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## Attitudes toward Russia's War on Ukraine in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

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In October, Russian President Vladimir Putin [traveled](#) to Kyrgyzstan for a summit of the Commonwealth of Independent States. This was Putin's first known trip abroad since the International Criminal Court issued a warrant for his arrest in March on allegations of war crimes related to the unlawful deportation and transfer of Ukrainian children. Russia's war on Ukraine has fundamentally [altered](#) Russia's role in Central Asia and led the governments of Central Asia to [reassess](#) their relationships with Russia. While they have [avoided](#) publicly supporting Russia's invasion, trade between Russia and the countries of Central Asia has [boomed](#) and Putin has held an unprecedented number of meetings with his counterparts in the region.

But how does the public in Central Asia view Russia's war against Ukraine? This memo provides a preliminary examination of public attitudes toward the invasion in two Central Asian countries, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Using data from [Central Asia Barometer](#) surveys conducted in the months after Russia's invasion of Ukraine (May-June 2022), we find that, in general, Kyrgyzstanis are less likely to hold Russia responsible for the conflict and to believe Russia's actions to be unjustified than their counterparts in Kazakhstan.

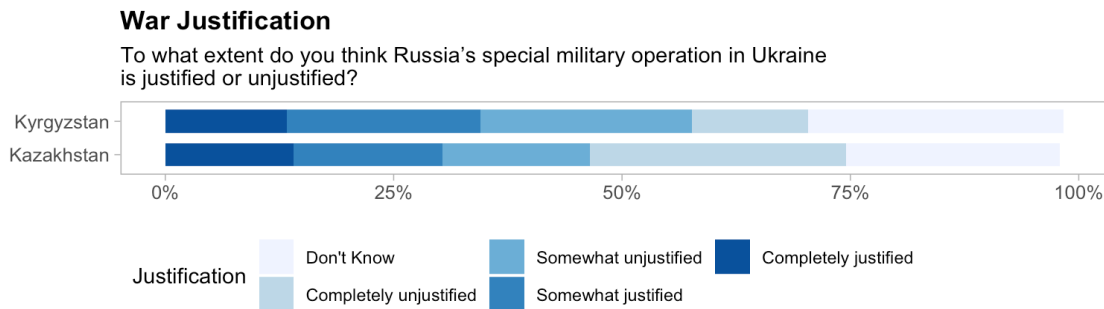
We then explore a number of specific factors commonly considered to impact political attitudes toward foreign powers and their behaviors, namely ethnic identity, language, and media usage. Initial results suggest that ethnic Russians are more likely to express pro-Russian attitudes than individuals from other ethnic groups in both countries. The association of Russian language with pro-Russian attitudes, however, is less consistent and varies across issue areas and political contexts. Finally, while there is some evidence of a link between Russian television viewership and pro-Russian attitudes in both countries, the impact thereof is moderated by the declining role of Russian media in the region.

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## Attitudes toward Russia’s War in Ukraine

In general, individuals in Kazakhstan are more critical of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine than those in Kyrgyzstan: 44% of respondents in Kazakhstan stated that Russia’s “special military operation” in Ukraine was either somewhat or completely unjustified, compared to 36% in Kyrgyzstan – an 8-percentage-point difference. However, this difference does not extend to views on whether the war is justified. While 34% of respondents in Kyrgyzstan state that the “special military operation” is completely or somewhat justified, compared to 30% in Kazakhstan, the difference between these groups does not reach conventional standards of statistical significance. Rather, the results suggest that individuals in Kyrgyzstan are less likely to articulate attitudes toward the war: 28% of individuals in Kyrgyzstan selected “don’t know” as their response to this question, compared to 23% in Kazakhstan.



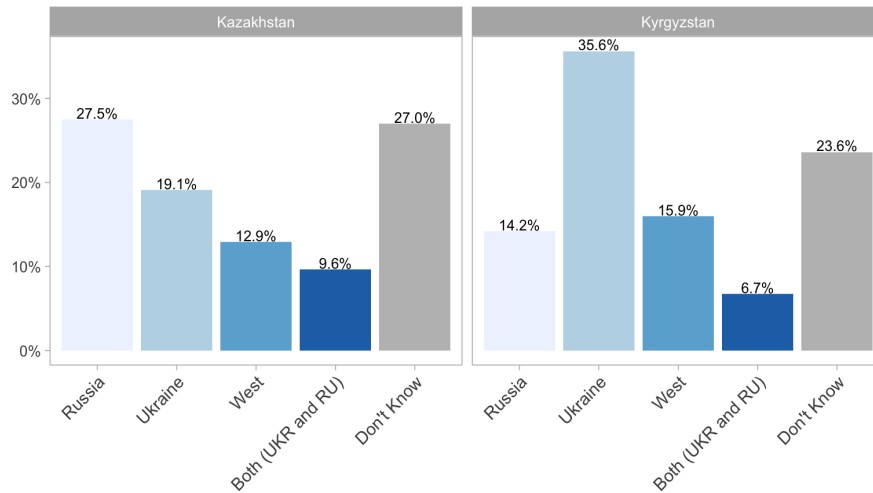
**Figure 1.** Source: Compiled by the authors on the basis of data from Central Asia Barometer surveys.

