HOW DO ORDINARY CITIZENS EXPERIENCE POLARIZATION UNDER AN AUTHORITARIAN REGIME?

A Qualitative Study of Affects and Preferences in the Post-Invasion Russian Society

By

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Submitted to Central European University - Private University
Department of Political Science

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Political Science

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Vienna, Austria
2023

Abstract

In recent decades, political polarization attracted increasing attention in the academy and beyond. Most scholars considered polarization a phenomenon that erodes democratic norms in the interest of populist political entrepreneurs therefore harming democracies. However, the definitional characteristics of polarization – affective and preference distance among citizens – can be observed and studied outside democracies as well. This research suggests exploring affective and preference polarization under an authoritarian regime, specifically in Russian society in the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine. The analysis of semi-structured interviews with supporters, undecideds, and opponents of the invasion, demonstrates that both affective and preference polarization fails due to depoliticization, typical for autocracies. Precisely, the hostility of citizens diminishes because they found their adversaries mostly in primary groups – among relatives, friends, and colleagues. At the same time, preference polarization appears to be non-divisive since many political views are shared by adversaries. The polarization attempted by Kremlin and its opposition did not succeed, which opens perspectives for further cooperation and compromises between citizens with opposing views.

Table of Contents

Table of Figures

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Introduction

Contrary to popular belief, Russian society's support of the invasion of Ukraine was far from unanimous. Almost 20,000 anti-war protesters were arrested (OVD-Info, 2022), while up to 1 million citizens left the country in 2022 (Ebel & Ilyushina, 2023). Independent research groups claimed that the number of citizens supporting and opposing invasion was relatively the same, while the majority of the population had no definite position (Chronicles, 2023). At the same time, with the efforts of the Kremlin and its opposition, the pro- and anti-war cleavage has coincided with the pro- and anti-establishment cleavage, making it possible to organize politics along a single boundary. In particular, Kremlin introduced several laws, intending to punish and silence the "traitors" – anti-establishment and anti-war activists, as well as deserters (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Vladimir Putin claimed that polarization will be beneficial, because "everything unnecessary, harmful and everything that prevents us from moving forward will be rejected" (Putin, 2022). The opposition leaders that refused to emigrate, were sentenced, independent media were blocked, and the label of "foreign agent" has been largely expanded in its potential and actual application (Radio Free Europe et al., 2022). Similarly, the survived 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).

However, neither elite-driven polarization nor the presence of different opinions in society necessarily translates into hostile attitudes among citizens, which therefore should be studied separately (LeBas, 2006, 2018; Schedler, 2023). Indeed, scholars point to an important difference between perceiving one's opponents as adversaries, who can be cooperated with and trusted, or enemies, who must be destroyed and never trusted (Ignatieff, 2013; Mouffe, 2005). Despite the efforts of political entrepreneurs, the formation of a firm social boundary

1

turning adversaries into enemies may fail. In particular, the polarizing efforts of elites might not influence the population if multiple equally salient boundaries, mutual dependency, and therefore a set of cross-cutting relationships are present in society (LeBas, 2018; Straus, 2015). While discourse and legal analysis help to observe how political entrepreneurs foster polarization (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019), a different task is to figure out how polarized the population actually becomes. In competitive regimes, scholars used to study the 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, the polarization of the population in autocracies remains an under-researched phenomenon. The focus on observable political participation in competitive environments and instrumental view on polarization as used by elites for mobilization limits the scope of empirics. 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. To study polarization in regimes with limited political participation, this project suggests turning to interpretative, rather than observational or measuring approaches. Indeed, polarization can be found in non-competitive regimes, where conflictual attitudes may exist among citizens, but not manifest themselves publicly due to an unconducive political opportunity structure (Kriesi, 2007; Nugent, 2020). Whereas latent conflicts in non-democracies cannot be detrimental to the non-existent democratic rules, they are still important for the potential establishment of such rules and the system of checks and balances (LeBas, 2018). Hostile attitudes towards out-group, also known as *affective polarization*, and a vast distance between groups' interests and values, or

2

preference polarization, are shaping the possibilities for communication, cooperation, and compromises, essential for democratization (Nugent, 2020).

This study, therefore, aims to resolve empirical and technique puzzles in the debate on polarization (Day & Koivu, 2019). Empirically, this research focuses on the polarization of ordinary citizens (rather than elite-driven polarization) in a non-democratic (rather than democratic) political system, namely Russian society in the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine. Methodologically, this research uses semi-structured interviews with ordinary Russian citizens, assuming that public opinion polls might not be reliable in authoritarian contexts, especially in wartime. Out of on average of one-hour long interviews, several questions were selected for analysis of each dimension of polarization. For *affective polarization*, informants were asked to elaborate on how the members of their primary groups reacted to the invasion, what interactions followed, and what is the attitude of the informants towards their interlocutors having different opinions. At the same time, respondents were asked about their attitude toward distant adversaries – people, holding opposite opinions, but not belonging to one's primary groups. For *preference polarization*, the respondents were encouraged to discuss the current problems of Russia, their origin, and the ideal future of the country. The responses of supporters, undecideds, and opponents of the invasion were analyzed and compared.

In the first section, I discuss the current debates on polarization, its empirical focus, and its definition, and summarize the discussion on polarization in Russia in the last decade. In the second section I outline the choice of qualitative methods over quantitative, explain the analysis procedure, and the precautions of using interviews in authoritarian contexts which were followed during the process of data collection. The third section is dedicated to the analysis of affective and preference polarization between supporters, undecideds, and opponents of the invasion. I conclude that neither affective nor preference polarization is

3

salient in Russia. The affective polarization fails because of depoliticization and heterogeneity of the primary groups. In other words, supporters and opponents of invasion are not only friends or relatives to each other, but also, they consider personal relationships more important than political debates. The preference polarization does not appear to be divisive either, as there are several issues of key importance for both supporters, undecideds, and opponents of the invasion. Despite having disagreements over international integration, regime change, and patriotic upbringing, most respondents agree that basic needs must be satisfied given the rich resources of the country, corruption must be eliminated, and the future must be peaceful.

Literature Review

Polarization in Democracies and Beyond

Current debates on polarization lack consensus on its definition and hence, on appropriate empirical foci. Since the beginning of the debate, scholars were mostly preoccupied with polarization in and its pernicious consequences for democracies (Sartori, 2005). The most attractive empirical case for these scholars is and was the United States (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019). Yet newer literature does not restrict the scope of research to democracies. Recent evidence suggests that non-democracies and in particular hybrid regimes such as Venezuela, Turkey, and Hungary encounter polarization as well with all the pernicious consequences it entails (McCoy et al., 2018). Based on findings from authoritarian countries of sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, it is claimed that polarization can facilitate or impede the transition to democracy depending on the scope of repressions, the strength of pre-existing cleavages, and the use of excluding rhetoric (LeBas, 2006, 2018; Nugent, 2020).

At its core, the conceptual debate on polarization is driven by a disagreement over the defining dimension of the phenomenon. For the "classics" of polarization – those who consider it a democratic phenomenon – the definitional key is the erosion of basic democratic norms (Abramowitz & 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, which permits the extension of the scope of research to non-democracies as well (Iyengar et al., 2012; LeBas, 2018; Nugent, 2020). Indeed, the affects – emotions of hate or empathy towards in-group and out-group, and strong group identities – "us" versus or together with "them", are not inherent to democracies only.

