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Canadian Slavonic Papers

Revue Canadienne des Slavistes

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcsp20

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To cite this article: Lisa McIntosh Sundstrom (2022): The improbable path to peace through domestic political change in Russia, Canadian Slavonic Papers, DOI: 10.1080/00085006.2022.2105503

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00085006.2022.2105503

Published online: 14 Sep 2022.

CANADIAN SLAVONIC PAPERS/REVUE CANADIENNE DES SLAVISTES
https://doi.org/10.1080/00085006.2022.2105503

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FORUM: RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE

The improbable path to peace through domestic political change in Russia

Lisa McIntosh Sundstrom

Department of Political Science, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada

ABSTRACT

Could an end to the Russian attack on Ukraine come about through domestic political change in Russia? This article considers possibilities by examining what we know about the current degree of support for the war and for Putin as leader, as well as the developing impacts of brain drain, economic sanctions, and military losses that could lead to increased domestic opposition to the war over time. The article includes a brief analysis of potential sources of elite opposition in Russia, which could oust Putin or persuade him to back down from the invasion.

RÉSUMÉ

Des changements dans la politique intérieure de la Russie pourraient-ils entraîner la fin de son offensive en Ukraine? Cet article en examine les probabilités par l'étude de ce que nous savons du soutien populaire à la guerre et de la popularité de Vladimir Putin comme dirigeant, ainsi que l'impact à plus ou moins long terme que pourraient avoir sur le renforcement d'une opposition à la guerre des facteurs tels que l'exode de cerveaux, les sanctions économiques et les pertes militaires. L'article propose aussi une brève analyse des motifs qui pourraient conduire certaines élites à chercher à renverser Putin ou à le persuader de mettre fin à la guerre.

KEYWORDS

War in Ukraine; elite politics; coup; protest; Russian politics

As the Russian invasion of Ukraine grinds on with no apparent solution through international diplomacy or military victory by either side, one of the questions that people often ask is whether an end to the war could come through domestic change in Russia, either through a shift in government policy to retreat from Ukraine, or through Vladimir Putin's removal from power.

What are the facilitating and limiting factors to this potential development? I discuss them in this article by considering what we know about the degree of support for the war and for Putin as leader, the apparent developing impacts of brain drain, economic sanctions, and military losses that could affect the growth of opposition, and a brief analysis of where those potential sources of effective opposition might be in Russia, who could oust Putin or persuade him to back down from the invasion.

CONTACT Lisa McIntosh Sundstrom lisa.sundstrom@ubc.ca

How popular are the war and Vladimir Putin in Russia?

Most polling, even by semi-independent agencies, indicated just as the war began that over 50% of the population was in favour of the so-called special military operation. That figure later rose to just over 80% in late March 2022, according to polling by the non-governmental Levada Centre.[1] Thereafter, a small dip appeared by the April 2022 survey, to 74% in some way supporting the operation.[2] Yet this figure includes 45% who report being strongly in favour of the war, and 29% who have reservations, alongside the 19% reporting opposition and 7% who could not say ("затрудняюсь ответить"). By July 2022, these survey results remained largely unchanged. Similarly, concerning the popularity of Putin as a leader in general, his popularity shot up from 65% in December to 71% in February, up to 83% in May.[3]

These results are doubtless partially an effect of people responding disingenuously to surveys owing to fear of punishment for opposing the war.[4] As Denis Volkov, the head of the Levada Centre, has stated: "We must understand that polls show us not what people really think or really believe, but what they want to share" and what they are willing to say publicly.[5]

Still, Russians' responses to polls may not be as untruthful as we would like to think. Previous research has shown, through a list-survey experimental study, that Vladimir Putin's soaring approval ratings are likely close to accurate reflections of opinion.[6] People's responses can be their real opinions, partially an effect of the relentless propaganda that most Russians witness in remaining state media sources, which depicts Ukraine as ruled by Nazis – or at least by anti-Russian nationalists – who are attacking Russian-speaking Ukrainians and are staging fake scenes of Russian war crimes.[7] Indoctrination campaigns are particularly pronounced in Russian schools.[8] In this world, it is Ukrainians who are bombing their own citizens, not the Russian military, and reports of Ukrainians calling relatives in Russia who refuse to believe what they are witnessing firsthand are legion.[9]

However, propaganda is not a thorough explanation for strong support for the war, since Russians *can* access alternative information and news sources, such as through the use of virtual private networks (VPN) to access blocked websites, or by following dissenting Telegram social media channels. Levada's March 2022 survey showed that 68% of respondents used the Internet every day for information, and nearly 23% used VPNs.[10] Moreover, use of Telegram as a messaging app – practically the only non-Russian social networking platform left unblocked by the Russian government – jumped from 21% to 37% of respondents between March 2021 and March 2022.[11] The survey also revealed that over half of all respondents were aware of protests that had taken place against the "special operation." Notably, in all of these survey questions, younger Russians were more likely to access independent information, to be aware of protests taking place, and to understand such protests as expressing indignation at the special operation itself and dissatisfaction with the state of affairs in the country. They were also most likely to be opposed to the war. Their responses contrasted with members of older generations, who were more likely to receive their information from television and radio and were more likely to suspect that people participated in protests because "they were paid for it."[12]

So why do Russians continue to support the war and their president, despite the availability of information documenting war atrocities and military failures?