In general, respondents in Kazakhstan are substantially more likely to blame Russia for the conflict (28%) than individuals in Kyrgyzstan (14%) – more than a 13-percentage-point difference. Looking at those who blame Ukraine for the conflict, this divide is even more apparent: In Kazakhstan, 19% of respondents stated that Ukraine was responsible for the war, compared to nearly 36% in Kyrgyzstan.

However, despite the large differences in blame attribution between the two countries, a substantial portion of respondents in both countries profess uncertainty as to who is responsible for the war. 27% of respondents in Kazakhstan stated that they did not know who was responsible for the situation in Ukraine, as did 24% of those in Kyrgyzstan.

### Responsibility for the War

In your view, who is mainly responsible for the situation in Ukraine?

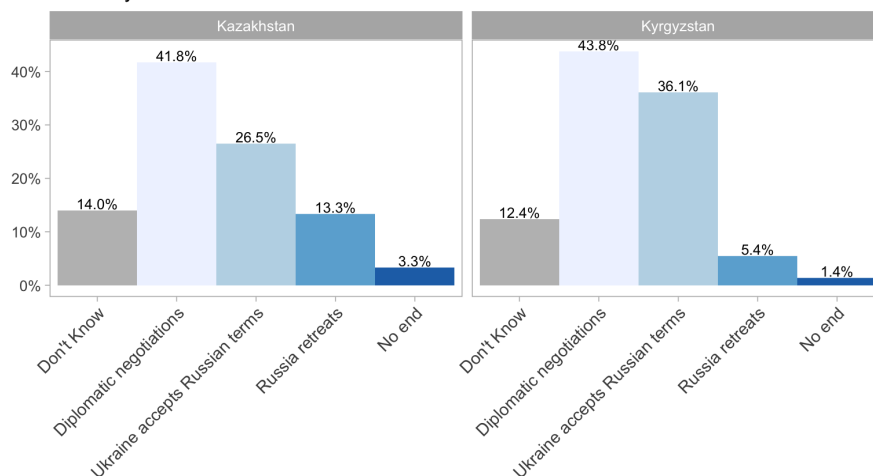


**Figure 2.** Source: Compiled by the authors on the basis of data from Central Asia Barometer surveys.

Finally, individuals in Kazakhstan are less inclined to expect the conflict will end in Russia's favor than their counterparts in Kyrgyzstan. Specifically, 27% of respondents in Kazakhstan anticipate that Ukraine will be compelled to accept Russia's terms, as opposed to 36% in Kyrgyzstan. Even more notably, over 13% of surveyed Kazakhstanis predict that Russia will be forced to retreat, a view shared by a mere 5% of respondents in Kyrgyzstan. Despite these disparities, however, a significant share of individuals in both countries believe that the conflict will culminate in diplomatic negotiations. This suggests a profound divergence in expectations within each country.

### End of the War

How do you think the conflict in Ukraine will end?



**Figure 3.** Source: Compiled by the authors on the basis of data from Central Asia Barometer surveys.

## Ethnicity, Language, and Views of the War

In general, preliminary results suggest that people in Kazakhstan hold more negative attitudes toward Russia's invasion of Ukraine, are more likely to blame Russia for the conflict, and are less likely to believe that the war will end in Russia's favor than people in Kyrgyzstan. But what factors are associated with support for or opposition to the war? In this section, we focus on three potential factors: ethnicity, language, and media use. Table 1 presents the estimated probability for the variables examined earlier by ethnicity and language.<sup>2</sup> Results are purely correlational and do not imply a causal relationship.

Previous research has [suggested](#) that measures of Russian identity, including ethnicity and language preference, have important but variable political implications. Our initial findings provide some support for this argument but also point to important caveats.

In both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, Russian ethnicity is consistently associated with pro-Russian attitudes across all measures. Ethnic Russians are more likely to state that the war is justified and less likely to state that the war is unjustified than ethnic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz. Moreover, the difference between these groups is substantial: In Kazakhstan, there is an 18-percentage-point difference between ethnic Russians and ethnic Kazakhs who state that the war is justified (40% v. 22%); in Kyrgyzstan, the difference between ethnic Russians and ethnic Kyrgyz reaches 20 percentage points (53% v. 33%).

