

GCKN RUNNING ESTIMATE THE WAR IN UKRAINE: A LOOK BACK AT YEAR ONE



The War through the Russian Public’s Experience: War Events, Support for the War, Perceptions of Success, Support for Negotiations

This special issue of the GCKN Russia-Ukraine Running Estimate examines domestic Russian perceptions and motivations since the invasion of Ukraine in light of several variables.

On 24 February 2022 Russia launched its “special military operation” (SMO) in Ukraine. Russia and Ukraine have had a difficult relationship for centuries, but the invasion surprised many people, as it was the first major war in Eastern Europe in decades. Despite Russian President Vladimir Putin regularly claiming that Ukrainians and Russians are one people, he ordered an offensive against Ukraine. The war, now in its second year, is showing no clear end in sight.

Since Ukraine gained independence in 1991, successive Ukrainian governments had forged closer ties with the European Union and NATO, then shifted back to Russia, then edged away again. In 2013, after then-Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich refused to sign a trade agreement that would bring Ukraine closer to Europe, he was ousted from office by the Ukrainian public. Many

Ukrainians preferred trade relations with the West and the opportunities that would come from being part of NATO or the European Union. However, Russia perceived these actions as direct threats.

Russia made its first aggressive move against Ukraine in 2014 by invading and swiftly annexing the Crimean Peninsula. This move was met with limited resistance and required few aggressive acts by Russia. The ease of this takeover is in part attributed to Russian loyalists in Crimea who believed Ukraine was in danger of being taken over by extremists and turned over the region in allegiance. Russia claimed that it is backing the loyalists to protect Russians in Crimea. Most of Ukraine, however, saw the seizure of Crimea as strongarm hegemony and it accelerated the breaking of close relations with Russia. The Kremlin used its actions in Crimea as a rationale and blueprint to invade Ukraine again eight years later.

Russia views any turns by Ukraine toward the West as a risk to Russian security. Putin sees the war as a way to redirect Ukrainians’ future. Although the Kremlin’s narrative and

YEAR 1 FEB 2022 — FEB 2023

Russian Public Perceptions in Relation to the War



justification for the February 2022 invasion has changed over time, it told the Russian public that the objective of the invasion was to demilitarize Ukraine and cleanse it of “Nazi” influence. It explained that the SMO was necessary to keep Ukraine from joining NATO, whose expansion to the Russian border would threaten the Russian way of life. From that time, the Russian narrative, in justifying its actions to the public, has not waivered. However,

the war’s unfolding has made it difficult at times for the Russian public to remain steadfast in its support. This edition of “Running Estimates” explores how events over the past year align with Russian public perceptions of the war and Russia’s military performance. It also explains how the events influenced the Russian public’s interest in negotiating an end to the conflict.

YEAR ONE ASSESSMENT

Despite battling an unexpectedly strong and unwavering resistance by Ukrainian forces, the Kremlin remains steadfast in its war efforts. Russia has suffered many setbacks and limitations, including personnel and equipment attrition and mobilization concerns, prompting Russians to flee. However, after one year, the Kremlin remains committed to its military objectives, bolstered by an adaptive messaging strategy that it initiated and solidified decades ago.