Despite the disagreement over defining dimensions of polarization, "classic" and newer approaches can be productively combined in the framework of democratization. For instance, both approaches stress the importance of the instrumental use of polarization by elites and challengers – be it Trump (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019) or Mubarak (Nugent, 2020). Whether in democracy or non-democracy, political leaders foster the "us" against "them" rhetoric and promote the view of opponents as "enemies" rather than "adversaries" (Ignatieff, 2013). But, while in a democracy the effect of polarization is the erosion of "basic democratic trust" (Schedler, 2023), polarization in non-democracy could either help or hinder the establishment of such a trust in the first place through building a strong system of checks and balances (LeBas, 2018; Rustow, 1970). The break with polarized rhetoric and practice is essential since deconsolidation and backsliding – situations, when every "player" tries to change the rules of the "game" – are the most likely outcomes of democratization (Schmitter, 1995). On the contrary, shortening the affective and preference distance between citizens is important for communication and cooperation (Nugent, 2020). Therefore, the absence of a democratic regime does not cut the ontological connection between polarization and democracy. Rather, the character of polarization under autocracy may point to the prospects of democratization.

Furthermore, although assigning different importance to these dimensions, both approaches to polarization focus on affection and political preferences. In simple terms, polarization is defined as "the extent to which groups dislike each other and the extent to which they disagree with each other" (Nugent, 2020, p. 2-3). The first component – "affective distance" is conditioned by one's belonging to and identification with the group (Iyengar et al., 2012; Melucci, 1995; Nugent, 2020). It involves positive assessment and feelings towards the in-group and negative ones towards the out-group (Nugent, 2020). Of course, not every affective distance is classified as political polarization. In the words of Chantal Mouffe, polarization is

6

present when citizens consider their opponents as "an enemy to be destroyed" rather than "an adversary whose existence is legitimate and must be tolerated" (Mouffe, 2005). An extreme example of polarization is a civil war, although polarization does not always manifest itself in a violent conflict (Schedler, 2023).

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 supposed to flow not directly from structural conditions or ideology, but rather emerge in a complex socio-psychological process, including identity formation (Nugent, 2020). The information that shapes political preferences, is selected, and interpreted in a certain way depending on one's identity, including the affective distance between the group one belongs to (in-group) and other groups (out-groups). 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 pre-existing cleavages (LeBas, 2018). The acceptance or rejection of democratic norms and mutual trust are the effects of these aspects of polarization.

While discussing 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 basis (LeBas, 2006). However, there are abrupt and extraordinary socio-political 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 significant transformations in social structures, and (3) resulting in a rupture in

routine (Sewell, 1996). The events, full of uncertainty and danger, force people to take sides and redefine allies and enemies. Secondly, current literature on political polarization focuses on the publicly manifested affects and preferences. Both in democracies and non-democracies, scholars study election results, the discourse of the politicians, and/or physical demonstrations and encounters of the members of opposing groups. The focus on manifestations limits the scope of research to environments with a political opportunity structure that is conducive to public action. Hence, closed autocracies stay out of sight, whereas both affective and preference polarization there could exist and be amplified as a result of events. Thirdly and finally, despite acknowledging the existence of the phenomenon (Roberts, 2022; Schedler, 2023), the scholarship pays limited attention to cases of polarization, where only one aspect – affective or preferential, is present, while another one is not. The case suitable for studying hidden polarization provoked by the event is the 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: economic polarization, online hostility, and top-down political polarization. While some scholars pointed to the low level of trust in Russian society compared to other developed countries (Avdeeva, 2019; Shabunova et al., 2021), only a few attempted to link the data to economic and political cleavages in a casual way. Taking as the basic premise the economic inequalities across classes and regions (Fedorov, 2002; Gimpelson & Kapeliushnikov, 2016; Zubarevich, 2019), the studies explored both affective and preferential polarization in the aftermath of Bolotnaya protests in 2011-2013. For instance, Zhuravlev and Matveev (Zhuravlev & Matveev, 2022) have argued that both political divide and even "culture war" (Matveev, 2014) between the oppositional minority and loyalist majority are organized along class lines. In terms of

8

preferences, the "winners" of the transition to a market economy – the educated middle class – insisted on greater political freedoms, while the "losers" – working class and state employees – remained supportive of the government. In terms of affection, journalists and intellectuals from the camp of "winners" distanced themselves radically from the "losers". They often dehumanized the supporters of the regime appealing to the myth of "two Russias" separated by the wall, while predictably enjoying little support from the "losers" (ibid.). Sensing the opportunity, 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 & Robertson, 2019, p. 32). The government has galvanized the debates on religion and LGBT therefore increasing the already existing affective and preference distance between opposition and 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 anti-corruption, pro-democratic and redistributive claims (Navalny, 2017), he appealed to both "winners" and "losers" of the transition to a market economy. The maneuver was successful: if the meetings of 2011-2013 were attended mostly by "winners" of transition, in 2017-2021 so-called "navalnings"[1] attracted poor people as well, many of them for the first time in life (Zhuravlev & Matveev, 2022). The unifying power of redistributive agenda is confirmed by the qualitative study of Carine Clement, the leading scholar of Russian contentious politics. The title of her recent book, based on hundreds of interviews 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?" (Clement, 2021). Focusing on how ordinary people experience belonging to a national community, rather than the discourse of politicians, Clement claims that the aspiration towards solidarity, not conflict, is

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[1] Meetings in support of Alexey Navalny.

prevalent among ordinary people. This strive is satisfied partially by what is understood by them as international recognition of Russia. However, most respondents express harsh criticism towards inequality which they find unfair given the 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 discourage challengers. Contrary to previous repressions and instrumentalization of wedge issues that delegitimized 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 their bones "rot in a foreign land" (Medvedev, 2022). Later, the Duma spokesman suggested confiscating the property of those who speak against the war (Volodin, 2023). The anti-war and anti-Putin opposition played the same card. In the first weeks of the invasion, the former businessman created a website with a telling name [https://human-nonhuman.info/,](https://human-nonhuman.info/) 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 claimed that someone's position on the war is the only criterion for identifying allies and enemies from now on (Khodorkovsky, 2023).

However, there is limited data that assesses the character of polarization of ordinary citizens in post-invasion 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 affection. Various media 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 the prominent blogger published an interview called "How war divides families" based on the story of a famous artistic family, reaching 13 million views (Dud', 2022). To day, only two studies measured polarization induced by war. The first,

experimental study modeled a game, where supporters of invasion were suggested to impose a fine on opponents of the war – and most did impose (Chapkovski & Zakharov, 2022). In the second study (Chronicles, 2023), respondents were asked if they "agree that anti-war protesters must be sentenced?" (Figure 1) and if they "condemn those who avoid participating in the war" (Figure 2). As the figures show, the Russian population is indeed polarized affectively. At the same time, the analysis of war supporters and opponents' social media accounts shows, that these people have common values and interests (Sokolova et al., 2023). However, neither the studies measured policy preferences or ideology, nor elaborated on the character of the affective polarization. So far, it is not clear whether Russians consider their compatriots with opposing views as enemies or adversaries, while this difference is crucial as it determines the prospects for cooperation and compromises.
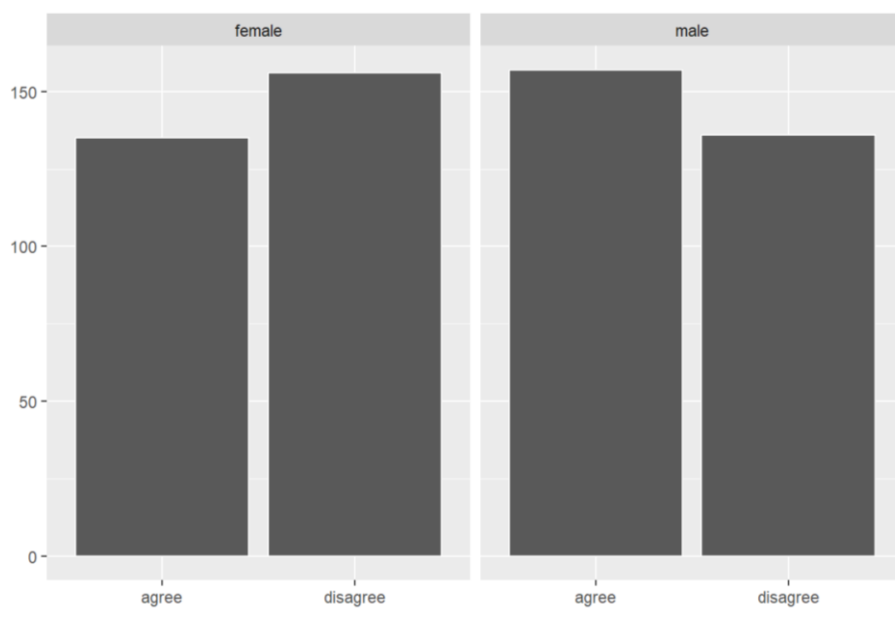

Figure 1. "Do you agree that anti-war protesters must be sentenced?"

