

HOW DO ORDINARY CITIZENS EXPERIENCE POLARIZATION UNDER AN AUTHORITARIAN REGIME? A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF AFFECTS AND PREFERENCES IN POSTINVASION RUSSIAN SOCIETY

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The research for this article is the result of collective efforts of members and volunteers of PS Lab, who designed the study and collected the data for it. However, the analysis presented here—with its successes and errors—is the responsibility of the author.

In recent decades, political polarization has attracted increasing attention in academia and beyond. Most scholars consider polarization a phenomenon that erodes democratic norms in the interests of populist political entrepreneurs, thereby harming democracies. However, the definitional characteristics of polarization— affective and preference distance among citizens—can be observed and studied outside democracies as well. This study suggests exploring affective and preference polarization under an authoritarian regime, specifically in Russian society in the aftermath of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. An analysis of 213 semistructured interviews with supporters, undecideds, and opponents of the invasion demonstrates that polarization fails due to depoliticization, typical for autocracies. Specifically, the hostility of citizens diminishes because they find their adversaries mostly in primary groups—among relatives, friends, and colleagues. Hence, after the spark of conflicts at the beginning of the invasion, people prefer to avoid controversial topics to save the relationships with close ones. At the same time, preference differences appear to be non-divisive. Adversaries share political views, including the need for economic development and expansion of the welfare state, as well as a negative attitude toward corruption. The polarization attempted by the Kremlin and its opposition has failed, opening up prospects for further cooperation and compromise between citizens with opposing attitudes toward the war.

Keywords: Polarization; Authoritarianism; Primary Groups; Depoliticization; Democratization

Contrary to popular belief, Russian society's support for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was far from unanimous. Rather, existing data show a divide in society. At the level of elites, with the efforts of the Kremlin and its opposition, the pro- and antiwar cleavage has coincided with the pro- and antiestablishment cleavage, making it possible to organize politics along a single boundary. In particular, the Kremlin has introduced several laws intending to punish and silence "traitors"—antiestablishment and antiwar activists, as well as deserters (Human Rights Watch 2023). President Vladimir Putin has claimed that polarization will be beneficial, because "everything unnecessary, harmful and everything that prevents us from moving forward will be rejected" (TASS 2022). Similarly, the surviving opposition, including public intellectuals, has deepened the cleavage as well by interpreting the alleged absence of protests in terms of mental and/or moral degradation of the population (Volchek 2022). Yet, almost 20,000 antiwar protesters were arrested (OVD-Info 2025), while up to 1 million citizens left the country in 2022 (Ebel and Ilyushina 2023). An independent research group concluded that the number of citizens supporting and opposing invasion was relatively equal, while the majority of the population had no definite position (Chronicles, n.d.).

While discourse and legal analyses help to observe how political entrepreneurs foster polarization (Abramowitz and McCoy 2019), a different task is to figure out how polarized the population actually becomes. This task must be approached differently in competitive and noncompetitive political systems. In competitive regimes, scholars study polarization of the population by analyzing voting behavior, demonstrations, discourses, or violent encounters of hostile groups (LeBas 2006; Nugent 2020). The key preoccupation of these scholars is the erosion of democratic trust induced by populists who use polarization instrumentally (Schedler 2023). In contrast, polarization of the population in autocracies remains an underresearched phenomenon.

The focus on observable political participation in competitive environments and instrumental view of polarization as used by elites for mobilization limit the empirical scope. This approach is ill-designed to capture the less observable but potentially more influential processes of polarization, which unfold in reaction to political shocks but do not manifest themselves in an easily observable form. Indeed, polarization can be found in noncompetitive regimes, where conflictual attitudes may exist among citizens but not manifest themselves publicly due to an uncondusive political opportunity structure (Kriesi 2007; Nugent 2020). Whereas latent conflicts in nondemocracies cannot be detrimental to the nonexistent democratic rules, they are still important for the potential establishment of such rules and the system of checks and balances (LeBas 2018). Hostile attitudes toward out-group, also known as *affective polarization*, and a vast distance between groups' interests and values, or *preference polarization*, are shaping the possibilities for communication, cooperation, and compromises, essential for democratization (Nugent 2020).

Empirically, this research focuses on the polarization of ordinary citizens (rather than elite-driven polarization) in a nondemocratic (rather than democratic) political system, namely Russian society in the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine.

Methodologically, this research uses semistructured interviews with ordinary Russian citizens, assuming that public opinion polls might not be reliable in authoritarian contexts, especially in wartime. For *affective polarization*, informants were asked to elaborate on how members of their primary groups reacted to the invasion and what interactions followed, as well as on their own attitudes toward their interlocutors having different opinions. For *preference polarization*, the respondents were encouraged to discuss the current problems in Russia, their origin, and the desired future for the country. The responses of supporters, undecideds, and opponents of the invasion were analyzed and compared.

In the first two sections that follow, I discuss the current debates on polarization, the empirical focus of previous polarization studies, and the definition of the concept, and I summarize the discussions about polarization in Russia in the last decade. I then describe the choice of qualitative methods over quantitative, the analysis procedure, and the precautions around using interviews in authoritarian contexts that were followed during the process of data collection. The last two sections are dedicated to the analysis of affective and preference polarization among supporters, undecideds, and opponents of the invasion. I conclude that neither affective nor preference polarization is salient in Russia. The affective polarization does not happen because of depoliticization and heterogeneity of the primary groups. In other words, not only supporters and opponents of the invasion are each other's friends or relatives, but they also consider personal relationships to be more important than political debates. The preference polarization does not appear to be divisive either, as there are several issues of key importance to supporters, undecideds, and opponents of the invasion. Despite having disagreements over Russia's international integration and regime change, most respondents agree that basic needs must be satisfied given the rich resources of the country and that corruption must be eliminated.

POLARIZATION IN DEMOCRACIES AND BEYOND

At its core, conceptual debate about polarization is driven by a disagreement over the defining dimension of the phenomenon. For those holding the "classic" view of polarization—that it is a phenomenon of democratic systems—the definitional key is the erosion of basic democratic norms (Abramowitz and McCoy 2019; Enyedi 2016; Schedler 2023). Although these scholars account for the affective and preferential distance between groups, their ultimate concern is the maintenance or violation of democratic procedures. In turn, the newer wave of literature emphasizes affective and social aspects of polarization, rather than democratic norms, which extends the scope of research to nondemocracies as well (Iyengar et al. 2012; LeBas 2018; Nugent 2020). Indeed, the affects—emotions of hate or empathy toward in-group and out-group—and strong group identities—"us" versus or together with "them"—are not inherent to democracies only.