Unfortunately, aside from state propaganda and information suppression, this support is partly a result of strong cognitive biases that humans – not only Russians – have towards confirming their existing beliefs, as well as not wanting to believe that their fellow citizens are committing horrendous crimes against innocent civilians.[13] Moreover, political science research shows us that there is a group herd effect with surveys of authoritarian leaders' popularity, wherein people tend to side with the apparent majority view, thinking it is the socially desirable view and must be the "correct" opinion if most people believe it.[14] Citizens sometimes see popularity as a sign that leaders are competent, and popularity snowballs among the population.

But history also shows that such staged perceptions of popularity can be fragile. When unanimity or social consensus breaks down, regime support can dissolve very quickly, as happened when the Soviet Union abruptly crumbled in 1991.[15]

What are potential reasons for a breakdown in support?

If public opinion in autocracies can indeed be fragile and subject to sudden change, what are possible reasons why this might occur in the future? Two seem most likely: unbearable economic decline and military losses so great that average citizens cannot ignore them.

On the economic side, very early in the war, the Russian Central Bank more than doubled its base interest rate to 20% overnight, from approximately 9% previously.[16] This was a necessary initial response to how devastating the inability to conduct international business in euros or dollars is, the inability for Russia to draw on the foreign currency reserves of its sovereign wealth fund held in US and European banks, and international companies ceasing their activities in Russia. The jump in the interest rate contributed to the ruble initially losing about half its value in terms of its exchange rate, and to widespread speculation that the Russian government could potentially default on future international debt payments.[17]

Many ordinary Russians have lost their jobs entirely if they have anything to do with international transactions, communications, or imported goods.[18] Many goods that need to be imported are disappearing, creating expectations of shortages of crucial components for the economy, such as computer chips and spare parts for airplanes and cars.[19] Roughly one thousand Western companies have pulled out – most within the first few weeks of the February 24 invasion – including many that are very visible and familiar to urban Russians, such as IKEA, Apple, Nike, McDonald's, and Starbucks.[20] Longstanding joint venture business partners in Russia, such as Siemens (doing business in Russia for 170 years) and Renault (key partner with the AvtoVaz car factory), have also withdrawn.[21]

Since early March, Russians who can do so have started to leave the country in droves, which is creating a massive brain drain, estimated to consist of approximately two hundred thousand people in the first two weeks of the invasion; later estimates range from three hundred thousand to one million.[22] This is the largest mass emigration of Russians from their country since 1917. These numbers are less substantiated than figures tracking people displaced within or beyond Ukraine; however, a research group of sociologists from the site "OK Russians" conducted a survey of a sample of those leaving the country in March 2022. This survey found that people initially fled mostly to countries immediately surrounding Russia that do not have visa entry requirements, such as Georgia, Armenia, and Turkey. Some very well-known Russians have left the country,

including the long-time political advisor to Russian governments Anatolii Chubais, the prima ballerina of the Bolshoi Ballet, and many musicians, activists, actors, journalists, and prominent academics.[23] The IT sector is a specific area that has experienced a mass exodus of highly trained citizens from the country; according to the OK Russians survey, one third of respondents worked in the IT sector (possibly over-represented in this survey owing to the online questionnaire format).[24]

Yet the government has been taking aggressive steps to prop the economy up. It is still earning handily from fossil fuel export revenues, over half of which come from Europe, owing to international oil and gas prices skyrocketing as a result of the war. Russian natural gas, which Europe is more dependent on than Russian oil, is unfortunately much more difficult to substitute with new supply source countries than oil is, because of the way in which gas must be transported and converted; moreover, variations in EU member states' reliance on Russian gas leads to disagreement over measures to be taken.[25] The Russian government has been able to use these revenues to continue to pay state-employee salaries and state welfare benefits in full. It has also used Central Bank fiscal and monetary policies in tandem with oil and gas revenues to re-boost the ruble to a higher point than it was prior to the invasion – for example, by temporarily raising the interest rate, which incentivized people to keep their rubles rather than converting them, and by instituting strict capital flow controls, such as forcing any businesses earning international revenues to convert 80% of them into rubles.[26] In fact, these early stabilizing measures, along with the fortuitous spike in oil prices that the war caused, were successful enough that the government felt sufficiently confident to lower the bank interest rate gradually starting on April 8, eventually returning it to the pre-invasion rate of 9.5% on June 10.[27] The government has also so far been able to negotiate some exceptions to foreign debt payment terms to allow it to find sufficient funds to pay minimum amounts owing in April and May, but for this to continue requires the continued flexibility of US and European governments and financial institutions – which is by no means certain.[28]

