.)

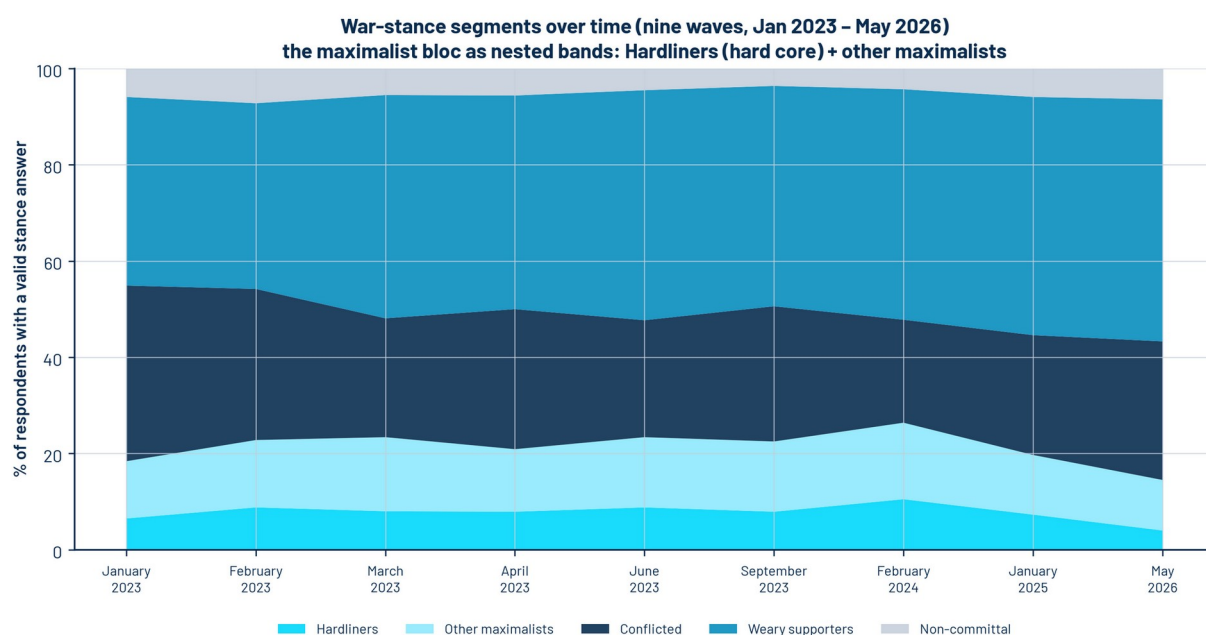


Figure 7. War-stance segments across the nine reliable waves (a fatigue-and-resolve spectrum, not a support-versus-opposition split). The maximalist bloc appears as two nested bands – the hardline core and other maximalists – which together give the share wanting the war run for years or until all goals are met. December 2022 is omitted: the time-limits item is anomalous in that wave, which inflates the maximalist bands and makes them non-comparable with the rest of the series.⁴⁹

The movement across the nine reliable waves runs in one direction, though not by the route the earlier four-way reading suggested. Weary supporters grew from 39% to 50% and have been the largest group throughout; the hardline core shrank from roughly 7–11% to 4%; and the Non-committal bloc stayed small and flat, with no war-driven trend. The Conflicted middle is the instructive case. It is net lower across the series, from 37% to 29%, but not by a steady drift: it bottomed at 21% in February 2024 and then recovered, in the same two waves that the maximalist bloc contracted from 26% to 14.5%. These are repeated cross-sections, not a panel, so no individual movement can be traced; but at population level the maximalist contraction is matched almost point for point by the growth of the Conflicted band rather than of the Weary or the Opposed. Belief appears to be degrading into hedging rather than into dissent. By May 2026, half of those with a view want the war over soon.

The belief check: why “weary” is not “opposed”

This is the crucial guardrail against misreading the growth of the weary bloc as a swing into opposition. The belief check collapses the two maximalist bands back into a single Hardliner group, giving four segments rather than five. Crossing those segments against the belief items in every wave shows that belief the war is succeeding, and belief that the West rather than Ukraine is the real adversary, stay high across all four and move together. In no wave does the Weary-supporter majority fall below ~55% believing the war is succeeding – typically only 5–15 points behind the Hardliners – and on the West-as-enemy framing the two are within 7–15 points. What separates

⁴⁹ Caveats: these are exploratory cross-sections, so no segment membership can be tracked at the individual level over time; the groups are soft, describing overlapping tendencies rather than discrete factions; and all figures are unweighted. The over-time series rests on a two-item war-stance proxy, the belief check on the single richest wave, and the estimate of opposition on the one wave that carries the regime-approval items

them, sharply and consistently, is a single axis: appetite for another mobilisation wave (Hardliners 27–45% against Weary supporters 6–17%).

