

GCKN RUNNING ESTIMATE

April 2022 — Update 2



The Previous Running Estimate:

- Early polling indicated that the majority of domestic Russians supported Russian President Putin’s “special military operation” in Ukraine at an average rate of 65%. Age was a *significant predictor*, with the Silent generation having the highest level of support, followed by the Boomers, then Generation X and Millennials respectively. Generation Z has the least support.

This Running Estimate:

- Domestic Russian perceptions of Putin and the Ukrainian conflict have continued to rise.
- Emerging reports of perceptions in the "Near-Abroad" are largely mixed. Some diaspora communities follow the generational patterns of support found in Russia. The influx of fleeing Russians is causing ripple effects that portend increasing tensions.¹

DOMESTIC RUSSIAN PERCEPTIONS

Russia’s internal support for President Putin’s “special military operation” in Ukraine has strengthened over the past month, though multiple sociocultural factors suggest this increase may not authentically or fully represent domestic perceptions. The Kremlin’s effort to silence most independent media and opposition in Russia—including a legal order that outlaws protests and imprisons anyone spreading “false information”—appears to be impacting independent public opinion polls.²

- Following a first round of polling in Russia addressing perceptions of the Ukraine conflict (28 FEB through 12 MAR – see Running Estimate #1), three new polls have emerged: Sociologists from the Public Opinion Foundation released a poll on 29 March, Levada released a separate poll the same day,^a and an independent interviewer conducted an informal poll among domestic Russians—on YouTube – on 6 APR.

- » The Public Opinion Foundation poll indicates an increase of 5% in domestic support for Putin’s actions in Ukraine, bringing it to 73%. However, the poll also indicates that the number of Russian critics of the “special military operation” has increased by 2%, raising it to 14%.³
- » The latest Levada poll, conducted 24-30 MAR among 1,632 Russian adults, indicates an increase in support by 12%, bringing it to 83%.⁴

a Levada’s first poll was prior to the invasion. According to the article, Levada’s polling is likely the best proxy for Russian public opinion: FiveThirtyEight describes Levada as a “respected, independent pollster,” and a 2016 paper led by Columbia University professor Timothy Frye found Putin’s approval rating polls are generally reflective of public opinion.

- » Leveraging social media via YouTube, an independent pollster recently interviewed a sampling of domestic Russians and released the results on 6 APR. The responses reflected Russian domestic perceptions largely aligned with the generation breakdown from the previous round of polls: Silent and Boomer generations are shown supporting the Russian narrative, with television as their nearly exclusive news source. Generation X and Millennials are mixed, receiving some information external to Russian TV. The younger generations are not showing support.⁵
- Domestic polling in Russia—*while still worth tracking*—has become increasingly skewed by a forced Kremlin narrative. In short, many domestic Russians live in a world, as presented by state-media, where there is no war with Ukraine; there is only a Russian “special military operation” intended to uproot far-right extremists in a brotherly country that has fallen victim to Western, anti-Kremlin influence.⁶

