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Russian Public Accepts Putin’s Spin on Ukraine Conflict

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While the whole world seems to be watching the Russian “special military operation” in Ukraine,¹ a new joint survey by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and the Levada Center conducted March 24–30 shows that most people living in Russia are not following these events closely. Nevertheless, a majority of Russians say they support their country’s military action—with just over half strongly backing it. For the most part, Russians think these actions are being taken to protect and defend fellow Russians and Russian speakers in Ukraine, to protect Russia itself, or to “denazify” Ukraine—story lines that have been amplified by the Russian government’s media apparatus.² But as the conflict drags on, it may become more difficult to sustain this support, especially as the casualty rates are uncovered and the economic repercussions of the Western sanctions begin to more seriously affect Russian households.

Key Findings

- A majority of Russians strongly (53%) or somewhat (28%) support their country’s military operation in Ukraine.

¹ Because of the Russian government restrictions on the use of [certain terms](#) to describe the Russian military action in Ukraine, the joint survey used either “military operation” or “military action” in these questions. To be true to the results, we use that language throughout this report.

² President Putin has repeatedly claimed “[denazification](#)” as a motive behind the military operation in Ukraine. He has compared Ukrainian elected officials to the Nazi regime, claiming that they oppress, and are even committing genocide against, the ethnic Russian population in Ukraine. This survey used the terms “denazify” and “denazification” because they are prevalent in Russian government and media discourse surrounding the operation in Ukraine.

- Few who support the military action believe it is motivated by Russia's desire to annex Ukraine and/or the Donbas region.
- Those who rely on internet sites, social media, or family/friends for information are roughly 15 percentage points less likely to strongly support the military operation than those who get their news from television, radio, or newspapers.
- While there have been significant protests in Russia against the military action, most Russians are not closely following them.

Wide Support for “Military Operation” in Ukraine, but Some More Committed Than Others

Seven weeks into the Russian military action, Ukraine is bracing for a Russian offensive in eastern Ukraine with troops rerouted from the northern regions of the country. While Western media are [broadcasting](#) images of atrocities committed by Russian forces in Ukraine, Russian media are [pushing back](#) against the “West’s information war,” claiming these atrocities are staged and doubling down on the “denazification” narrative.³

The joint Chicago Council-Levada survey finds that a limited segment of Russians is following the situation very closely (29%), while an additional 35 percent are following it somewhat closely. Yet an overall majority of Russians support their government’s action in Ukraine. Fifty-three percent strongly support, and 28 percent somewhat support, the military operation. Just 14 percent oppose the military operation, and an additional 6 percent decline to respond.

Although many observers have raised questions about how free Russians feel to express their true opinions in the current political climate, the response rate, refusal rate, and percentage responding “don’t know” to various questions are generally in line with [previous Levada surveys](#) conducted since January 2021. This suggests there is not a significant change in Russian willingness or sense of freedom to participate in surveys in light of the situation in Ukraine.