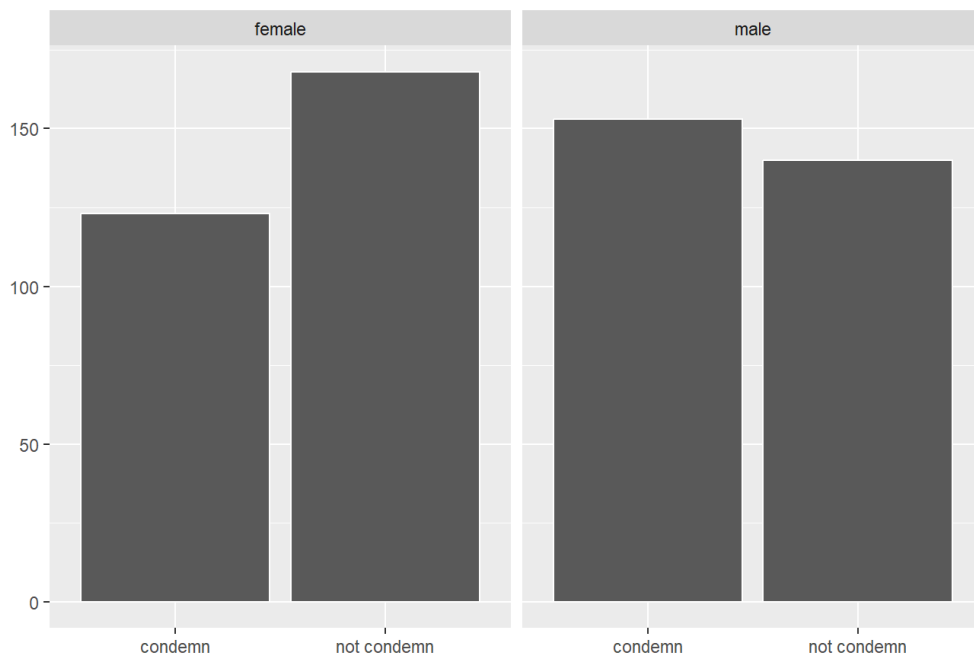Based on the dataset from the research of the "Chronicles" project, 2023.

Figure 2. "Do you condemn those who avoid participation in war?"

Based on the dataset from the research of the "Chronicles" project, 2023.

Methodology and Data Description

In authoritarian regimes like Russian, especially when paired with inequality, there is not only a problem of communicating to authorities safely, but also a pervasive mistrust among citizens towards each other (Shabunova et al., 2021). Therefore, public opinion researchers are used to having a high rate of rejections when approached by would-be-respondents (Vvedensky, 2022). Even if agreeing to be surveyed, respondents are likely to demonstrate views that will entail the least risk for them, especially in wartime (Chapkovski & Schaub, 2022). However, if assuming that respondents are overwhelmingly sincere, surveys nevertheless can rarely convey the logic, narratives, and emotions behind the answers. The "attitudinal patterns" exhibited in daily interactions or kept privately are important to know even when no public conflict is observed, because "they form latent bases of collective conflict that may or may not translate into manifest conflict" (Schedler, 2023). Therefore, the extent to which the population follows the elite-emphasized cleavages can be better analyzed by approaching people intimately.

The technique puzzle can be solved by using qualitative methodology to a used-to-be quantitatively explored topic (Day & Koivu, 2019). Qualitative methods may be more suited for research on 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, the researchers give the space for informants to elaborate, therefore going beyond binary or four-scale responses, typical for questionaries. Thirdly, even if informants would be hesitant to speak openly and therefore lie or conceal their views, the hour-long interview allows researchers to grasp the essence of one's position and notice inconsistencies, which are valuable in themselves. The limit of this approach is the sampling bias because informants are usually recruited through available

social networks while creating a representative sample is often costly. Hence, to understand the nature of polarization in the politically closed system and dissect population-experienced from elite-driven polarization, this project will use qualitative methods, namely, interviews with Russian citizens with different attitudes towards war.

The dataset used in this study was composed by the independent research collective which specializes in Russian and post-Soviet socio-political processes, namely, Public Sociology Laboratory[2]. After the invasion started in February, 213 interviews were collected, among which 134 informants identified themselves as opponents of the invasion, 49 as supporters, and 30 as undecideds (Public Sociology Laboratory, 2022). Importantly, the informants in this study were recruited using the snowball sampling strategy and 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 was not required, all the recognizability-increasing information was deleted, and informants were given a right to refuse to answer any of the questions.

The motivation behind this data collection was to grasp the spectrum of attitudes toward war and Russian politics, rather than to estimate the distribution of certain opinions, as quantitative research would suggest (Erpyleva & Savelyeva, 2023). Therefore, the sample was not representative of the population. For example, there are more respondents with higher education, more those based in Moscow and Saint-Petersburg, and more opponents of invasion than in the entire population (Public Sociology Laboratory, 2022). However, as existing research on the same dataset argues, such labels are not always accurate. The support of the invasion is often rooted in depoliticization, rather than in firm imperialist beliefs,

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[2] Besides the Public Sociology Laboratory, interviews were collected by Irina Kozlova (RANEPA, MAF) and volunteers Irina Antoshchuk, Serafima Butakova, Kira Evseenko, Daria Zykova, Nadezhda Kokoeva, Alexander Makarov, and Anna Shabanova.

frequently ascribed to Russians (Ishchenko & Zhuravlev, 2022). Therefore, many of those who claim to support invasion are either far from politics, or support only some aspects of invasion while criticizing others, or both.

The interview guides included dozens of questions (see Appendix 1), yet for this study, the focus will be on those which allow analyzing the affective and preference-related dimensions of polarization. For exploring 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 to grasp the character of affective polarization in terms of cognitive and moral "failures" (Schedler, 2023) which are or are not the characteristics of people with opposing views. Besides capturing the attribution of "failures" to respondents' interlocutors, attention is also paid to whether the qualities of interlocutors are portrayed as "natural" and quasi-ascriptive (LeBas, 2018) or rather caused by external factors. At the same time, the emotional and behavioral aspects of polarization will be visible in the discussions of this question, because respondents were encouraged not only to describe the opinions and characteristics of their primary groups' members (Cooley, 1902) but also the interaction strategies with them.

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?*

Contrary to the previous question which concerned daily interactions with the members of one's primary groups, this question focuses on abstract and distant "protests" and their participants. Since studies assume that the distance between social groups might affect the

15

degree of hostility between them (LeBas, 2018; Melucci, 1995), it is important to analyze the affects exhibited towards both close and distant people with opposing views. This question was not asked to the opponents of invasion, because they belong to the same category as those who protested invasion on the streets. Instead, the opponents of invasion were asked *2.1) "Who is responsible for the beginning of the war?"*, as this question helps to focus on distant actors with pro-invasion views.

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 this?*

Comparing how supporters, opponents, and non-decided reply to these questions, it is possible to describe the difference in political preferences. The lower level of differences in preferences may make the potential cooperation and compromise easier (Nugent, 2020), which is essential for possible democratization (LeBas, 2018). At the same time, the discussions of current problems and the desirable future of Russia will help to conclude, whether the "culture wars" (Matveev, 2014) and the effects of the "wedge issues" (Greene & Robertson, 2019) prolong or fade away.