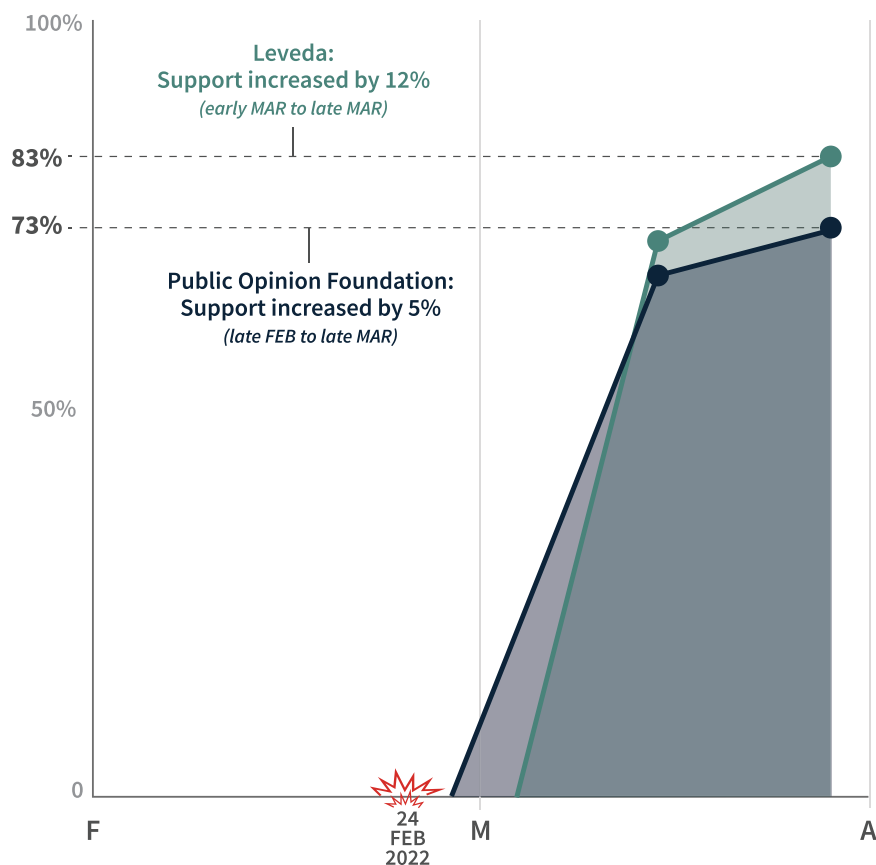
In conjunction with the Kremlin’s narrative, higher rates of support for Putin and his Ukraine operation likely stem in part from social desirability bias^b, increased fear of retribution, weaker representative polling, uninterrupted and unchallenged media coverage on state television, and rallying around the Russian flag to defy mounting international pressure . . . meaning that some Russians are essentially anchoring down in their position.⁷

- Viktor Shenderovich, a popular Russian writer who is now living abroad, recently remarked that “normal sociology and popular opinion polls **do not** exist in authoritarian countries.”⁸

^b Social desirability is the tendency for survey participants to provide a response that will be viewed favorable by others—and this includes the person administering the survey. This bias interferes with the results by skewing the average tendencies of the sample as well as individual differences.

Domestic Russian Perceptions of the "Special Military Operation"

Public Opinion Polls In Russia Show Support Rising



*It is important to note that Russian opinion polls are immediately instrumentalized by the Kremlin, repeated by the Russian media, and used to claim that the invasion is supported by the Russian public and conducted in its name.

PERCEPTIONS IN THE "NEAR-ABROAD"

Table 1: Ethnic Russians Living in the "Near-Abroad"

	POPULATION	PERCENT OF ETHNIC RUSSIANS
Estonia	1.3M	24%
Latvia	1.9M	25%
Lithuania	2.8M	5%
Belarus	9.3M	8%
Ukraine	41.4M	22%

*Russia's Population is just over 146 million and about 80 to 82% are Ethnic Russian.

*Some 20 to 30 million ethnic Russians are estimated to live outside the bounds of the Russian Federation.⁹

In the Baltics, ethnic Russians—comprising up to 25% of the population—are divided over their perceptions of the war in Ukraine. Age and proximity to Russia are key factors related to their support. Most ethnic Russians reside in pocket communities relatively close to the Russian border, and are heavy consumers of Russian television and its increasingly Kremlin-influenced news broadcasts. However, a 2021 report suggests that Russian diaspora in the Baltic states may not be “the Trojan horse” the Kremlin likely desires, based in part on massive protests against the war in Ukraine.¹⁰

