

Where Russians go for the news

Wendy Sloane

An older generation relies on television for news about war in Ukraine – and President Putin is keen to keep it that way

Russian journalist Svetlana Kunitsyna's credentials are impressive. In her long career, the 50-something Muscovite has been the arts correspondent at Russia's NTV before it became the state propaganda channel, editor-in-chief of the weekly *Meantime (Time Out)* magazine, editor of *Snob* magazine (launched in 2008 for the "sophisticated" middle class), and director of broadcast content for Dailyonline.ru. She also worked as a Moscow-based freelancer for Radio 4 and spent a year in London with *Big Ben from London* on BBC World Service.

But in late September, Kunitsyna abandoned her career in Russia. Armed with a suitcase on wheels and a "senselessly small" rucksack, she travelled 24 hours by train from Moscow to Vladikavkaz in North Ossetia, then paid for lifts with strangers before dragging her luggage several kilometres on foot to reach her destination: the Georgian capital, Tbilisi.

"I don't regret going through the hell prepared by my motherland for even one second, although I've had to bite my lips until they were bloody," she posted on social media, alongside a video of her punching the air ecstatically after crossing the border. "But that doesn't matter anymore."

Like many highly educated Russians, Kunitsyna's decision to leave Russia was not spontaneous. "On February 24, it became clear to me that I have nothing in common with a state that kills people and destroys a neighbouring country," she recalled in an interview a few weeks after settling in Tbilisi. "During the first several days I had the illusion that people like me, those who are against the war, are in the majority in Russia. But when fellow

citizens frantically shout propaganda slogans at pro-war rallies, it became clear that I was surrounded by Putin's aggressive electorate. Even in Moscow."

As much as the West lauds decisions like Kunitsyna's, not all Russians agree. While Ukrainians are being hit by Iranian suicide drones and threats of nuclear strikes following the attack on a major bridge linking Crimea to the Russian mainland in October, Russians are also suffering from shortages of food and other items, the first mobilisation since the Second World War, and the possibility of completely closed borders and martial law.

Reactions to the changes vary. Some Russians are swallowing the official party line, believing that Putin is embroiled in a battle that began against Nazis and nationalists and now incorporates "terrorists" too, after the Kerch bridge attack. Others are risking their lives – or at least their livelihoods – to protest against the current situation and, in some cases, flee the country. And a considerable percentage of the Russian population is now doing what many of us do when confronted with the brutal reality of a situation: they are burying their heads in the sand.

Putin's quest to shore up support is facilitated by state-controlled television, the primary source of information for many older Russians. In provincial Russia, TV audiences consist mainly of people aged 50-plus, who watch it either out of habit or because in small towns there is no alternative. Not many Russians outside large, westernised cities such as Moscow or St Petersburg have access to the internet or speak a foreign language, which would enable them to access international news.

As a result, the older generation largely believe the war is a defensive one, according to polls, and that Russia had no choice but to fight back to protect Ukraine's Russian-speaking population, especially in the Donbas. Putin's popularity soared when Crimea was annexed in 2014, and many observers believe he decided to launch his invasion of Ukraine when the rosy so-called "Crimea effect" had diminished.

"Before Crimea, people had been supportive of the president but not particularly engaged. When we asked people how proud they felt of their president, very few people did feel pride," says Graeme Robertson, co-author of *Putin vs the People: The Story of a Popular Dictator and the Struggle for the Future of Russia*.

"But after Crimea, lots of people felt pride. So you had lots of people who felt joy and an emotional transformation to Russia. It's possible that Putin drew from this experience the idea that if he could launch a successful war, he could once again capture the hearts and minds of the Russian people."

A Levada poll taken in late September showed Putin's 80 per cent overall approval rating dropping to 77 per cent. But this number is "more nuanced than the headline figures suggest", wrote Andrei Kolesnikov, senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for Peace, and Denis Volkov, the Levada Center's director, in a joint article published in *Project Syndicate*.

Up to 20 per cent of Russians do not agree with their country's actions in Ukraine, according to the poll, which is up from 14 per cent in March. "This group is dominated by young urban dwellers who consume news from the internet, rather than state-controlled television," the article said.

While many independent news organisations have been forced out of Russia and/or blocked, the encrypted messaging app Telegram is still going strong. Interestingly, Putin tried to bar access in 2018 but it was officially unblocked in 2020 – with some saying the app's ability to reach large audiences means it's useful both for those against the war and for the Kremlin.

Subhead

"It's very noticeable that after the Russian government moved to ban other social media platforms earlier on in the conflict, there has not been an attempt to ban Telegram. We increasingly see interest in what is being reported on Telegram, especially by pro-military bloggers," said Joshua Tucker, director of the Jordan Center for Advanced Study of Russia at New York University, speaking at a recent online conference at Columbia University.

But while the pro-war bloggers get huge followings on Telegram, the app is also playing a pivotal role in creating an "alternative narrative", said Timothy Frye, the Marshall D Shulman Professor of Post-Soviet Foreign Policy at Columbia. "We know that autocracies have low information systems, and there is really a great hunger to try to figure out what people are thinking," he said. "We know from other autocracies that leaders are constantly looking for any source of information to try and figure out what is going on in the absence of a free media and other sources of information that operate in some countries."

Telegram has grown exponentially since the war began, with an estimated 2.5million extra users joining in the first three weeks of the war – a jump of 25 per cent, according to Al Jazeera. That's partly because it provides its users with "inside information", said Sam Greene, director for democratic resilience at the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) and professor in Russian politics at King's College London.

