

How Russians Think about Chechnya

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Human rights activists have documented mass graves, disappearances and torture, as well as the indiscriminate use of force by Russian federal forces against civilians in the current war in Chechnya. They recently have collected information that suggests Russian authorities are forming death squads to track down rebels. What impact do these reported abuses have on how Russians think about the war in Chechnya? What other factors shape their views? How popular is the war and why?

Over the last year, surveys have typically shown that the Russian public is more-or-less equally divided between those who support a military solution and those who support peace talks in Chechnya, with a sizable portion not having an opinion. These findings suggest ambivalence, but they tell us nothing about the contour of the ambivalence (e.g., the military versus negotiated settlement is too stark a distinction) or about the deeper feelings and interpretations of the war that inform whatever policy preferences Russians articulate. Findings from a survey we conducted through VTsIOM allow us to address both of these issues.

First, we find that virtually no one supports the status quo in Chechnya. Russians are ambivalent about what the correct course of the war should be. The ambivalence ranges across a complex set of positions, ranging from support for intensifying military action, to negotiation, to cease-fire, and to withdrawal. A fair number have no opinion about what the policy course should be regarding Chechnya. Second, we find a lot of evidence that the war is not popular, and while there is not much detailed information in the Russian media about the war, the subject evokes a variety of intense negative feelings. That said, few Russians are concerned about human rights abuses in Chechnya; it is not an important factor driving the war's unpopularity. Instead, loss of Russian troops, military failure, and economic costs are more likely to turn Russians against the war. This finding points to the importance of critical media; to the extent that the government increasingly controls media markets and, specifically, information about Russian casualties, battlefield failures, and the expenses of the war, it is able to prevent strong opposition from developing.

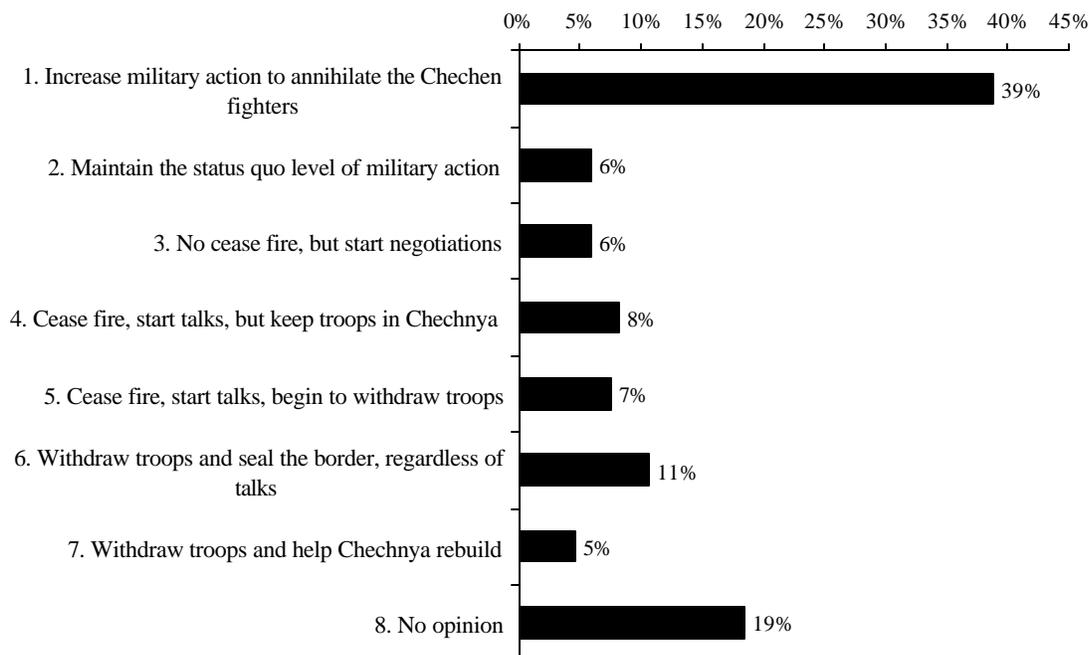
To find out more precisely how Russians think about the war in Chechnya, we included a special battery of questions regarding human rights and Chechnya in an omnibus survey given to a nationally representative sample of 2405 Russians by VTsIOM from September 17–October 9,

2001. Here we focus on answers to questions about the war: the preferred policy course in Chechnya, feelings provoked by reports about the war, what considerations influence views of the war, and responses to reports of abuses and atrocities committed by Russian troops. Altogether, the responses give us a uniquely detailed and nuanced picture of how Russians think about the war.