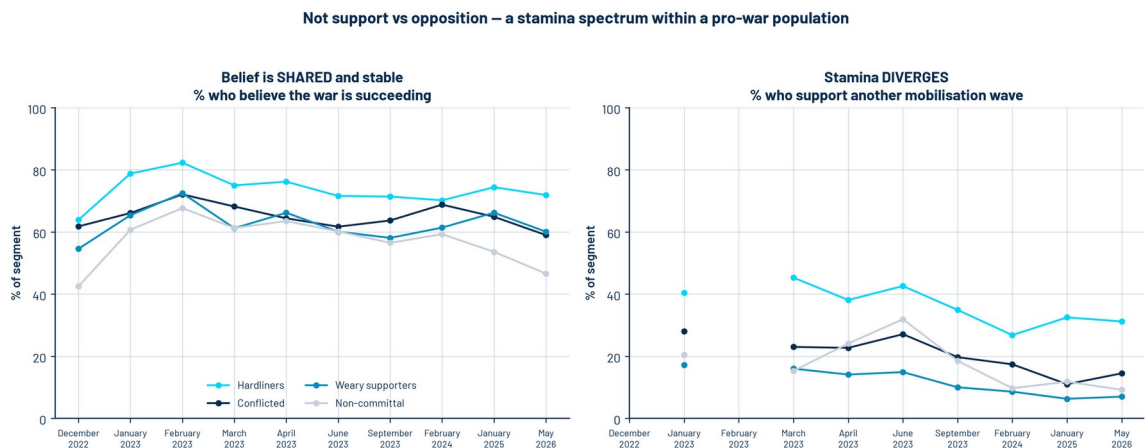


Figure 8. Left: belief the war is succeeding is shared and stable across segments, all ten waves. Right: support for another mobilisation wave – the stamina axis – is where Hardliners and Weary supporters diverge.

Segment (Wave 9)	Size	Believes war succeeding	Sees West / NATO as enemy	Wants more mobilisation	Says war has failed
Hardliners	7%	74%	91%	33%	24%
Conflicted	34%	65%	80%	11%	16%
Weary supporters	50%	66%	83%	6%	19%
Non-committal	10%	54%	75%	12%	22%

Belief that the war has failed is a minority view (~16–24%) spread evenly across the segments so this is not what the stamina typology is capturing. Weary supporters are not opponents in any wave: they share the war’s justifying beliefs almost as firmly as the Hardliners and simply have less appetite for the means. The population did not swing into opposition; it grew tired within support. The table also shows the two axes to be independent: the West-as-enemy framing runs high in every segment (75–91%), including among the Weary supporters, whose appetite for further mobilisation is the lowest of all. Hostility to the West and a will to keep fighting are separate things.⁵⁰

7. How opinion is likely to develop

The findings above are diagnostic; this section turns them forward. The governing constraint carries over: opinion moves on inputs – strain, shocks, elite signals – rather than generating movement of its own. The nearer horizons rest directly on the ten-wave data; the post-transition and generational ones extrapolate from it, and are offered as reasoned scenarios rather than forecasts. Each is conditional, and the falsifiable core is gathered in the box at the end.

The coming year: saturation, not rupture

⁵⁰ Interviewee 18 (‘Sophia’), follow-up interview, May 2026.