Similarly, ethnic Russians are more likely to believe that the war will end in Russia's favor. In both countries, ethnic Russians are more likely to state that Ukraine will be forced to accept Russia's terms and less likely to state that Russia will be forced to retreat than individuals in other ethnic groups.

Finally, ethnicity is associated with blame attribution in both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, though these results are more robust and consistent in Kazakhstan. Ethnic Russians are less likely to blame Russia for the conflict (in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) and more likely to blame Ukraine or the West (in Kazakhstan).

Thus, our results suggest that ethnicity is strongly associated with pro-Russian views of the war across issue areas and political context. However, the findings for language preference are more complex.

First, the relationship between Russian language preference and pro-Russian attitudes appears to be dependent upon issue area. In both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Russian speakers are more likely to claim that the war is justified than their counterparts who

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<sup>2</sup> Our measure here is the language in which the respondent opted to conduct the interview. Tables 1 and 2 show results from multinomial regressions controlling for age, education, sex, income, residency, social media use, and general favorability toward Russia and are clustered by region.

speak the titular language (30% v. 22% in Kazakhstan and 46% v. 31% in Kyrgyzstan). Yet the results regarding expectations about the war's end are inconsistent and, at points, counterintuitive. In Kazakhstan, Russian speakers are more likely to believe that the war will end with Ukraine accepting Russia's terms than Kazakh speakers; language does not appear to be associated with beliefs about whether Russia will be forced to retreat. In Kyrgyzstan, the results are even more surprising. Russian language preference is only correlated with the belief that Russia will be forced to retreat—and contrary to expectations, Russian speakers are *more* likely than Kyrgyz speakers to believe that the war will end with Russia's retreat.

Finally, the salience of language for blame attribution is highly context-specific. There is no evidence to suggest that language preference is associated with blame attribution in Kazakhstan: Kazakh speakers are no more or less likely to blame particular entities for the conflict than Russian speakers. In Kyrgyzstan, while language preference does seem to be associated with blame attribution, this relationship does not align with expectations. Although Russian speakers are (as expected) more likely than Kyrgyz speakers to blame the West for the conflict, they are also more likely to blame Russia for the conflict. These results may be explained in part by differences in response rate: Kyrgyz speakers are more likely than Russian speakers to state that they do not know who is to blame for the conflict (28% v. 18%). However, this is at best a partial explanation for these counterintuitive results; further research is needed to delve deeper into these findings.

These results support the argument that language should be [disaggregated](#) from ethnicity. Overall, ethnicity appears to be more strongly associated with political preference than does language, a finding that holds across political context and issue area. The salience of language for political attitudes, meanwhile, is both context- and issue-specific: In general, language preference is more strongly associated with attitudes toward the war in Kyrgyzstan than in Kazakhstan, but this relationship is complex and varies between issue areas.

**Table 1. Predicted Probabilities by Ethnicity and Language in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan**

Dependent Variables	Kazakhstan						Kyrgyzstan					
	Ethnicity			Language			Ethnicity			Language		
	Russian	Other	Marginal Effects	Russian	Other	Marginal Effects	Russian	Other	Marginal Effects	Russian	Other	Marginal Effects
<b>Who is mainly responsible for the situation in Ukraine?</b>												
Russia	16%	32%	16%	28%	29%	1%	5%	17%	12%	23%	15%	8%
Ukraine	28%	17%	9%	18%	21%	3%	35%	34%	1%	36%	34%	2%
West	13%	8%	5%	11%	9%	3%	25%	15%	10%	20%	15%	15%
<b>To what extent is Russia's special military operation in Ukraine justified?</b>												
Justified	40%	22%	18%	30%	22%	8%	53%	33%	20%	46%	31%	15%
Unjustified	36%	52%	16%	46%	49%	3%	25%	38%	13%	31%	39%	8%
<b>How do you think the conflict in Ukraine will end?</b>												
Diplomatic Negotiations	45%	46%	1%	42%	45%	3%	32%	44%	12%	39%	44%	5%
Russia retreats	8%	17%	9%	17%	14%	3%	3%	6%	3%	10%	5%	5%
Ukraine accepts Russia's terms	35%	21%	14%	24%	28%	4%	51%	37%	14%	40%	37%	3%

*Note:* Predicted probabilities for full models with covariates using Central Asia Barometer survey data. Marginal effects are highlighted in green if the difference between groups have  $p < .1$  and red otherwise.

