

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

# WHY DOES THE KREMLIN'S PROPAGANDA REMAIN EFFECTIVE IN WARTIME?

**Series "Russian Crisis". Policy paper #1**

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For a consumer, Putin's information machine does not look like an endless monologue of one cynical propagandist, but like a full-fledged discussion, in which almost anyone, who agrees with the basic thesis "Putin is right, one way or another", can find something for her- or himself.



Before attempting to convince any particular person or even an entire group that Putin's propaganda is inadequate, one must, at the very least, find out to which of the information bubbles he or they belong. The intrinsic complexity and inconsistency of Putin's loyal audience is often downplayed or completely ignored.



The reasons for the war, its meaning and course – none of this has any single explanation for all Russians, which could be refuted by a set of facts, and thus prove that this war is immoral and criminal. Those who somehow support the war, see it differently and support not at all what is attributed to them.

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# WHY DOES THE KREMLIN'S PROPAGANDA REMAIN EFFECTIVE IN WARTIME?

Fyodor Krashenninikov

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*“Why do Russians support a war against Ukraine?” This question has been asked repeatedly over the past six months. To answer it, one has to understand how the information machine built by Vladimir Putin works. This paper will outline the technologies and mechanisms of Putin's information machine, how it operates during the war and the obstacles to anti-war propaganda among Russians. At the very end, we will offer some recommendations for confronting Putin's information machine at war, both of a general nature and relating to specific groups of Russian society.*

## MULTIPLE NARRATIVES AND INFORMATION BUBBLES: THE ILLUSION OF CHOICE

We know little about the practical operation of Putinism's information machine in times of war. Therefore, it is impossible to say with certainty whether everything described below is a conscious and purposeful policy of the Kremlin, based on constant analytical work, or whether it is a synergetic effect of the independent activities undertaken by many structures, each trying to prove its usefulness and thereby increase their budgets. Thus, we propose to consider this as a model of how the communication mechanism of Putin's regime works in a practical sense vis-à-vis various population groups in Russia as well as abroad.

The main feature of Putinism that should be kept in mind is its lack of a coherent and one-size-fits-all ideology<sup>1</sup>. Putinism combines a variety of narratives, each aimed at making Putin himself and his regime acceptable to one segment of the audience or another, based on their needs and ideas about the world and themselves. Putin's information managers are not afraid of contradictions between different narratives. On the contrary, the Kremlin puts forward some mutually exclusive versions when events do not allow for a favorable interpretation. Then each alternative interpretation is shared in separate communities in their information bubbles so that the regime can gain support without officially expressing its position.

The most telling case illustrating this strategy is the incident with the downed Malaysian Airlines aircraft in 2014. From the outset of the MH17 crisis, the Kremlin offered various accounts, each suggesting that Russia was not to blame for the incident and that the accusations were false. For example, one of the accounts maintained that it was a Ukrainian plane that shot down the Boeing 777 in the sky; another version stipulated that the Buk missile, which brought down the civil aircraft, came from Ukraine and was fired from the territory controlled by Ukrainians. Finally, the most exotic conspiracy narrative was offered, only to find its supporters: that none of the passengers were alive before the takeoff and that the plane was filled with dead bodies, the whole crash being an operation staged by the CIA<sup>2</sup>. It is tempting to criticize the conspiracy with the plane, the bodies, and fictional characters like “pilot Voloshin” and “dispatcher Carlos”<sup>3</sup>. However, for all the unreliability of each version, all of them together were able to distract an audience loyal to Putin from accepting the fact that the passenger plane was shot down by the Russian military with a Russian Buk<sup>4</sup>.

Putin's regime is actively exploiting the possibilities of the modern communications environment, something the dictatorships of the past could not

<sup>1</sup> To read more about this: <https://www.spiegel.de/ausland/wladimir-putin-hass-ist-die-gefahrlichste-waffe-des-russischen-praesidenten-a-dec3577d-3300-4e2b-810f-269bc624aac2>

<sup>2</sup> For example, see: <http://ru-an.info/новости/катастрофа-малайзийского-боинга-это-спецоперация-цру-сша/>

<sup>3</sup> The air traffic controller Carlos is a man who was shown once on Russia Today as an alleged air traffic controller and his testimony was the basis of the argument in the report. Pilot Voloshin is a real Ukrainian pilot who used to fly in 2014 and committed suicide in 2018. However, Russian propaganda has put forward the theory that he used his plane to shoot down the Malaysian Boeing, although in reality the plane was shot down by a missile from the ground and the pilot had nothing to do with the incident.