Fatigue is already at its ceiling – 81% would welcome an end, and appetite for another mobilisation has fallen to 11% – so additional strain has little room to raise it much further and no established channel to convert it into pressure. Fuel strikes, deepening material pessimism (62% expect their own finances to worsen) and a tightening manpower picture will therefore most likely produce saturation rather than rupture: a population more tired, more materially anxious, and no less convinced of the enemy-frame. The single input that would most likely break this pattern is a second mass mobilisation. September 2022 remains the only episode that visibly punctured accommodation, which is why the Kremlin can be expected to keep substituting inducement and technology for conscripted bodies. The falsifier is a general mobilisation ordered without an acute battlefield forcing event, which would signal that manpower constraints had overtaken the regime's sensitivity to domestic accommodation. Sub-threshold pressure of this kind was visible in recent fieldwork: Sophia described a military commissariat visiting a Moscow college of medically exempt students in May 2026, timed just before Victory Day, and was read by one parent as an effort to "sign up as many people as possible and report those numbers to Putin" without triggering a formal second wave. She also said that a trigger for her to leave the country again would be another mobilisation and busification.⁵¹

That substitution has limits, and the manpower arithmetic may force the Kremlin's hand sooner than the fatigue data alone would suggest. A renewed mobilisation should therefore be treated as a live near-term possibility rather than a remote one. Its effect would be disproportionate to its scale, because it strikes at the two conditions that make the present accommodation bearable: personal safety and the ability to opt out of the war. So long as the war can be held at arm's length, delegated to the poor and the distant and absorbed as background noise, fatigue stays inert. A mobilisation collapses that distance, converting a diffuse and avoidable cost into a direct and near-universal one. It is the most plausible mechanism by which fatigue could curdle into anger, and the point at which this report's expectation of saturation over rupture is most exposed.

12 to 18 months: a larger, wearier, still-believing majority

If the war continues on present trends, the population's centre of gravity keeps shifting towards the weary-supporter bloc, already past half, with fatigue deepening within support rather than curdling into opposition. The committed core, by contrast, is unlikely to thin much further, having already fallen to about 4%, but should change in temper: the hardliners can be expected to grow more critical of how the war is being waged, and open scepticism about whether it is reaching its goals (broadly flat across the series so far) should begin to climb. That climb should not be misread as a peace signal. As Section 5 shows, a hawk who judges the war to be failing wants it fought harder, not halted; a rising "this is not succeeding" sentiment is therefore as likely to fuel pressure to escalate as pressure to stop.

Throughout, the durable substrate holds: the enemy-frame, in which the West is the real adversary and the war is justified, shows no sign of defection. The strain that accumulates is thus double-edged: a widening, passive, weary majority on one flank and a restive hardline core, frustrated with

⁵¹ IKAR series. On hypothetical operations against Poland (Waves 4 and 7), Georgia (Wave 4) and Sweden (Wave 8), 15–25% of respondents rejected action under any circumstances, the remainder endorsing it only under reactive conditions ("if it threatens Russia", "if Russian-speakers are oppressed there"); the one trackable item – whether grounds exist for an operation against the Baltic states (Waves 4, 6, 7) – moved from around 34–35% to 26% over 2023. These are conditional, defensively-framed items and are not measures of unprovoked expansionist intent.

the war's prosecution, on the other. For hardliners, war is a means of achieving and confirming a country's greatness and the frustration comes from when the instrument of war begins to demonstrate the opposite.

The regime's likelier exposure is not anti-war pressure from below but a shock to the system that allows for an outpouring of frustration combined with hawkish pressure to prosecute the war more aggressively. If the Kremlin cannot satisfy either disgruntled or hardline demands, disgruntlement is more likely to rise: the regime's authority rests less on benevolence than on a demonstrated capacity to project strength and impose order, and it is the appearance of weakness, more than of cruelty, that has historically proved corrosive to Russian rulers' legitimacy.

What would move opinion: channelled strain, not accumulated suffering

The data suggests that material deterioration, at least within the current parameters, registers as strain without routing to any political outcome. Opinion is an energy that requires a channel; as such, the shocks that matter are not those that merely increase suffering but supply a channel. Two candidates dominate. The first is a forced second mobilisation, which converts a private willingness to see the war end into a concrete, personal and near-universal cost. The second, and more consequential, is visible elite fracture: a Prigozhin-scale rupture that signals division at the top and briefly licenses the weary majority to voice what it privately holds. Absent elite cueing, even a very large fatigued majority stays inert: the central asymmetry of an atomised polity.