## Media Use and Views of the War

Finally, we examine whether turning to Russian sources for international news is associated with holding more pro-Russian attitudes (Table 2). Theories of international media [posit](#) that media will have the strongest impact on foreign audiences in contexts where the sending and receiving countries share high degrees of political and cultural resonance and value proximity – as with Russian media in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. However, research in these contexts has [demonstrated](#) that this relationship is dependent on the issue at hand and that Russian television has, at best, a moderate and conditional influence on political attitudes. Given this tension, is Russian media usage associated with more pro-Russian attitudes toward the war in Ukraine?

<b>Table 2. Predicted Probabilities by Media Use in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan</b>						
<b>Dependent Variables</b>	<b>Kazakhstan</b>			<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>		
	<b>Russian media</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Marginal Effects</b>	<b>Russian media</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Marginal Effects</b>
<b>Who is mainly responsible for the situation in Ukraine?</b>						
Russia	20%	30%	10%	10%	18%	8%
Ukraine	25%	19%	6%	49%	35%	14%
West	17%	10%	7%	18%	17%	1%
<b>To what extent is Russia’s special military operation in Ukraine justified?</b>						
Justified	44%	27%	17%	44%	36%	8%
Unjustified	38%	49%	11%	31%	40%	9%
<b>How do you think the conflict in Ukraine will end?</b>						
Diplomatic Negotiations	33%	45%	12%	38%	44%	6%
Russia retreats	11%	16%	5%	4%	6%	2%
Ukraine accepts Russia’s terms	49%	24%	25%	51%	37%	14%

*Note:* Predicted probabilities for full models with covariates using Central Asia Barometer data. Marginal effects are highlighted green if the difference between groups have  $p < .1$  and red otherwise.

Results suggest that Russian media use is indeed associated with pro-Russian views about the war, although there is some variation by issue area and political context. In both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, individuals who turn to Russian television as their primary source of information are more likely to state that Russia's invasion is justified and less likely to state that it is unjustified than individuals who primarily use alternative news sources, all else being equal. Moreover, this difference is particularly strong in Kazakhstan, where there is a 17-percentage-point difference between Russian TV viewers and other groups. Similarly, Russian TV viewers are more likely to accept that the war will end in Russia's favor, with Ukraine being forced to accept Russia's terms.

The link between Russian media use and blame attribution is more mixed. While there is some evidence that users of Russian media are more likely to hold attitudes consistent with Russian messaging, these findings are inconsistent. In Kyrgyzstan, Russian TV viewers are less likely to blame Russia for the conflict, but no more or less likely to blame other parties. In Kazakhstan, meanwhile, Russian media users are more likely to blame the West for the war, but no more or less likely to blame Russia or Ukraine.

These findings underscore the role of media consumption patterns in shaping political preferences. Once again, however, these patterns vary across issue areas and political context.

Importantly, there has been a visible decline in reliance on traditional Russian media as a source of political information in recent years. When this survey was fielded in the summer of 2022, a mere 8% of respondents in Kyrgyzstan and 4% in Kazakhstan depended on traditional Russian media sources for news on international events. This stands in stark contrast to the scenario in 2014-2015, when approximately 60% of the population in Kyrgyzstan [turned](#) to Russian television for political news.

While the association between Russian media use and pro-Russian attitudes remains relatively consistent, the dwindling viewership implies that Russian media are likely to influence fewer people over time. This shift can be attributed to increasing preference for the internet as a key source of news, which represents a significant transformation of media consumption habits. Thus, while Russian media continue to play a role in shaping pro-Russian attitudes, their influence is waning due to the changing media landscape.

## **Conclusion**

Our study provides initial evidence that, overall, the public in Kazakhstan is less supportive of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine than the public in Kyrgyzstan. On the surface, this result is not necessarily surprising. Despite continued strong ties with Russia, the government of Kazakhstan has long pursued a multi-vector foreign policy that has sought to balance between competing world powers. Russia's invasion may also have tapped into long-standing fears that Kazakhstan will someday become a target of Russian



imperialism due to its shared border with Russia and large ethnic Russian minority population. Kyrgyzstan, meanwhile, is more economically dependent upon Russia: Russia is one of Kyrgyzstan's most important trade and economic partners, and remittances from Russia make up a substantial portion of Kyrgyzstan's GDP.

The study reveals that ethnicity, language preference, and media use play important but nuanced roles in shaping attitudes toward Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan consistently express more pro-Russian attitudes and hold views more consistent with Russian narratives surrounding the war than their counterparts from titular ethnic groups. Russian language preference, meanwhile, is less consistently related to pro-Russian attitudes and varies by issue area and political context, a finding that underscores the importance of disaggregating various measures of ethnolinguistic identity. Finally, while Russian media use in both countries is generally associated with pro-Russian attitudes, the impact of traditional Russian media is diminishing due to the shift toward internet-based news sources. These findings highlight the importance of political context and issue area in shaping attitudes toward international events.