<sup>4</sup> An overview of the accounts offered by Russian propaganda and their timeline can be found in the [ICTV](#) investigation.

do. The state does not address society as a whole and does not set one agenda, but targets various groups and subgroups of the public, selecting narratives, opinion makers and breaking news which suit them most and are valid and efficient for convincing these different audiences. In this way, Putin's information machine produces and/or supports a multitude of information bubbles based on varying information backgrounds, which provide accounts favorable to Putin.

Social media has become an important mechanism for working with the public in recent years, with troll factories not only insulting regime critics and challenging their messages but also sustaining attention to the desired stories and statements, targeting the tastes and preferences of different groups of information consumers<sup>5</sup>. The scale of this activity and its coordination is difficult to assess, but it is likely to be much larger than is commonly believed.

Social media is also used to create and/or maintain many niche micro-media accounts in Telegram, YouTube, TikTok and the Russian social networks VK, Ok.ru and Zen (until April 2022 - Yandex.Zen.), now owned by state-controlled Holding VK Company Ltd.. Such projects make it possible to quickly create diverse and nuanced content, taking into account the tastes and interests of various population groups in Russia and those countries that the Kremlin is interested in.

A large part of these micro-media outlets, especially the Telegram channels, are anonymous and portray themselves as sources close to the centers of power and security agencies. They convince their readers that they have access to important information right from the desks in the Kremlin's offices. Many niche micro-media outlets provide their consumers with diverse information, creating the effect of pluralism of opinion, the illusion that an individual can seek information and then develop an independent opinion of their own.

With the beginning of the war in Ukraine, a whole network of “war correspondents”<sup>6</sup> was deployed in social media to inform the audience about the course of military operations firsthand, virtually from the front lines. Some of the authors of such telegram feeds indeed serve in the Russian military or in the armed

formations of the “people's republics.” While others simply recite official reports of the Russian Armed Forces, peppering them with personal insights. All in all, this makes the audience take the information as “truth from the trenches,” i.e. reliable information from witnesses and participants in the war.

The importance and success of these techniques are essential when confronted with convinced and motivated proponents of a particular Kremlin concept. It is convenient to think that we have before us a “propaganda victim” who gets all their ideas about the world from a single source ( or “watches too much television”). In that case, all it takes is to present them with an alternative version of events and tell them that Putin's propaganda is lying, and they will change their view of the world. For such people, opponents of Putin are only “victims of propaganda” who offer the Ukrainian Armed Forces news bulletins or information from foreign or émigré media as the ultimate truth. At the same time, consumers of state propaganda perceive themselves as critical thinkers and erudite individuals who have a reliable picture of events collected from various sources. It is not easy to recognize that these sources work for the same purpose and therefore manipulate and deliberately misinform the audience, especially if one has been inside the information bubble for many years rather than observing it from the outside.

It is worth recalling that, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccination opponents in Russia considered themselves the bearers of a scientific and critical worldview precisely because they relied on multiple sources that supposedly reported the truth inconvenient to the authorities, while supporters of vaccination were perceived as victims of straightforward propaganda, broadcast through all official channels.

Considering that official Russian media outlets (e.g. RT / Russia Today) were also involved in the anti-vaccination propaganda, it demonstrates some of the techniques of Putin's information machine that were also used during the war. In particular, it should be noted that conspiracy theories and a total distrust of the West resulted in problems with Russia's vaccination campaign. Several important conservative media personalities (Nikita Mikhalkov, a famous Russian filmmaker actively supporting Putin, for example) continued to circulate conspiracy theories even after the outbreak of the epidemic in Russia. State-funded RT and related social media accounts campaigned for vaccination in Russia, harshly criticizing those

<sup>5</sup> Numerous investigations into the widespread use of troll factories by the Russian authorities have been published. For example, see investigations by [RBC](#), [BBC](#), and [Svoboda](#).