Although assigning different importance to emotions and political preferences, both approaches to polarization focus on these dimensions. In simple terms, polar-

ization is defined as “the extent to which groups dislike each other and the extent to which they disagree with each other” (Nugent 2020:2–3). The first component—“affective distance”—is conditioned by one’s belonging to and identification with a group (Iyengar et al. 2012; Melucci 1995; Nugent 2020). It involves positive assessment and feelings toward the in-group and negative ones toward the out-group (Nugent 2020). The second component—“distance in policy preferences”—is defined as a disagreement over a political issue of central importance to society (Nugent 2020) or as a conflict over interests and values (Schedler 2023). With an intersection of cultural and economic cleavages, a preference polarization appears beyond the left/right divide and includes the split over religion, nation, gender, and other issues (Lauka et al. 2018). Preferences are not supposed to flow directly from structural conditions or ideology, but rather to emerge through a sociopsychological process, including identity formation (Nugent 2020). In sum, polarization can be identified when both affective dispositions and policy preferences are salient to the extent of hostility between groups, which diminishes the importance of all preexisting cleavages (LeBas 2018). The acceptance or rejection of democratic norms and mutual trust are consequences of these aspects of polarization.

Yet, while considering the roots of polarization, its aspects, conceptual foundations, and empirical application beyond democracies, existing literature has significant blind spots. Firstly, most research conceives polarization as a gradual process fostered by political leaders to politicize, mobilize, and organize the electoral base (LeBas 2006). However, there are abrupt and extraordinary sociopolitical changes—events that can split society as well. Historical sociology is aware of eventful episodes, defined as (1) accepted by contemporaries as events, (2) leading to significant transformations in social structures, and (3) resulting in a rupture in routine (Sewell 1996). Secondly, current literature on political polarization focuses on the publicly manifested affects and preferences. Both in democracies and nondemocracies scholars study election results, politicians’ discourse, and/or physical demonstrations and encounters of the members of opposing groups. Hence, closed autocracies remain out of sight, whereas both affective and preference polarization can exist there and be amplified because of events. A case suitable for studying hidden polarization provoked by an eventful episode is Russian society in the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

POLARIZATION IN PUTIN’S RUSSIA

Regardless of a rich legacy of polarization debate in Russia in the 1990s (Belin et al. 1997; McFaul 1996), newer literature is divided into three broad categories based on how it construes polarization: economic polarization, online hostility, and top-down political polarization. While some scholars have pointed to the low level of trust in Russian society compared to other developed countries (Avdeeva 2019; Shabunova et al. 2021), only a few have attempted to link the data to economic and political cleavages and only in a casual way. Taking as a basic premise the economic inequalities across classes and regions (Fedorov 2002; Gimpelson and Kapeliushnikov 2016;

Zubarevich 2019), the studies explored both affective and preferential polarization in the aftermath of the 2011–2013 protests against parliamentary and presidential elections that were widely considered fraudulent.

For instance, Ilya Matveev and Oleg Zhuravlev (2022) have argued that both the political divide and the “culture war” (Matveev 2014) between the oppositional minority and loyalist majority are organized along class lines. In terms of preferences, the “winners” of the transition to a market economy that happened after the end of the Soviet Union—the educated middle class—insisted on greater political freedoms, while the “losers”—the working class and state employees—remained supportive of the government. In terms of affect, journalists and intellectuals from the “winners” camp radically distanced themselves from the “losers.” They often dehumanized supporters of the regime, appealing to the myth of “two Russias” separated by a wall, while predictably enjoying little support from the “losers.” Sensing the opportunity, the Kremlin deepened the divide by introducing “wedge issues,” defined as “issues that are not central to the usual axes of political competition, but that can cleave off part of an opponent’s potential support” (Greene and Robertson 2019:32). The government galvanized the debates on religion and LGBT issues, therefore increasing the already existing affective and preference distance between the opposition and the loyal base.

In the year before the 2018 presidential election, the leader of the opposition Alexey Navalny attempted to shorten the affective and preferential distance between what used to be two camps. Combining anticorruption, pro-democratic, and redistributive claims,¹ he appealed to both the “winners” and “losers” of the transition to a market economy. The maneuver was successful: If the protest rallies of 2011–2013 were attended mostly by the “winners” of transition, in 2017–2021 the so-called “navalnings”² attracted poor people as well, many of whom participated in political rallies for the first time in their lives (Matveev and Zhuravlev 2022). The unifying power of the redistributive agenda is confirmed by the qualitative study of Karine Clément, a leading scholar of Russian contentious politics. The title of her recent book (2021), based on hundreds of interviews with people from all over the country, reflects the popular grievance of depoliticized people: “How is it possible for people to live so poorly in a rich country?” Most of Clément’s respondents expressed harsh criticism toward inequality, which they find unfair given the abundant natural resources that country possesses.

After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, political entrepreneurs in Russia attempted to foster polarization to gain political support and media capital and to discourage challengers. In contrast to previous repressions and instrumentalization of wedge issues that delegitimized the opposition, this time Russian officials expanded the scope of polarization. For example, former President Dmitry Medvedev called those who left Russia “cowardly traitors and greedy defectors” and wished that their bones “rot in a foreign land” (RIA Novosti 2022). Later, the Duma spokes-

¹ See Navalny’s campaign site, <https://2018.navalny.com/en/platform/>.

² Rallies in support of Navalny.

man proposed confiscating the property of those who speak against the war (Rofe 2023). The antiwar and anti-Putin opposition played the same card. In the first weeks of the invasion, a former businessman created a website with a telling name Human-Nonhuman,³ where he published photos of celebrities supporting the war (nonhumans) and those opposing it publicly (humans). One of former Putin's adversaries, London-based oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky, said that someone's position on the war is the only criterion for identifying allies and enemies from now on (2023).

