Strategic Narrative and Global Public Opinion on the Russia-Ukraine Conflict

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Claremont McKenna College

Strategic Narrative and Global Public Opinion on the Russia-Ukraine Conflict

submitted to
Professor Hilary Appel

by
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Abstract

Through analyzing the cases of public opinion in Russia and South Africa, this thesis explores the nature of strategic narratives and the effects that they have on public opinion. Using the Russia-Ukraine conflict as a case study, it is conclusive that while strategic narratives are important and impactful, they are not the only factor that shape domestic and international public opinion. In Russia, while narrative has swayed a large portion of the population, there are those who’s stances can be attributed to the pressure to conform to the Russian nationalist majority. In South Africa, the country’s leadership has taken a stance that is different than the majority of its public, failing to garner their support through its justifications. History, geopolitics, and both qualitative and quantitative data are used to highlight the independence and growing autonomy of contemporary public opinion.
Acknowledgements

I would like to dedicate my senior thesis to my parents, Howard Rhett and Claudia Donald. As their only child, my parents always wanted to see me flourish, pouring all the love, energy, and time they had into me. Once college arrived, they made the difficult decision of allowing me to move almost 3,000 miles away to Claremont, hopeful that I would settle down and grow academically, professionally, and personally. Although the distance between us is large, my parents instilled values into me that continue to shape me into the young man that I am. Understanding that I am a reflection of my parents, I strive to make them both proud everyday through working hard, being respectful, and putting a smile on people’s faces. Mom and Dad, thank you for being my constant support system, for believing in my dreams, and for being the guiding lights in my life. I am grateful for the love and inspiration you have given me. Without you two, this project is nowhere near possible.
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Introduction

Currently, there is a war going on in Ukraine that has taken the lives of more than 10,000 civilians, many of these casualties taking place far behind the front lines.¹ The use of long-range missiles, shells, and cluster munitions has harmed thousands of Ukrainian civilians, triggering, among other things, the largest and fastest-growing refugee crisis in Europe since the Second World War. The 2022 invasion of Ukraine shook the world, flooding the frontpages of international journals and dominating the feeds of social media timelines.

Globally, many countries and organizations were quick to condemn Russia and side with Ukraine following the invasion, yet the use of strategic narratives by Russia has muddled the views of the international audience. Claims of historical ties linking Ukraine and Russia together have influenced those residing in the region, while digs at the United States and the Western world have involved those completely separated from the conflict. Knowing the invasion would garner a significant response from the West and an equally large reaction internationally, the Kremlin’s use of strategic narratives to justify the invasion has swayed domestic public opinion and challenged global views of the invasion.

As argued in this thesis, global public opinion on the Russia-Ukraine conflict is far from homogenous. There are supporters of the war, those who condemn Russia’s actions, and those who are unsure or choose to remain neutral. In some countries, the majority of the population shares the same stance on the invasion while in others, multiple groups of people hold differing views, representing an array of opinions within the same borders. Specific cases, such as South

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Africa’s, feature a division in opinions between the public and government, where public opinion remains detached to internal elite narratives. Despite the government’s claims of neutrality and non-alignment, many South Africans disagree with their leadership and remain in opposition of the invasion. It comes as no surprise that there is a difference in opinion around the globe on this issue, yet there are forces that drive this difference in opinion, namely strategic narrative. Generally, many would condemn the invasion of a sovereign neighbor without much knowledge of the situation, yet a carefully crafted strategic narrative can swiftly change the public’s opinion, such as in the case of the Russian invasion.

As a tool, strategic narrative has been a key source of soft power in the battle to target an enemy’s opinions, mass populations, and elites. Since ancient times, hard power alternatives such as narrative have been theorized and conceptualized by philosophers and generals. Among others, Chinese writer and general Sun Tzu conceptualized ways in which soft power can be used as an alternative or deterrent of hard power. In his text The Art of War, Tzu wrote, “Though the enemy may be stronger in numbers, we may prevent him from fighting. A clever general, therefor avoids an army when its spirit is keen, but attacks it when it is sluggish and inclined to return.”\(^2\) With the idea that warfare should be avoided until necessary, Tzu recognized the importance of alternate means to attacking an enemy. Should the enemy have a keen spirit, narrative can be employed to weaken the enemy; targeted strategic narrative can discourage the enemy from fighting at all.

In warfare, a state should use both hard power and soft power, calling on soft power when attacking values, cultural identities, and policies. As conceptualized by Joseph Nye in the 1990s, soft power is the recognition of the importance of ideas and culture in international

relations and foreign policy. It can also be the ability to build a shared consensus around a specific meaning; if a group of people come to the consensus that the protection of human rights is important in their society, any actions that conflict with that belief would be difficult to justify. In most cases, the creation of this shared consensus can be more challenging than using hard power when trying to influence a decision, yet the effects of soft power can be more lasting than hard power. As Nye refers to it, soft power can create a “milieu,” in which soft power resources can foster a shared consensus that can lead to other interactions, such as the coordination of social agendas and additional incentives to collaborate economically. As one of the most effective manifestations of soft power, states use strategic narratives to achieve the same goals as hard power, attacking the enemy’s minds and ideologies rather than their soldiers and military bases.

While it is evident that soft power and strategic narratives are critical components of international relations, it remains difficult to establish what qualifies as strategic narrative. There must be some sort of communication for narrative to be spread, yet there is communication and spreading of ideals throughout the globe daily. In an article published in 2014 on strategic narrative, authors Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon, and Ben O’Loughlin defined strategic narratives to have three distinct characteristics. Firstly, a strong narrative can be a power source for people. Strong narratives can sway people in certain ways, drawing them towards actors, events, and explanations that they may have not considered without the narrative. One of the main objectives of strategic narratives is to change the perception or course of action of a

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4 Roselle, Miskimmon, O’Laughlin, “Strategic Narrative”.
5 Roselle, Miskimmon, O’Laughlin, “Strategic Narrative”.
6 Roselle, Miskimmon, O’Laughlin, “Strategic Narrative”.
specific group. Should the strategic narrative prove successful, these people can use the narrative as a driver for new actions or beliefs. Secondly, narrative communication as a process is a way in which power resources and tactics can work more broadly. While soft power resources such as culture, values, or policies can be attractive because they fit within a specific sphere, strategic narratives, the authors write, “directly address the formation, projection and diffusion and reception of ideas in the international system.” While strategic narratives are a component of soft power, they have the ability to be “cross-disciplinary” in nature and influence many different aspects of a state. Finally, whereas strategic narrative can sway audiences, it can also present values and messages that are contested, especially during the current age with a complex and interconnected media algorithm. For those seeking to use narrative strategically, it is vital that they pay as much attention to the reception and interpretation of prior narratives as the target audience matters just as much as the agents. There are cases in which the spreading of narratives can backfire, where the audience reacts in a way unintended by the actors who spread the narrative.