<sup>6</sup> The term originates from the vocabulary of Soviet propaganda during World War II.

against vaccination inside the country while also engaging in anti-vaccination propaganda in Europe. It is this latter narrative that backfired in Russia against the official vaccination campaign<sup>7</sup>.

Unfortunately, even after all this, no fundamental changes have occurred in the work of the state information machine, which says a lot about its priorities: obviously, maintaining conspiracy thinking in the audience seems more important to the Russian authorities than exposing it, even in the face of the pandemic.

It is also important to note that even in the free media-saturated information space of Germany and other Western countries, Putin's information machine achieved some results by discrediting the EU policies and calling for sabotage of the inoculation campaign. That is, all the methods and technologies described above can very well work not only in Russia, which once again points to their efficiency and potential danger. Should we be surprised that Putin's information machine is so successful in Russia, where it has no competitors?

## THE WAR

Despite social media playing an important role, state-run television remains the linchpin of the entire information machine, primarily because it still has a large audience and retains credibility as a provider of reliable information, primarily to segments of Russian society sympathetic to Putin. Through political talk shows on television, Putin's regime introduces a multitude of speakers and concepts to its audience, with all of these narratives being convenient to the state despite their contradictions. Then, the TV experts create their accounts on social networks or their micro-media, which, in turn, are quoted by other media outlets contributing to an entire ecosystem of mutually intertwined media.

A perfect illustration of the above is the media system built by Vladimir Solovyov: in addition to broadcasting himself, he introduces many other speakers and promotes their micro-media, which endlessly interact with each other in various configurations.

Alexander Dugin, a far-right publicist and pro-government propagandist, is another example of how this technology works. Some people in the West and even in the Russian opposition believe that Dugin is close to Putin and that he is allegedly the author of the Kremlin's ideology. This myth has fostered an opinion that one can get inside Putin's head by reading Dugin's writings and listening to his speeches. By criticizing and exposing the absurdities in Dugin's thought, one can reveal the ideological fallacy of Putinism or its spiritual proximity to neo-fascism. Dugin is one of the many figures collaborating with the Kremlin, and his job is to provide an ideological product for one of the many conservative and chauvinistic groups, nothing more. Should one quote Dugin to someone from a different Putinist audience, the response would probably be that they do not know who Dugin is and do not think Dugin's ideas are of any importance or relevance for Putin's political decisions.

As a result, to the consumer, Putin's information machine does not look like an endless monologue of one cynical propagandist but like a meaningful discussion in which almost anyone who agrees with the basic thesis that Putin is somehow right can find something more acceptable for themselves. All of this adds to the effect already described above: consumers of Putin's narratives feel that they have access to a broad range of opinions and that by listening to the different positions, they can form their own. As we have noted, opponents appear to them as zombified victims of Western and Ukrainian propaganda, because they all say the same thing (“reciting the instructions sent by the State Department”). This assumption seems logical as all alternative information comes from one or several well-coordinated sources – Ukraine's military, political leadership, and NATO.

Thus, before trying to change the mind of any particular person or even an entire group, one must, at the very least, find out which information bubble they belong to. It seems to us that the main obstacle to communicating with an audience loyal to Putin is rooted precisely in the fact that its internal complexity and contradictions are downplayed or completely ignored.

Western, Ukrainian, and opposition-minded media consumers also belong to various information bubbles. However, the consensus is that Russia started the war and thus cannot be justified, that Ukraine is rightfully defending itself while the Russian army is committing crimes against civilians.

<sup>7</sup> See an investigation on the Kremlin's information policy during the vaccination campaign by Meduza: <https://meduza.io/feature/2021/11/09/v-rossii-rt-agressivno-propagandiruuet-vaktsinatsiyu-veduschie-kanala-nazyvayut-ee-protivnikov-imbetsilami-zato-na-zapade-kanal-stal-ruporom-otritsateley-kovida>

Consumers of Putin’s media are united only by their loyalty to Vladimir Putin, though not necessarily their complete and unconditional loyalty. As for other issues, there might be no consensus between the different audiences. Moreover, they may view the same events and phenomena in contrasting ways. That is why things that seem apparent to Putin’s opponents are not perceived in the same way by his supporters, who circulate a variety of interpretations, all disproving the information offered by the opposition.