However, there is limited data that assesses the character of polarization of ordinary citizens in postinvasion Russia. Anecdotal evidence suggests that at least at the beginning of the war, elite and opposition-driven polarization was either very effective or accurately reflected the overall social affective state. Some media outlets posted guidelines on how to talk to relatives with opposing views (DOXA 2022; *The Village* 2022), others simply documented family break-ups (*Kholod* 2022), and a prominent blogger published an interview titled "How War Divides Families" based on the story of a famous family of stage and film actors, reaching 13 million views (Dud 2022). Today, only quantitative studies have analyzed polarization induced by the war. The first, experimental study modeled a game in which supporters of the invasion were suggested to impose a fine on opponents of the war—and most did (Chapkovski and Zakharov 2022). The second study (Chronicles, n.d.) found evidence that the Russian population is indeed polarized affectively to a certain extent: Half of respondents agreed that antiwar protesters must be sentenced and those who evade participating in the war should be condemned. At the same time, the analysis of the war supporters' and opponents' social media accounts shows that these people have common values and interests (Sokolova et al. 2023). Eventually, testing the spiral of the silence theory (Noelle-Neumann 1984), the survey discovered that only 21 percent of the opponents and 35 percent of the proponents of the invasion are willing to discuss the issue with people of different views (Zvonovsky and Khodykin 2023). The risk of repressions, and the state support for the prowar position, affects the opponents of the invasion more than supporters.

However, none of the studies addressed policy preferences or ideology, nor elaborated on the character of the affective polarization. Instead, the existing research focused on interactions and observable characteristics, rather than on people's attitudes to their opponents. Therefore, it is not clear whether Russians consider their compatriots with opposing views as enemies or adversaries, while this distinction is crucial because it determines the prospects for cooperation and compromise.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA DESCRIPTION

In authoritarian regimes like Russian, especially when paired with economic inequality, there is not only a problem of communicating with authorities safely, but also a pervasive mistrust among citizens toward each other (Shabunova et al. 2021). Therefore, public opinion researchers are used to having a high rate of rejections when

³ <https://human-nonhuman.info/>.

they approach would-be-respondents (Vvedenskii 2022). The technical puzzle can be solved by using qualitative methodology on a topic preciously explored quantitatively (Day and Koivu 2019). Qualitative methods may be more suitable for studying sensitive topics in repressive environments. Firstly, qualitative approaches—namely, interviewing people confidentially—help to establish more trusting relationships with informants. Secondly, by asking open-ended questions researchers give informants the space to elaborate, therefore going beyond binary or four-point-scale responses, typical for questionnaires. Thirdly, even if informants are hesitant to speak openly and therefore would lie or conceal their views, an hour-long interview allows researchers to grasp the essence of one's position and notice inconsistencies, which are valuable in themselves.

The dataset used in this study was compiled by the independent research collective that specializes in Russian and post-Soviet sociopolitical processes, Public Sociology Laboratory.⁴ In March–May 2022, 213 individuals were interviewed, among whom 134 identified themselves as opponents of the invasion, 49 as supporters, and 30 as undecideds (Public Sociology Laboratory 2022). As a member of PS Lab, I took part in data collection and analysis. While this sample is far from being representative—in fact, none of the public opinion polls in Russia showed that the opponents of the war exceed 30 percent—the purpose of a qualitative study and its advantage are in the detailed attention to the multitude of differences in how people experience a given phenomenon.

Informants were recruited through social media, using announcements inviting participation in interviews, and via personal connections, employing a snowball sampling method based on referrals. This sampling did not capture all perspectives on the war, with some groups being underrepresented, such as those without higher education. Nevertheless, the sample reflects trends seen in surveys: War supporters are generally older, while opponents are younger, and both apolitical individuals and those undecided about the war are more common among supporters of the government. Recruiting individuals willing to speak for an hour with researchers who were unknown to them was challenging; therefore, strict selection criteria were not applied; interviews were conducted with all available participants.

While there are slightly more women (51 percent) than men (48 percent) among the opponents of the war in the sample, men are overrepresented (67 percent) among its supporters. In turn, among undecideds, there are twice as many women (67 percent) as men (33 percent). Opponents of the war are mainly aged 25 to 39 (48 percent of opponents) or under 24 (33 percent), with fewer aged 40 to 64 (16 percent). Supporters tend to be older, with 47 percent aged 40 to 64, 31 percent aged 25 to 39, and 12 percent under 25. Those who are undecided show a balanced age distribution: 33 percent under 24, 37 percent aged 25 to 39, and 27 percent aged 40 to 64. Among opponents of the war and especially among the undecided, people with low incomes predominate: 45 percent and 54 percent, respectively, have incomes under 50,000

⁴ Besides Public Sociology Laboratory, the interviews were collected by volunteers Irina Kozlova, Irina Antoshchuk, Serafima Butakova, Kira Evseenko, Daria Zykova, Nadezhda Kokoeva, Alexandr Makarov, and Anna Shabanova.

rubles per month, which is below the average wage in Russia, while supporters are characterized by higher incomes. Most of the interviews were with residents of European Russia, particularly Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and 22 cities in the surrounding regions. In total, 11 cities had two to seven interviews each, and 13 cities had one interview each.

Importantly, the informants in this study were not only recruited using the snowball sampling strategy but also granted confidentiality. Being aware of all the risks posed by an authoritarian context (Bellin et al. 2019), the safety of informants was prioritized during data collection: Turning the camera on during interviews conducted via video-conferencing platforms was not required, all information that could contribute to informants' identification was deleted from the interview transcripts, and informants were given the right to refuse to answer any of the questions.

The interview guide included dozens of questions (see appendix 1), yet for this study, the focus will be on those that allow analyzing the affective and preference-related dimensions of polarization. To explore the affective dimension, the responses to the following questions will be analyzed:

(1) How do your family members, friends, and colleagues feel about the "operation" and the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in general? With whom do you discuss what is happening?

Analyzing this topic will help grasp the character of affective polarization in terms of the cognitive and moral "failures" (Schedler 2023) that are or are not characteristics of people with opposing views. At the same time, the emotional and behavioral aspects of polarization will be visible in the discussions of this question, because respondents were encouraged to describe not only the opinions and characteristics of members of their primary groups (Cooley 1902) but also strategies for interacting with them.

Unlike the previous question, which concerned daily interactions with the members of one's primary groups, the second question focuses on abstract and distant "protests" and their participants:

(2) Protests were held in many Russian cities against the operation and the presence of Russian troops in Ukraine. How do you feel about them?