A post-Putin transition: appetite among the few, acquiescence among the many

Here the analysis moves beyond the polling and should be read as a reasoned scenario. The constituency with a real appetite to continue or expand the war is narrow but intense: the committed hardliners, older, more male and most system-loyal, who want an open-ended war and, for the most part, further mobilisation. On the measures used here, the hard core who would not welcome any end at all stood at 4% by May 2026. Around it sits a wider pool of maximalists – those who would have the war run for years or until all its goals are met – which peaked at about a quarter in early 2024 before falling to 14.5% by May 2026. On either measure they are heavily outnumbered by the weary and the conflicted. These hardliners are not, however, a single constituency: they span establishment loyalists, a pro-war populist current (the audience Prigozhin briefly commanded), and imperial-nationalist revanchists, united more by an appetite for continuation than by any common programme. The nationalist strand in particular is worth investigating further, within a broader field of patriotic-policy critics whose quarrel is with the war's conduct rather than its aims.

In any case, numbers are the wrong metric. Regime direction in a transition is likely to be set by elite alignment, with public opinion functioning as a legitimating resource rather than a driver. It is an energy to be channelled, not a force that channels itself. A motivated hawkish faction with elite backing could therefore sustain or even widen the war over a reticent majority, because that majority shares the enemy-frame it would be asked to endorse and holds no mechanism to convert reluctance into constraint. The same passivity cuts the other way: a faction seeking de-escalation would find a public ready to accept relief without resolution. The weary majority is permissive in both directions; it ratifies rather than decides. The decisive variable is which elite coalition consolidates, and opinion will have a role to play in providing legitimacy to whichever does.

This permissiveness matters beyond the transition scenario. Russian public opinion functions as a permissive condition for state aggression rather than its author. It neither originates nor demands the war, but its priors pre-authorise force wherever that force can be framed as defensive, and it shifts from passive acquiescence towards active refusal chiefly as the costs reach it. The series' questions about third countries show the same structure. Asked about hypothetical operations against Poland, Georgia or Sweden, only 15–25% of respondents rule one out under any circumstances but the conditions offered are uniformly reactive ("if it threatens Russia", "if Russian-speakers are oppressed there"), so the large conditional majority is defensively-coded endorsement triggered by a self-defined provocation, not appetite for unprovoked conquest.⁵² What matters is the structure, not the level: the same justificatory template that legitimated the war in Ukraine is applied, largely uninterrogated, to fresh targets. This reflects the culturally-stocked repertoire of national myths and justificatory narratives the state curates and the public draws on to interpret events. This "mythscape" functions like a "shelf" of pre-stocked meanings, as described in Section 4, that offers a reusable, portable justification for force the public can use whenever the "threat to Russia" cue is supplied. In this reading, opinion is neither the driver of Russian foreign policy nor an impediment to it, but a permissive enabler whose priors keep the cost of aggression low.

This interpretation touches a question broader than survey methodology: in Charles Taylor's terms, a population that neither originates nor is asked to justify the terms of its own war is not exercising agency in the strong sense. In other words, it is not self-reflectively interpreting and evaluating what is significant about its own situation, so much as inhabiting an inherited framework of meaning without being called to stand back from it.⁵³ That diagnosis is echoed almost exactly in interviewees' own language: 'Katya' described a kind of learned helplessness in which "people are scared and care more about their families, and they don't fight against things they don't like," while 'Varvara' put the point more starkly still: "being Russian is understanding that nothing depends on you... you do not know true democracy, and it has always been this way."⁵⁴ Many interviewees named emigration as the only means by which they could reclaim any agency at all.

The distinction between accommodation and belief tracks a formal one in self-determination theory: motivation becomes more genuinely autonomous only as it moves along a continuum from external regulation through introjection towards identification and integration, since "regulations that lie further along this continuum from external towards integrated are more fully internalised, and the resulting behaviours are more autonomous." Sustained accommodation without belief revision reads, on this account, as behaviour still governed by external or introjected regulation rather than genuine internalisation: motivation that persists only so long as the surrounding pressures that produced it remain in place.⁵⁵ That selectivity is not always seamless even for those who have internalised it: Kira, describing her pride in Russia's role defeating the Nazis in the Great Patriotic War, added unprompted that Russian television "doesn't discuss that the equipment came

⁵² Charles Taylor, "What Is Human Agency?," in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

⁵³ Interviewee 14 ('Katya'), (Female, 20–29), Moscow, Tourism Sector, In Russia & Abroad, interview by Metcalf (remote), 8 August 2023. Interviewee 26 ('Varvara'), (Female, 20–29), Tech Sector, Yekaterinburg, Abroad, interview by Metcalf (remote), 4 October 2023.