Consider the case of Bucha, a suburb of Kyiv, where the Russian troops committed multiple crimes against civilians during the occupation. Everything seems clear for Putin’s opponents: the Russian army committed war crimes during the occupation, and should Russians be told about them, they will stop supporting Putin and the war.

In the information bubbles of Putinism, however, the Bucha story may look different and be explained in different ways: 1) “It was all staged, nothing like that happened” 2) “All those killed were victims of Ukrainian’ national battalions” 3) “All those killed were Nazis, who had to be punished by our anti-fascists” 4) “A war is going on, and casualties are inevitable” 5) “No one knows what happened there, it is not that certain.” Mind that these explanations are unnecessary for the Russian chauvinists, who do not find anything wrong with killing members of other nations simply because they are different.

The reasons for the war, its purpose, and its course – none of this has any uniform explanation for all Russians, which could be refuted by specific facts to prove that this war is immoral and criminal. According to one interpretation, there is no war, but rather a local operation to protect the citizens of the “people’s republics.” Another opinion is that this war is fought to liberate the fraternal Ukrainian people and all of Ukraine from the yoke of the Nazis and the West. The third account is that there is no such people as the Ukrainian people and that this is a civil war between Russians, in which one side (the “good” one,) saves the other part, which has been duped by the external forces. Forth, it is a war for the rebirth of the Soviet Union, where all the nations lived as brothers until they were torn apart. Fifth, it is the way to rectify the consequences of the 1917 revolution used by the Bolsheviks to divide the great and glorious Russian empire. Sixth, it is simply a war, in which “our people” are fighting against the “other,” and therefore it is necessary to support “our guys.” By the way, this narrative is increasingly popular since it both helps to level the impact of the growing number of victims of the war in Russia, and can be used to Putin’s benefit: no matter

why this war broke out, a lot of Russians have already died in it, and now it is impossible to simply stop fighting without taking revenge and declaring victory.

Thus, all those against the war have roughly the same understanding of their objectives. However, supporters of the war see it differently and grant only partial support to what is often attributed to them by the opponents of the war. It is enough to read the conversations with people in Russia on this topic <sup>8</sup>to see how differently they describe their support and what exactly they support.

The plurality of Putinism’s information bubbles has an important feature: they are all connected in one way or another. An individual can be a member of several of them at once. Therefore, even if there is a failure in the logic in one explanation, the audience can migrate to a different information bubble, where a new logic is applied that makes it possible to interpret an alarming event in a completely different way (we analyzed this situation in the case of Bucha above).

Thus, the famous question “How can Russians approve of a war with Ukraine?” is meaningless unless a particular group and their motivation are specified. As stated above, each information bubble has a narrative of the war and its reasons for supporting it or not opposing it. Therefore, the support of Putin’s policy in Ukraine, or at least the loyalty of many Russian citizens to it, does not mean that they support everything that the other side associates with this war, i.e., the bombing of peaceful cities, the deaths of children, rape, and looting. They either have no idea of the actual scale of violence, or they blame the other side for the crimes and horrors of war. Ultimately, they may consciously or unconsciously not want to know anything discrediting their country, government, or army. Putin’s communication strategy boils down to this: in every specific case, offer a multitude of narratives to pick from so that, having found a convenient one, people do not have to blame themselves or Putin’s regime.

## KEY AUDIENCES

We will conclude with a brief typology of the various groups supporting Putin to elucidate our approach.

**1. “Soviet people.”** This group comprises individuals over 45 who have personal memories of their childhood and youth in the USSR and are inclined to

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. the publication made by Meduza: <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/04/24/voyti-vo-mrak-i-naschupat-v-nem-lyudey>.



idealize and romanticize this period. They value Soviet symbols (Lenin, Stalin, the red flag, and other symbols of the USSR) while disliking the symbols of present-day Russia (the tricolor, the two-headed eagle) and even the country's name itself. These people feel strongly about the USSR's victory in WWII because they either witnessed the war (the oldest in the group) or were brought up by those who experienced it in one form or another. Despite their great trust in the TV, they have mastered the Internet and social networks. However, they find it hard to navigate the information sources and fall prey to all kinds of marginal and niche micro-media with a pro-Soviet orientation.