Since studies assume that the distance between social groups might affect the degree of hostility between them (LeBas 2018; Melucci 1995), it is important to analyze the affects exhibited toward both close and distant people with opposing views. This question was not posed to the opponents of the invasion, because they belong to the same category as those who protested the invasion in the streets.

For the preference-related dimension of polarization, in turn, all respondents were asked to elaborate on the following questions:

(1) In your opinion, what problems in Russia need to be solved first?

(2) What future does Russia need? How to achieve it?

Comparing how supporters, opponents, and undecideds answer these questions, it is possible to detect differences in political preferences.

AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION: CLOSE AND DISTANT ADVERSARIES

This section provides an analysis of perceptions of and interactions with members of out-group, or adversaries. Supporters, undecided, and opponents of the invasion were encouraged to discuss who in their primary groups (Cooley 1902)—among family members, friends, and colleagues—held different opinions about the war and how the respondents explained and acted on these differences. At the same time, respondents discussed their attitudes toward more distant adversaries—abstract citizens who hold opposing opinions. In particular, the analysis clarifies who belongs to the out-group (relatives, peers, colleagues, etc.), how the stance of out-group members is named (position, opinion, viewpoint, etc.), in what terms the stance of the out-group is qualified (moral or cognitive failure), and what is the presumed reason for this stance (propaganda, lack of education, professional background, etc.).

SUPPORTERS OF THE INVASION

For supporters of the invasion of Ukraine, the out-group of their political adversaries always includes members of their primary groups, which makes it difficult for a strong negative emotion to appear and persist. Among members of the out-group, supporters mention “the very best friend,” “some friends” and “old friends,” “good guys . . . holding very progressive views,” “parents,” “spouse,” and “beloved people.” Hence, the increasing distance between groups—physical, social, and cultural—which is conducive to polarization, is unlikely in such circumstances. The heterogeneity of one’s primary groups creates a “cross-cutting” connection (LeBas 2018) between people who hold polar views on politics.

The distance or difference in the attitudes of supporters and their adversaries is mostly described in a nonessentialist rather than “quasi-ascriptive” way (LeBas 2018). Instead of claiming that people with opposing views possess some inherent qualities that make them think and act differently, supporters of the invasion use the language of preferences. They speak about “positions,” “reactions,” “attitudes,” “opinions,” “and views” and claim that the war is only one of the “topics.” Moreover, these attitudes are said to originate either from propaganda, making them even less innate, or from naive pacifist ideas. Supporters believe that their adversaries are either “brainwashed” or just too emotional and poorly educated. It is claimed that the adversaries “have not studied this issue, do not understand the possible consequences” (male, 21, student) or that they “didn’t understand [the situation], being rather just pacifist(s)” (male, 50, administrator). In other words, the adversaries are indeed different, but not because they were born or predestined that way.

Perceived as attitudinal difference rather than as an existential threat, opposing opinions in one’s primary group are met with two strategies for interaction. The

first strategy is to discuss the event in a civilized manner, without excessive emotions: "There are no fights, none of that. . . We just calmly discuss it over a cup of tea" (female, 61, employee of the Ministry of Defense). Supporters of the invasion emphasize the serenity that is important for them in a conversation: "I discuss this topic with them. But I try to make it as nonconflicting as possible. I do not impose my point of view" (male, 43, project manager). However, while most supporters appreciate the nonconflicting discussion, not everyone can perform it. Therefore, the second strategy is to avoid unpleasant conversations to preserve social connections. Even if a conflict about politics happened among relatives—which is quite unusual for a depoliticized society—relationships are quickly restored: "Even the closest circle was divided. . . . Mom and aunt quarreled, they didn't talk for two days" (female, 36–45, manager). In rare and extreme cases when people break up, they do it to avoid fights: "Not that we enter into a conflict, but we rather stop communicating. In order not to quarrel, we break up" (female, 41, scientist).

Apart from having members of the opposing camp in their primary groups, supporters of the invasion are aware of protests against military aggression. Predictably, the affective distance increases along with the increase of social distance between adversaries. Therefore, when discussing people who protested publicly, supporters of the invasion use more hostile rhetoric than they used for primary groups. On the one hand, the protests are justified as being motivated by commonly shared "humanism" and "pacifism": "Perhaps [the protesters] are driven by humanism. Any war is bad. Humanly speaking, this is really bad" (male, 42, occupation unknown). Even more: "Pacifism . . . should be in any sane person" (male, 40–45, technician). In this case, protests are not criticized, because it is just "ordinary citizens, neighbors, . . . classmates . . . [who] have a different point of view." Therefore, supporters of the invasion are "not going to beat them in the eye" (male, 42, occupation unknown).

However, even if the pacifist sincerity of the protesters is questioned, it is because of the external influence to which they might be subject rather than due to evil intentions or innate qualities. Supporters of the invasion say that "one needs to know why [the protesters] came out and who directed them . . . Navalny! If these are his people. . . You know, I have a very negative attitude toward Navalny. So negative!" (female, 60, doctor). By default, the protesters lack agency, being either "hysterical old folk" or "children, poorly informed, behind whom there are quite adult people . . . who solve their political problems at their expense" (male, 26, photographer). Therefore, the real enemy might be the one who manipulates the protesters to challenge the regime—Navalny, for example—and not the protesters themselves. Hence, even if treated with increased hostility, participants of antiwar demonstrations lack the quasi-ascriptive, inherent qualities that would make them "enemies," rather than "adversaries," in the eyes of the invasion's supporters.

Furthermore, supporters of the invasion differ in their attitude toward the state's repression of antiwar protesters. On the one hand, no supporters dispute the legitimacy of the right to protest as such. On the other hand, they use various arguments to justify the reaction of the state. Supporters claim that protesting against the war often implies protesting against the state itself. These protests are seen as

intending to harm the state, vulnerable in wartime, and hence helping the enemy. That is why “citizens, in principle, must support their state in a war” (male, 50, administrator). Regardless of the justifications for repressions, supporters of the invasion do not claim that the protesters are enemies who must be exterminated. Rather, the state should “understand what they want, what they mean by their protest” (male, 40, tourist guide), “educate them with propaganda” (female, 61, occupation unknown), and “stop [the protests] without causing damage to the image of the country and to the participants” (male, 26, photographer). Finally, there are supporters of the invasion who condemn the state for the repression of peaceful protests.