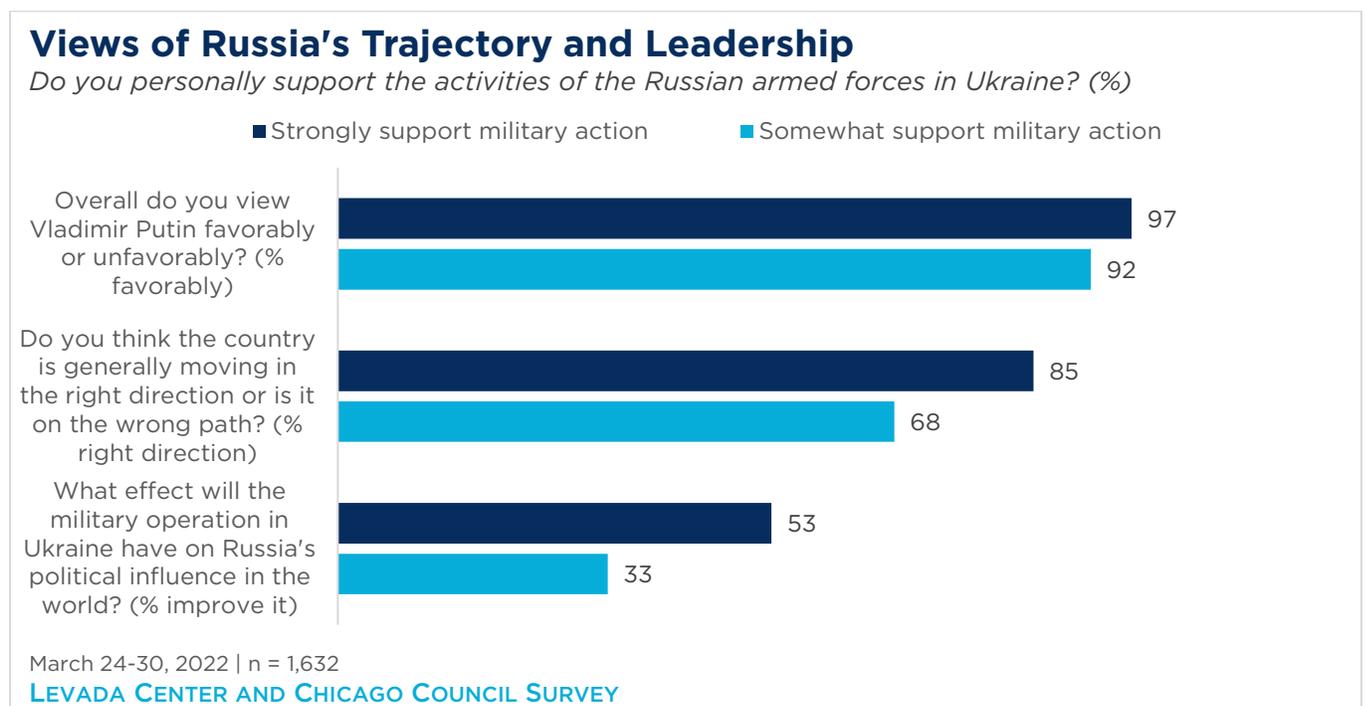
A February 2022 Levada Center survey before the military operation began found that half of Russians (49%) thought it was not very likely or not likely at all that the tensions in eastern Ukraine would boil over into a war between Russia and Ukraine. In this March Chicago Council-Levada survey, 43 percent of Russians say the military operation personally makes them feel shocked, anxious, or fearful. But a slight majority say it makes them feel proud of their

³ President Putin has claimed that the West is waging an “information war” by spreading negative and untrue information about Russia and the actions of Russian troops. This survey uses the term “West’s information war” because it is prevalent in Russian government and media discourse surrounding the operation in Ukraine.

country (51%). Additionally, two-thirds think Russia is somewhat (37%) or very (29%) respected in the world today, compared to just 18 percent who say the same about Ukraine. Amid this atmosphere, most Russians also express a favorable view of Vladimir Putin (87%) and approve of his performance as president of Russia (83%).

Those who “strongly” support the military action are also more convinced than other supporters that it is good for the country: they are significantly more likely to say that the action will improve Russia’s political influence in the world (53% vs. 33% somewhat support) and believe that Russia is generally going in the right direction as a country (85% vs. 68% who somewhat support the action). Yet nine in ten among all supporters are positive about Putin and his performance as president. These patterns could be interpreted to mean that those who strongly support the military action believe in the mission—whatever they believe the mission to be—while those who support it only somewhat may do so out of a sense of loyalty to the president, group think, or even general apathy.

When Putin annexed Crimea in 2014, Russian opinion surveys registered comparably high ratings for Putin to those we are seeing today. But unlike the public reaction when Russia took Crimea, there are no signs of celebration within Russian society. As one Russian sociologist remarked in a recent [New York Times article](#): “Enthusiasm—I don’t see it. . . What I rather see is apathy.”



Military Action Seen as Defensive Operation

At the outset of the military action when Putin announced the “special military operation,” the Russian government [outlawed](#) the use of the terms “war” and “invasion,” in effect shutting down independent reporting and making the government-run media outlets the voices of record for the Russian public. [Depicting](#) Ukraine’s fighters as terrorists and rebels, and NATO as their “overseas master,” the rhetoric has only grown more extreme as the crisis continues, painting the Ukrainians as [genocidal Nazis](#).