For them, the war in Ukraine is a follow-up to the Great Patriotic War, a war against the neo-Nazi Bandersites for the liberation and rebirth of Soviet Ukraine and the USSR. When working with this group, it is necessary to avoid negative assessments of the Soviet past, to avoid the unfamiliar account of historical events (including the distant past, they firmly believe the accounts of the Soviet textbooks), and to use the appropriate vocabulary. To influence this group, one needs to portray Putin and his regime as Yeltsin's successors, the anti-Sovietists who destroyed all the social gains of socialism and betrayed internationalism. It is necessary to talk about Ukraine using Soviet phraseology. For instance, “it is with these brotherly people that we fought shoulder to shoulder and built the USSR together.” One should describe the war with Ukraine as Putin's betrayal of the common Soviet past. In creating content for this group, it is crucial to match existing pro-Soviet media projects' visual and textual aesthetics.

Former military men in late middle age (or those who look this way) are the preferred speakers for this group.

**2. “Russian patriots.”** The core of this group is men between 25 and 45 who actively use the Internet. For them, Russia is, first and foremost, Putin's Russia, with all of its symbols, celebrations, and rituals. They either do not remember the country before Putin came to power (those who are 25-30 years old), or they have negative feelings about it (“the wild 90s”). They believe it is necessary to be faithful to their country. Various conspiracy theories and “alternative history” is prevalent in this group.

They see the war in Ukraine primarily as a revival of Russia's greatness, a forced measure necessary to preserve its status as a great power. This group is loose and internally diverse, but some members are ready to turn away from Putin and stop supporting

the war. Addressing them, one needs to avoid negative assessments of Russia, its history, culture, and past. It is worth taking into account the commitment of this group to widely understood “traditional values,” hence they are unlikely to support radically opposing forms of culture such as gay pride parades and feminism. For starters, it is a good idea to limit the argument to stating that Putin is destroying Russia's future and is a shame to its glorious past, and that war only hurts Russia.

The ideal speaker for this group is an adult male, preferably an expert, reasonable and skeptical of the West, Ukraine, and the Russian opposition.

**3. “Russian nationalists.”** A small but very active group, potentially ready to participate in protests, though not under any slogans. They are mostly young residents of big cities (15-35 years old) who consider themselves of Russian ethnic origin. They hold a wide range of nationalist (even neo-Nazi) views while rejecting pro-Soviet agitation, as well as the ostensible enthusiasm of Ramzan Kadyrov, the Head of the Chechen Republic.

For them, the war in Ukraine is a triumph of will and the right of the fittest, they see it as a just war of the metropole against its colony or the conquest of the enemy's territory. When working with this group, extreme caution is required; the best way to do so is to stick to the ideology of the National Democrats, which is well developed and boils down to the idea that Russians should think about rebuilding Russia, and that they should not be interested in Ukraine at all. Such nationalism should be declared good and promising, and the other should be denounced. Putin and his regime can be described as anti-Russian and consciously seeking to destroy the Russian people for the sake of his insane theories to prevail.

A young man with an appearance typical for this group, and preferably with a background in the movement (there are many of them in Europe now), would be an ideal speaker for this group.

**4. “Anti-Western conspiracy theorists.”** This is an amorphous and passive group, which can consist of people of all ages, with its specific vocabulary and mythology. They do not have any positive ideology, but have a hatred for the West and, above all, the United States, tied to conspiracy theories, homophobia, and xenophobia.

For them, the war in Ukraine is primarily a war with the West, in which Ukrainians are not a subject at all.

Therefore, representatives of this group can quite deliberately hate Ukraine and show no compassion for Ukrainians. Working with this group it is necessary not so much to justify the West and try to make them love Ukraine, as to lead them to the idea that Putin himself is either an agent of the West, who is interested in destroying Russia with his policies, or he is so stupid and politically short-sighted that he gives in to provocations of the West, which dragged him into a war with Ukraine with unpredictable results.

Anyone can be the speaker, as long as they know the lingo and know how to turn any existing conspiracy theories against Putin.

**5. “Ordinary People.”** The largest group of the population, with little interest in the political propaganda of any kind. They may be quite skeptical about Putin and do not feel any enthusiasm about the war, but in general, they prefer to declare allegiance to the regime and look for excuses for the state policy.