All the questions are open-ended, which makes the findings richer in comparison to existing research, where questions implied binary answers. Furthermore, these questions allow detecting emotions and particular rhetoric used by informants. Last but not least, respondents were encouraged to share how they interact in their daily life.

Data Analysis

Firstly, the analysis aims to assess affective polarization – the extend to which ordinary Russian citizens belonging neither to the elite nor to the opposition, reproduce the hostile rhetoric of elites. As mentioned above, the Kremlin provoked a split legally (by extensively applying "foreign agent" law) and discursively (calling migrated Russians "traitors", among other things) (Medvedev, 2022; OVD-Info, 2022). Moreover, since 2011 oppositional elite fostered polarization by referring to the allegedly silent population as morally or intellectually retarded and conformist (Matveev, 2014). The question here is, whether Russian society adopts polarizing attitudes towards people from a different camp, prescribing moral and cognitive "failures" to them (Schedler, 2023). Further, do Russians, in the words of Chantal Mouffe, consider the opponents as "an enemy to be destroyed" or "as an adversary whose existence is legitimate and must be tolerated" (Mouffe, 2005)? Finally, do they talk to each other about the political conflict, and if yes, what does it lead to?

Second, the analysis aims to describe preference polarization – political views, interests, and values communicated by the informants with different attitudes towards invasion. If the first question focused on their affective mutual perception, the second one seeks to assess what sort of political common ground the opponents might have. In particular, the second set of questions includes a discussion about the problems of Russian society and the ideal future of the country. In other words, what are the qualitative differences in political preferences of citizens supporting invasion, condemning it, or staying undecided?

Affective Polarization: Close and Distant Adversaries

This section provides the analysis of perceptions of and interactions with the members of out-group, or adversaries. The supporters, undecided, and opponents of invasion were encouraged to discuss who in their primary groups (Cooley, 1902) – among family members, friends, and

colleagues – hold different opinions about the war, and how the respondents explain this difference and act upon it. At the same time, respondents discuss their attitude towards more distant adversaries – abstract citizens having the opposite opinion. 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 assumed reason for this stance (propaganda, lack of education, professional background, etc.).

Supporters of invasion

For supporters, the out-group of their political adversaries always includes members of one's primary groups, which makes the strong negative affection difficult to appear and sustain. 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" (LeBas, 2018) connection between people who hold polar views towards politics.

The distance or the difference in the attitude of supporters and their adversaries is mostly described in a non-essentialistic, not "quasi-ascriptive" way (LeBas, 2018). Instead of claiming that people with opposing views possess some inherent qualities that make them think and act differently, the supporters 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 inherent, or from naïve 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…"* (m., 21 y.o., student) or that they "*didn't understand [the situation], being rather just pacifist(s)"* (m., 50 y.o., administrator). Along with claiming the cognitive failure of adversaries, the tolerance of and even compassion for their position becomes possible, but only until the emotions of the adversaries do not translate into effective political actions: *"let them speak out all their worries because it is clear that this is a shock. <...> But this should not harm politics and, most importantly, [not interfere] with the people who are solving these issues"* (m., 42 y.o., musician). In other words, the adversaries are indeed different, but not because they were born or predestined so.

Perceived in the form of attitudinal difference, rather than an existential threat, the adversarial opinion in one's primary group is encountered 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 these ... We just calmly discuss it over a cup of tea"* (f., 61 y.o., employee of the Ministry of Defense). The supporters of invasion emphasize the serenity which is important for them in a conversation: *"I discuss this topic with them. But I try to make it as non-conflicting as possible. I do not impose my point of view"* (m., 43 y.o., project manager). However, while most supporters appreciate the non-conflicting discussion, not everyone can perform it. Therefore, the second strategy is avoiding unpleasant conversations to safeguard social connections. Discussing politics might be physically hurting: *"I said that at home I don't talk about politics anymore, I can't. Even now, when talking to you, I have pain on the left side, where the heart is"* (f., 60 y.o., doctor), and harmful for the relationships *"people with a radical point of view, respectively, quickly start to push people away"* (m., 40 y.o., tourist guide). However, the relationships between the members of the primary group are seen as more important that the conflicts over politics. One informant asked: *"Why to burn bridges and spoil relationships, especially with loved ones?"* (m., 24 y.o., deputy's assistant).

Even if the conflict about politics happened among relatives – which is quite unusual for a depoliticized society – the relationships are quickly restored: *"Even the closest circle was divided. <…> Mom and aunt quarreled, they didn't talk for two days"* (f., 36-45 y.o., manager). In rare and extreme cases, where 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"* (f., 41 y.o., scientist).

Apart from having the members of the opposing camp in their primary groups, the supporters of invasion are aware of protests against military aggression. Predictably, the affective distance increase along with the increase of the social distance between adversaries. Therefore, when discussing people that protested publicly, the supporters of invasion use more hostile rhetoric in comparison to one they used within primary groups. On the one hand, the protests are justified as being motivated by commonly shared "humanism" and "pacifism": *"perhaps [protesters] are driven by humanism. Any war is bad. Humanly speaking, this is really bad"* (m., 42 y.o.). Even more: *"pacifism <…> should be in any sane person"* (m., 40-45 y.o., technician). In this case, protests are not criticized, because it is just *"ordinary citizens, neighbors, <…> classmates, <…> (who) have a different point of view."* Therefore, the supporters of invasion are *"not going to beat them in the eye"* (m., 42 y.o.). On the other hand, the protests and protesters are perceived with greater hostility, when one is unsure whether the motivation is different from "humanism" and "pacifism". The real danger, from the supporters' viewpoint, comes from people who are *"chanting against Putin"* (m., 21 y.o., student), therefore acting not *"against the war",* but *"against the country"* (m., 40-45 y.o., technician). Moreover, if the protests turn violent, their participants might be treated as *"extremists"* (m., 42 y.o.) or *"followers of Bandera"* (f., 58 y.o., psychologist) – West Ukrainian anti-Soviet nazi leader during the World War II, used by Kremlin propaganda to justify the invasion.

20

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

Furthermore, the supporters of invasion differ in their attitude toward state repressions of anti-war 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. The supporters claim that protesting against the war often implies protesting against the state as such. These protests are seen to intend to harm the state, vulnerable in the war times, and hence help the enemy. That is why *"citizens, in principle, must support their state in a war"* (m., 50 y.o., administrator). At the same time, the supporters use legalist rhetoric, appealing to the fact that the Russian government prohibits the protests: *"according to the law, they must register somewhere, get a place for this. If they do not, then this means some kind of illegal manifestations"* (f., 72 y.o., pensioner). Regardless of the justifications for repressions, the supporters 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"* (m., 40 y.o., tourist guide), *"educate them with propaganda"* (f., 61 y.o.), and *"stop*

[the protests] without causing damage to the image of the country and to participants" (m., 26 y.o., photographer). Finally, there are supporters of the invasion who condemn the state for the repression of peaceful protests. Such supporters say that the repressive actions of the state *"are not entirely justified"* (m., 27 y.o., clerk). The condescending look towards protesters, who are just a *"liberal youth, not at all mature in their mind and body"* (m., 27 y.o., clerk), turn to the critique of the state which is overly repressive to those who are not considered as real enemies by the supporters of invasion.

The supporters of invasion are also persuaded that the majority in the society shares their opinion. In part, this might shape their attitude towards adversaries – people, who disagree with the decision to launch military actions, or even protest them publicly. In a nutshell, the supporters of invasion acknowledge the existence of others as normal. Yet, the opinion of others is rarely taken seriously, which surprisingly diminishes partisan animosity. The supporters of invasion tend to ascribe cognitive "failures" (Schedler, 2023) to those who have a different stance. The opponents of invasion are characterized by intellectual inferiority – in particular, lack of historical knowledge, which, in turn, leads to naïve belief in pacifism. Nevertheless, there are three reasons why the supporters of invasion treat opponents as "adversaries", rather than as "enemies". Firstly, in the eyes of supporters, opponents of invasion lack agency, being brainwashed by liberal propaganda and/or manipulated by puppet-masters with their own political goals. Secondly, opponents of invasion are irrational and uneducated, rather than evil and insidious. Thirdly and finally, even the protests against invasion, not to mention individual opinions, are less important than the preservation of private relationships and therefore lack the conflictual core. The affective polarization is only moderately present in the camp of supporters.