And then there are the vulnerabilities to dissent emerging as a result of catastrophic military losses. Since there is no fully reliable disclosed number of Russian casualties in the war, estimates range very widely. By early April, the Ukrainian military estimate of Russian losses was 18,600, while NATO's was slightly lower, at between 7000 and 15,000 Russian soldiers killed in the first four weeks of the war.[29] In mid-May, the British defence ministry estimated that approximately one third of Russian ground forces committed to the invasion in February had been killed – effectively translating to a figure of 50,000 battle deaths.[30] If even close to accurate, this is an astonishingly high casualty rate and total number of deaths of military personnel; it far outstrips losses of roughly 15,000 troops in Afghanistan during the late Soviet period, which led to significant mobilization of social movements opposing that war.[31] Meanwhile, the Russian military claimed just 1351 military deaths in March – a figure that it had still not updated by August, and which the government seemingly feels no obligation to update because of a 2015 law that made all military deaths a state secret.[32] Some Russian and Ukrainian lawyers and analysts have argued that the Russian military is avoiding returning the bodies of killed forces to Russia because if they do not enter the military accounting system, they will not count as military casualties.[33] Moreover, Valentina Mel'nikova of the Russian Union of Committees of Soldiers' Mothers and many soldiers' families complain that the government classifies many cases as "missing in action" without any details or ensuing updates to this status, as

a way of avoiding reporting deaths.[34] Numerous observers have pointed to the disproportionate number of soldiers being sent to Ukraine from non-Russian ethnic minority regions far from urban centres, particularly Buryatia – a strategic approach that seems suspiciously geared towards averting the likelihood of major protest developing.[35]

The lack of transparency has sparked anger among many Russian parents of conscript soldiers who cannot find out what happened to their sons or find out that they have been blatantly lied to. In a damage-control effort, the Russian government moved in April to restrict the spread of information about military casualties further, replacing civilian authorities with Defence Ministry enlistment offices as the institutions that issue certificates offering benefits to killed soldiers' relatives.[36] The change came as public complaints began to surface from relatives of those who served on the *Moskva* missile cruiser that was sunk in the Black Sea, stating that they had not heard back from their relatives after the vessel's crew was supposedly evacuated successfully.[37]

The soldiers' mothers' organizations in Russia are working, as they have since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, to find out information about soldiers' whereabouts and when they were injured or killed.[38] Ukrainian mothers and activists have mobilized – not without controversy – to take photos of dead Russian soldiers, track down their identities, and send messages to their parents about what happened to their sons.[39] This truth-seeking mission by parents of soldiers was important in shaping public opposition to the Soviet war in Afghanistan and Russia's wars in Chechnya, and it could become so again.[40] While majority public opinion in Russia generally does not seem to be distressed by the concept of attacking their neighbouring Ukrainian citizens, with whom about a third of Russian families have relational ties, this could change with time if sufficient quantities of persuasive evidence reach them and Russians start to believe it.

How could opposition grow and lead to change?

At the beginning of the invasion, many observers placed their faith in an end to the war through a mass uprising of Russian citizens in protest. Group anti-war protests initially occurred in Russian cities every day after the invasion began – in over 60 cities across the country, thousands of people every day into early March.[41] Mobilization by feminist groups has been particularly prominent.[42] As repression has mounted, protestors have constantly innovated in their forms of non-violent dissent in order to keep going, by doing things like holding up blank signs (which happened in Soviet times as well), stamping anti-war messages on ruble banknotes, or placing little anti-war figurines in random public places.[43] Those protestors have met with harsh police treatment in many instances. According to a longstanding Russian NGO called OVD-Info, by the beginning of April, over 15,000 protesters had been detained across the country since the invasion began.[44]

A new Russian law that came into force in early March makes speaking out against the government narrative, and even using the word "war" to describe the so-called special operation, a criminal offence subject to up to 15 years in prison.[45] This measure immediately placed a strong chill on both open protest in the streets and independent discussion of the war in mass media. All independent media and virtually all social media and international communication platforms, such as YouTube, have been shut down or blocked from open access within Russia, one by one.[46]

Protest on its own in Russia – even if large in magnitude – is not likely to lead to a change in government approach or the downfall of the Putin government. The scholarly literature on comparative democratization historically tells us that what is almost always needed, and always needed in *successful* cases of transition towards more democratic political regimes, is a split within the important decision-making elites in the country.