For such people, the war in Ukraine is a random phenomenon beyond their control, which is not yet taking place in their area. They should not be required to adopt any radical anti-war or anti-Putin slogans, but it makes sense to talk to them about how life is still better in the West (with detailed evidence), and that in Russia even the good things that Putin himself has done are being destroyed by him for an unknown reason. The main thesis for this group is: “Under Putin, life will never go back to normal.” The only chance of normalizing life in the country is Putin’s departure and the end of the war.

The ideal speakers are psychologists, yoga teachers, fitness trainers, or nutritionists, who share their unhappy observations about life incidentally criticizing Putin.

To simplify communication, the number of groups could be reduced to three – “Ordinary People”, “National Patriots” and “Soviet Anti-Westerners.”

## OVERALL CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) No “average Russians” see the world the same way. To counter the information war waged by Putin’s regime, it is not enough to have journalists reporting facts and news or political activists and commentators endlessly repeating anti-war and anti-Putin slogans. Russian society is fragmented. Thus, in addressing a specific group, one needs to appeal to facts and arguments relevant to the target audience.
- 2) Putin’s regime has created a sophisticated and effective system for controlling the minds of the audience sympathetic to the state and disseminating beneficial information. To underestimate this strategy and consider it “blunt propaganda” is a big mistake, leading to an incorrect response to the challenges it creates.
- 3) “Cold” contacts, that is, attempts to communicate a set of banal anti-war and anti-Putin slogans to an arbitrarily selected person or group by any means (telephone calls, texting, spamming) make no sense. This approach would not only leave Russians unconvinced but also reinforce their view that the West is waging an information war against Russia, as Putin’s media relentlessly claims. A more promising strategy would be to approach target groups with arguments and facts tailored precisely to them.

### NB.

The text was last revised on 14 September 2022. The work does not include an analysis of the situation after the start of the partial mobilization and subsequent events.



## ABOUT THE SERIES

**The Russian Crisis** is a series of policy papers focusing on the implications of the serious crises conditioned by the events in and around present-day Russia. While the Russian full-scale invasion of sovereign Ukraine in 2022 has provoked a massive military crisis, it points to even broader challenges. Russia creates crises because it entered a crisis state itself and became the focal point of several global crises. This series provides inputs to understanding the situation within Russia and situates it in a larger political context. The aim of the papers is to chart grounded strategies of crisis management and resolution, providing policymakers with insights on Russian politics and ways for thinking ahead.

The series editor is Greg Yudin. He is a political theorist and sociologist, affiliated with multiple academic institutions in Russia and the United States. He has contributed to the theorization of Russian politics within the current global trends, conducted fieldwork in Russia and beyond, engaged in methodological debates on studying and reading Russian society. He is active as academic researcher, author of commissioned reports and policy papers, and is a contributor to major media in Russia and abroad.

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Fyodor was persecuted in Russia and was forced to leave the country in 2020. Since then, he lives in Vilnius, Lithuania. In 2022, the Russian Ministry of Justice recognized Fyodor Krasheninnikov as a «foreign agent.»

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## SUMMARY



Putinism should be seen as a set of narratives, each of which aim to make Putin himself and his regime acceptable to certain segments of the audience, based on their needs and perceptions of the world and themselves. At the same time, Putin's information managers are not afraid of any contradictions between different narratives. On the contrary: in all cases that are difficult to interpret events in favor of the Kremlin, Putin puts forward a number of mutually exclusive versions, around which information bubbles are formed for those who are ready to accept the version that is favorable to the regime.



Putin's regime is actively exploiting the possibilities of the modern communications environment, which were not available to the dictatorships of the past, and is not working with the entire mass of citizens simultaneously and on one agenda, but with multiple groups and sub-groups of society individually. It chooses the narratives and influencers that suit each particular group and illuminates exactly the news from the national agenda that is significant and effective for working with this certain audience. Thus, Putin's information machine produces and/or maintains many advantageous information bubbles, each with a different informational background, while still broadcasting loyalty to Putin.



All those who are against the war have roughly the same understanding of what they are up against. But those, who in one way or another support the war, see it differently and, accordingly, support not the things that are often attributed to them by the opponents of the war. It is enough to read the published conversations with people in Russia on this topic to see how differently Russians describe their support and what exactly they support.