UNDECIDEDS ABOUT THE INVASION

Similar to the primary groups of supporters of the invasion, the undecided have heterogeneous opinions within their circles. Typically, the primary group of undecideds is divided generationally: Their older family members are supportive of the invasion, while younger friends and colleagues are not. Among people with whom the war is discussed, the undecided mention “husband,” “friends,” “colleagues,” “children,” “family members,” “beloved one,” “closest people,” and “my circle.” Like supporters, the undecided find it difficult to sustain an unbridgeable cleavage because of the social connections with people who think differently. Therefore, the attitudes toward the war are labeled as a “side,” “opinion,” “interest,” “belief,” “support,” “position,” and “thoughts.” Again, the language of preferences, rather than of essential characteristics, decreases the hostility toward people with different positions.

At the same time, depoliticization—giving greater priority to social relationships over political disagreements—plays a strong role in how undecideds interact with others. The undecideds claim that they are ready to try to understand the opponents’ position, but not to engage in a heated debate that could harm the relationship. Rather than confronting each other, undecideds claim that currently one needs to stay socially united: “Sometimes we argued . . . but in a polite manner, that is, at the level of an ordinary discussion” (female, 34, IT start-up creator).

First, this strategy is chosen precisely because of the hardship that everyone experiences regardless of their views: “Now is not an easy time, we need to support each other . . . even just talking to a person, calming [them] down—this already helps” (female, 34, IT start-up creator), since “it is very hard to talk about this topic all the time” (female, 59, state employee). Second, undecided citizens are sure that their opinions and conflicts are useless because they cannot influence political decisions. It is seen as meaningless to argue about “politics in which we are all pawns” (male, 19, student and administrator). And since “we won’t change anything,” the best strategy is to “hope that this will end as soon as possible” (female, 59, instructor). Thirdly and finally, depoliticization makes citizens unsure about whether they—or anyone else—possess enough information to make a political statement or “defend interests” (female, 35, attorney). Moreover, the undecided believe that people have opinions “based not on facts, but on disinformation” (female, 20, student), hence discouraging political divisions even more.

However, for some undecideds the level of hostility increases as does the social distance between them and people with different views. Undecideds claim that the participants of antiwar demonstrations are “fools lacking information,” “provocateurs,” “idiots,” “windbags,” or even members of a “liberal mob, which in our country is douchey” (male, 23, data scientist). Yet others refrain from hostile characteristics, expressing either understanding, because protesting “is their personal choice” (female, 35, attorney), or even sympathy for a “beautiful impulse” (female, 40, kindergarten teacher). Regardless of whether the characterizations of the protesters are negative or positive, all undecideds agree that the protests are currently pointless and can cause harm first and foremost to the protesters themselves, who will face repressions.

OPPONENTS OF THE INVASION

From the point of view of the invasion’s opponents, among the out-group members, there are members of primary groups. There are “friends,” “mother,” “father,” “gran-ny,” “elder relatives,” “colleagues,” “the closest people,” “a lover,” and “sisters” who have a different opinion on the war. However, contrary to the experience of supporters (who believe that society as a whole holds the same opinion as they do) and of the undecided (who emphasize the feeling of despair and disorientation allegedly shared by most people), opponents of the invasion speak about “division” and “polarization.” Even if opponents of the invasion keep relationships with the adversaries, they either have had conflicts with them before or know someone who has broken up with their primary group because of conflicts over the war. Nevertheless, opponents of the war refrain from qualifying those with different opinions as enemies and from ending relationships with them. Despite negative affects and conflicts, they still call supporters and undecideds as just having different “positions,” “reasoning,” “justification,” “viewpoint,” “perspective,” “disposition,” “belief,” or “worldviews.”

In contrast to supporters and undecideds, who merely speak about the cognitive failures as a lack of information and naivety, opponents of the invasion tend to hostilely condemn their adversaries and experience strongly negative emotions when interacting with them. Opponents say that the people (*narod*) are “fooled” (male, 75, scientist) and “sick, . . . with a veil [on their eyes]” (female, 29, events manager). Hence, it is “not very helpful to talk to them” (female, 35, service industry worker). They call their relatives “brainwashed” (female, 29, IT specialist) and the “hostages of propaganda . . . who talk obvious nonsense that defies any common sense at all” (female, 29, events manager). They juxtapose people capable of “normal thinking” to those who are “absolutely besotted” (female, 59, occupation unknown). After heated conflicts, they together with their adversaries “conclude that it is better not to touch on this topic at all” (female, 27, jurist).

Yet, even despite emotional conflicts, opponents of the invasion do not characterize their adversaries as having inherently evil qualities that would make communication and cooperation impossible. When describing the reasons for their adversaries’ beliefs, opponents of the invasion talk about external factors: propaganda, life experience, and professional background. People are believed to “support the

war with Ukraine as a result of television propaganda" (male, 75, scientist), where they receive "only a certain point of view, that is, no information from the other side" (female, 35, service industry worker). On the contrary, citizens with antiwar positions are described as those whom "television didn't influence" (female, 21, content creator) and those who "use alternative sources of information" (male, 30, manager). Some informants say that supporters of the invasion are those who experienced hardship in the 1990s (after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the transition to a market economy), while now these people "thank Putin for the improvements" (female, 41, teacher and business owner). Others claim that people who justify the invasion have "relatives serving in the military sector or working in the [state] structures" (female, 35, service industry worker). None of these characteristics are inherent or quasi-ascriptive.

Therefore, the affective polarization, attempted by the Kremlin to create an unbridgeable split between supporters of the invasion and the rest, failed partially because of depoliticization. Contrary to comparisons of Putin's regime with totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, some scholars argue that Putin has rather demobilized and depoliticized the Russian population (Erpyleva and Magun 2014; Prozorov 2012). In essence, depoliticization is characterized by indifference to politics and prioritization of private interests versus political ones. Even if people are affected by political events and make a political statement, the motivation behind it may be not political or ideological, but rather social and declarative (Ischenko and Zhuravlev 2022). In 2022, the split between supporters and opponents of the invasion was therefore overcome by the prevalence of private values over political ones. The growing risks of repressions have only exacerbated the tendency, silencing opponents of the invasion more than its supporters (Zvonovsky and Khodykin 2023). In general, however, encountering people with strongly different opinions in one's primary group, supporters of the invasion, opponents, and undecideds all either attempted conflictless discussions or decided to avoid political topics to save relationships.