- Support for the Kremlin in many Baltics ethnic Russian communities is strong, as is access to Russian state-run television. Most of the Baltics’ ethnic Russians live in urban areas, with substantive numbers in the cities of Tallinn and Narva, Estonia; Riga and Daugavpils, Latvia; and Vilnius, Lithuania. Beyond these locations, Latvia’s ethnic Russians are dispersed throughout the country, while Estonia’s are mostly concentrated among a few other cities and towns. Lithuania hosts the fewest ethnic Russians—comprising only 5% of its population—in small municipalities where the population is over 50% Russian.¹¹ The Russian language is widely spoken throughout Latvia and in specific areas of Estonia (see Figure 1). Since the beginning of Ukraine’s 2014 separatist movement in the Donbass, the Kremlin has effectively saturated these areas with state-backed Russian-language television news broadcasts promoting anti-Ukraine propaganda.¹²
- Although limited polling has emerged regarding ethnic Russian sentiment outside of Russia, some qualitative reporting suggests Latvian Russians are divided fairly evenly over support for/against the war in Ukraine.¹³ Meanwhile in Estonia, in a recent interview, an ethnic Russian explains that “some are against it, and some are for it.”¹⁴ **Russia has almost certainly targeted these populations with intensified state propaganda—primarily via Russian television**

before and throughout the invasion of Ukraine—to shore up support in communities divided over Putin’s actions.

In Belarus, the Russian diaspora likely shares a pattern of perspectives on the Ukrainian conflict similar to that of domestic Russians, with age as the biggest indicator of support. Ethnic Russian perceptions sit within a greater Belarusian sentiment where opposition to the war in Ukraine is largely anti-war, and not anti-Russian. Ethnic Russians comprise 8% of Belarus’ population and mostly reside less than 100 miles from the Russian border.

- There is no substantive polling data from Belarus specifically reflecting ethnic Russian perceptions about the Ukraine conflict. However, limited evidence suggests that ethnic Russian millennials in Belarus do not support the war, while their parents are aligned with their generational counterparts in Russia. One millennial explained of her parents, “...they get all their information from TV, and the Belarusian state-owned television is flooded with Russian content and Russian propaganda. With no alternative sources for information, our parents are left ill-informed, and for a lack of a better term, brainwashed.”¹⁵ Furthermore, independent journalism has been under siege over Belarusian President Lukashenko’s nearly 30 years in office—generally mirroring the situation in Russia under Putin.¹⁶
- Only 3% of Belarusians reportedly favor military assistance to Russia’s Ukraine operation, and two-thirds (67%) object to Russian forces bombing Ukraine from Belarusian territory.¹⁷ **It is unclear if Lukashenko’s support to Putin and the Ukraine conflict is translated to his people; but it appears that a majority of Belarusians do not want to get involved.**
- Belarus is home to almost 160,000 Ukrainians (one of the largest minorities at roughly 2% of its population), while Ukraine hosts nearly 300,000 ethnic Belarusians. Most of Belarus’s ethnic Ukrainians live near or along its nearly

700-mile border with Ukraine—primarily concentrated in the country’s southwest (Brest) region—and many families have members on both sides.

Many Russians have fled the country, notably including those in Information Technology (IT) and similar white-collar fields, raising the prospects that Russia will soon experience the effects of a “brain drain.” Since the 24 FEB invasion of Ukraine, more than 250,000 Russians are estimated to have left Russia,¹⁸ primarily because of increasing persecution of those expressing any sentiment against the Kremlin’s narrative, economic pressures, and avoidance of conscription—although the Kremlin has so far not engaged in a broad military mobilization.¹⁹

- Most fleeing Russians are millennials and Gen Z, many of whom work in IT or similar white-collar fields.²⁰ Others are journalists, academics, Non-Governmental Organization workers, or artists. Additionally, some are Gen Z teenagers sent abroad by their parents.²¹
- Many Russian and Belarussian companies began moving workers and operations out of Russia months prior to the invasion of Ukraine, in anticipation of economic fallout.²² Georgia and Armenia in particular are welcoming Russian IT workers (Yerevan is a regional technology hub).²³
- In mid-March, more than 40% of Russians age 18-30, and roughly 39% of those 31 to 45, stated that foreign companies’ departure from Russia would worsen their quality of life, compared with less than 30% of older Russians, according to a survey.²⁴ *The departure of Russian workers in local and foreign companies, together with its impact on workers who stay, suggests a vicious cycle of decreasing domestic confidence in the Kremlin’s ability to counteract the effect of Western sanctions.*

The arrival of Russians in nearby states is facilitating “ripple” effects that portend various levels and types of uncertainty external to Russia and Ukraine. Many Russians have fled to destinations with Russian-friendly business and travel policies, but where perspectives on Putin and the Ukrainian conflict are largely mixed.