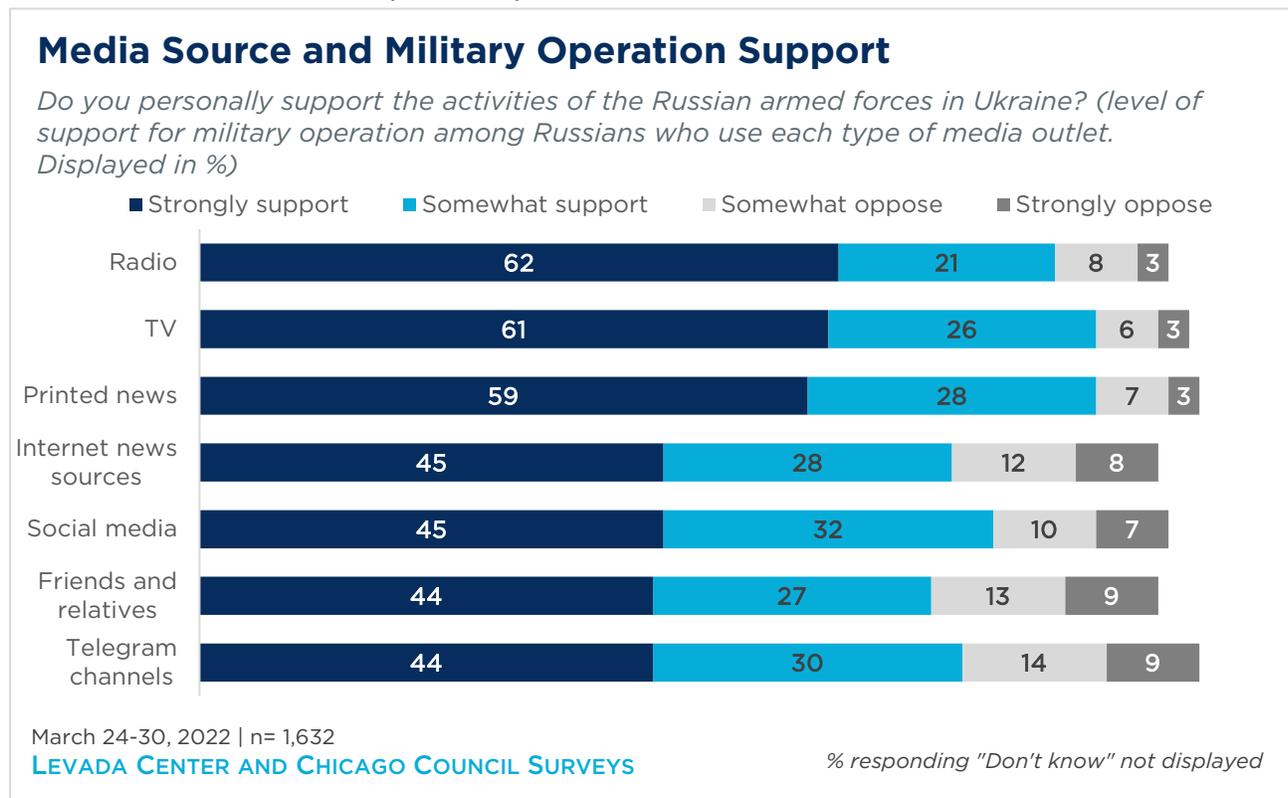
When asked in an open-ended question why they think the military operation is taking place, a plurality (43%) say it is to defend civilians, ethnic Russians, or Russian speakers, including those in eastern Ukraine. This seems to resonate with most Russians: nearly all Russians agree that their country is the rightful defender of Russian speakers abroad (78% strongly agree, 16% somewhat agree).

Other messaging from the Kremlin also gets some traction among the public. A quarter of Russians (25%), according to the open-response question, think the military operation is a preemptive measure to prevent an attack on Russia, and 21 percent say it is to get rid of nationalists and “denazify” Ukraine. Few Russians (3%) appear to view the operation as an attempt to incorporate Ukraine and/or the Donbas region into Russia. Nor do Russians actively support that goal: in a separate question, only 26 percent believe that Russia and Ukraine should be united into one state. Instead, a majority of Russians (69%) think the two countries should remain separate, either completely independent (20%) or as friendly states with open borders and no visa or customs requirements (49%).

While television, radio, and printed publications are the media sources over which the Russian government exerts the most pronounced influence (and are used most often), majorities of Russians say they support the operation no matter what form of media they turn to most often. But there is a difference in degree of support between those who mainly consume news sources that tend to be state-run (TV, print and radio) and those who look to other sources.⁴ Russians who consume news from online media sites (30%), social media (38%), the Telegram messaging app (14%), and family, friends, and neighbors (18%) are roughly 15 percentage points less likely to strongly

⁴ Overall, 70% of Russians say they turn to television most often (70%); 10% on radio; 6% on newspapers; 18% on friends and relatives, 30% on internet websites; 38% social media; and 15% on Telegram channels. Respondents were able to give multiple responses to these sources.

support the military operation than those who get their news from television (70%), radio (10%), and printed publications (6%).