The authors broaden the discussion about narratives, outlining three levels at which strategic narratives can persist: international system narratives, national narratives, and issue narratives. International system narratives describe how the world is structured, who the players are, and how it works. While on the surface it seems that most actors have similar views of the international system, yet there are many contesting views. For example, The War on Terror narrative puts states out as protecting their citizens from specific non-state actors (terrorists) from security threats. This War on Terror narrative can constrain playmaking if a political actor is defined or not defined as a terrorist by others in the world. Pertaining to international system

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7 Roselle, Miskimmon, O’Laughlin, “Strategic Narrative”.
8 Roselle, Miskimmon, O’Laughlin, “Strategic Narrative”.

narratives, the way in which one state conducts its labeling, recognition, and grouping is important, as even small misunderstandings in definitions can cause major disconnects. National narratives set out to depict the internal story of what a state or nation is, namely its values and goals. Examples of national narratives could include any internal narratives within a state that convince the population of specific state goals. Additionally, other parts of the world can hold national narrative views about other states, such as the sentiment that the US is a “world bully” by anti-West states. Finally, issue narratives state why a policy is needed and desirable, and how it can be successfully implemented or accomplished. Rather than focusing on a larger international order or domestic values, issue narratives focus on setting governmental actions in context, stating who the important actors are, what the issue or conflict is, and what the resolution of the issue will be.

Further, there is no narrative impact without reception from an audience. The ways that different narratives are received by the public and the opinions they form are what give narratives their weight and importance. Although there has been a sharp increase in global democratic governments over the past 50 years, there is still an underwhelming number of countries that take into consideration public opinion in foreign policy. American scholar and inventor George Gallop recognized the power of public opinion as early as the 1940’s in his journal article *How Important is Public Opinion in Time of War?* Referring to the rise of Hitler and Nazi Germany, Gallop noted, “Each time that Hitler took over another country in Europe, the proportion of voters in the United States who wanted to increase the size of our Army, Navy, and Air Force rose sharply. By 1939, and the outbreak of the war, we were finding an overwhelming demand for substantial increases in the size of our Army and Navy, and a still greater demand for
a strong air force.”9 As Gallup knew well, the public is often ahead of their own political leaders. People have different and closer experiences to war than their political leaders and they see trends and details that their political leaders do not. Put simply, the importance of public opinion is often overlooked in international conflicts.

Concerning the intersection of narrative and public opinion, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine is an ideal case for highlighting the effect of global and domestic narratives due to the increased global polarization of the conflict. With tensions between Russia and Ukraine boiling since Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, the 8-year conflict saw a new chapter open in February of 2022. Since the seizure of Crimea, Russians have largely been in support of President Vladimir Putin’s decision, following the dominant party line that has been bolstered by state TV and radio propaganda. In a joint study done by Russia’s Levada Center and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, results showed that in March 2015, one year after the annexation of Crimea, around 70% of Russians supported the annexation as a positive initiative for Russia. 10 Simultaneously, the public opinion about the status of the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk was less straightforward. In April of 2014, the same study showed that 35% of Russians thought the two regions should be part of Russia in the future, while around 25% of Russians supported the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk.11 While the future of these two regions was far less straightforward than the future of Crimea, the Russian public was not exposed to the same narratives and rhetoric that surrounded Crimea. In speeches, Putin drew upon historical and ethnic claims to Crimea, claiming that the region has been misgoverned by “nationalists, neo-

11 Volkov, Goncharov, “Russians Want Crimea”.
Nazis, Russophones, and anti-Semites”. These narratives, while stretched, had vast implications on the opinion of the public, so much so that it can be the difference between 70% public support and 35% public support.

Russia’s use of strategic narratives has long predated the Ukraine conflict. As authors Alister Miskimmon and Ben O’Loughlin recognize, Russia has held a firm view on the global order since 2000, informing its narrative stance on the 2014 conflict in Ukraine and later the invasion. Primarily, Russia’s outward facing strategic narrative has concerned “demands for recognition of Russia’s standing in the world by the West, the stressing of pan-European cooperation under the Common European Home narrative, and stress on the emergence of a new world order based on polycentrism.” Further, the authors argue that the events in Ukraine are symptoms of increased tensions between Russia and the West. While Russia has been historically clear on its position in the world, there is a disconnect in a common understanding between Russia and the West of an international order. While the West views the current international order as one in which invading neighboring sovereign states is unjustified and wrong, Russia believes that due to its position in the world as a Great Power, it can justify the annexation and invasion, with reference to the West’s hegemonic behavior. This “Western Enemy” narrative has been central to the Kremlin discourse for years and has transcended the Cold-War era.

As discussed by author Chelsea Mai, this Western enemy narrative has been spread through several smaller narratives fabricated by the Kremlin to depict America as Russia’s primary enemy, describing the United States as an aggressive power that constantly incites

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14 Roselle, Miskimmon, O’Laughlin, “Strategic Narrative”.
problems in other countries and regions of the world. The Kremlin’s goal of this narrative is to blame the West for much of the global instability that occurs, including events unfolding in Ukraine. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 is a prime example of Kremlin-based narratives supporting the main Western enemy narrative. Following violent clashes in Ukraine between security forces and protestors due to public disapproval of government actions, the Kremlin claimed that the 2013 Euromaidan protests in Ukraine were a western-backed coup to “remove the rightful rulers of Ukraine.” The specific aim of this narrative was to illustrate to both the global and domestic audience that the West (United States in particular), is an enemy to Moscow and should be considered an enemy to the stability and integrity of other countries. Still, the Western enemy narrative is twofold, also serving to legitimize the actions of the Kremlin. On the annexation of Crimea, Putin blamed NATO, claiming that the Western Bloc was encroaching on Russia’s sphere of influence and that it was trying to “drag Ukraine in.” Related to Joseph Nye’s theory of soft power and narrative, the Kremlin used both historical context and pre-existing social beliefs to sway the opinions of as many people as possible. The Western enemy narrative, although predating the Crimea annexation, follows all the pre-existing beliefs of the West by Russians, making the claims more believable.

*The Russkiy Mir*, or “The Russian World,” is another dominant strategic narrative created by the Kremlin relating to Russia’s ties to land officially recognized as part of other nations. This narrative affirms that national borders are secondary to Russian ethnolinguistic ties; describing

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17 Mai, “The Kremlin’s Meta-Narratives”.
Russia as not a country, but as a people. The *Russkiy Mir* narrative pertains to the “extension” of Russian influence to the “near aboard,” referring to countries that are in the post-Soviet space. Under this narrative, the Kremlin has a duty to protect the rights and security of the Russian diaspora, which is officially supported by the Russian compatriot policy. What makes the *Russkiy Mir* narrative so effective and compelling, are its ties to real and historical events. Although Russia doesn’t have a “historical right” to Crimea or various regions throughout the former Soviet space, the regions in question were once part of the Soviet Union, reinforcing the validity of the narrative. When using the annexation of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine as examples, the Kremlin leans on the *Russkiy Mir* narrative to justify acting in these regions. Instead of an “annexation” of Crimea, it is the process “re-joining” Crimea with Russia. Since Ukraine and Crimea were both a part of the Soviet Union, the global population in support for Russia is a lot more likely to subscribe to a narrative that draws upon historical ties rather than fabricated, imaginary ones.