Undecideds about invasion

Similar to the primary groups of supporters of invasion, the undecideds have heterogenous opinions in their circles. Typically, the primary group of undecideds is divided generationally: older family members are supportive of invasion, while younger friends and colleagues are the opposite. Among people with whom the war is discussed, the undecided mention "husband", "friends", "colleagues", "children", "family members", "beloved one", "closest people" and "my circle". As well as supporters, the undecideds find it difficult to sustain an unbridgeable cleavage because of the social connections with people that think differently. Therefore, the attitudes toward war are labeled as "side", "opinion", "interest", "belief", "support", "position" and "thoughts". Again, the language of preferences, rather than of essential characteristics, decreases the hostility towards 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 which could harm the relationship. Rather than confronting each other, undecideds claim that currently one needs to stay socially united: *"Sometimes we argued <…> but in the correct form, that is, at the level of an ordinary discussion"* (f., 34 y.o., IT start-up initiator). First, this strategy is chosen exactly because of the hardship that everyone experiences regardless of views: *"now is not an easy time, we need to support each other <…> even just talking to a person, calming down – this already helps"* (f., 34 y.o., IT start-up initiator), since *"it is very hard to talk about this topic all the time"* (f., 59 y.o., instructor). Second, undecided citizens are sure that their opinions and conflicts are useless because they cannot influence political decisions. It is seen as meaningless to conflict about *"the politics in which we are all pawns"* (m., 19 y.o., student and administrator). And, since

23

"we won't change anything" the best strategy is to *"hope that this will end as soon as possible"* (f., 59 y.o., 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"* (f., 35 y.o., attorney). Moreover, undecided believe that people have opinions *"based not on facts, but on disinformation"* (f., 20 y.o., student), hence discouraging the political splits even more.

However, for some undecideds the level of hostility increases as does the social distance between undecided and people with different views. Undecideds claim, that the participants of anti-war demonstrations are "fools lacking information", "provocateurs", "idiots", "chatterboxes", or even the members of a *"liberal mob which in our country is douchey"* (m., 23 y.o., data scientist). Yet others refrain from hostile characteristics, expressing either understanding, because protesting *"is their personal choice"* (f., 35 y.o., attorney) or even sympathy for the *"beautiful impulse"* (f., 40 y.o., kindergartener). Regardless of whether the characteristics of protesters are negative or positive, all undecideds agree that the protests are currently meaningless, and can cause harm foremost to the protesters themselves which will face repressions. Moreover, undecideds do not consider political attitudes towards war as an expression of some inherent, quasi-ascriptive qualities. The condescending attitude towards "fools" is not the same as the hostile attitude towards an enemy. At the same time, undecideds repeatedly emphasize the commonality of experience with other people, mentioning social proximity, repressions, hard times, and a lack of trustworthy information. The exposure of adversaries' cognitive failures that supporters of invasion use to delegitimize opponents, is used by most undecideds as the common ground with people from different camps, to show that they all are hostages of the situation which they cannot change. Therefore, affective polarization for this group is rather limited, which makes communication and cooperation possible.

24

Opponents of invasion

So far, the analysis concerned the groups whose positions are legitimate within the legal and discursive framework of current Russia – the supporters of invasion and undecided citizens who neither protest the war nor wholeheartedly support it. However, a large number of Russians oppose the war or even protest it, hence encountering repression (OVD-Info, 2022). At the same time, the opponents of invasion have heterogenous primary groups, therefore interacting with both supporters and undecideds. Even passively taking the side of the repressive state is less costly than opposing it. This socio-political imbalance of power shapes the interactions between opponents of invasion and their primary groups, as well as their attitude towards distant citizens that take a different stance because autocracies are often co-constructed by the exercise of social pressure of citizens upon each other (Greene & Robertson, 2019). It is therefore expected that opponents experience greater social pressure from and in turn, express greater hostility towards the citizens with opposing views.

From the opponents' of invasion point of view, among the out-group members, there are members of primary groups. There are "friends", "mother", "father", "granny", "elder relatives", "colleagues", "the closest people", "a lover" and "sisters" that have a different opinion on the war. However, contrary to the experience of supporters (who believe that society, generally, holds the same opinion as they do) and undecided (who emphasize the feeling of despair and disorientation allegedly shared by most people), the opponents of invasion speak about "divide" and "polarization". Even if the opponents keep the relationships with adversaries, they either had a conflict with them before or know someone who broke up with their primary group because of the conflicts over the war. Nevertheless, the opponents refrain from qualifying their opponents as enemies and end relationships. Despite negative affects and conflicts, they still call the supporters and undecideds as having

25

different "positions", "reasoning", "justification", "viewpoint", "perspective", "disposition", "belief", or "worldviews".

In contrast to supporters and undecideds who merely speak about cognitive failures as of a lack of information and naivety, the opponents of invasion tend to hostilely condemn their adversaries and experience strongly negative emotions when interacting. Opponents say that the people (*narod*) are *"foolished"* (m., 75 y.o., scientist) and *"sick, <...> with a veil (on their eyes)"* (f., 29 y.o., event manager). Hence, it is *"not very helpful to talk to them"* (f., 35 y.o., service worker). They call their relatives *"brainwashed"* (f., 29 y.o., IT specialist) and the *"hostages of propaganda <...> who carry an obvious heresy that defies any common sense at all"* (f., 29 y.o., event manager). They juxtapose people capable of *"normal thinking"* to those who are *"absolutely besotted"* (f., 59 y.o.). Many opponents use these labels when describing people with whom they had conflicts, including strong mutual accusations. After the relatives learned about the opponents' position and participation in protests, they were *"hysterically dissatisfied"* (f., 41 y.o., teacher and business owner), blaming opponents for sympathies towards *"fascism"* (f., 32 y.o., freelance editor) and firmly rejecting to accept the difference. The openly hostile reaction of one's primary group made many opponents *"force myself to shut up"* (f., 81 y.o., pensioner) to avoid escalation and ruining relationships. The verbal aggression, unwillingness to respect the opponent, combined with the fact that the adversaries *"speak in stable constructions"* (f., 29 y.o., event manager) taken from propaganda, make opponents of invasion feel *"increased anxiety and <...> powerlessness"* (f., 31 y.o.). After the heated conflicts, they, together with adversaries *"conclude that it is better not to touch on this topic at all"* (f., 27 y.o., jurist).

Yet, even despite the emotional conflicts, the opponents of invasion do not characterize their adversaries as having inherently evil qualities which would make communication and cooperation impossible. When describing the reasons for their adversaries' beliefs, the

26

opponents of 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"* (m., 75 y.o., scientist)*,* where they receive *"only a certain point of view, that is, no information from the other side"* (f., 35 y.o., service worker). On the contrary, citizens with anti-war positions are described as those upon which *"the TV didn't influence"* (f., 21 y.o., content-maker) and those who *"use alternative sources of information"* (m., 30 y.o., manager). Some informants say that the supporters of invasion are those who experienced hardship in the 90s, while now these people *"thank Putin for the improvements"* (f., 41 y.o., teacher and business owner). Others claim that people justifying invasion have *"relatives in the military sector or working in the (state) structures"* (f., 35 y.o., service worker). None of these characteristics are inherent or quasi-ascriptive. Essentially, even after heated conflicts, opponents tend to believe that their adversary could change their opinion in different circumstances: *"if they could see a bigger picture, then maybe they would change the position"* (f., 35 y.o., service worker).