PREFERENCE POLARIZATION: CURRENT PROBLEMS AND IDEAL FUTURE

This section describes the political preferences of supporters, undecideds, and opponents of the invasion. Informants were encouraged to speak about current problems of highest importance to them and the ideal future of Russia. The responses were compared and contrasted. On the one hand, informants disagree on the issues of international isolation or integration and preserving the political status quo or changing the regime. On the other hand, regardless of their attitudes toward the invasion, informants want the Russian economy to improve to satisfy the basic needs of the population, corruption to be eliminated, and the future to be with a clear goal and social cohesion.

DISAGREEMENT NO. 1: ISOLATION VS. INTEGRATION

The number one problem for many supporters of the invasion is economic underdevelopment, which, however, has isolationist connotations not shared by opponents

and undecideds. Specifically, supporters find the prevalence of trade in natural resources over industrial production problematic. They regret that while “Russia has every opportunity to be a normal power, adequate, capable of providing for itself,” in reality “the only thing that today’s Russia is capable of is supply timber to China, oil to Europe, gas to Europe, and that’s it” (male, 21, student). The development of national industries is associated with the need to weaken the ties with the West, which informants hope will happen. The problem of industrial underdevelopment is seen by supporters to originate from agreements among “major business players” (male, 28, computer graphics artist). Importantly, supporters of the invasion do not attribute these problems to particular politicians, parties, or ideologies. Indeed, the only actor that was named is big business, blamed for hindering national economic development and for being overly engaged in international trade.

While supporters tend to associate the development of Russia with economic protectionism, undecideds and opponents either talk about integration or ignore the international dimension altogether. Significantly, the reason for undecideds and opponents to prefer integration is the same as for supporters to prefer isolation, which is the belief that “we do not really produce anything that would allow us to develop it within the country.” Hence, instead of isolating from the world, “we need to integrate, exchange experience with people from other countries” (male, 69, oil industry worker and elected local official). Although they share regret of the industrial decline of the 1990s and claim that “it is necessary to rebuild the factories and industries that we ruined at the time,” the undecided emphasize that these factories “did something good for society” (female, 49, occupation unknown) rather than their role in sustaining the country’s independence. In sum, even if industrial development is a concern shared by supporters, opponents, and undecideds, only supporters of the invasion tend to see this issue from the geopolitical perspective that implies competition between countries and, if necessary, isolation and protectionism. In contrast, opponents and undecideds favor economic development in more integrative terms, while being overall less concerned than supporters about the international dimension.

DISAGREEMENT NO. 2: STATUS QUO VS. DEMOCRACY

In interviews, the supporters of the invasion barely mention political problems, while undecideds and opponents discuss them extensively. Even though they complain about “the absence of any institutions of civil society” (male, 43, project manager), “police brutality” (female, 20, student), or the incompetence of the local branch of the United Russia party that has the majority in parliament (male, 60–65, entrepreneur), supporters avoid mentioning the president, the political elite, or the autocratic regime as such. Only a few informants described political problems in terms of the lack of “a system of control over the actions of the authorities and the principle of separation and change of power” (male, 28, computer graphics artist). Therefore, supporters of the invasion tend to support the authorities or at least consider political problems less relevant than socioeconomic ones.

The undecided, in turn, criticize autocracy and violations of rights, yet often express their views in personal, depoliticized language of human relationships. Based on their life experience, undecideds claim that in Russia “a child is not given the opportunity to think, choose, reason, [because] this is condemned in every possible way” (female, 35, attorney). Authorities are perceived as being “not close to the people” (female, 30, marketing specialist), and therefore undecideds “would like the authorities to turn to the people more” (female, 59, instructor). They discuss the ideal future in terms of feelings, wishing for “security, value, and significance of the individual” (female, 30, teacher).

Finally, opponents of the invasion are not only more concerned about political problems than supporters and undecideds but also use political language to describe their preferences. They criticize authoritarianism, lack of freedoms, irremovability of power, bad courts, unfair elections, and overcentralization of the state. Moreover, some opponents claim that the root of all the problems is either Putin himself—“as long as Putin is in power, we will have no rest” (female, 27, jurist)—or the authoritarian regime in general—“without solving this “problem,” there is no point in solving others” (male, 39, collector).

AGREEMENT NO. 1: DEVELOPMENT AND BASIC NEEDS

Despite disagreeing over the issue of international isolation and integration, the respondents share the perception that the condition of the Russian economy makes people’s life miserable. Therefore, regardless of their attitude toward the war, most respondents agree that the foremost problem is the standard of living and the satisfaction of basic needs. Supporters speak about “poverty of the population” (male, 27, clerk), “assistance for socially vulnerable groups of the population—pensioners, children, parents with many children” (female, 33, kindergarten teacher and psychologist), and the necessity “to make medicine more accessible” (female, 61, occupation unknown). Hence, “raising the economy” is important not in itself, but because it helps “improve well-being of the people” (male, 71, pensioner).

However, as with the discussion of economic underdevelopment, supporters are unwilling to attribute the existence of well-being problems to any political actor. In contrast to supporters, undecideds talk explicitly about the obligation that the state fails to meet: “Most people, unfortunately, do not live very well. There are many questions about the domestic policy of our state” (female, 34, IT start-up creator). Both undecideds and opponents of the invasion express concerns about not only social but also regional inequality. They say that while “Moscow is okay . . . one of the coolest cities in the world . . . the country in general, like, sucks. Most of it [does],” and therefore there is “a need to throw away the whole elite” (male, 23, data scientist).

Regardless of their position on the war, informants agree that the satisfaction of basic needs could be achieved not only through economic development but also through direct redistributive policies by the state. Supporters hope, without blaming the state or the president directly, that “the understanding will come that salaries should be given to teachers who bring up our children, and not to athletes who work with their legs” (male, 46, occupation unknown). In sum, while the attitude toward

the war shapes the way in which problems are framed and solutions to them proposed, there is a high degree of similarity of key policy preferences among supporters, opponents, and undecideds. Most respondents believe that the basic needs of the population must be satisfied first, which is not the case in contemporary Russia.