While the West and Russia have had difficulty finding common ground on where to position each other in the international order, the advent of social media and widespread news has complicated the situation. In their chapter “Great Power Politics and Strategic Narratives of War,” authors Andreas Antoniades, Alister Miskimmon, and Ben O’Loughlin highlight the impact that broadcasting and non-state news sources had on the state’s ability to narrate their position. During the 1970s and 1980s, broadcasted media was largely homogenous in many countries, with leaders able to exercise some control over the narrative that was being pushed to the public. Even if domestic audiences were rather skeptical about the perspectives being broadcasted to

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19 Mai, “The Kremlin’s Meta-Narratives”.
them, there were few alternative broadcasted perspectives to base an opinion on. By the 2000s however, U.S. leaders found themselves subjected to bloggers and online publishers who pushed a different narrative, one contrasting the dominant American strategic narrative.\textsuperscript{20} This shift marked an important turning point in strategic narrative; labeling international audiences from domestic audiences became increasingly difficult while expectations of transparency became more prevalent. The invention and use of social media brought with it the “digital footprint,” where bloggers could reference past images to trigger emotions and different perspectives of thought on current issues.\textsuperscript{21} Since this shift, Great Powers and international leaders have had difficulty with strategic narratives, as the public began to form its own opinions based on a variety of new and emerging news sources.

In the context of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, strategic narratives, public opinion, and greater geopolitical concerns are all very significant. Focusing mainly on Russian based narratives, the following thesis will consider the effects of narratives on public opinion in two countries: Russia and South Africa. This thesis selected Russia to highlight the public opinions of their own population, while looking at how Russian spread narratives are shaping up within its borders. South Africa was chosen as a country of focus due to its status as a major influential and economic country on the African continent with a long history with Russia and the Soviet Union. South Africa is a BRICS member along with Russia and is an example of a country that has a divergence in opinion among its citizens and government. Through analyzing data, speeches, and scholarly articles, this thesis argues that contrary to the era of early, homogenous media, the contemporary public is much less likely to subscribe to dominant elite

\textsuperscript{20} Antoniades, Andreas, Alister Miskimmon, and Ben O’Loughlin. “Great Power Politics and Strategic Narratives.” Centre for Global Political Economy, University of Sussex, January 2010.
\textsuperscript{21} Antoniades, Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, “Great Power Politics”.
narratives and state strategic narratives, comfortable with forming their own opinions on conflicts. In Russia, the public is subject to a dominant party line to which many passively subscribe, while in South Africa, many members of the public do not agree with the justifications of the stance that their leadership takes. While these dynamics are unique in every country, one trend is clear, people are comfortable forming and expressing their own opinions regardless of elite narrative. While still prevalent, the prestige and credibility of elite narratives is slowly crumbling.
The Russian Case

Introduction

While tensions between the two nations escalated into warfare in 2022, Russia and Ukraine have a complex history. In the 20th century, Ukraine was a very important nation to the Soviet Union as it was one of the most powerful and populous of the fifteen Soviet republics. Second to only Russia, Ukraine was the second-most populous and powerful out of the fifteen republics, housing much of the union’s agricultural production, defense industries and military, including the Black Sea Fleet and nuclear arsenal. It was not until 1991, that the Union lost one of its most vital republics with Ukraine’s decision to sever ties and strive for independence.

Since independence, Ukraine has generally shifted its stance and at times showed more interest in Western institutions such as the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). While aligning itself in the international community, Kyiv has struggled to deal with internal political instability, highlighted by divisions between Ukraine's nationalist population and its Russian-speaking population, with both sides advocating for different national goals. In 2014, Russia began arming and supporting separatists in Ukraine’s Donbas region, resulting in the first annexation of Crimea. Between 2014 and 2021, more than 14 thousand people died as a result from the conflict, marking the bloodiest conflict in Europe since the Balkan Wars of the 1990s. As justification for the annexation of Crimea, Russian president Vladimir Putin spoke about a prior shared history and pride between Russia and Crimea, suggesting that the peninsula is still very much Russian. In his address to the nation in March

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23 Masters, “Ukraine: Conflict at the Crossroads”. 
2014, Putin stated, “[The West] must have really lacked political instinct and a common sense not to foresee all the consequences of their actions. Russia found itself in a position it could not retreat from. If you compress the spring all the way to its limit, it will snap back hard.”\textsuperscript{24}

Eight years later in 2022, Putin and the Kremlin’s view on Ukraine has remained unchanged”, so much so that annexation turned into a full-scale invasion of Ukrainian territory. From the Russian perspective, invasion was the only course of action for what was unfolding in Ukraine. “Genocide, Russian history, the failures and role of the West in the conflict,” all being points in Putin’s 2022 address for his reasoning to invade Ukraine. In terms of why the war was necessary, Putin claimed that, “The purpose of this operation is to protect people who, for eight years now, have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetuated by the Kyiv regime.”\textsuperscript{25}

Alongside the narrative that ethnic Russians are at danger in the Donbas region of Ukraine, Putin also raised claims of Nazism in Ukraine, stating, “To this end, we will seek to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine, as well as bring to trial those who perpetrated numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including against citizens of the Russian Federation.”\textsuperscript{26} In the discussion of Russia and Ukraine’s prior history, considering Ukraine’s important role in the Soviet Union, Putin’s language points to his belief that the invasion was inevitable.

Despite the many lenses through which the world sees the Russia-Ukraine conflict, there is one undeniable fact: this conflict is a result of Russian action. Simply put, Vladimir Putin steered his country into war, and he is now trying to find ways to unite the Russian public and garner support for the “just” and “legitimate” invasion of Ukraine. Although the majority of

\textsuperscript{24} “Address by President of the Russian Federation.” President of Russia\textsuperscript{http://En.Kremlin.Ru/Events/President/News/20603}, 2014. The Kremlin.
\textsuperscript{25} “Address by President of the Russian Federation.” President of Russia\textsuperscript{http://En.Kremlin.Ru/Events/President/News/20603}, 2014. The Kremlin.
Russian citizens already express support for Putin and the Russian “special operation” in Ukraine, Putin has to find ways to sway the opinion of those citizens who are unsure about what is really going on between the two states, and if they choose to support or condemn the war. As a result, there are dominant narratives that are being spread domestically throughout the country over social media, through online sources, and over the television. Like many Westerners who are cautious to trust Russian media sources spreading “propaganda” and “false narratives,” many Russians believe that leaders in the West and the United States in particular are characterizing Russia as the “bad guys” and trying to turn the world against it. For many Russians, the truth comes from internal Russian resources.

Public opinion in Russia can be characterized by a general sentiment of support. While there are people on both ends of the spectrum, those who absolutely support the invasion and those who dramatically don’t, there is a basis of national identity that is present among citizens. On top of this, there is a type of passive conformity at play, where people are more inclined to curb their more immediate beliefs to make room for what they perceive as the general public’s opinion. This section first discusses the qualitative data surrounding Russian public opinion, looking at why citizens are inclined to take the stance that they do. Following the qualitative data is a discussion of the quantitative data including government approval ratings and public opinion, with a consideration of some limitations of quantitative data as a research tool. In conclusion, the section will cover some of the main narratives that have been spread among the Russian public and from which sources of media.
Qualitative Data

Quantitative data of Russian public opinion on the war in Ukraine suggests that there is majority support for the Russian “special operation.” Discussions in focus groups however, depict a different, more heterogeneous type of Russian support, one that is varied in nature but similar in belief. The truth is clear: the numerical majority of Russian citizens are in support of Russia’s war on Ukraine, yet divisions in the country still persist. Younger citizens living in larger cities are more exposed to international opinions via social media, producing some (mostly suppressed) feelings of doubt or distrust in the nation’s actions. Other Russian nationals feel differently about the war, claiming that the invasion is simply the result of years of building tensions relating to history and territory. The consequences of these disagreements are palpable; teachers and students denounce each other; old friends and neighbors feel distrust towards one another; relations between social groups are deteriorating. While it seems that the war on Ukraine is polarizing the nation, the majority of Russian citizens still show an underlying support for the war, regardless of their more personal beliefs.