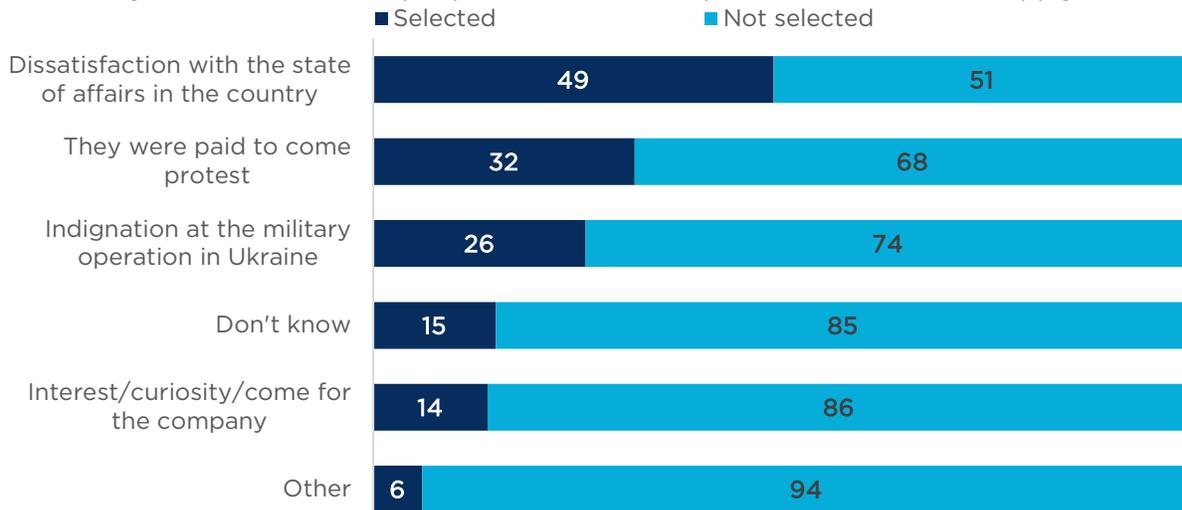


Limited Awareness of Protests against the Military Operation

When asked about the protests in Russia against the military operation, four in ten Russians (41%) responded that “this is the first time I’ve heard about it.” Among the rest, half (50%) have heard something about them, and just eight percent claim to be following the protests closely. When asked about the motivation behind the protests, a third are fairly cynical, saying many of the protesters were paid to participate (32%). It is not uncommon for the Russian government to claim that those protesting are paid to do so; Putin [made this claim in 2011](#) in response to protests over contested parliamentary elections. Half say the protests aim to express discontent at the country’s state of affairs (49%). Only 26 percent specifically attribute the protests to “indignation at the military operation,” though this belief is somewhat more prevalent among those who rely on online sources (33%), social media (33%) or the Telegram app (44%). There is also a clear age gap: young people were somewhat more likely than older people to attribute the protests to indignation at the military operation (42% between the ages of 18-24, 33% between the ages of 25-39, 22% of those between 40-54, and 18% of those 55 and older).

Reasons for Protests in Russia

What do you think motivated people to come out to protest? (mark all that apply) (%)



March 24-30, 2022 | n= 1,632

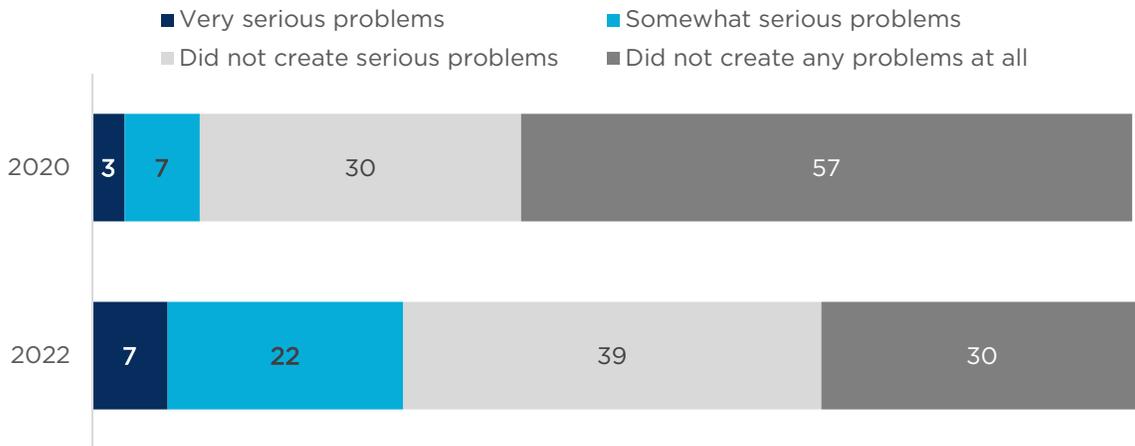
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Increased Concern about Sanctions' Impact, but Strong Rejection of Compromise