Intensify, Maintain, or Abate? Overall Policy Preferences

Our first question on Chechnya asked: “In your view, what should be the government’s policy toward Chechnya?” We provided seven policy courses, in order of diminishing military engagement, and a “no opinion” category. The distribution of the weighted adult sample (18 and older) across our categories reveals just how divided Russians are over what to do in Chechnya (Figure 1).

Figure 1: In Your Opinion, What Should be the Russian Government's Policy in Chechnya?



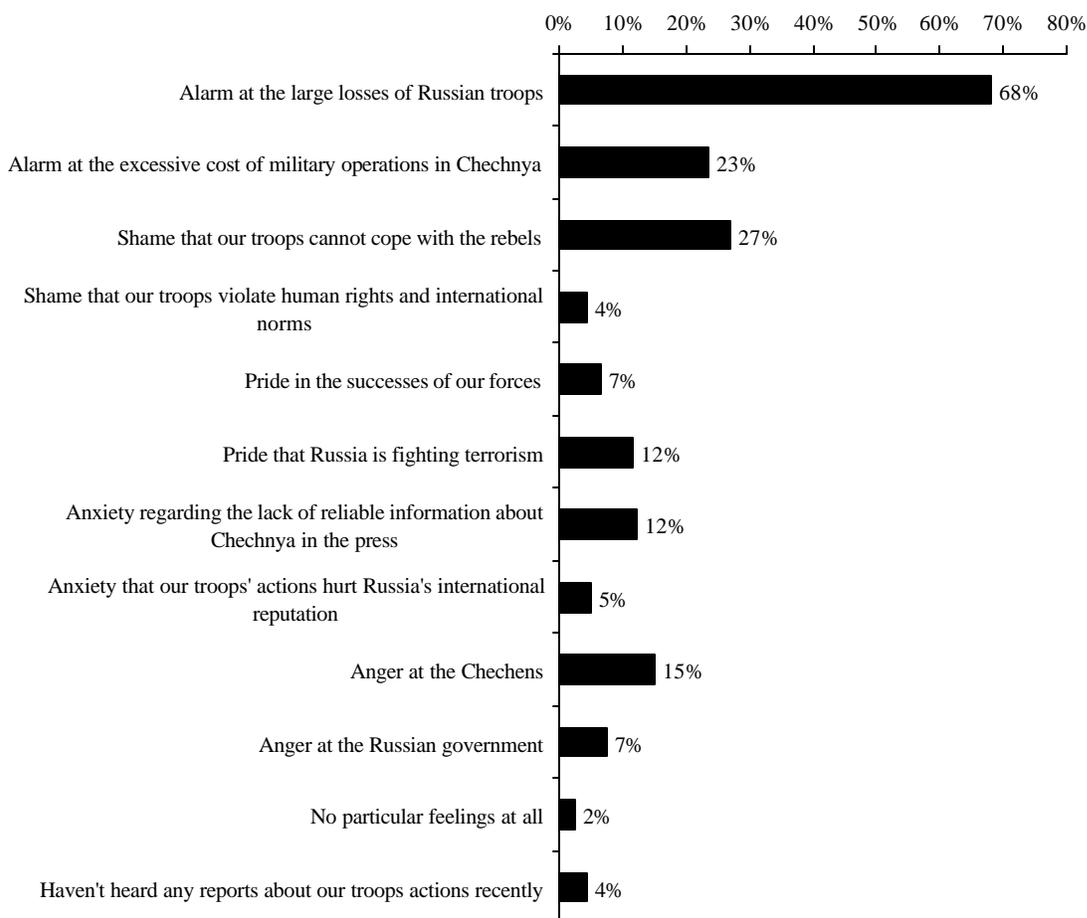
Very few Russians—only 6 percent of our respondents—support the status quo in Chechnya. A large plurality (39 percent) supports the intensification of military action. Thirty-seven percent (combining categories 3-7) favor some form of nonmilitary approach, ranging from negotiations to unilateral withdrawal and assistance to Chechnya. Within this group is a subdivision, one-third of which advocate a cease-fire (31 percent, combining categories 4-7), and about one-quarter (23 percent, combining categories 5-7) of which the support withdrawal of troops. Finally, nearly a fifth (19 percent) have no opinion on what the government should do, which is surprisingly large given the importance of the issue.