As shown by a sociological research and opinion poll conducted by the Levada Center from February-August 2022, there are many different narratives and beliefs among the Russian public that serve as driving forces of conflicting public opinions. On a broad level, there is a mix between assured/unconditional support for the war and tentative support. The former stems from people who are more willing to portray the war as a “preemptive blow,” or “unavoidable measure.” These people tend not to question narratives that are the bread and butter of Russian state media coverage of the war. They have the upmost support for Putin and carry a sense of

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28 Volkov, Kolesnikov, ”My Country, Right or Wrong “.
pride over that is going on in Ukraine. They differ from those who tentatively support the war in their belief that the government knows best; that Russian leadership would never act in an irrational or unjustified way.

The viewpoints of the unconditional supporters tend to mirror the viewpoints fed to them by the Russian government and media. As one participant disclosed in one of the focus groups, “It’s not like we are taking anything [that isn’t ours], we’re liberating Ukraine from Nazis and Fascists, that’s what Putin called it, and I trust him.”

Another respondent said, “War is the locomotive of history. We have never invaded anyone; we’ve only every defended our borders. Why didn’t we do it eight years ago? It wasn’t the right time!”

Comments suggesting full and unconditional support of Putin and the regime’s decisions can be connected to a strong sense of national identity and patriotism, such that citizens will support their country’s actions regardless of the situation and consequences.

The tentative supporters, those who voice their support in a more uncertain way, represents a majority of those who are in support for the war. They experience more doubt over whether what is going on is right or wrong and question the justifications for which the Kremlin is acting. As discovered in the focus group, people who fell into this category were twice as likely to express feelings of anxiety and fear about the war and were less likely to associate as closely with the sentiment of national pride.

Further, the tentative supporters were more inclined to follow the dominant public opinion and official party line, which is a trend that remains true to date. As of February 2022, there has been some “passive conformity” at play, where citizens who are more unsure about whether to support or condemn the war ultimately

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29 Volkov, Kolesnikov, "My Country, Right or Wrong.”
30 Volkov, Kolesnikov, "My Country, Right or Wrong.”
31 Volkov, Kolesnikov, "My Country, Right or Wrong.”
choose to support the war along with the majority of their fellow Russians. Narratives spread by Putin in his media appearances have only reaffirmed the national identity of the majority, strengthening the gravity of the nation’s polarization. As “weapons” of persuasion, Putin has injected specific narratives into the sphere of public opinions, creating tensions among those who disagree. In any nation, people want to share a common national identity and belief in community to establish a fundamental basis of coexistence. When this national identity is linked to a state’s actions, citizens feel pressure to conform with others to have a shared understanding of national identity, in its simplest form.

For this “middle” group in Russia, the least uncomfortable option is to subscribe to the mainstream point of view. Especially during a post-invasion social climate, it is not comfortable for Russian citizens to outwardly portray themselves as holding opinions that go against the country’s dominant narrative on Ukrainian affairs. As a result of this conformity, the tentative supporters tend to turn a blind eye to negative news that might appear in the media, choosing to follow the dominant national opinion instead of believing the “Ukrainian provoked” negative news. In the focus groups, there were many “tentative” supporters who believed that Putin really didn’t have any other option but to launch the “special operation” to counter an attack on Russia itself. 32

Disconnected from the other two groups are those on the other end of the spectrum: the dissenters of Russia’s war on Ukraine. While this group represents a small portion of the population from a public opinion data perspective, the dissenters are those who outright blamed the Russian side for the events that unfolded in Ukraine. When explaining their position in focus groups, much of the reasoning for their dissent stems from the socioeconomic impact that the

32 Volkov, Kolesnikov, "My Country, Right or Wrong".
war is having in Russia and the number of deaths that are occurring as result of the war.\textsuperscript{33} It is also noteworthy to reference the increase in those who condemned Russia’s actions in 2022, compared to those who did with the annexation of Crimea in 2014. From a figure of around 10% in 2014, double the amount of people disagreed with the regime overall in February of 2022 when the invasion took place.\textsuperscript{34} Despite this, the naysayers still find common ground with those that support the war. Even the dissenters may believe that NATO and the United States had “provoked” Russia into invasion. Likewise, they believe that even though the US has bombed over 20 countries in its history, Russia is still depicted as the “bad guys.”\textsuperscript{35} Even among those at the opposite end of the spectrum who do not agree with Russia’s decisions, there is still blame to be attributed to other nations and organizations around the world; it is not solely Russia’s fault that war unfolded in Ukraine.

**Quantifiable Data and Limitations**

In Russia, the raw public opinion data tells a simple story: the majority of Russians would characterize themselves as in favor of the “special operation” invasion of Ukraine and believe that it was both justified and legitimate. In a study conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs in May of 2023, the authors conducted a public opinion survey to gather raw data on public opinion on the war in Ukraine. Additionally, the Levada Center of analytics provides valuable raw data on Vladimir Putin’s approval rating per month, along with other statistics that are valuable in assessing Russian public opinion.

\textsuperscript{33} Volkov, Kolesnikov, "My Country, Right or Wrong".
\textsuperscript{34} Levada. “From Opinions to Understanding,” 2023.
\textsuperscript{35} Volkov, Kolesnikov, "My Country, Right or Wrong".
Since the invasion, public approval for Vladimir Putin as Russia’s leader has largely increased. This comes as no surprise however, as the same trend happened in 2014 with Russia’s annexation of Crimea. At the beginning of the year in 2014, around 65% of Russians “approved of the activities of Vladimir Putin as the President (Prime Minister) of Russia.”36 Once the annexation of Crimea took place in February and March of the same year, the number of people who supported Putin rose from 65% to as high as 86% by June. During February of 2022, history repeated itself, seeing Putin’s approval ratings jump from figures in or around 65% to 83% in May, signifying that people rally with Putin when he makes clear cut decisions and acts with the interest of Russian nationalism in mind.37

The same can be said for public approval of the for the Russian government at large, the only difference being the lower overall approval ratings. Before the annexation of Crimea in 2014, public approval ratings of the government rested around 45% and grew to 60% in the months following the annexation.38 In 2022, the trend remained the same: approval rating of the Russian government was objectively low at the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022, increasing only after the invasion of Ukraine served as a catalyst for the jump in both Putin’s approval rating and the government’s rating. From the statistical data, it can be observed that government and presidential approval ratings are linked to the direct actions that the entities make. Even with seemingly “radical” decisions, the Russian public is much more approving of the government and its leadership during times of invasion.