“If people just want to know what’s going on in the war and just be able to talk about it round the kitchen table, then for a lot of people television is enough. For some people for whom this is particularly important and want to have a sense of involvement, then keeping track of the inside information you get from Telegram is great,” he said. “What Putin has done with the mobilisation is actually giving people a lot of reason to pay attention to these Telegram channels much more than they were before. Because now, all of a sudden, the war is real.”

Telegram is also popular due to its interactivity. “Ukrainian armed forces are using Telegram as the most effective channel to get Russian conscripts to surrender, as there are telephone numbers they can call where they can surrender safely without being killed,” said Anastasiia Vlasenko, postdoctoral fellow at the Jordan Center for the Advanced Study of Russia. Sending messages to the Russian population in that way would be impossible through the normal Russian TV channels, she added.

I Want to Live is a Ukrainian Telegram channel that opened in September, offering Russian soldiers both the chance to give themselves up and to get cash in exchange for Russian military equipment. Soldiers will be treated as captives, not traitors, so they would not face reprisals later. “It is better to surrender to Ukrainian captivity than to be killed by the strikes of our weapons,” Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky said in Russian on his own Telegram channel in September, according to *iNews*.

Russians support the war “more as a matter of conviction than of conformism”, with some respondents to the Levada poll commenting that “they cannot know exactly what is going on, indicating that the government knows best”. While some might experience fear and anxiety surrounding their country’s involvement in Ukraine, the “desire to stay in their psychological and intellectual comfort zone prevails”, Robertson writes.

After decades of being kept in the dark by the government, many (mainly older) Russians are content to turn a blind eye to reality, according to a former *Moscow Times* reporter, “Sara”. “Don’t discount the fact that people just don’t want to know. People want to have an ordinary life, so they look away from the news that disturbs them,” she says.

Can age, education and geographic location really forecast what Russians feel about the war? Many believe so. Russians today can be divided into three groups: a “shrinking minority” who have been against Putin from the very beginning and have already begun to leave the country; hard-liners who are “real enthusiasts” about the war and want Putin to take a harder

stance; and those in between, says Peter Conradi, *Sunday Times* Europe editor, author of *Who Lost Russia? From the Collapse of the USSR to Putin's War on Ukraine*, and a former Moscow correspondent.

“In the middle, you have a large number of people who see that the war is basically being waged in a faraway country they are only aware of on their TV screens. They are not enormously troubled by it,” he says. What is beginning to bother them is that shortages of some items are beginning to emerge – although Robertson says that sanctions are a “slow burner” with little or no impact thus far – and that it’s becoming more difficult for most people to travel outside the country.

In fact, life was more or less “tolerable” for most Russians, Conradi says, until Putin announced his plans to step up military activity. “The decision for mobilisation, even a partial one, has really brought home to these people that their country is involved in a war and there is a danger that they, their country and their sons will have to fight in it, and there is a very good chance they will not come back alive,” he says. “That is really a decisive moment.”

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Low morale among Russian troops, poor military training, a dire lack of supplies including safety and first aid equipment, and a shortage of effective weaponry already plagued the Russian army before conscription came into effect. Julia Davis, creator of the (now banned) Russian Media Monitor and columnist at *The Daily Beast*, recently tweeted: “Meanwhile in Russia: Tempers fly, as not everybody is happy with the government’s failure to properly equip the troops, leading to proposals to cancel the New Year’s festivities and spend the money on the military. One pundit concludes: ‘The government sh*t its pants’.”

As videos emerge of conscripts advised to purchase tampons to use as bandages before going to the front, Conradi predicts things will only get worse. He points to Russian defence minister Sergei Shoigu, who has said that Russia has succeeded in calling up 200,000 conscripts. “But already an estimated 400,000 who were eligible for the draft have left the country. People directly affected, directly at risk of being conscripted, are heading for the border. Long term, what does that mean?

“It means Russia is essentially suffering an enormous brain drain, as quite well-educated people are leaving the country. There are already serious demographic problems and an ageing population. If there is an exodus of

smart people as well, long term, that is very serious for the country.”

Russians who speak out openly against the regime now are swiftly silenced, either with fines or with prison sentences. They face criminal charges for “inciting” others to participate in protests, which are categorised as “unsanctioned”, as well as for “discrediting the Russian armed forces”.

Grigory Ivanov, an IT specialist from St Petersburg in his mid-20s who didn’t want to use his real name, asked for political asylum after landing at Heathrow in May. He had taken part in several political demonstrations against the invasion and was worried that he’d either have to betray his conscience or be arrested. “I couldn’t do nothing, and I didn’t want to land up in prison,” he told me after he had been in the country only a few weeks. He was living in Home Office accommodation, sharing a room with seven other men who smoked, but said it was worth the discomfort and lack of privacy. “I heard on the news that anyone who demonstrated would go to jail, so I had no choice but to leave.”

For people like Ivanov, the door has opened and will perhaps never swing shut. Kunitsyna says she also cannot foresee going back to Russia soon – and expects more people to follow her lead. “Given that about 70 per cent of Russians have never been abroad, it’s not hard to imagine that they would easily believe any tales concocted by Russian propaganda about the West,” she says. “Are they happy to stay where they are trapped now is another matter entirely.”

She is in Tbilisi recharging her batteries while she ponders what to do next. “I am torn apart by conflicting feelings. On the one hand, as a journalist, I would like to sit in the front row of the *parterre*, watching the moment when the inevitable changes will come to Russia. On the other hand, I understand that this moment may well not come in my lifetime. But I am an optimist. I hope to clear up the rubble left by the Putin era.”

Wendy Sloane worked as a journalist in Moscow from 1989 to 1995, writing mainly for Moscow Magazine, the Associated Press, The Daily Telegraph and Christian Science Monitor before becoming a magazine editor in the UK. She currently freelances for the London Economic, among others, and is an associate professor and journalism course leader at London Metropolitan University.

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