- Google searches for “How to leave Russia?” hit a ten-year peak “within a week of the invasion of Ukraine on February 24.” Top trending destinations were Australia, Turkey, Israel, Serbia, Armenia, and Georgia. At least 37 countries, including all of the EU, have closed their airspace to Russian airlines. Armenia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkey are a few of the handful of countries that have not done so, and so are prime destinations or waypoints for fleeing Russians. Moreover, Armenia and Georgia do not require visas for Russians.²⁵
- Many of those fleeing are anti-war and/or anti-Putin “activists-in-exile” who are establishing networks across the diaspora community and within Russia. Several activists postulated in interviews that they could be more effective

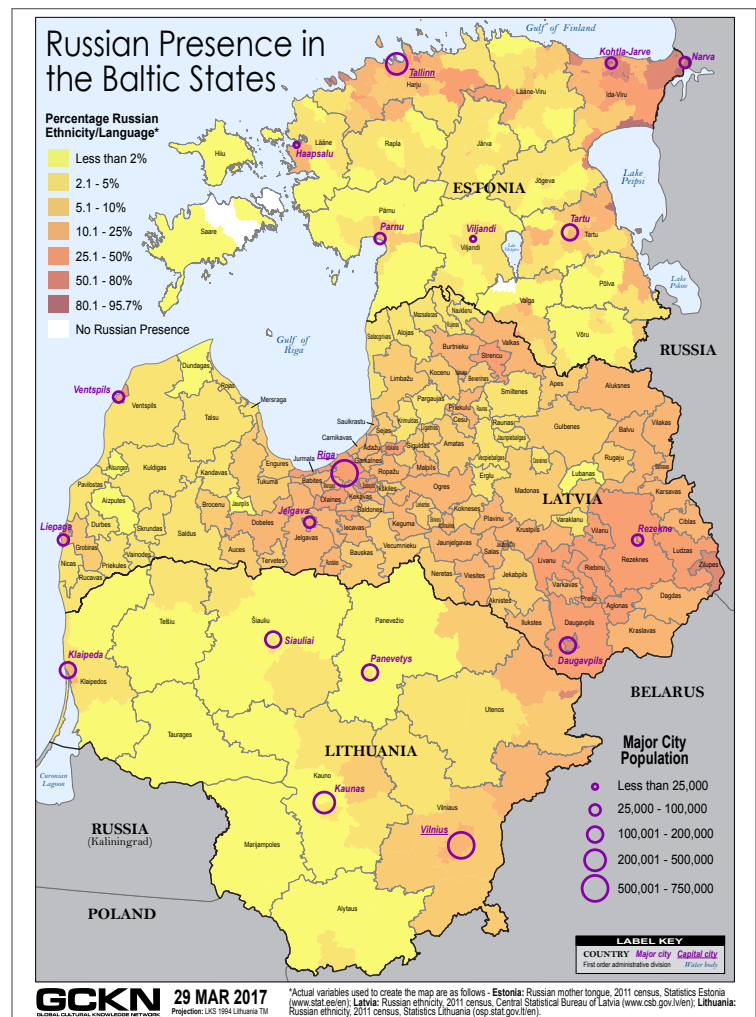


Figure 1. Russian Presence in the Baltic States, GCKN.

outside of Russia than within.²⁶ *This raises the prospect of Russian security services targeting activists in external locations—possibly through direct action or cyber operations—with potential consequences for the countries where activists are based.*