In the context of the ongoing war, there is a mix of support for those who want the war to continue until Russia secures new Ukrainian territory, and those who want to end the war,

regardless of outcome. In the research conducted by the University of Chicago’s Council of Foreign Affairs, there are three main takeaways from the data regarding the continuation of the war, the outcome of the war, and the immediate ending of the war.\textsuperscript{39} As of June 2023, the majority (62\%) of Russian respondents reported that they would support Putin in ending the war this week. Of these 62\%, more than half (35\%) fell under the category of definitely agreeing, while the remaining 27\% only somewhat agreed with the statement. If ending the conflict this week meant that territory must be given back to Ukraine however, the same percentage of people (62\%) would oppose ending the war.\textsuperscript{40}

In a discussion of territory, many Russians believe that if ending the war meant returning territory to Ukraine, the war should continue until an alternative outcome can be found. Around seven in ten (73\%) respondents thought that returning Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, or Kherson to Ukraine would be completely unacceptable under any circumstances. Further, 82\% of respondents would find returning the formally annexed Crimea unacceptable under any circumstances. Lastly, very few Russians (3\%) believe that their country alone will be capable of making concessions to bring about an end to the war, while 41\% of respondents believe that both Russia and Ukraine will collectively have to make concessions. On the contrary, 39\% percent of people think Ukraine alone will have to make concessions.\textsuperscript{41}

As a research tool, especially when looking at metrics such as public opinion, quantitative data has its limitations and is unable to tell the full story at face value. Firstly, quantitative data is great for getting big picture trends, yet removes any real specific details from the situation. For example, it is easy to understand that the majority (62\%) of Russians support

\textsuperscript{40} Smeltz, Wojtowicz, Volkov, Goncharov, “Majority of Russians Still Unwilling”.
\textsuperscript{41} Smeltz, Wojtowicz, Volkov, Goncharov, “Majority of Russians Still Unwilling”. 
the “special operation,” yet this 62% provides no insight into the variation in support and the different beliefs that they operate under. Another limitation that quantitative research faces is the unnatural or artificial way in which it is carried out. Most quantitative research projects are conducted in an unnatural environment so that certain variables can be controlled. While this is an important part of the process, some participants might give more biased or unauthentic answers, while a more natural setting might garner more genuine answers. Finally, quantitative research as a practice limits the variety of answers that can be derived from a study. Many research projects that aim to gather quantitative data have a certain number of previously established, closed-ended questions that have been decided upon by the researcher, which limits the amount of detail that can be synthesized from the answers.

Taking both the quantifiable and qualitative data into consideration, a clearer picture of Russian public opinion can be formed. There are varying categories of people who hold different opinions of the war, yet the “middle” majority passively support the war regardless of their more personal beliefs about what is happening in Ukraine. The backing behind where people stand however, are the narratives that they subscribe to and the stories that they choose to believe. The following section will discuss the three main narratives that are circulating among the Russian public and how these narratives have affected the public.

**Internal Russian Narratives**

The ways in which the Russian public supports and condemns the government and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin are largely based on an individual’s belief in narratives that have circulated throughout Russia, largely coming from different domestic sources on television or social media. Since the invasion, three main narratives have surfaced and circulated amongst the
Russian population, all geared at invoking some feeling of national pride, identity, or comradery to justify the invasion of the neighboring Ukraine.

Firstly, one of the main discussions that is taking place in Russia is the consideration of the Russian speaking population living in Ukraine’s Donbas region. Citizens are buying into the narrative that the Russian-speaking population across the border is under threat and that the protection of Russian “compatriots” in Ukraine is reason enough to justify a military intervention. Although Kyiv and other places in Ukraine are Russian speaking places at large, Putin has still made claims that there is a genocide going on against Russian speakers.42 Similarly, Russians justified the annexation of Crimea eight years ago in a comparable way, as a necessary action to combat the persecution of Russian-speakers in Ukraine.43

Secondly, Russian narrative has allowed citizens to take the stance that Russia is not at fault nor responsible for the war that is ensuing in Ukraine; rather the war is the result of Russia’s adversaries and their involvement in the war. There is an anti-NATO and anti-United States sentiment in Russia, one that is ready to pin the responsibility on the US and NATO for escalating the conflict to one of drawn-out warfare. Under this assumption, the Russian public is much more likely to support the Russian military if the blame for the war and casualties can be attributed to another entity.44 Additionally, many Russians have been swayed to believe that NATO and the West is deploying an informational/ideological attack against Russia to turn the world against it.45 People believe that much of the Western information that is being released is

44 Volkov, Kolesnikov, “My Country, Right or Wrong”.
false and is only framing Russia as the villains, while the “real” villains are the United States because of its “villainous” history of violence and imperialism. By framing the attack as a response to US escalation and framing the West and NATO as the true global “villains,” Russians feel like the operation was more justified as it was simply a response, not an initiative.

On top of everything, rests Vladimir Putin. The Russian president is the main driving force for public opinion; people take what he believes in and says at face value. One of the more strategic ways that Putin is legitimizing Russian military actions is by carefully appearing in the media in an attempt to rewrite historical narratives. Many of Putin’s appearances included dialogue related to Russia’s history as a nation and the founding principles that it was built upon, drawing on citizens connection to their nation on an identity front. Referencing the past, Putin reframes Russia’s position in the world as one of victimhood, claiming that he is a protector from foreign aggressors, a liberator of forced-Ukrainian Russians, and a restorer of historically Russian land.46 One of the more candid examples of Putin’s efforts, is the unveiling of Russia’s new military mega-church, which was constructed two years before the conflict and serves as a statement to legitimize the army through the historical structures of the Orthodox faith, connecting Russia’s actions as divine through God.47

As for the sources of media, Russians have become distrustful of non-Russian sources. As a result of the “western information attack” narrative, many Russians believe that the only credible sources of media are those of Russian origin: made by Russians, for Russians. At large, international sources have lost credibility in Russia, as many people have noted the differences in

how the conflict is being covered between Russian and Western media sources.\textsuperscript{48} Citizens are now looking to pay closer attention to Russian “official media,” which can be described as television stations, radio channels, or media journals and accounts that are Russian run, with the Russian perspective on the war. This, in part, is indicative of why social media is becoming less and less trusted for information on the war due to its connectivity to the global sphere. Among the Russian public, social media is playing a part in affecting the thoughts of those disapproving of the war, due to the sheer vastness of social media platforms and the instantaneous and abundant nature in which international opinions can be shared and spread.

Conclusion

In Russia, public opinion in Russia has changed to generally reflect a conformity mindset. Even among those who are tentative to agree or support the “special operation,” there is a passive conformism at play. Although Russians held different opinions during the opening phases of the war, there was a common sense of national pride that has kept many of those in the middle in support for the war. For many Russians, whether they completely agreed with the “special operation,” only somewhat agreed, stood indifferent, or outright disagreed, there existed this sense of national obligation to support what is best for Russia. The West (and seemingly the world) is against them, disagree or agree, citizens must find a way to unite one way or another. As the war has dragged on however, people have stopped following the news as closely as they once had. After the initial shock among the public, people began to exist with the conflict as part as their everyday lives.

\textsuperscript{48} Volkov, Kolesnikov, "My Country, Right or Wrong".
The South African Case

Introduction

South Africa’s close relations with Russia predate the Russian Federation itself, going back to times of the Soviet Union. More specifically, Moscow and South Africa’s African National Congress forged relations during the Cold War period when the Soviet Union backed the NAC’s fight against apartheid. Many activists from South Africa traveled to Moscow for military training during this era of oppression, mainly learning sabotage work from the Soviets. Of top of supplementing military and naval training, the Soviet Union extended additional aid to the African National Congress. At the time, the ANC was receiving more aid from the Soviet Union than the Organization of African Unity, or anyone else. Once the end of the 1970s came around, Scandinavian donations to South Africa surpassed Soviet funding, however the Soviets provided both peaceful and military aid, providing weapons and other military supplies, while the Scandinavians only provided peaceful aid.