Feelings Provoked by the War

To get more information about the emotional responses Russians have to the war and the basis for these responses, we provided respondents with a list of 12 possible “feelings” prompted by “reports about the activities of federal forces in Chechnya during the last several months.” We asked them to choose the two they feel the most often.

The answers to these questions suggest that the war evokes considerably more negative than positive feelings, even if a near majority advocates maintaining or intensifying military action (Figure 2). Most strikingly, 68 percent of Russians express alarm at the large losses of Russian troops. This is the most commonly cited feeling by far; suggesting that concern over the loss of Russian soldiers is widespread. Shame over the inability of Russian troops to “cope with the rebels” and alarm at the excessive cost of the military operations are the next most cited feelings, both chosen by roughly one-quarter of the weighted adult sample.

Figure 2: Percent Who Experience Each Feeling (Maximum 2) When They Hear Reports of Troops' Actions in Chechnya



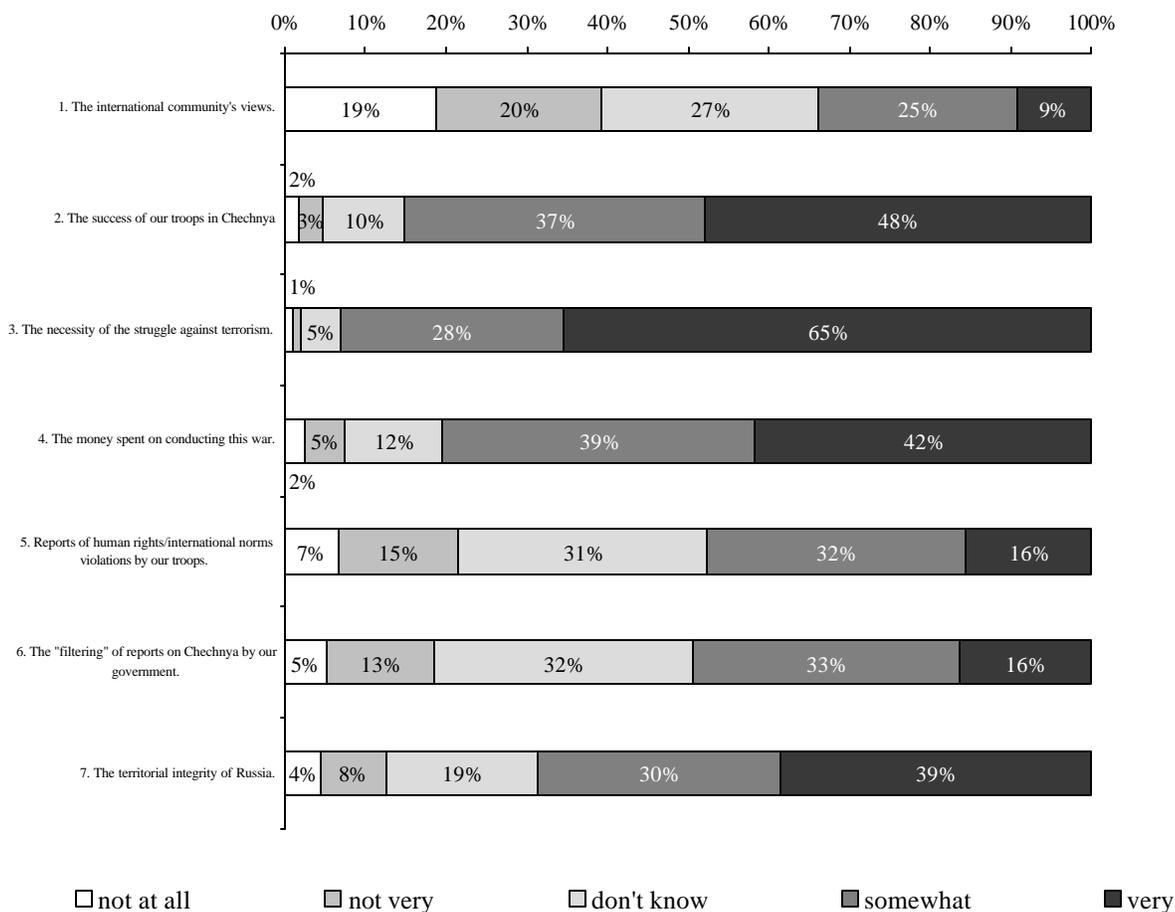
Clearly, this is not a popular war: only 12 percent take pride in Russia’s purported stand against terrorism in Chechnya and a mere 7 percent appear to applaud the military successes of