AGREEMENT NO. 2: ANTICORRUPTION

Despite disagreements over political regime change, supporters, undecideds, and opponents of the invasion mention corruption among the key problems that need to be solved in Russia. Supporters relate corruption mostly to socioeconomic problems: "Probably, some kind of policy with an improvement in the quality of life could also be done more efficiently. Where do the multimillion budgets go? We know we have corruption" (female, 20, student). Conversely, undecideds view corruption as both a socioeconomic and a political problem. While some claim that they do not like "the kind of people who come to power . . . and the severe corruption in our country" (female, 30, marketing specialist), others, similarly to supporters, emphasize the detrimental impact of corruption on the lives of ordinary citizens: "Corruption eats up a fairly large amount of resources, which, if directed to social improvement, could yield great results" (female, 27, psychologist). Finally, some undecideds explicitly connect the political and the socioeconomic aspects of corruption: "As soon as they stop stealing from us and all the earmarked funds get to where they need to go, education, medicine, and road repairs will immediately improve" (female, 35, service industry worker).

Contrary to supporters and undecideds, opponents of the invasion criticize corruption as primarily a political problem. Opponents pair anticorruption with the desire for "independent courts, fair elections . . . and restructuring of the security system" (female, 19, student). The corruption is portrayed as a way for the political elite, including the president, to enrich themselves at the expense of the population: "The head of state and a company of his friends are simply stealing all the resources of our very, very rich country. We could live very well if it weren't for bad organization and the horrendous level of corruption" (female, 21, student). Therefore, opponents do not believe that corruption can be fought without political change: "Corruption must be defeated . . . but in the first place we need to give a rest to those people who have been in power for a long time" (male, 41, personnel manager) because these problems are "closely related" (female, 18, student). In short, while supporters and undecideds criticize corruption for the harm to the population's well-being, opponents treat corruption as a political problem, although not denying its socioeconomic consequences. Yet, all informants regardless of their attitudes toward the war name corruption among the country's most worrisome problems.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

So far, most research on polarization has been concerned with the pernicious consequences of polarization for democracies (Enyedi 2016; McCoy et al. 2018; McCoy and Somer 2019; Schedler 2023). And at the same time, the focus has often been

on elite-driven polarization (Abramowitz and McCoy 2019; LeBas 2018; Nugent 2020). Moreover, current scholarship has analyzed the observable behavior of citizens as the manifestation of polarization (LeBas 2006). This study used different empirical and methodological approaches. First, it considered polarization in an authoritarian regime, assuming that both affective and preference distances can appear outside of democratic regimes (Nugent 2020). Second, this study focused on affects and preferences of ordinary citizens, rather than political activists or elites, because top-down polarization does not necessarily transform itself into open hostility within the population (LeBas 2018). Thirdly, this research analyzed not the observable behavior but rather self-reported perceptions, emotions, interactions, and interests, using semistructured interviews instead of election results or public opinion polls.

While the efforts of political entrepreneurs to foster polarization in Russia in the aftermath of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 are evident (Human Rights Watch 2023; Khodorkovsky 2023; OVD-Info 2025; RIA Novosti 2022; Rofe 2023; TASS 2022), the success of these efforts is dubious. The findings of this study confirm that polarization is likely to fail if a society is permeated by strong preexisting boundaries that persist despite the external attempts to impose new cross-cutting boundaries. The key conclusion that follows the analysis is that the priority of personal relationships over political disagreements hinders affective polarization, whereas preference polarization appears to be nondivisive since many political views are shared by adversaries.

Polarization is limited because of depoliticization. While citizens may strongly disagree with, fervently argue against, and be highly biased toward their adversaries, in the end of the day both sides realize that their adversaries are often the most important people in their life. This is because most citizens' primary groups—including friends, family members, and colleagues—consist of people with different views on politics. Even though informants may call their relatives victims of propaganda, they prefer to stop arguing about politics to preserve the relationships. Personal relationships appear to be more important than politics not least because of the authoritarian regime, which by design disregards the opinion of ordinary people and discourages active political engagement. Depoliticization also entails that out-groups of adversaries and in-groups of allies are not real groups but rather imagined communities, since political participation and association under autocracies are limited. Most informants lack any political experience and often express their political views in terms of human relationships. Therefore, relationships with one's primary group members—concrete and very close people—significantly affect one's everyday life, whereas political adversaries and allies are often too abstract to be significant.

This study has several limitations. First, polarization in a given society is always a moving target. For example, this dataset was composed before the mobilization was announced in September 2022, which forced many citizens to choose between participating in the war or escaping the country. Secondly, the sample of respondents is not representative of the population as a whole. For example, people

without higher education and residing outside of Moscow and Saint Petersburg are underrepresented. Thirdly, interviews put informants into an artificial environment. It could be useful to supplement interview with participant observation of people's interactions with their adversaries, but the sample for such a study would be much smaller.

Finally, the theoretical assumption of this study implicitly connects affective polarization, preference polarization, and the potential establishment of democratic trust. It is not evident, however, that the short affective and preference distance will necessarily translate into the establishment of a checked-and-balanced democracy. The classic of research on democratization Dankwart Rustow (1970), for example, pointed to fruitless and exhausting political struggle as a necessary precondition for setting democratic rules to resolve conflicts. In a different way, Ernesto Laclau (2005) argued that popular contentious engagement in politics is beneficial for toppling authoritarian regimes. At the same time, the polarization that turns "adversaries" into "enemies" (Ignatieff 2013) may lead to civil wars, which often result in building authoritarian rather than democratic regimes. Future research on polarization should account for these limitations.

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APPENDIX 1

Interview guide

Do you remember how and from where/whom you first learned about the beginning of the “special operation”? What was your first reaction?

How did this reaction and attitude to what is happening in general change from that day to today?

You said that your attitude to what is happening is “undecided.” How does this manifest itself?

That is, what do you support and what can’t you support?

OR (for supporters): I understand that you generally support the “special operation.” Can you please tell us exactly which aspects you support and why?

OR (for opponents): You are against the war—how would you formulate what exactly outrages you the most? What are you mainly against?

Who do you think is responsible for this conflict?

Do you have any connections to Ukraine—relatives, friends, memories of trips, something else?