⁵⁴ Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, *Self-Determination Theory: Basic Psychological Needs in Motivation, Development, and Wellness* (New York: Guilford Press, 2017), Organismic Integration Theory, Proposition II.

⁵⁵ Interviewee 25 ('Kira'), interviews, October 2023.

from the West,” or that Allied nations besides Russia fought the Nazis too, observing simply that “no one wants to share the victory”.⁵⁶

Grigory’s own diagnosis of Putin’s power touches this question of agency directly. Reflecting on why Western sympathy for Aleksei Navalny changed nothing, he concluded that legitimacy was never the real mechanism: Putin’s power rests on a reserve of the disposable, not the persuaded. “Putin can take one million [expletive] and give them AK-47s... to the ignorant, poor, and stupid. They can make a mess.” On his account, those capable of exercising agency in the stronger sense, of interpreting and evaluating the war’s terms for themselves, are precisely the ones without power: “There are normal Russians; no one cares.” He does not offer this as an endorsement but as something closer to grief: “Putin is right, I regret that Putin is right, that no one cares.”⁵⁷

Five to ten years: the war-socialised cohort and the durability of the priors

The generational gradient emerges from the data as the only obvious structural de-escalation vector, and it is the one the Kremlin works hardest to reverse: socialising tomorrow’s youth through militarised “patriotic education” at home and its export into the occupied territories, in the hope of manufacturing a hawkish successor cohort. Whether the project takes hold turns on a question this cross-sectional data cannot resolve: whether today’s youth dovishness is a cohort effect, which generational replacement would carry forward, or a life-cycle one, which it would not.

Two considerations temper the Kremlin’s bet. Lived reality competes with the curriculum: a decade of accumulating casualties and self-inflicted trauma is its own formative experience, and disillusion with the war is a plausible cohort outcome. But, again, disillusion with the war is not rejection of the priors. The paper’s central distinction holds across generations as well as within them: a cohort can emerge war-weary without emerging frame-rejecting. What has so far proved most durable is not enthusiasm for this war but the underlying conviction of Russia’s rightful place and sphere. This is a prior that predates Putin, would very likely outlast him, and that the war’s meaning-making has if anything reinforced. On this evidence neither Russian atomisation nor those priors are close to breaking; both are structural and self-reproducing, and the priors are actively renewed by the very grief the war generates. What could break them lies outside this data, and probably outside public opinion altogether: a defeat severe enough to discredit the great-power narrative, or an elite-led reckoning that reopened it. Neither can be produced by public opinion alone, though opinion could ratify either once supplied.

The predictions, stated for testing

Fatigue caps manpower, not politics. A population that would welcome an end to the war generates no pressure to produce one. The appetite for another mobilisation wave, already down from 24% to 11%, marks the domestic ceiling on manpower-intensive escalation. A second wave would be the one event capable of showing where accommodation ends: September 2022 remains the only episode that visibly

⁵⁶ Interviewee 30 (‘Grigory’), interview, December 2023.

⁵⁷ Maria Snegovaya and Jade McGlynn, “Russian Attitudes Are Shifting as the War’s Effects Come Home,” CSIS Commentary, 7 July 2026, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-attitudes-are-shifting-wars-effects-come-home>. On the distinction between military and economic shocks, and on attribution as the contested variable.

punctured it, and absent such a shock this data cannot locate the limit.

Material deterioration is an indicator of strain, not a political mechanism. It should be understood as a read-out of regime strain (62% expect their finances to worsen), not as a fuse.

A ceasefire lands as relief without resolution. High fatigue, an intact frame and flat defeatism mean an imposed pause is neither punished nor read as defeat and provides latitude for the Kremlin to pause and rearm, not a constraint on it.

Generational replacement is the only structural de-escalation vector but it is contested. It erodes the war constituency only if youth dovishness is cohort rather than life-cycle. The Kremlin behaves as though it is generational, which is why it invests so heavily in youth-militarisation. Time is contested terrain, not automatically on the West's side.

