

Who supports Putin? Men, older generations and traditionalists, study shows

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An international team of researchers has released an exhaustive look at support for Russia's autocratic President Vladimir Putin across several neighboring countries.

The study, [published in the journal *Political Geography*](#), was a massive

effort. From 2019 to 2020, researchers led by John O'Loughlin at CU Boulder contracted with local polling companies to survey more than 8,400 people face-to-face in six nations: Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Moldova, and Ukraine.

The team's findings give a deep look at the type of people who support Putin, a former KGB spy who once held a photoshoot of himself riding a horse shirtless. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the results reveal that Putin is more popular among men than women and less popular among younger and more [educated people](#).

"Our research has shown that Putin's machismo and his authoritarian personality appeal to people who have more close-minded personalities, hold traditional values, and don't trust science," said John O'Loughlin, professor in the Institute of Behavioral Science and Department of Geography.

In the former Soviet Union, Putin remains a complicated presence.

In Georgia, for example, the survey found that Putin was wildly unpopular, with more than 70% of respondents indicating that they had "no trust at all" in the leader. He boasted much more favorable ratings in Belarus and Kazakhstan, which traditionally have close ties with Russia.

O'Loughlin noted that he and his colleagues conducted the surveys before Russia launched its long and bloody invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The researchers are planning to return to the same respondents in early 2024 to see how the war may have reshaped, or not, their attitudes toward Putin.

They separately conducted phone interviews with hundreds of people living in parts of Ukraine under Kyiv control in October 2022, and responses show that [the war has backfired on Putin](#). In the country,

support for joining NATO, a military alliance including the U.S. and dozens of European nations, soared from 44% to 77% since 2019.

"It was dramatic," O'Loughlin said. "We asked the same people exactly the same questions, and the shift in attitudes was incredible."

Whether the same shifts will happen in other former Soviet Union nations is less clear.

"We have what's called a 'natural experiment,'" O'Loughlin said. "We weren't expecting the war in Ukraine, but we can see the effects of the full-scale invasion on people's attitudes about Putin and Russia and toward the West and NATO."

Putin's stamp of approval

Asking people about Putin, however, can be a loaded topic, he added.

People don't always tell the truth on surveys. In some cases, they may be worried about the consequences. In others, [survey respondents](#) merely give researchers the answers they think they want to hear.

To get around those limitations, O'Loughlin and his colleagues undertook what researchers call an "endorsement experiment."

During the roughly 45-minute surveys, the team asked participants a seemingly innocuous question—whether they supported drilling for oil in the Arctic. For half of the respondents, however, the researchers tacked on an extra caveat: "President Putin of Russia strongly favors oil drilling."

"The difference between the more neutral question and the question mentioning Putin's endorsement gives you an idea of his real support,"

O'Loughlin said.

It made a difference, too. In Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, the fake Putin endorsement made people less likely to support drilling in the Arctic. The opposite was true in Armenia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan.

Appeal of the 'strong man'

The findings could provide researchers with clues about why some people find autocratic leaders in the mold of Putin so appealing.

Researchers, for example, asked the [survey respondents](#) if they agreed with the statement: "Husbands should make the important decisions in a marriage."

People who said yes were significantly more likely to support Putin than those who disagreed. The same was true for people who agreed with the statement: "I see myself as conventional and uncreative."

"Our biggest surprise was that these results were consistent across the different countries in our study," O'Loughlin said. "It's the same people in every place who like or dislike Putin."

O'Loughlin noted that, in Russia, Putin has tapped into nostalgia for the former Soviet Union—an era that many people in the region, and especially [older generations](#), still view as a time of relative peace and stability.

"In the U.S., that's easy to dismiss, but many people want security, peace and quiet," O'Loughlin said. "They believe that if you don't have a strong, authoritarian leader, the whole society is going to collapse."

More information: John O'Loughlin et al, Support for Vladimir Putin

in Russia's neighbors: Survey evidence from an endorsement experiment in six post-Soviet countries, *Political Geography* (2023). DOI: [10.1016/j.polgeo.2023.103014](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2023.103014)

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