While discussing the reasons for the invasion, only a few opponents blame the population's support of the imperial ambitions of the Kremlin and/or the absence of civil resistance to gradual autocratization. However, many of these opponents do include themselves in the broad category of "people". These respondents claim that *"it would be nice to bear the responsibility of all of us together"* (m., 31 y.o., project manager in IT)*,* therefore bridging the gap between opponents, supporters of invasion, and undecideds. Some respondents claim that the very existence of Putin's regime which started the war is partially their responsibility: *"there is a certain share of my civic responsibility in the fact that such a regime has become possible in Russia"* (f., 39 y.o., psychotherapist). At the same time, other opponents tend to blame abstract compatriots, saying that *"society has consistently headed towards this"* (m., 51 y.o., coordinator of political organization) or that the *"fault (for invasion) – is wholly and*

27

completely on all Russians" (m., 39 y.o., collector). Nevertheless, all opponents claim that the first and foremost responsibility for the invasion is on Russian authorities and Putin personally. In this regard, the opponents, supporters, and invasion share the perception of politics in Russia that none of the regular citizens can influence.

The opponents of invasion are both similar to and different from supporters and undecideds in how they perceive their adversaries and interact with them. As well as others, the opponents' primary groups consist of people who have different views on war and regime. But, contrary to supporters and undecideds, the opponents more often report taking part in painful conflicts over politics with their primary groups. Although they strive to preserve relationships, as well as supporters and opponents, the conflicts inflict more pain on opponents, rather than on their adversaries. Facing aggression and accusations, the opponents of invasion qualify their adversaries as being inadequate victims of propaganda sharing no common sense. This is different from how supporters and undecideds qualify their adversaries: while supporters and undecideds could sympathize with their adversaries based on "pacifism" and "humanism", the opponents of invasion can find nothing positive in the position of their adversaries. However, the opponents do not tend to ascribe the inherent evil qualities to their adversaries. Rather, opponents treat others as the victims of propaganda, which is also similar to what supporters and undecideds do. Experiencing both state repressions and aggression from primary groups' members, the opponents of invasion are quite radical in qualifying their adversaries as intellectually inferior. Yet, the social proximity towards adversaries makes opponents preserve their relationships and avoid discussing the war.

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 XX century, some

28

scholars claimed that Putin rather demobilized and depoliticized the Russian population (Erpyleva & Magun, 2014; Prozorov, 2012). In 2022, the split between supporters and opponents of invasion was therefore overcome by the prevalence of private values over political ones. Encountering people with strongly different opinions in one's primary group, supporters of invasion, opponents, and undecideds attempted either conflict-less discussions or decided to avoid political topics to save the relationships.

Preference Polarization: Current Problems and Ideal Future

This section describes the political preferences of supporters, undecideds, and opponents of the invasion. The informants were encouraged to speak about current problems of the 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, preserving the political status quo or changing the regime, and developing patriotism or critical thinking during socialization. On the other hand, regardless of their attitude towards 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 №1: Isolation VS Integration

The problem number one for some supporters of invasion is economic underdevelopment, which, however, has isolationist connotations, unshared by opponents and undecideds. Precisely, the supporters find the prevalence of natural resources trade over industrial production problematic. They regret, that *"Russia has every opportunity to be a normal power, adequate, capable of providing for itself",* while 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"* (m., 21 y.o., student). They claim, most probably referring to privatization and consequent

industrial decline of the post-Soviet era, that Russia's *"own production is sold for scrap"* (m., 37 y.o., business owner). Comparing Russian industries with other developed nations', the supporters claim that *"the defense industry lags behind other countries, rocket science – let's forget <...> engineering – nothing simple, nothing"* (m., 21 y.o., student). Therefore, despite *"everyone constantly talks about import substitution"* (m., 37 y.o., business owner) after sanctions were introduced, there is still an unsatisfied *"need for creating an internal market"* (m., 43 y.o., project manager). 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 the agreements between *"major business players"* (m., 28 y.o., computer graphist). Therefore, it is desirable to let smaller businesses evolve, yet due to corruption and *"to the detriment of our business, [they] let the Chinese enter the market, who, of course, can easily displace [us]"* (f., 41 y.o., scientist). Importantly, the supporters of 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 overly engaged in international trade. The extreme isolationism was expressed only by one supporter that confessed to being a *"nazi"*, claiming that *"all migrants should be kicked out of the country"* (m., 21 y.o., student).

While supporters tend to associate the development of Russia with economic protectionism, the undecideds and opponents either speak about integration or disregard the international dimension at all. Interestingly, 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 produce anything properly so that we have something to develop within the country"*. Hence, instead of isolating from the world, *"we need to integrate, exchange experience with people from other countries"* (m., 69 y.o., oil extractor and deputy). Although sharing the regret of

industrial decline in the 1990s and claiming that *"it is necessary to build factories and industries that we ruined in our time"* (f., 49 y.o.), the undecideds emphasize that these factories *"did something good for society"* (f., 49 y.o.), not that the country's independence was sustained. One respondent complains: *"I just don't understand how they didn't get tired of building the Iron Curtain. Why should we separate ourselves from the world?"* (m., 24 y.o.). In sum, even if industrial development is a concern common to supporters, opponents, and undecideds, only supporters tend to see this issue from the geopolitical perspective which implies competition between nations and, if necessary, isolation and protectionism. On the contrary, opponents and undecideds favor economic development in more integrative terms, while being overall less concerned about the international dimension, than the supporters.

Agreement №1: Development & Basic Needs

Despite disagreeing over the issue of international isolation and integration, the respondents share the perception of the condition of the Russian economy which makes the life of the population pitiful. Therefore, regardless of their attitude towards war, most respondents agree that the foremost problem is the standard of living and the satisfaction of basic needs. The supporters speak about *"poverty of the population"* (m., 27 y.o., clerk)*, "assistance for socially vulnerable groups of the population – pensioners, children, parents with many children"* (f., 33 y.o., kindergartener and psychologist), and the necessity *"to make medicine more accessible"* (f., 61 y.o.)*.* Hence, *"raising the economy"* is not important as such, but because it helps *"to improve the well-being of people"* (m., 71 y.o., pensioner). However, as well as in the discussion of economic underdevelopment, the supporters are unwilling to attribute the existence of well-being problems to any political actor. In contrast to supporters, explicitly undecideds talk about the obligation that the state fails to meet: *"most people, unfortunately, do not live very well. There are many questions to the domestic policy of our state"* (f., 34 y.o., IT start-up initiator). Both undecideds and opponents of invasion repeat the

31

concerns about not only social but also regional inequality. They say that while *"Moscow is okay <...> one of the coolest cities in the world <...> in general, the country, like, sucks. Most of it"*, and therefore there is *"a need to throw away the whole elite"* (m., 23 y.o., data scientist). For the opponents of invasion, the ideal future of the country is when *"people do not think about some of the most simple, primitive everyday things. That is, a <...> wealthy society"* (f., 30 y.o., architect).

Regardless of one's position towards war, the informants agree that the satisfaction of basic needs could be achieved not only with economic development but also with direct redistributive policies from the state. Supporters hope, avoiding blaming the state or 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"* (m., 46 y.o.). The problem of overconcentration of private wealth is suggested to be solved via *"nationalization...so that all the subsoil, which earlier, in the Soviet Union, belonged to people, to the Russian people, would not be in the possession of the oligarchs"* (m., 71 y.o., pensioner). And, since sports celebrities and oligarchs are legitimate targets for complains, the supporters of invasion manage to criticize inequality without challenging the power. In contrast, undecideds blame *"the economic policy related to pricing, employment and domestic issues that directly affect the lives of ordinary citizens"* (f., 20 y.o., student), or, more specifically, *"the failed medicine reform"* and local bureaucrats (f., 64 y.o., pensioner). Eventually, the opponents of invasion claim that the state, and personally Putin mistakenly prioritized war over the development of the country: *"the money that is spent on the war every day is a huge, huge expense, for which you can do so much in the country, which is just a shame"* (f., 41 y.o., clerk). In sum, while the identity towards war shapes the way that problems are framed and suggested to be solved, there is a high similarity of a key policy preference among supporters, opponents, and undecideds. Most respondents claim that the

basic needs of the population must be satisfied first of all, which is not the case in contemporary Russia.

