

Online search data shows Russian morale remained low and 'tacit dissent' spiked after invasion of Ukraine

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A new study analyzing online search terms used every day by millions of Russians suggests that—contrary to official data from Russian polling agencies—the invasion of Ukraine did not lead to a national "war rally" in happiness and life satisfaction among the Russian population.

In fact, levels of well-being and public morale in Russia may be close to their lowest in a decade, with internet search data revealing a "limited appetite among ordinary Russians for the war," according to a University of Cambridge report.

Research shows that web searches related to anti-war and anti-Putin sentiment surged during the early invasion, and continued to spike at points of military mobilization involving mass conscription. This has tapered off since the Kremlin switched to relying on mercenaries and prison recruits.

However, the study also suggests that Western economic sanctions had little effect on Russian households, with the financial situation of consumers and businesses appearing to stabilize rapidly in the spring of 2022.

State-sanctioned polling from the Russian Federation is no longer reliable, say political scientists, with data skewed by public fear of speaking against the war or Putin, as well as suspected government manipulation and dubious changes to methodology.

Researchers from the universities of Cambridge and Surrey analyzed data collected through Google Trends on a daily basis from 2012 until April 2023, and cross-referenced it with the last 12 months of search data from Russian tech giant Yandex, to assess public sentiment in Russia.

They found that, for several years preceding Russia's most recent invasion of Ukraine, web search trends closely matched the data from major Russian pollsters such as the Levada Center and VCIOM. From early 2022, however, results dramatically diverged.

Russian polling after the invasion saw Putin's ratings leap to 80%, with

self-reported [life satisfaction](#) apparently closing in on record highs earlier this year. Yet search engine data shows public mood deteriorating, while searches for terms linked to "tacit dissent" rose sharply.

The report's authors plan to continue updating their dataset, arguing that online search trends are now a more accurate proxy for Russian public opinion than data from the country's leading survey institutes. The initial report is published by Cambridge's Bennett Institute for Public Policy.

"Online search data has been proven to be a powerful tool for inferring the beliefs and attitudes of national populations," said Dr. Roberto Foa, report co-author from the University of Cambridge. "Unlike social media data, online searches represent a much wider section of the population."

"Web searches are felt to be private, and often reflect internal thoughts and anxieties that people would not wish to broadcast. Such data provides insight into the public consciousness within repressive states, where truth is hidden by a fog of fear and disinformation."

"Polling from agencies within Russia shows the war boosted morale, but our research suggests that the national public mood is near its lowest level for a decade," said Foa.

"Online search data shows the Russian people are not simply passive subjects. The legitimacy of the regime is being eroded by failure in war and the demand for personal sacrifice at the altar of Putin's dictatorship."

The researchers tracked rates at which certain words and phrases were web-searched. These included mental health symptoms such as 'depression' and 'insomnia' to indicate well-being, and terms related to

personal finance emergencies such as 'bankruptcy' and 'eviction' to measure the state of household finances.

Well-being search trends closely matches the pattern of VCIOM polling on life satisfaction right up to February 2022, when VCIOM data leapt by fifteen percentage points, while online search data for well-being flatlined.

The detailed nature of the web search data allowed researchers to create a weekly rolling average of national well-being in Russia, which shows a continual overall decline following the onset of war.

A mild bump in [public sentiment](#) occurred right at the point of invasion—but was extinguished as soon as 4 March 2022, when the Kremlin passes the War Censorship Act.

By April of this year, public mood among Russians was at its lowest since the invasion and only marginally higher than a 2021 nadir during the worst of Russia's coronavirus crisis.

Google and Yandex data shows levels of financial stress quickly bounced back to pre-war levels, with initial shocks from Western sanctions only lasting throughout March 2022 for Russian households.

However, the financial impact of the pandemic on Russians was severe, with little government help, and sanctions "blunted" what had been a steady recovery, say researchers, who found no lift in economic sentiment since the war. Yet official polling has financial satisfaction at a five-year high.

The study also looked at anti-war searches such as "pacifism," "no war" and anti-Putin phrases—the portmanteau "Putler," for example—to gauge the extent to which many Russians privately contemplate political

dissent when online.

Searches for names of outspoken Putin critics Boris Nemtsov (assassinated) and Alexei Navalny (imprisoned) as well as famously anti-authoritarian writers—from Orwell to Solzhenitsyn—were included in the analysis.

Anti-war and anti-regime online searches saw huge spikes around conscription announcements, such as the call-up of aging reservists in May 2022 and last September's partial mobilization order, along with smaller but still significant jumps during periods of heightened Russian casualties.

"Ordinary Russians are more likely to think critically of the regime and search online for opposition movements when the chances increase that they or their loved ones will be sent to fight," said co-author Dr. Roula Nezi from the University of Surrey.

"Russia may have a vast population to draw on, but the Kremlin risks a tipping point of public dissent if it keeps forcing Russian citizens to fight in Ukraine. This could explain a growing reliance on aerial bombardment and use of convicts in the fighting," said Nezi.

Web search data tallies with this shift in Russian tactics. Since last autumn, what researchers describe as "cognitive dissent" has stayed at much lower levels while the Kremlin has been emptying prisons onto frontlines and leaning on long-range assault rather than mobilizing its citizens.

More information: Report: Piercing the Fog of War: Measuring Russian public opinion via online search data,
[www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk ... cing-the-fog-of-war/](http://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk...cing-the-fog-of-war/)

Provided by University of Cambridge

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