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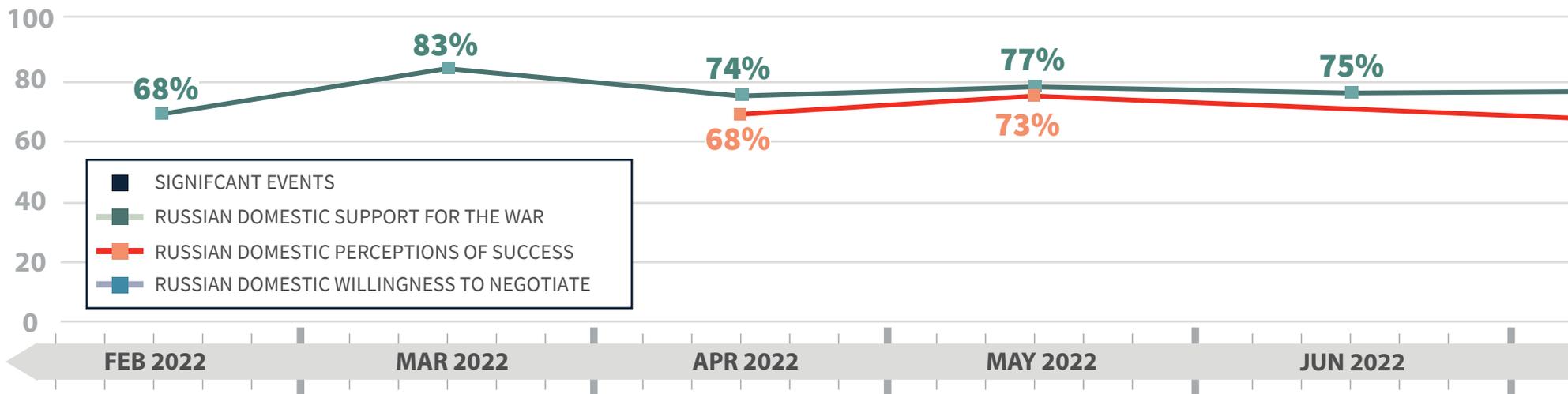
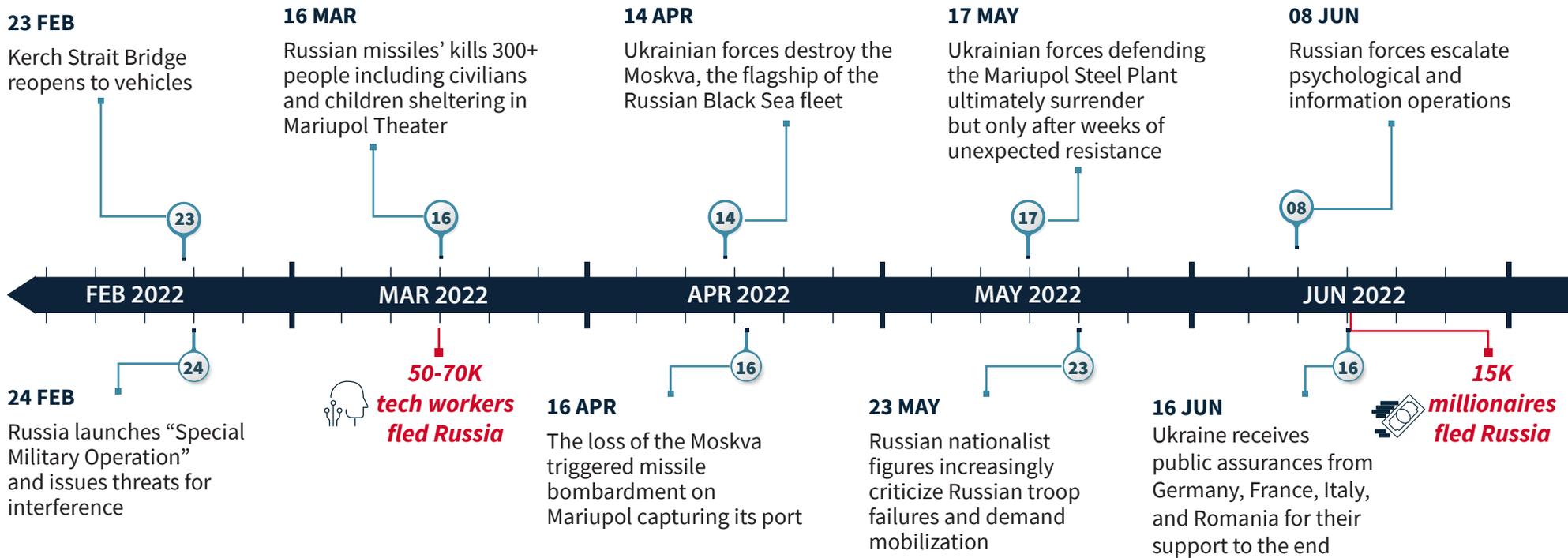
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ENDNOTES

Image Content

Page 3-6. Figure 1: Susan Littleton, *The War in Ukraine: A Look Back At Year One*, infographic, GCKN, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

THE WAR IN UKRAINE: A LOOK BACK AT YEAR ONE



*Special Military Operations (SMO)

Figure 1: The War in Ukraine: A Look Back At Year One, infographic, GCKN.

23 JUL

Ukrainian forces launch counteroffensives in Kherson Oblast, raising Russian nationalist concerns

23

09 AUG

Ukrainian forces start major counteroffensive in the south and destroy significant Russian infrastructure in Russian-occupied Crimea

09

21 SEP

Russia initiates partial mobilization

21

08 OCT

Ukraine partially destroys Crimea bridge, the main connection from Russia to Crimean peninsula

08



400k fled Russia

JUL 2022

AUG 2022

SEP 2022

OCT 2022



200k fled Russia



300k fled Russia

16 OCT

Russian retaliation for the Kerch Strait Bridge with the massive missile barrage across Ukraine