The United States and its allies have placed [unprecedented sanctions](#) on Russia; last week the US Treasury Department [increased the targets of these sanctions](#), including Putin's adult daughters. Among the Russian public, slightly more say they are not concerned (53%) than are concerned (46%) about the impact of Western political and economic sanctions. But the percentage who are concerned has increased since December 2021, when it was only a third (32%). In turn, those who say they have been personally financially impacted by the sanctions has increased from 10 percent in 2020 [to 29 percent](#). And while in 2020 a majority of Russians (57%) said sanctions had not created any problems at all for them and their family, only a third (30%) say the same today. In a separate question, a clear majority think the sanctions will affect the general population (67%) rather than a narrow circle of people who are responsible for Russian policy toward Ukraine (26%).

Personal Effect of Sanctions

Did the sanctions create problems for you and your family? (%)



March 24-30, 2022 | n= 1,632

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The Russian ruble appears to have rebounded after a sharp fall in response to sanctions, although some think this [rebound is artificial](#). Just last week, inflation hit a [seven-year high](#), raising consumer prices. Despite these rising worries about the economic impact of sanctions, a large majority of 80 percent say Russia should not make any concessions to Western countries to get the sanctions lifted (13% think they should, 7% don't know). When asked specifically about various negotiating points, Russians are most resistant to ceasing economic and military assistance to the breakaway regions in eastern Ukraine (87% oppose). Majorities also oppose returning Crimea to Ukraine (64% oppose, 27% support) and withdrawing Russian forces from Ukraine (64% oppose, 27% support) in exchange for sanctions relief.

Conclusion

Today, a critical factor in Russian attitudes is likely the muzzling of independent media. [In the first week](#) of the war in Ukraine, Russia passed laws criminalizing publishing "false information," restricted Russians' access to much foreign news and social media sites, and banned referring to the military operation in Ukraine as a "war" or "invasion." Many [Western news](#) outlets suspended operations in Russia in light of the current restrictions, while the government restrictions forced the [closures](#) of the few remaining independent Russian news organizations. The findings from our survey likely reflect this media landscape.

The vastly different understandings of Russians compared to publics in the West over the situation in Ukraine underscores just how powerful government control of information and media has become within Russia.⁵ With many commentators now expecting the military operation to drag on for a considerable time, further polling will be essential in determining what, if anything, could act as a tipping point for the Russian population to turn against the operation. Russian leaders have publicly admitted that there have been [significant losses](#) of Russian soldiers, a situation different from Russia's retaking Crimea in 2014. This fact, along with the economic strain from Western sanctions on Russians' living standards, may prove to be factors in how long Putin can retain public support for this operation.

Methodology

The data in this report comes from a survey conducted March 24–30, 2022, by the Levada Center. The survey was conducted among a representative sample of 1,632 Russians 18 years of age or older, including urban and rural residents. The sample included people from 137 municipalities within 50 regions of the Russian Federation. The survey was conducted as a personal interview in respondents' homes. Quotas for gender and age are used in the final stage of respondent selection to increase accessibility of some problem groups (younger persons, males) and to decrease some groups that often are oversampled (for example, women 55+). These quotas are applied after 75 percent of the sample is collected and when the deviations after the next birthday method are +/- 15%. For more information about Levada sampling, please see <https://www.levada.ru/en/methods/omnibus/>