Support from Moscow in winning the battle against Apartheid was a memory that lingered in the minds of the South African government. Formal relations were established immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, with diplomatic relations between the Russian Federation and the Republic of South Africa beginning on February 28, 1992. The Russian-South African relations are based on a legal platform of around 70 different documents covering the spheres of investment protection, double taxation avoidance, energy, agriculture, exploration, mining, and

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51 Gottschalk, “History May Explain South Africa’s Refusal”.

intellectual property.\textsuperscript{52} 2013 and 2016 brought fundamental documents to serve as a basis for relations between the two countries, including the Joint Declaration on the Establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2013), and the Treaty on Friendship and Partnership (2016).\textsuperscript{53} Although various historical and ideological shifts in South Africa and Russia have taken the two countries in different directions, the relations between the two countries remain seemingly in good health.

Alongside the independent relations established between the two governments, South Africa joined the BRIC forum in 2010, having developed independent economic relations with all the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China). As explained in an economic diplomacy report from the South African Institute of International Affairs, South Africa is the largest economy on the African continent and used to house nuclear weapons, placing it within the interests of global superpowers such as Russia.\textsuperscript{54} In this light, the two nations have become more accustomed to each other economically, building off their prior lost-lasting political relationship and shifting the focus of collaboration towards that of economic gain. Russian businesses recognize South Africa as the economic leader on the continent of Africa and consider two main ways to utilize this productively: using the relationship to strengthen joint representation in neighboring countries, and mineral resources collaboration due to South Africa’s rich and broad resource base.\textsuperscript{55} Experts in Russia also believe that their country could play a key role in South Africa’s globalization agenda by acting as a counterbalance against Chinese influence.\textsuperscript{56} To protect its own interests from large foreign investments from other world powers, South Africa

\textsuperscript{52} Embassy of the Russian Federation in South Africa, and I.I. Rogachev, Russian-South African relations § (n.d.).
\textsuperscript{55} Volchkova, Ryabtseva, “Russia-South Africa Relations: Collaboration”.
\textsuperscript{56} Volchkova, Ryabtseva, “Russia-South Africa Relations: Collaboration”.
could consider a wider Russian presence in different economic sectors, helping to strengthen its ability to bargain. At large, the economic opportunities for Russia in South Africa are vast and numerous, creating an ideal climate for mutually beneficial projects in the future.

**United Nations General Assembly Vote**

In October 2022, around eight months after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the United Nations General Assembly called for a vote to adopt a resolution that would condemn Russia’s “illegal so-called referendums” in regions within Ukraine’s internationally recognized borders, demanding that Russia reverses its annexation declaration. In the vote, 183 countries around the world participated, 143 (78%) of countries voted in favor of the resolution, 5 (3%) voted against the resolution, and 35 (19%) decided to abstain and not submit a vote for the resolution. Out of the 35 countries to abstain in the vote, South Africa rests in this category among its fellow “neutral countries.” Following the country’s decision to abstain in the vote, the South African ambassador insisted that the country “must stand in seeking peace.”

Following the decision to abstain in the General Assembly vote, South African president Cyril Ramaphosa noted that the resolution “did not foreground the call for meaningful engagement,” for Russia and Ukraine, and that it “does not provide the encouragement and international backing that the parties need to continue with their efforts.” Due to the public’s mixed response, South African leadership shifted focus to justification of its decision to abstain in the vote. Many of the government’s broader reasons for abstention stemmed from the belief

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that the war is mainly a proxy struggle between the US and Russia, that for South Africa to play a mediating role in the war it should not take sides and maintain a stance of non-alignment, and that South Africa still needs to rely on continued Russian trade and security assistance.

Stemming from the abstention, scholars question the benefits of proclaiming non-alignment, as dependence on resources from Ukraine and Russia doesn’t compare with Western aid that allows South Africa and other African nations to function. According to work released by the Institute for Security Studies, while the increasing price of hydrocarbons is affecting Africa’s most fragile states, African countries feel less able to adopt a principled and values-based foreign policy. European countries imposed sanctions against Russia despite costs to their energy supplies, yet the difference in thought extends to how the two countries view the international order itself. While Western states defend a rules-based system in international politics, many African countries have a more cynical view of a global order whose rules seem to be determined by the West. Due to this difference in outlook, it becomes easier to conceptualize why South Africa and other African nations continue to practice leniency towards Russia. As a tool for upholding state beliefs and outlooks on the world, non-alignment has been used by South Africa and other nations around the world to both protect themselves in an unforgiving international environment and uphold their unique state norms and values.

While the South African government’s abstention was done with the idea of non-alignment in mind, many South African’s themselves and Western pundits disagree with the country’s justifications, claiming that its reasons are not completely sound. In terms of where South Africa should position itself in the conflict, the leadership believes it should take a stance

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61 Handy, Djlö, “Unpacking Africa’s Divided Stance”.
of non-alignment and stray away from supporting one side over the other. Due to South Africa’s somewhat peaceful transition to democracy in the 1990s, the country is expected to play an intermediary role and support a peaceful ending to the war, especially as a member nation of the BRICS formation. The country has applicable experience as an intermediary as well, aiding Northern Ireland negotiate an end to their armed conflict between 2000 and 2005.\textsuperscript{62} To be an effective mediator in any conflict however, South Africa must remain neutral and acceptable to both sides, which is currently not the case. In practice, South Africa currently leans towards the Russian side, potentially swayed to its side due to past relations and historical ties with the Soviet Union. As Western scholar Joh Stremlau notes, a more qualified “host” for both sides would be a country such as Turkey, which has continued to maintain solid and healthy relations with Moscow, while simultaneously being a NATO member and supporting Ukraine with drones since 2019.\textsuperscript{63} In practice, South Africa’s relations with Russia are too “comfortable” to claim neutrality, which has sparked disapproval from the public on the abstention in the vote.

**Russia’s Post-Invasion Relations with South Africa**

Continuing even after the invasion and United Nations General Assembly vote, the relationship between South Africa and Russia has continued to baffle governments and analysts in the West. There are no strong cultural or linguistic ties between the two countries and Russia makes only make up around 0.4% of South African imports.\textsuperscript{64} While South Africa continues to claim “non-alignment,” policy experts and Western diplomats point to a series of actions that

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{62} Stremlau, John. “African Countries Showed Disunity in UN Votes on Russia: South Africa’s Role Was Pivotal.” The Conversation, April 8, 2022.
  \item \textsuperscript{63} Stremlau, “African Countries Showed Disunity”.
\end{itemize}
might suggest otherwise: including the abstention from the votes condemning Russia; hosting war exercises with the Russian and Chinese Navy, and allegedly loading weapons and ammunition onto a sanctioned Russian cargo ship. In contrast with most other “neutral” or abstaining countries, South Africa differs in the way that it continues to be involved with Russia and seemingly continues to aid the country.