8. Recommendations

- **Do not expect or wait for the Russian people to solve the threat posed by Russia.** Plan for a conflict that continues on elite and ideological logic despite majority fatigue. War-weariness is real, but it is not capable of demanding peace.
- **Treat the second-mobilisation number as the leading cost-tolerance indicator.** It is the cleanest available gauge of the domestic ceiling on manpower-intensive escalation and of the pace of the shift towards inducement- and technology-intensive war.
- **In influence terms, legitimise de-escalation readiness rather than attacking the enemy-frame.** The “war with the West” framing is among the most stable attitudes in the dataset; validating war-weariness has more purchase than contesting the enemy-image, and (per Section 4) assaulting the war's meaning is unlikely to resonate with the bereaved.
- **Insist on distinguishing accommodation from belief in every assessment.** A naive reading of “fatigue rising” predicts a softening that the worldview data does not support. The two must be tracked separately or Western analysis will keep mistaking exhaustion for change.
- **Distinguish mediated from unmediated costs.** The enemy-frame holds most firmly where the war reaches people through an information environment the state controls, and least firmly where costs arrive physically, locally and personally: casualties can be renamed and ritualised, a fuel queue cannot. The analytical question is therefore not whether Russians feel the war's costs but what they attribute them to, and attribution is contested rather than fixed. Sanctions and long-range strikes raise the material cost; information effort determines whether that cost is connected to the war the Kremlin chose to continue. The two belong in one strategy rather than in sequence.⁵⁸
- **Treat opinion as a permissive enabler, not a brake.** Because its priors pre-authorise defensively framed force, Russian society lowers the cost of aggression rather than raising it; planning should assume opinion will ratify escalation or de-escalation alike, and will not by itself constrain either.

9. What this data cannot tell us

⁵⁸ “Busification” is colloquial Russian for forced conscription in which men are seized in public and taken away in minibuses; here it denotes a renewed and coercive mobilisation.

Several limits bound what this evidence can support. The series is a set of repeated cross-sections, unweighted, so it records population-level shifts rather than the same people changing their minds; and where subgroup figures are pooled across waves they blend time and composition, describing typical group differences rather than a single-date estimate. Coverage is uneven. The general future-optimism battery and the country-by-country allies and adversaries batteries were fielded only in the first wave, and income only in the final three, so none of those dimensions can be trended. Everything here is self-reported under wartime conditions, in which rising “hard to say” may register uncertainty or reticence and social-desirability pressure cannot be measured, which is why the stable frame figures are best read as a floor on public conformity rather than a thermometer of private conviction. And the subgroup and proximity differences reported throughout are associations: they do not establish that the war caused the attitude.

10. Conclusion

Over four years of full-scale war have changed how Russians live with the conflict far more than what they believe about it. Fatigue stands at its recorded maximum, loss has become a widespread experience, and the appetite for another mobilisation has more than halved. None of this has dislodged the frame that makes the war intelligible: that the West rather than Ukraine is the real adversary, and that launching the war was not a mistake. The exhaustion is genuine but it is not opposition.

For a Western reader the first implication is a negative one, and it is worth stating without hedging: there is little point waiting for Russian society to bring this war to an end. The weariness is real and it has nowhere to go, at least for now. There is no elite cue to follow, no organisational vehicle to join, no channel through which private reluctance becomes public constraint. Fatigue metrics will continue to rise, and they will probably also continue to be reported as a countdown when they are not one.

The same inertia cuts the other way. A public that cannot force an end will not obstruct one either. Were an elite coalition to move towards a settlement, it would find a population ready to accept relief without resolution, and a hard core — around 4% by May 2026 — with no more means of compelling continuation than the majority has of compelling an end. The binding constraint on ending the war is elite, not popular. Those who treat Russian opinion as the obstacle to peace make the same error as those who treat it as the engine of it.

What follows is a shift of attention rather than a prescription. The variables that matter are those that move opinion or bypass it: which elite coalition consolidates; whether a second mobilisation is ordered (still the one shock capable of revealing where accommodation ends); and whether the war's costs reach Russians already interpreted or unmediated. A fuel queue, unlike a casualty figure, cannot be mediated by narrative or censorship alone. The contest is not over whether Russians know the war is expensive. It is over what they attribute the expense to.

That leaves the question this kind of work is usually asked to answer: what would actually degrade the regime's capacity to sustain the war? Naturally, a report on public opinion evolution is not tailored to answering that question, although there is little point pretending it is not the normative

horizon behind research of this kind. What the data does establish is narrower, and clarifying: public opinion on the war is not, in itself, the mechanism that degrades regime capacity.