16

- SIGNIFICANT EVENTS
- RUSSIAN DOMESTIC SUPPORT FOR THE WAR
- RUSSIAN DOMESTIC PERCEPTIONS OF SUCCESS
- RUSSIAN DOMESTIC WILLINGNESS TO NEGOTIATE

76%

76%

72%

73%

53%

57%

44%

48%

JUL 2022

AUG 2022

SEP 2022

OCT 2022



12 NOV

Ukrainian forces liberate Kherson, ending eight months of brutal Russian occupation

12

21 DEC

Ukrainian President Zelensky visits Washington DC

21

25 JAN

Germany agrees to tanks for Ukraine, which is likely to boost Ukrainian counteroffensives

25

21 FEB

U.S. President Biden visits Kyiv

21

NOV 2022

DEC 2022

JAN 2023

FEB 2023



74%

54%

53%

71%

50%

75%

77%

63%

50%

NOV 2022

DEC 2022

JAN 2023

FEB 2023

RUSSIA MEETS UNEXPECTED UKRANIAN RESISTANCE

In year one, Russia demonstrated commitment to its maximalist war objectives, but was unable to overcome the stronger-than-expected Ukrainian resistance and resilience. Ukraine was surprisingly fierce and resourceful, which caused the Kremlin to refocus and redirect its strategy. The Kremlin overcompensated for its significant military missteps with the muzzling of civil society and the media, along with aggressive messaging about Western encroachment and curated military achievements. These efforts helped to maintain the facade of a successful military campaign, boost flagging troop morale, and sustain the initial momentum of high public support for the war; however, the Russian military suffered from a series of setbacks including poor leadership and a significant loss in personnel and equipment. The loss in personnel created an erosion of morale among its troops and forced the Kremlin to hastily draft 300,000 civilians to compensate for manpower deficits. The mobilizations motivated about a million draft-age citizens to flee Russia to escape the draft. While this outflow reduced primarily its unsupportive population, it did unravel some of Kremlin messaging efforts about nationalist pride driving support for the war.

RELATIVELY STABLE DOMESTIC SUPPORT EXPLAINED BY THE KREMLIN'S "RALLY-'ROUND-THE-FLAG" EFFORTS, AND DEMOGRAPHIC SUPPORT

During the first year of the conflict, domestic Russian perceptions of and support for the war appeared to remain relatively stable. However, a closer look shows that domestic support for the war varied. The momentary spikes in support coincide with deceptive Kremlin messaging and civil society repression efforts (e.g., criminalizing speaking out against the war), while more rapid and dramatic changes coincide with key war milestones. Variations in support are also based on generation, with the oldest generations consistently showing the most support and the youngest generation the least. In short, specific causes for the spike in support for the war include a) Russian framing of the war as essential to protect a Russian civilization from the West's existential threat; b) the war's emotional contagion, which tied citizens directly to Russia's war (mis)fortunes; and c) an inherent desire for patriotism or the "rally-'round-the-flag" phenomenon.

RUSSIANS REMAIN OPTIMISTIC... AS THE KREMLIN TELLS THEM THEY SHOULD

The Kremlin's framing of the conflict sought to build on popular confidence in Russia's regional military hegemony. Early reports that the operation was proceeding as planned convinced domestic Russians that Ukraine will quickly capitulate like it did during the annexation of Crimea in 2014. This bolstered initial public support for the invasion and belief that the SMO would be successful. However, repeated Russian operational and political setbacks, amid successful Ukrainian counteroffensives and the "partial" mobilization of 300,000 Russians, significantly tempered popular expectations. Russian domestic perceptions of success dropped by 20% between May and November 2022. Despite the drop, Russians remained relatively optimistic overall about their country's ability to succeed in its objective.

SUPPORT FOR NEGOTIATIONS CLIMBS AS ONE YEAR MARK SHOWS INCREASED MILITARY CHALLENGES

Cleverly framed as a "special military operation," the Kremlin declared its actions were saving Ukraine from Western encroachment. However, external sources of information, alongside a prolonged timeline to complete the military operation, increasingly revealed the true nature of the war. Although the Kremlin attempted to highlight the obvious Russia-Ukraine military mismatch and set expectations for a swift victory, this did not happen. The repeated military setbacks, high casualties, and the misfortunes from Western sanctions became more apparent to the public. The Kremlin used a combination of mass mobilization, civilian targeting, and fiscal and reporting manipulations to steady the campaign. As much as the Kremlin tried to control the effects, Russian citizens became increasingly persuaded that the costs of the conflict had become prohibitively high. Over time, public support for a negotiated solution slowly increased and by February 2023, half of the Russian population preferred a negotiated end to the war (and only about 40% supported continued fighting).