the campaign. But the reasons for the lack of popularity have little to do with concerns over human rights norms: minuscule percentages appear to care about violations by troops and Russia's international reputation and only 12 percent are worried by restrictions on the press. Moreover, Russians are twice as likely to direct their anger about the war toward the Chechens rather than the Russian government. All told, the war appears to trouble Russians, but mainly due to the loss of Russian lives it has caused and, to a lesser extent, due to the economic costs and military failures.

Different Ways of Framing the War

In order to determine how Russians frame the war, we asked respondents to rank seven aspects of the conflict (Figure 3). We found that Russians have three principal ways of framing the war: as a matter of national security, a matter of economic costs, and a matter of human rights. The first two are significantly more influential in Russians' thinking than the last. The results suggest the regime's efforts to frame the war as a struggle against terrorism have been extremely effective, as almost two-thirds say this struggle is a very important influence on their assessment of the war, and another 28 percent say it is fairly important. The level of military success on the battlefield also influences the assessments of a large majority, which creates a strong incentive for the regime to take steps to insure that only good news from the front reaches the Russian public. Supporters of the war should be encouraged by the relatively strong resonance for the notion of Russia's territorial integrity. On the other hand, the economic costs of the war also figure in how Russians think about the war: four-fifths indicate that they are at least fairly important.

Figure 3: How Important are the Following to Your Assessment of What's Happening in Chechnya?

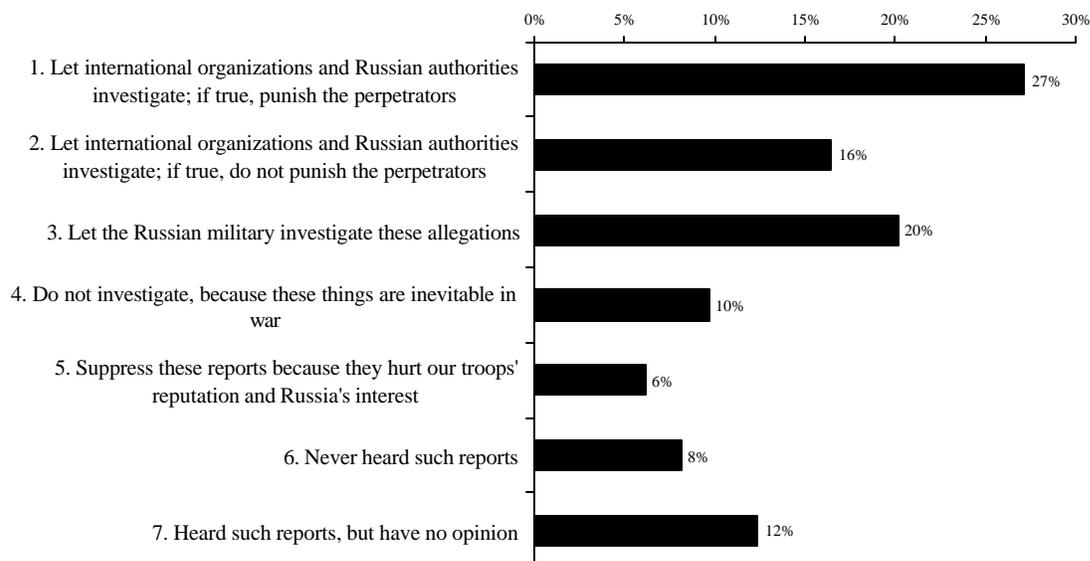


While Western and Russian human rights groups have issued reports and held press conferences detailing abuses in Chechnya, the responses to this battery of questions provide more evidence that considerations about human rights and civil liberties do not shape Russians’ assessments of the war. Although roughly half of the sample identifies human rights abuses by troops and government censorship of press reports from Chechnya as important influences, only one-third say such factors are very important. Barely more than one-third assign any importance at all to the international community’s views of events.