Disagreement №2: Status-quo VS Democracy

However, if supporters tend to criticize inequality in an apolitical way, merely hoping that the "understanding will come" (probably, to authorities), the undecideds, and mostly so, opponents of invasion find the existence of the current political regime problematic. Consequently, the supporters barely mention political problems, while undecideds and supporters discuss them extensively. Even though complaining about *"the absence of any institutions of civil society"* (m., 43 y.o., project manager), *"police brutality"* (f., 20 y.o., student), or the incompetence of the local branch of "United Russia" which has the majority in parliament (m., 60-65 y.o., business owner)*,* the supporters avoid mentioning president, political elite or an autocratic regime as such. Only a few informants described the political problems in terms of the lack of *"the system of control over the actions of power and the principle of separation and change of power"* (m., 28 y.o., computer graphist). However, while some supporters indeed speak of *"democratic government, (and) democratic elections"* (f., 58 y.o., psychologist) in their ideal future scenario, others claim that Russia needs *"a permanent political hand that would hold it tightly, in many ways non-changeable"* (f., 20 y.o., student). Therefore, the supporters of invasion tend to support the authority, or at least consider the political problems less relevant, than socio-economic ones.

The undecideds, 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"* (f., 35 y.o., attorney). Authorities are perceived as being *"not close to people"* (f., 30 y.o., marketologist), and

33

therefore the undecideds *"would like the authorities to turn to the people more"* (f., 59 y.o., instructor)*.* They discuss the ideal future in terms of feelings, wishing for *"security, value, and significance of the individual"* (f., 30 y.o., teacher). At present, however, undecideds rather feel ambiguity in the relationships with the state: *"[authorities] are trying to teach us, as citizens, to play by the rules, while the state itself is constantly changing these rules, and one can't understand what you can and cannot do"* (f., 37 y.o., business owner and coach). Rarely, undecideds discuss concrete political improvements they wish to happen: in *"the judicial system <…> (where) they can sack the guilty person if he has some powerful friends"* (m., 24-26 y.o.) and the establishment of political competition, meaning *"fair elections, lack of corruption, change of power"*, which *"should be taken for granted"* (f., 37 y.o., business owner and coach).

Finally, the opponents of invasion are not only more concerned about political problems, than supporters and undecideds, but also use political language to describe their preferences. The opponents criticize authoritarianism, lack of freedoms, irremovability of power, bad courts, unfair elections, and over-centralization of the state. Moreover, some supporters claim that the root of all the problems is either Putin himself: *"as long as Putin is in power, we will have no rest"* (f., 27 y.o., jurist), or, generally, an authoritarian regime: *"without solving this problem for something else, there is no point in taking it"* (m., 39 y.o., collector). Moreover, only opponents of invasion discuss the problem of depoliticization. They wish their compatriots *"were not afraid to take part in politics"* (m., 26 y.o., manager), because *"politics is the most important thing!"* (m., 51 y.o., coordinator of political organization)*,* while currently, the population is *"too tired and too passive"* (f., 18 y.o., student). In sum, the supporters of invasion almost do not discuss political problems and speak both in favor and against democracy; the undecideds use depoliticized language when criticizing authorities;

34

and the opponents see democratization and politicization as necessary for solving other

problems.

Agreement №2: Anti-Corruption

Despite disagreements over political regime change, the supporters, undecideds, and opponents of invasion mention corruption among the key problems that need to be solved in Russia. Supporters relate corruption mostly to the socio-economic problems: *"probably, some kind of policy with an improvement in the quality of life could also be done more efficiently. Where are the multi-million budgets going? We know we have corruption"* (f., 20 y.o., student). On the contrary, undecideds consider corruption both as a socio-economic and a political problem. While some claim that they do not like *"the kind of people which come to power <...> and severe corruption in our country"* (f., 30 y.o., marketologist), others, similarly to supporters, emphasize the detrimental condition of corruption on the life of ordinary citizens: *"corruption eats up a fairly large amount of resources, which, being aimed at social improvement, could yield great results"* (f., 27 y.o., psychologist). Finally, some undecideds explicitly relate the political and socio-economic aspects of corruption: *"as soon as they stop stealing from us and all targeted funds get where they need to go, the education, medicine, and the road repair immediately will improve. That is, life will get better"* (f., 35 y.o., service worker).

Contrary to supporters and undecideds, the opponents of invasion criticize corruption as, first of all, a political problem. The opponents pair anti-corruption with the desire for *"independent courts, fair elections <...> and restructuring of the security system"* (f., 19 y.o., student). The corruption is portrayed as a way for political elites, 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 a horrendous level of corruption"* (f., 21 y.o., student). Therefore, the 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" (m., 41 y.o., director), because these problems are *"closely related"* (f., 18 y.o., student). In short, while supporters and undecideds criticize corruption for the harm to the population's well-being, the opponents treat corruption as a political problem, although not denying its socio-economic consequences. Yet, all informants regarding their attitude towards war name corruption among the most worrisome problems.

Disagreement №3: Patriotic Upbringing VS Critical Thinking

The third and final disagreement between supporters and undecideds on the one hand and opponents of invasion on the other, concerns education. Since most respondents explain the position of their adversaries in terms of cognitive failures, they find education crucial to change their adversaries and society as a whole. The supporters of invasion emphasize the lack of patriotic elements in education and upbringing. Education is seen as a mechanism to create people who *"will take care of their country, and not try to fill their wallet"* (m., 38 y.o., journalist). Similarly, the undecideds compare the current educational system with a Soviet one, regretting that *"[the authorities] are not at all engaged in the patriotic education of young people, as was the case with us."* (f., 49 y.o.). Moreover, regardless of the content of education, both supporters and undecideds tend to consider it as a basic need, which is currently not satisfied as people lack *"the opportunity to work, get an education, receive medicine, that is, the closure of basic needs at least"* (f., 34 y.o., computer graphist).

On the contrary, the opponents of invasion emphasize not patriotism and access to education as such, but rather the need to develop critical thinking through education. Since they attribute the support for the invasion and regime to the influence of propaganda, they consider critical thinking as a way to emancipate their compatriots. They want to *"re-educate people a little, make them think, <…> open their eyes"* (f., 58 y.o., accountant) and to make

adversaries *"more capable of critical thinking, of perceiving information, of filtering information"* (f., 20 y.o., student). Hence, whereas the supporters claimed that their adversaries lack historical knowledge, the opponents of invasion rather discuss the processing of information, because *"knowledge is now very easy to find"* (f., 20 y.o., student). Education is also important for politicization, and the ultimate goal is *"that people are not afraid to take part in politics so that they take part in life"* (m., 26 y.o., manager). At the same time, the lack of critical thinking is not considered a natural flaw of the population. Rather, the opponents claim that the political elite is interested in the stupefaction of the population: *"these are all authorities, which make sure that our people do not try to develop intellectually"* (m., 27 y.o., service worker). In other words, *"for a state like ours, teaching people is generally harmful"* (f., 58 y.o., accountant). Shortly speaking, the supporters and undecideds want to bring more patriotism into education and make education universally accessible, whereas the opponents of invasion yearn for spreading critical thinking to combat propaganda and depoliticization.