In the past year alone, South Africa has been involved in activities with Russia that would suggest that the two countries are closer than once thought; that South Africa’s stance of “neutrality” falsely depicts the relationship with the Eastern power. For example, in February of 2023, as the anniversary of the Russian “special operation” invasion of Ukraine approached, a Russian warship arrived into a port on the east coast of South Africa. It came as a surprise to many as the side of the ship boasted symbols resembling the same markings that were on the side of the tanks that rolled into Ukraine a year before. Although the naval exercises were something that South Africa had been planning for a long time, many politicians and diplomats questioned the timing and symbolic significance of hosting exhibitions with a Russian warship present almost exactly one year after the Russian invasion. Steven Gruzd, head of the African Governance and Diplomacy Program at the South African Institute of International Affairs commented on the subject, claiming, “The timing of these exercises is particularly unfortunate and will focus the world’s attention of South Africa during the anniversary of the war. I don’t think Western nations are going to let this one slide.”

In May, only a few months after the naval exercises, another incident involving Russia resurfaced, highlighted by the US ambassador to South Africa, who accused the South African

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66 McKenzie, “South Africa’s Stance on Russia”. 
government of delivering arms and ammunition to a sanctioned Russian cargo ship in late 2022. The “Lady R” cargo vessel was first spotted docking at the naval base in Simon’s Town in December of 2022, raising suspicion among locals as cargo vessels usually dock at Cape Town’s civilian harbor, not the naval base. Escalated by the Russian invasion and the emphasis of South African-Russian relations, Lady R served as a symbol of uncertainty and indecisiveness from the South African Government. If South Africa was to truly stick to its stance of non-alignment, hosting Russian war ships close to the one-year anniversary of the Ukrainian invasion would have been contested, as officials would be weary of the image that the acts portray. In this sense, the South African government is not acting clearly, claiming it does not support or condemn Russia yet opens its ports and waters to their war ships for military exercises. Many Western powers are catching on to these seemingly isolated incidents, piecing together the puzzle to form a basis of criticism, depicting South Africa as pro-Russia, even though it claims to be neutral. Whether completely accurate or not, the incident of the Russian cargo ship again points to the limbo that South Africa is currently in, with one foot in its “non-alignment” movement, and the other grounded in its history of relations with Russia and the former Soviet Union.

**South African Public Opinion on Russia**

Although the South African government may be clear on what stance it takes in relation to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the population is not necessarily sharing the same views on the situation as Pretoria is, illustrated by the public backlash that the capital has gotten for abstaining in the vote. The Democratic Alliance Party released a statement condemning the country’s stance, with its shadow minister for international relations stating that the party and many South Africans alike are shocked that the country decided to abstain from such a vote. In an address
given on the issue, Darren Bergman noted, “This was an opportune time for South Africa to take a stand and to assert itself on the international stage.” Furthermore, Bergman noted how hard South Africans fought to end the oppressive system of Apartheid and get the right to vote and how the international community helped them to win this fight; a vote against Russia would be repaying this favor. “An abstention or voting for Russia is pretty much the same language. It’s a vote against Ukraine. It’s a vote against peace, and it’s a condonation of the violence that’s currently taking place in Ukraine,” Bergman exclaimed in the same statement.

In a survey conducted on behalf of the Brenthust Foundation in November of 2022, data showed that 74.3% of South African respondents believe that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is “an act of aggression that must be condemned,” while only 12.7% believe it is “an acceptable use of force.” In terms of the abstention, the country’s decision is totally at odds with the views of ordinary South African voters. When asked what South Africa should do if a sovereign democratic country is invaded by its neighbor, 32.6% of respondents said, “offer moral support,” 27.3% said “offer military support,” and a further 22.6% said, “offer diplomatic support.” Only 7.7% of respondents said that South Africa should “offer no support,” which is what the country ended up choosing with its stance of non-alignment. In response to the joint naval exercise with Russia and China, the South African public had their opinions on their country’s involvement with these Eastern powers as well. When asked, “If you were to leave South Africa, which

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68 Stark, “South Africa Criticized for Abstaining”.
70 Mills, Hartley, “Brenthurst Survey Shows”.
71 Mills, Hartley, “Brenthurst Survey Shows”.
country would you choose to go to?”, 51.9% cited western countries, 16.6% said other African
countries while only 4.1% of respondents said Russia, 3.6% said China, and 2.4% said India.\textsuperscript{72}

A PEW research study further highlighted South African views on Russia in July 2023
with their study, concluding that a large share of countries see Russia and Putin in a negative
light, while views of Zelenskyy are generally in more of a mixed light. As of mid-2023, 46% of
South African respondents reported that they had a “very unfavorable” opinion of Russia, 11%
hold a “somewhat unfavorable” opinion of Russia, and 28% of respondents held a
“very/somewhat favorable” opinion of Russia.\textsuperscript{73} Furthermore, the South African public’s view on
Russia has remined low, first reaching low points around 2014 with Russia’s annexation of
Crimea. In 2013, the percentage of people who had a favorable view of Russia was 26%,
dropping to 25% in 2014 and 2015. The years 2017, 2018, and 2019 all saw increases in the
percentage of the population which held a favorable view of Russia, reaching a country high
rating of 34% in 2018. Yet, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, favorable views of Russia
have since decreased, the number of people dropping to around 28% in 2023.\textsuperscript{74} While Russia’s
invasion of Ukraine had a large impact on South African views on the country, Russia’s
continued violence in the Donbas region in the late 2010s has had less of an impact on South
African public views.

Unlike the case of public opinion in Russia, most South African citizens hold vastly
differing views on the situation in Ukraine than its government does. While the government
holds a somewhat artificial nonalignment movement, continuing to support Russia, its citizens

\textsuperscript{72} Mills, Hartley, “Brenthurst Survey Shows”.
\textsuperscript{73} Fagan, Moria, Jacob Poushter, and Sneha Gubbala. “Views of Russia Are Largely Negative – and in Several
\textsuperscript{74} Fagan, Poushter, Gubbala, “Views of Russia Are Largely Negative”.
are in a different place completely, believing that Ukrainians should be the ones receiving support as victims of invasion. Data suggests that the South African government, fresh off refusal to condemn the invasion and abstain from the vote (even embarking on military exercises with Russia) is very out of touch with its voters, who believe that the country should be offering diplomatic and military support to democracies that are invaded by their neighbors. While the voices of the public have not been loud enough to warrant any major changes in relations between the two countries, there have been small protests in support of Ukraine, such as the one that unfolded in front of the Russian Embassy in February of 2023. Additionally, South Africans protested the visit of the Russian foreign minister in January 2023 outside of the Department of International Relations and Co-Operation, also protesting on the military exercises in February 2023. Movements have started in South Africa with the aim or raising awareness and organizing demonstrations, such as the Ukrainian Association of South Africa.75 In South Africa, there is no conformism or pressure mounting between the government and its citizens, the people are outright letting their opinion be heard.

**Russia’s Narratives in South Africa**

Although much of the South African population does not hold as positive views on Russia as their government does, narratives spread throughout South Africa and the African continent from the Russian side still have tangible effects on many South Africans and Africans alike. Anti-West rhetoric, commentary on international organizations, and highlights of global discrimination in these Russian narratives has spread throughout the African continent with the purpose of enraging Africans and turning them towards Russia instead of the West.