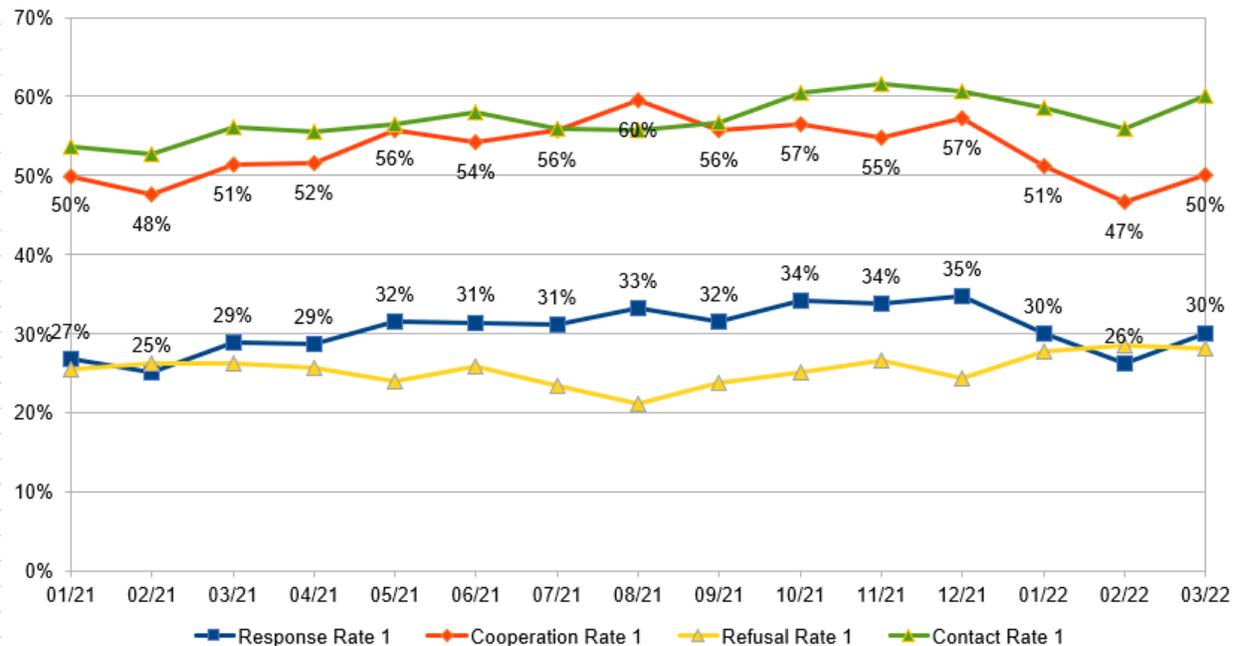
The statistical error of these studies for a sample of 1,600 people (with a probability of 0.95) does not exceed:

- 3.4% for indicators around 50%
- 2.9% for indicators around 25%/75%
- 2.0% for indicators around 10%/90%
- 1.5% for indicators around 5%/95%

While surveys conducted in non-democratic contexts can be [criticized](#), the survey's response rate, contact rate, and refusal rate are generally consistent with past readings since January 2021 (see below). In other words, there is no clear evidence that Russians have become less willing to cooperate with pollsters since the war started.

⁵ For example, while the Russian government estimates its soldiers' casualty rate at just over 1,000 soldiers, Western governments put that number at 7,000–15,000.

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Response rates - The number of complete interviews with reporting units divided by the number of eligible reporting units in the sample.
 Response Rate 1 (RR1), or the minimum response rate, is the number of complete interviews divided by the number of interviews (complete plus partial) plus the number of non-interviews (refusal and break-off plus non-contacts plus others) plus all cases of unknown eligibility (unknown if housing unit, plus unknown, other).

Cooperation rates - The proportion of all cases interviewed of all eligible units ever contacted.

Cooperation Rate 1 (COOP1), or the minimum cooperation rate, is the number of complete interviews divided by the number of interviews (complete plus partial) plus the number of non-interviews that involve the identification of and contact with an eligible respondent (refusal and break-off plus other).

Refusal rates - The proportion of all cases in which a housing unit or the respondent refuses to be interviewed, or breaks-off an interview, of all potentially eligible cases.

Refusal Rate 1 (REF1) is the number of refusals divided by the interviews (complete and partial) plus the non-respondents (refusals, non-contacts, and others) plus the cases of unknown eligibility

Contact rates - The proportion of all cases in which some responsible housing unit member was reached.

Contact Rate 1 (CON1) assumes that all cases of indeterminate eligibility are actually eligible

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About the Levada Center

The Levada Center is one of the leading research organizations in Russia that conducts public opinion surveys, expert and elite surveys, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and other types of surveys. The center brings together experts in the fields of sociology, political science, economics, psychology, market research, and public opinion polls. The center's research and experts have been cited in national and international media such as *Kommersant*, *Vedomosti*, *RBC*, *The Economist*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *Reuters*, *BBC Radio*, *Radio Liberty*, and others. Learn more at levada.ru and follow [@levada_ru](https://twitter.com/levada_ru) or on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/levada.ru).