Agreement №3: Peaceful Future

Finally, the opponents, and less so, undecideds and supporters of invasion express the desire for a feeling of peace and cooperation in the Russian society. Some supporters say that *"the most extreme individualism of all possible sorts <…> is the biggest problem"* (m., 43 y.o., project manager), and instead *"we should be kinder to each other from the inside, more humane"* (f., 33 y.o., kindergartener and psychologist). Similarly, the undecideds speak about their wish for people *"to be easier and kinder"* (f., 52 y.o., artist instructor). In their turn, the opponents of invasion propose the need to switch from *"the conflict mode"* to the *"dialogue mode"* (f., 30 y.o., architect). Suffering from the hostile attitudes in their primary groups, the opponents want to solve *"the problems of the fragmentation of the population, even anger at each other, when people write denunciations about their neighbors, as in 1937"* (f., 20 y.o.,

student). Aside from the affective side of the problem, the opponents complain about preference polarization claiming that *"the society is divided over very basic issues <...> (which is) the legacy of several unfinished civil wars."* (m., 34 y.o., university manager).

At the same time, the informants connect the concern about social hostility and atomization to the future of the country. The undecided informant just quoted, continues: *"What do we really want? As a people, as a nation, as a cultural community, as a separate family. What do we want?"* (f., 52 y.o., artist instructor). The supporters confirm: *"So far, we have no idea (about the common goals)"* (m., 60-65 y.o., business owner). Similarly, the supporters claim that current problems should be solved for future generations: *"We live here, after all, our children live here. They will have to live here"* (m., 46 y.o., scientist). The opponents of invasion connect social disintegration and a lack of a common idea which would similarly point to the future: *"it has to be a developed economy and for people to live with some goals. Because after the 90th year, there is no goal. This goal was replaced by personal enrichment and "leave to live somewhere better""* (m., 39 y.o.). Whereas opponents of invasion emphasize the problem of open hostility, the undecideds and supporters speak about atomization and indifference toward each other. Yet, regardless of the attitude towards invasion, the informants share concerns about social cohesion and a common future.

Discussion and Conclusion

So far, most research on polarization was concerned about the pernicious consequences of polarization for democracies (Enyedi, 2016; McCoy et al., 2018; McCoy & Somer, 2019; Schedler, 2023). At the same time, the focus of literature was often on elite-driven polarization (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019; LeBas, 2018; Nugent, 2020). Moreover, current literature analyzed the observable behavior of citizens as the manifestation of polarization (LeBas, 2006). This research used different empirical and methodological approaches. First, it considered polarization in an authoritarian regime, assuming that both affective and preference distance can appear outside democracies (Nugent, 2020). Second, this study focused on the affects and preferences of ordinary citizens, rather than political activists or elites, because top-down polarization does not necessarily transform itself into open hostility in the population (LeBas, 2018). Thirdly, this research analyzed not the observable behavior but rather reported perceptions, emotions, interactions, and interests, therefore using semi-structured interviews, rather than election results or public opinion polls. Regardless of the unusual approach, this analysis, as any research on polarization, is well-suited to draw conclusions about communication, cooperation, and compromises, essential for democracy and democratization.

While the efforts of political entrepreneurs to foster polarization in Russia in the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine are evident (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Medvedev, 2022; OVD-Info, 2022; Putin, 2022; Volodin, 2023), the success of these efforts are dubious. The findings from this study confirm, that polarization is likely to fail if the society is penetrated by strong pre-existing boundaries, which sustain despite the external attempts to impose a new cross-cutting boundary. The key inference following the analysis is that the priority of private relationships over political disagreements hinders affective polarization, whereas

preference polarization appears to be non-divisive since many political views are shared by adversaries.

The affective polarization is limited because of depoliticization. While citizens may strongly disagree with, emotionally argue against, and be highly biased towards their adversaries, by the end of the day both sides realize, that their adversaries are the most important people in their life. This is because the primary groups of most citizens – including friends, family members, and colleagues – consist of people with different views towards politics. Even though informants may call their relatives the victims of propaganda, they prefer to stop arguing about politics to save the relationships. Private relationships appear to be more important than politics not least because of the authoritarian regime, which by design disregards the opinion of the common people and discourages active political engagement.

At the same time, many citizens – especially the undecideds about invasion – tend to speak of mistrust towards available information, which makes having firm political beliefs (and fights over these beliefs) harmful to one's private life. The effects of propaganda which most informants consider powerful, and consequent cognitive failures ascribed to adversaries, surprisingly diminish hostility. Not taking adversaries seriously means avoiding fights with them, because such fights do not make sense. If one's adversary is considered as being brainwashed or manipulated by the insidious puppet masters, meaningful conversations are hardly possible, but also conflicts and break-ups are politically and personally pointless. Although some respondents managed to have "civilized" discussions with their adversaries, most complained about the emotional repetition of propaganda's cliché with detrimental effects on relationships.

Finally, depoliticization also entails that the out-groups of adversaries and in-groups of allies are not real groups, but rather imagined communities, since political participation and

41

association under autocracies are limited. Most informants lack any political experience and often express their political views in terms of human relationships. On the contrary, the everyday experience of people is shaped by their interactions with primary groups which consist of people with opposing views. Therefore, the relationships with one's primary group members – concrete and very close people – significantly affect one's everyday life, whereas the political adversaries and allies are often too abstract to be significant.

Although preference polarization is more salient than affective one, it still does not suffice to transform adversaries into enemies, nor does it organize political views along a single boundary. The key disagreement of supporters, undecideds, and opponents is the regime change. The way supporters discuss current problems is apolitical: they are unwilling to put the responsibility on any political actor. The opponents, in turn, blame Putin's regime for socio-economic problems. However, the problems themselves are common among all groups. The first problem, discussed almost by every informant is the lack of satisfaction of basic needs, poverty, and inequality. The second problem discussed by respondents regardless of their attitudes towards war, is corruption. This confirms the observations of analysts who claimed that by embracing redistributive agenda in addition to an anti-corruption investigation, Navalny successfully captured the views of previously depoliticized citizens (Zhuravlev & Matveev, 2022). At the same time, these findings confirm the arguments of Carine Clement who claimed that anger towards inequality and desire for solidarity, rather than conflict is prevalent among depoliticized Russians (Clement, 2021).

Despite preference polarization is not divisive, there are issues besides the war that are viewed differently by supporters, undecideds, and opponents. These are the issues of economic integration versus protectionism, democratization versus status quo, and patriotic socialization versus the development of critical thinking. Yet, these are not proper disagreements, where polarizing views are consistently expressed, but rather different

priorities. Undecideds and opponents almost do not discuss the international aspect of economic development a lot. Neither the opponents of invasion portray themselves as anti-patriots. Rather, they claim that their patriotism is different from Putin's militarist and xenophobic one. Therefore, the only issue that divides supporters, undecideds, and opponents of invasion is regime change. But, given the low level of affective polarization and a lot of common ground in terms of preferences, there are chances that the agreement over regime change will be found when an attractive political program reflecting these similarities appears. The revealed premises for cooperation overweight the elite-driven and invasion-provoked initial hostility.

This research has several limitations. First, polarization in a given society is always a moving target. For example, this dataset was composed before the mobilization was declared that 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. More people without higher education and more residing outside of Moscow and Saint-Petersburg should have been included. Thirdly, the theoretical assumption of this study implicitly connected 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 establishing of checked-and-balanced democracy. The attempts to prolong Putin's rule yet radicalize its militaristic components are already visible, which makes the prospects for democratization uncertain. Future research on polarization should account for these limitations.

List of appendices

Appendix 1. The interview guideline.

Remember how and from where 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 "non-decided". How does this manifest itself? That is, what do you rather 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 anything to do with 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 salaries, cuts, management policies, or something else?

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

Do you (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 Butch/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 in Russian captivity. How do you feel about this?

Can your position on the conflict change in any way in the future? What can make her 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? Who are you discussing what's going on with? 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 public events in general?

To what extent, in your opinion, does Russian television objectively reflect the events taking place? And online sources - online newspapers, social networks?

Protests were 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? Which one? How has she changed?

Are you interested in politics?

Maybe you had some experience of volunteering, what? Have you ever donated money to someone (to whom, when), have you shown your civic position in any other way? Do you go to vote in elections?

Are there any political/civil 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 towards 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 which 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 and in what field and by whom do you work? – I'm not asking you to name your place of work, I'm just interested in the field and your position/position.

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

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