A study conducted by the Brookings Institute on Russian-based tweets, narratives, and online posts, found that Nazism and fascism are two large ideologies attached to Ukraine in Russian narratives. Most of these tweets accuse the United States of supporting Ukrainian neo-Nazis, while adding claims that NATO is waging a proxy war and that the Western media outlets are ignoring fascism in Ukraine.\textsuperscript{76} During the early stages of the war, more users online interacted with online threads discussing Nazism in the context of racism and discrimination against African students, those who attempted to flee Ukraine and find refuge somewhere else in the largest European migration crisis since the Second World War. For example, many of these tweets accuse the European Union of instructing Ukraine not to let any African Students escape.\textsuperscript{77} Furthermore, other tweets went in a more extreme direction, framing the United States and European Union as “economic bandits,” stating that Russia does not have a history of slavery and colonialism while the other two do.\textsuperscript{78} The main objective of these narratives is to take the focus away from the actual war in Ukraine, they contain legitimate concerns of food insecurity and uncomfortable truths, such as the selective outrage of the West that undermines their partnership with African nations. Russian narratives on the African continent are focused on swaying the continent back to its side, a tactic carried out by bashing the West.

Another large narrative on the African continent, embraced by South Africans as well is “whataboutism,” where over 100,000 Russian tweets avert the conversation to other topics, disregarding the crisis and rejecting criticism of Russia’s actions and political influence. These narratives often discussed different conflicts going on in other parts of the world, particularly in

\textsuperscript{77} Blankenship, Mary, and Aloysius Ordu. “Russia’s Narratives About its Invasion of Ukraine are Lingering in Africa” Brookings, June 27, 2022.
\textsuperscript{78} Blankenship, Ordu, “Russia’s Narratives About”.
Yemen, Syria, Nigeria, and Ethiopia, suggesting that these conflicts are just as dire if not more dire than the situation in Ukraine. The tweets call to the sentiment that “Ukrainian lives are worth more than others,” how an emergency UN General Assembly meeting was called for Ukraine, but not for other wars and conflicts.\textsuperscript{79} A significant number of these “whatabaoutism” tweets also focused on the weaponization of food supplies and how the attention remains on Ukraine while Africans face daily food shortages that will only intensify, focusing mainly on the Tigray region of Ethiopia and the conflict in Somalia.\textsuperscript{80} Mainly, South Africans are subject to Russian narratives that constantly tell them that they are seen as less than other people in the world; that African issues and conflicts have been constantly overlooked internationally and priority will be given elsewhere. Russians, however, are the ones who realize this, suggesting that South Africans can align themselves with Russia because Russians understand.

Finally, and more relevant to the daily lives of South Africans, are the economic and energy shortages because of the war. At large, the post pandemic economic recovery of South Africa has been strong in 2021 with increased economic growth, yet the economy still holds post invasion challenges. As highlighted by a United Nations Development Programme Policy Brief, the war is expected to cut as much as 0.5% percentage points on economic growth in South Africa, affecting budget assumptions and hindering economic recovery from the Coronavirus pandemic.\textsuperscript{81} The war has had major implications in three major ways. Firstly, higher energy and fuel prices have increased inflation, eroded disposable income, and dampened consumer demand.\textsuperscript{82} Many South Africans have begun to feel the impact of rising fuel, wheat, and maize

\textsuperscript{79} Blankenship, Ordu, “Russia’s Narratives About”.
\textsuperscript{80} Blankenship, Ordu, “Russia’s Narratives About”.
prices, realizing that the war happening in Ukraine harms more than just Russian and Ukrainian citizens. Secondly, an increase to overall disruptions to trade and the effects of sanctions will impact South African imports and exports. Finally, an increase in investor uncertainty is projected to weigh on asset prices and depreciation of the South African Rand, potentially triggering capital outflows from South Africa.83

Immediate government reactions to these economic challenges have further mirrored the South African stance of non-alignment. In the month after the invasion in February 2022, John Steenhuisen, the leader of the Democratic Alliance party noted, “We are already involved in this war. Our government can’t be seen to be supporting Russia’s aggression and alienate its trading partners. Let’s put the country before party politics and think what this war will mean to us and what will be its impact on our economy.”84 Both the South African government and its citizens want to see diplomatic efforts by Russia and Ukraine to avert any further escalation of the war, as the implications span much further than just political affiliations.

Conclusion

Considering the nature of public opinion in Russia and South Africa, it is evident that strategic narratives impact the opinions of the public in varying ways, depending on the context. While Russia is a unique case, being the aggressor and main actor in this war, narrative has played a large role in justifying and rallying support for the invasion. Anti-West narratives, narratives claiming historical ties to Ukrainian land, and narratives portraying Ukrainians as racist neo-Nazis have shifted the nature of public opinion within the country’s borders. Whereas

the quantitative data shows a majority support for President Vladimir Putin and Russia’s “special operation” invasion, qualitative data suggests the majority is much less homogenous than the numerical value shows. Elite narratives distributed throughout the country have created an expectation for Russian citizens to support the actions of their leadership, putting pressure on those with an indifferent stance to support their country. This has created a “passive conformity” within Russia, where the more nationalistic population have bought into the Kremlin’s narratives of justification and used it to sway others into conforming. Without these internal elite narratives, Russian public support for the invasion could look much more diverse.

South Africans have a different relationship with elite narratives than the Russians. Unlike Russian citizens, South Africans live in a nation with far less to lose in the Ukraine war. Rather than passive conformity, the South African public struggles to grapple with the stance that its leadership takes on Russia’s invasion. They country’s abstention at the 2022 United Nation General Assembly vote condemning the actions of Russia proved to be significant as it highlighted divisions in opinions between the country’s leadership and its public. Proclaiming a stance of non-alignment, leaders in Pretoria remained neutral on the vote, resulting in criticism from both domestic and international audiences. While the government justified its reason for abstaining, much of the South African public holds an opposing view. Rather than remaining neutral, public opinion data shows that the majority are in opposition of Russian actions and believe that its country should offer diplomatic, moral, or military support. There are Russian narratives reaching South Africans as well, aiming to sway their opinions about Ukrainians and their own situation, yet Pretoria’s justifications for abstention are having little effect on the public.
Through the two cases, it is evident that elite and strategic narratives have been used in this conflict to garner support from the public and justify state actions. Though these narratives have undoubtedly affected the public in both Russia and South Africa, there is a growing sentiment of forming and upholding one’s own beliefs. Rather than blindly agreeing with state leadership on an international issue because of their “justifications,” citizens are comfortable drawing from other sources and forming their own separate opinions. The advent of social media and the internet brought a melting pot of opinions and stances, making it as easy as clicking a button to access thousands of other sources and perspectives on any issue.

Our world is evolving and our reactions to international events are evolving with it. Instantaneous and widespread media effortlessly spreads narratives throughout different social networks and across state borders, mixing and muddling the opinions of the public every day. Recently, the events in the Israel-Palestine conflict have attracted the globe’s attention and created a large divergence in opinion among the international audience. Regardless of the narratives spread about justifications or whichever side has been the “bad guys,” the videos, images, and stories are all that the public needs to form their own opinions. Now that the international audience can see what's going on in conflict zones in real-time, strategic narratives are no longer the only source to base one’s opinion on.
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