- **In Armenia** there is wide support for Russia’s actions in Ukraine, though there is popular empathy for the Ukrainian people. Pro-Russian sentiment stems from Russian support for Armenia—and Ukrainian support for Azerbaijan—leading up to the recent 2nd Nagorno-Karabakh War, and is influenced by Russian media and propaganda.²⁷ Sanctions are affecting “Near-Abroad” countries like Armenia, which relies on Russia for most of its direct investment and exports, as well as remittances from Armenian workers in Russia, many of whom have returned home.²⁸ Rental prices are surging from an influx of up to 80,000 Russians.²⁹
- **In Georgia**, close to 60,000 Russians arrived between 24 FEB and 31 MAR, despite Putin banning direct flights to Georgia since 2019. Georgia is attractive to Russians because they may stay for a year without a visa, Georgians speak Russian, and “quick business registration allows them to transfer their businesses from Russia to Georgia.”³⁰

- » The influx of large numbers of Russians has increased rental rates in Georgia up to 300%, though few Russians are buying real estate there. Former Georgian president Saakashvili has publicly warned that if he comes back to power, his government will confiscate Russian holdings, sell them at auction, and use the funds for Ukraine reconstruction.³¹
- » Anti-Russian sentiment in Georgia is high, rooted in its history under the USSR and the 2008 war with Russia, from which a fifth of Georgian territory is effectively under Russian control and occupied by Russian “peacekeepers.” There have been public calls to tighten immigration laws specifically against Russians.³² Saakashvili and others in Georgia are concerned that Russian agents will infiltrate Georgia among the waves of fleeing Russians, as a precursor to a future invasion or an expansion of the Russian-controlled ‘autonomous areas’ of South Ossetia (whose de-facto president has promised a referendum on joining Russia) and Abkhazia. “Saakashvili has warned that the appearance of a large ethnic-Russian minority in Georgia can be exploited by the Kremlin as a pretext for a new invasion.”³³
- **In Kazakhstan**, ethnic Russians make up nearly 20% of the population, residing mostly in the north of the country where they hold a significant majority, and many are Russian passport holders. There are separatist sentiments among ethnic Russian nationalists, which creates tension with ethnic Kazakhs. Pro-Russian sentiment is high across the country following Russian peacekeepers settling unrest there in JAN 2022. However, public and government sentiment is against the War in Ukraine, with the government refusing to send troops to Ukraine at the request of Russia and refusing to recognize the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk. No public polling is available; one pollster refused to release findings so as not to cause instability. Social media has been so vicious against the war that the Kazakh General Prosecutor’s Office called for the public to avoid posting inflammatory messages.³⁴
- **In Turkey**, newly arrived Russians are continuing to protest against the war in Ukraine and the Putin regime. The Russian rapper Oxxxymiron organized a Ukraine charity concert in Istanbul entitled “Russians Against War”³⁵ which sold out in minutes. Istanbul and the southern coastline, where Russians have long vacationed, are popular destinations. Many Russians are buying real estate to save their wealth as the ruble is increasingly volatile. While Russians may only stay in Turkey for two months without a visa, Turkey has had “a “golden visa” scheme since early 2017, where foreign nationals can acquire citizenship in just a few months after a real estate investment of \$250,000.”³⁶
- **In Uzbekistan**, since the invasion of Ukraine, several thousand Russians have added to the ethnic Russian minority that comprises approximately 2% of the population. “[M]ost new Russian arrivals are high-quality specialists or part of a liberal creative class, cadres Uzbekistan has largely lacked.” A Tashkent housing developer claims that most of the Russians coming to Tashkent lived there prior to the collapse of the USSR. The newly arrived Russians who are fleeing conscription, persecution for anti-war beliefs, and economic pressures, combined with a wave of returning Uzbek laborers who lost their jobs in Russia due to sanctions, are causing rents and home prices to rise up to 15% in Tashkent. Many Russians and returning Uzbek laborers are investing their money in real estate as a hedge against falling Russian and Uzbek currency values caused by economic sanctions.³⁷