In your opinion, what are the reasons for the start of the “operation” in Ukraine?

What consequences will it lead to (including for Ukraine)? How can this affect you personally, your acquaintances, friends, relatives? Has it affected your work in any way, in terms of salary, personnel cuts, management policies, or something else?

How accurate is it to call what is happening a war?

Do you follow (or have you been following) the losses among the civilian population, Russian and Ukrainian soldiers? Have you seen figures, photos and videos of victims or destruction? What was your reaction?

Have you paid attention to such high-profile events as the Bucha/Mariupol, etc.? What do you think of them?

In recent days, many Ukrainian soldiers from the Azov regiment, including those with characteristic far-right tattoos, have been taken into captivity by the Russian army. How do you feel about this?

Can your position on the conflict change in any way in the future? What can make it change?

Has your daily life changed in any way after the start of the “special operation”? How? Has something changed on an emotional level?

How do you feel about the sanctions that have been imposed and are being imposed on Russia?

Do you think there is a possibility that a world war will break out? What do you think about it?

How do your family members, friends, and colleagues relate to the “operation” and the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in general? With whom do you discuss what’s going on? Do you even want to talk to people about the war?

What sources do you use to get information about events in Ukraine and about current events in general?

To what extent, in your opinion, does Russian television objectively reflect the events taking place?

And what about the online sources: online newspapers, social media?

Protests have been held in many Russian cities against the “operation” and the presence of Russian troops on the territory of Ukraine. How do you feel about them? How should the state react to them?

Before the outbreak of hostilities, did you have a position on the situation in Ukraine and relations between Russia, Ukraine, and NATO? What was it? How has it changed?

Are you interested in politics?

Maybe you had some experience of volunteering, and if so, which exactly? Have you ever donated money to someone (to whom, when), have you expressed your civic position in any other way? Do you go to vote in elections?

Are there any political/civic forces in Russia—groups, movements, people—that you sympathize with at least in part? Which ones? When approximately did you start paying attention to their activities?

Has your attitude toward the authorities in Russia changed and if so, how has it changed over the past 10 years?

In your opinion, what problems in Russia need to be solved first?

What future does Russia need? How to achieve this? I understand that this is a very difficult question; it is difficult for me (myself) to answer it, but maybe you can describe at least something most important in what should be present in the country in which you would like to live?

I have a few short factual biographical questions left. We need this information in order to understand what kind of people generally support or do not support the operation.

What year were you born?

What city do you live in?

What kind of education do you have, in what field did you receive education, in what field do you work, and what do you do? I'm not asking you to name your place of work; I'm just interested in the field and your position.

Can you indicate the amount of your monthly income? If you do not want to name the amount, then you can choose one of these answer options: (1) up to 15,000 rubles, (2) 16,000–30,000 rubles, (3) 31,000–50,000 rubles, (4) 51,000–100,000 rubles, (5) 101,000–200,000 rubles, (6) 201,000–500,000 rubles, (7) more than 500,000 rubles.

Who is now part of your family with whom you share a household and income (including children)? Can you please tell me the approximate amount of income for this family?

Please tell us in a nutshell about how your well-being has changed over the past 10 years. And what do you think, over the past 10 years, who in Russia has become better off and who is worse off?

APPENDIX 2

Comparison of preferences of opponents, supporters, and undecideds

Preferences / Attitude to invasion	Disagreements		Agreements (shared by all groups)	
	Isolation vs. integration?	Status quo vs. democratization?	Development and basic needs	Anticorruption
Supporters	Pro-isolation; Russia must be more independent from the West and China	Pro-Putin; problems exist, but the regime should remain in power	Economy must develop so that people live decently	Corruption must be fought
Opponents	Pro-integration; Russia must exchange experience with other countries	Pro-democratic; problems exist because of the regime		
Undecideds	Industrial economy must be restored; no geopolitical connotations	Criticize autocracy, using depoliticized language of human relationships		

КАК РЯДОВЫЕ ГРАЖДАНЕ ПЕРЕЖИВАЮТ ПОЛЯРИЗАЦИЮ В АВТОРИТАРНОМ РЕЖИМЕ? КАЧЕСТВЕННОЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ АФФЕКТОВ И ПОЛИТИЧЕСКИХ ПРЕДПОЧТЕНИЙ В РОССИЙСКОМ ОБЩЕСТВЕ С НАЧАЛА ВТОРЖЕНИЯ В УКРАИНУ

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Исследование, лежащее в основе данной статьи, является результатом коллективного труда членов и волонтеров Лаборатории публичной социологии (PS Lab), которые разработали исследование и собрали для него данные. Анализ, представленный здесь, – с его преимуществами и недостатками – исключительная ответственность автора.

В последние десятилетия политическая поляризация привлекает все больше внимания в научных кругах и за их пределами. Большинство ученых считают поляризацию явлением, которое разрушает демократические нормы в интересах популистских политических предпринимателей, нанося тем самым ущерб демократиям. Однако ключевые характеристики поляризации – аффективная дистанция и дистанция предпочтений между гражданами – могут наблюдаться и изучаться и за пределами демократий. В данном исследовании представлен анализ аффективной поляризации и поляризации предпочтений в условиях авторитарного режима, в частности – в российском обществе с начала полномасштабного вторжения в Украину в 2022 году. Анализ 213 полуструктурированных интервью со сторонниками вторжения, его противниками и теми, кто не определил однозначно свою позицию, показывает, что поляризация не становится реальностью из-за деполитизации, характерной для автократий. В частности, враждебность граждан по отношению друг к другу снижается, поскольку они находят своих противников в основном в первичных группах – среди родственников, друзей и коллег. По этой причине после вспышки конфликтов в начале вторжения люди предпочитают избегать спорных тем, чтобы сохранить отношения с близкими. В то же время различия в политических предпочтениях не разделяют людей на два враждебных лагеря. Люди с разным отношением к войне разделяют политические взгляды, указывая на необходимость экономического развития и расширения социального государства, а также осуждая коррупцию. Поляризация, которую пытались воплотить в реальность Кремль и его оппозиция, провалилась, открыв перспективы для дальнейшего сотрудничества и компромисса между гражданами с противоположным отношением к войне.

Ключевые слова: поляризация; авторитаризм; первичные группы; деполитизация; демократизация