There are very likely some within the coterie of powerful Russian elites who are beginning to doubt the wisdom of the current approach to Ukraine, which includes devastating military casualties and failures as well as impacts on the Russian economy and the wide-scale repression of anyone who expresses dissent. There is no obvious path for this disgruntlement to lead to an overturning of the Putin regime, however, since political science research also shows that in personalist autocracies like Russia's – regimes in which nearly all power lies in the hands of a single person – dictators rarely relinquish power through negotiation.[47] This is because such leaders are typically determined to cling to power, and only a small and tightly controlled circle of people have any influence on them.[48] By all accounts, in Putin's case the pandemic has exacerbated this situation, and his circle is much smaller and more hardline authoritarian than it used to be.[49]

There has been much media speculation outside Russia that the country's economic oligarchs could be a disgruntled constituency poised to oust Putin. They have been in the cross-hairs of international sanctions against Russia, and they are no doubt displeased with the ruin of the country's economy.[50] But since Putin consolidated power in his first two terms as president, the super-rich beneficiaries of the post-Soviet capitalist transition and state corruption who remain in Russia have relied on his approval and facilitation to accumulate assets.[51] They have a great deal to lose if they oppose him and fail, despite how sanctions may be affecting them now. A few oligarchs, such as Oleg Deripaska, Roman Abramovich, and Oleg Tinkov, have expressed opposition to the war, but they are almost exclusively expatriates and individuals whose wealth is not controlled by Putin.[52]

Is a military coup a possibility? The military in Russia has historically been resistant to launching coups – largely owing to Communist Party oversight in the USSR and a continuation of these habits in the post-Soviet era, along with a heavy dose of infiltration by the security services.[53] Yet significant losses by the Russian military in Ukraine, terrible strategy and preparation, as well as recent replacements of military leaders because of these failures, could foster disgruntlement in the ranks that could lead some to support a coup.

A final possibility is defection from the state security agencies, including the Federal Security Service (*Federal'naia sluzhba bezopasnosti*, FSB). They might provide the most likely source of an insider coup.[54] Putin is a creature of these agencies, but a few tensions have been aired in public view. For instance, in March, Putin placed the head of the FSB's Fifth Division (responsible for external intelligence) under house arrest owing to bad intelligence about prospects for a quick and successful victory in Ukraine.[55]

An elite insider coup could be possible, particularly if several of these groups join forces to remove Putin forcibly or persuade him to step down. These processes would take time to develop and they may be unlikely, since, although we have seen signs of some ripples, major cracks have not yet emerged, now half a year into the intensified war.[56] Moreover, at least at this point, it is difficult to foresee concretely how this would happen and who could be agreed upon to replace Putin, given the very limited size of the ruling circle around him and Putin's prior elimination of all serious democratic political rivals. Because

repression has left most potential sources of opposition (at both mass and leadership levels) extremely reduced and in disarray through prosecution or exile, it is difficult to perceive a mechanism for the emergence of a political movement to replace the current governing forces. It is not entirely clear that a leader emerging from a "palace coup" to replace Putin would be likely to retreat from the war, and even less likely that he would loosen repression in the country, given the dominance of *siloviki* ("people of force") connected to the security services and the military among the inner circle.

On the optimistic side for democratic possibilities, Putin has miscalculated to a degree he has never done before, and the future prospects for the economy are truly dire. People are being very creative and persistent with their ways of organizing protests and sharing information, and they are finding clever ways of circumventing censorship. This persistence, combined with cracks that may emerge in political, security, and economic elites, may provide a pathway for change in the future.

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6. Tucker, "Why We Should Be."
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10. Levada Center, "Internet, Social Networks."
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15. Kuran, "Now Out of Never"; Hale, "Authoritarian Rallying."
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27. Ray, "Russian Central Bank Slashes."
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29. Dixon et al., "Russia's War Dead Belie."

30. Agence France-Presse, "Young, Poor."
31. Taylor, "Soviet War"; Kamrany and Killian, "Effects of Afghanistan War"; Eichler, *Militarizing Men*.
32. See note 29 above.
33. *Moscow Times*, "'Private Pivovarov'."
34. Soiuz komitetov soldatskikh materei Rossii, "Ob uchastnikakh boev."
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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Lisa McIntosh Sundstrom is a professor of political science at the University of British Columbia. She specializes in Russian politics, and her major research interests include democracy and authoritarianism, civil society, human rights, gender issues, legal mobilization, and NGO activism in both domestic and transnational politics. Her two most recent books are *Bringing Global Governance Home: How BRICS NGOs Engage the World* (2021, co-authored with Laura A. Henry) and *Courting Gender Justice: Russia, Turkey, and the European Court of Human Rights* (2019, co-authored with Valerie Sperling and Melike Sayoglu), both from Oxford University Press.

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