Table 2: Russians Arriving in Nearby States³⁹

	Population	% Ethnic Russians	Est. # of Newly Arrived Russians	Notes
Armenia	2.97M	0.5%	20-80K	2nd largest minority group
Azerbaijan	10.3M	1%	unknown	2nd largest minority group
Georgia	3.97M	0.7%	Est. 35-60K	Does not include South Ossetia and Abkhazia
Kazakhstan	19.2M	20%	“thousands”	Ethnic Russians concentrated in northern Kazakhstan
Kyrgyzstan	6.7M	6.2%	unknown	
Tajikistan	9.9M	0.5%	unknown	
Turkey	85.5M	0.1%	“thousands”	
Turkmenistan	6.2M	6.7%	unknown	
Uzbekistan	34.3M	2.3%	Est. 2-3K	Uzbek Migration Agency has not released official numbers

INFORMATION MESSAGING AND ATTITUDE CHANGE

Psychologists have long been interested in influence as it relates to attitude shifts. This becomes especially important when people receive contradictory information. One way to think about influence is to understand that the “Hail Mary” pass in football should be saved for very special occasions—something the coach might pull out of the playbook only once per year. Most offensive coordinators know that if the team can move the ball four or five yards at a time, it can retain possession and continue to head toward the end zone.

Attitude change is similar, and is explained in **Social Judgement Theory**. The following are key elements of this theory as they relate to domestic Russian perceptions of President Putin and his war in Ukraine:

The greater the “latitude for rejection” (i.e., the greater the number of positions the recipient already maintains that run counter to the new message), then the more engaged the recipient is in the message’s topic, and the more difficult he or she will be to persuade.

- Individuals tend to hold their own position on a topic, but maintain a range or latitude of opinions they are willing to accept. For example, if asked how one feels about NATO, a person may provide a response that is equivalent to a 7 out of 10, with 10 being extremely favorable. However, that same person may also be willing to accept messages that align with a 6 out of 10 as well as an 8 out of 10—depending on how involved he or she is with the topic.

When a new message is received, people use three categories of judgement to assess it: they accept or support it, reject or oppose it, or are unsure or uncommitted. People usually attempt to fit (and sometimes distort) information into one of those three categories. Moreover, their level of ego-involvement^c affects both the size (or length) and the strength of their latitude frame.

- For example, the extent that the older generations have been involved in the Russian situation, versus their children and grandchildren, will strengthen their ego-involvement on this topic. Alternatively, the extent that domestic Russians are involved in Putin’s operations, versus Euro Slavs, would make them have comparably stronger ego-involvement.

*Small or moderate differences between the new message and the recipient’s current position may cause attitude change; large discrepancies will not – and this is called the “Boomerang Effect”.*³⁸

- For example, if one believes firmly that Russia is facing a security threat from NATO enlargement, then hearing positive, completely opposite messages about NATO objectives will almost certainly not change his or her position. Instead, the new message will fall squarely within the recipient’s latitude of rejection. *Multiple messages with large discrepancies will usually further entrench the recipient in their current position; this is called the “Anchoring Down” effect.*

In short, audiences judge a new message by the degree to which it supports or opposes their current attitude or position on the topic. The sender will be most effective when the new message falls within the audience’s latitude of acceptance, yet incrementally diverges from the audience’s anchor or center . . . in the direction the sender wants to achieve.

- Strong or incessant messaging is not better or even effective. Successful messaging depends on 1) accurately identifying the audience’s current sentiment 2) incrementally crafting messages that are close to that sentiment, yet leaning towards the sender’s objective.

...It may take time to get the football in the red zone by moving it only five yards at a time, but there is a high chance of retaining possession, preventing a turnover, and reaching the goal.

^c According to the American Psychological Association, a person’s ego involvement is the extent to which a task or other target of judgment is perceived as psychologically significant or important to one’s self-esteem. It is presumed to be a determinant of attitude strength. Also called attitudinal involvement; personal involvement; self-relevance.

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ENDNOTES

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Image Content

Table 1: Susan Littleton, *Ethnic Russians Living Abroad*, infographic, GCKN, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

Figure 1. Keith French, *Russian Presence in the Baltic States*, 2017, map, GCKN, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

Table 2: Susan Littleton, *Russians Arriving in Nearby States*, infographic, GCKN, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.