Let’s Not Think about It: Views on Allegations of Rights Abuses

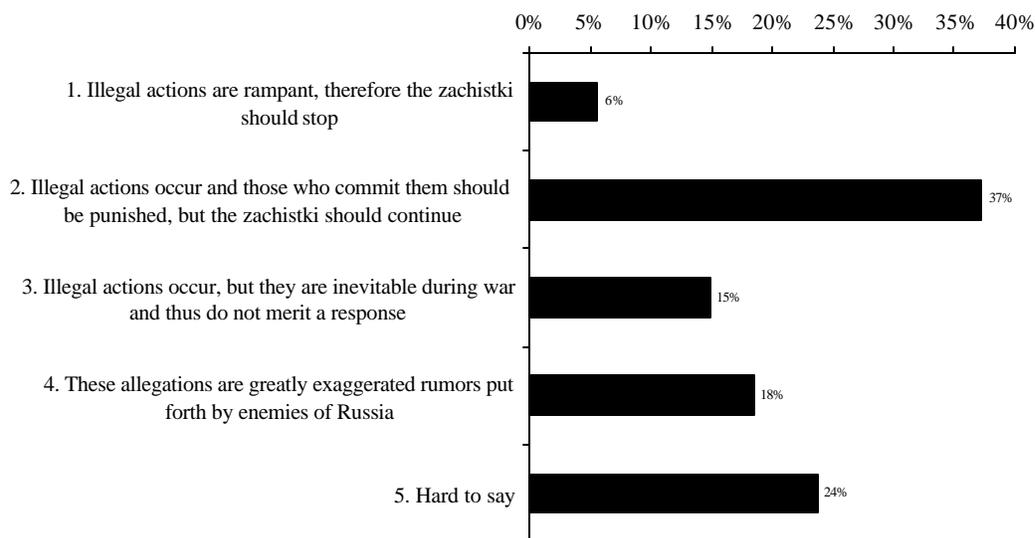
We asked respondents two questions specifically about allegations of rights abuses by Russian troops. First, we noted that there have been reports that Russian forces “violate international norms of military conflict by destroying civilian objects, arbitrarily detaining and interrogating civilians, and using torture and extra-judicial executions.” We then asked which of a series of positions most closely captured the respondent’s views about such reports (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Closest Position Regarding Proper Response to Reports of Illegal Acts against Civilians by Russian Forces in Chechnya



Perhaps the most troubling finding here is that 20 percent either have never heard such reports or have no opinion about them. Thus, one-fifth of the population appears to be apathetic about the conduct of Russian forces. On the more positive side, more than two-fifths (43 percent) advocate an independent investigation of the reported abuses with the involvement of international organizations. Although about 40 percent of these (16 percent overall) do not believe the perpetrators of such acts should be punished, it is slightly encouraging that there is at least some concern in the population that the truth about the military's conduct of the war be revealed. On the other hand, 16 percent of the population does not want the allegations to be investigated at all (positions 4 and 5), and an additional 20 percent want only an investigation by military authorities. Given the condition of military justice in Russia, this may be tantamount to no investigation.

We next referred to reports about marauding and the detention and torture of civilians associated with the so-called *zachistki* ("mop-up operations") and asked respondents which of a series of responses they supported (Figure 5). Again we encountered a large proportion (24 percent) with no particular opinion on the issue. A mere 6 percent believe the allegations and conclude that the *zachistki* should be stopped. A plurality (37 percent) supports holding the perpetrators of illegal acts accountable, but they think that *zachistki* should continue. This position presumes, unrealistically in our view, that such abuses do not inhere in the very practice of *zachistki*. Altogether, 43 percent want some action taken to curtail abuses during *zachistki*. But another 43 percent either deny that such abuses take place or say that nothing should be done about them.

Figure 5: Closest Position Regarding Illegal Actions during Zachistki

Our questions about specific allegations of human rights abuses by Russian troops in Chechnya reveal a striking level of ignorance and apathy toward such abuses. Nonetheless, it is also noteworthy that more than two-fifths of the weighted sample wants such abuses investigated or curtailed.

Frames, Feelings, and Policy Preferences

Because we gathered data on different aspects of Russians' views on the Chechnya conflict, we are able to assess whether particular feelings about the war and particular ways of framing it are associated with particular policy preferences. We did this using multivariate logistic regression analyses. We found that all the positive findings regarding the effects of frames and feelings on policy preferences hold true even when we control for the effects of age, sex, education, and region on policy preferences.

Frames strongly shape Russians' policy preferences regarding the war. Feelings also do, but to a lesser extent. In our multivariate models, higher values (greater importance) on scales representing the "human rights frame" and the "economic cost frame" are significantly associated with greater support for a cease-fire and lower support for intensifying military action. Higher values on a scale representing the "national security frame" are significantly associated with lower support for a cease-fire and greater support for intensifying military action. These results imply that the government's efforts to define the conflict in terms of national security (the war on terrorism, protecting Russia's territorial integrity, supporting the troops) are not only effective, but also produce the intended result: this framing increases support for military action. It also implies that to the extent opponents of the war can reframe the conflict in terms of either human rights abuses or economic costs, they might be able to reduce support for continuing military action. Given the much greater level of importance ascribed, on average, to the war's economic costs, it may be most fruitful to focus on the economic costs frame.

Concerns about human rights abuses and anger at the Russian government are significantly associated with greater support for a cease-fire. Most important, so is alarm over the loss of Russian troops: those who express such alarm have 59 percent higher odds of advocating a cease-fire (net of other variables in the model) than those who do not. This has important implications for antiwar groups: they should work to raise public awareness about the extent of Russian casualties. Curiously, both pride in Russian military successes and shame at Russian military failures increase support for intensifying military action. Perhaps this is also a question of framing: Russians who see the conflict mainly in terms of military success or failure are more likely to advocate a military solution.

What About Terrorism?

While our survey was conducted several weeks after the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, our survey provides evidence that the fear of terrorism did *not* surge among Russians: presented with a list of 20 specific problems facing Russian society, respondents were asked to choose the 5 or 6 they worried about the most. “The threat of explosions or other terrorist acts in your locality” ranked thirteenth out of twenty in the percentage of respondents (22.4 percent) who see it as one of the 5-6 most serious threats. Fears related to the economy—of price increases (62.4 percent), poverty (58.0 percent), economic crisis (33.6 percent), and unemployment (30.7 percent)—to crime (41.4 percent), to drugs (39.2 percent), and also more esoteric concerns regarding a “crisis in morals, culture, and morality” (27.0 percent) and the growth of inequality (29.8 percent) merit more widespread concern than terrorism. Finally, other survey data suggest that support for the war was unusually high at this point in time, but that the impact of September 11 was relatively muted. In any case, even if our results are somewhat influenced by the September 11 attacks, the breadth of coverage on attitudes concerning Chechnya provides a substantially more detailed picture than can be obtained from previous surveys.

Conclusion

The way Russians think and feel about the war is connected to their specific policy preferences. The government implicitly recognizes this and, therefore, seeks to explicitly frame the war as a matter of national security and to limit public awareness about casualty rates, human rights abuses, and the war’s economic costs. Opponents of the war face a difficult task due to the government’s overwhelming control over the media.

Our data suggest that the Russian public is more receptive to arguments stressing the economic and military costs (in terms of soldiers’ lives) of the war than to arguments stressing human rights violations. This says something about the level of support for human rights norms in Russian society: it appears to be low. In another memo, we focus on this topic, which our survey also addressed in considerable detail, and conclude that support for civil liberties is indeed low, but support for rights of the person (freedom from arbitrary arrest and torture) is stronger. Why do Russians not care about abuses of these rights in Chechnya? We believe that the answer lies in the imperiled state of civil liberties—in particular, freedom of information—a topic we explore in another memo [PONARS Policy Memo 244].

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