

What does Putin's popularity mean?

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According to most available evidence, Russian President Vladimir Putin is very popular. [Data from the Levada Center](#), the most highly-regarded independent polling organization in Russia, show that Putin's approval ratings have only rarely --- and then only slightly --- dipped below 80% since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

As a point of comparison, [US President Joseph Biden's popularity has ranged from 39 to 42% in 2023](#), often more than 40 percentage points lower than Putin.

Moreover, Putin's popularity seems to be resilient. Although we might expect "rally 'round the flag" effects after the 2022 invasion, we might also expect the high cost and lack of success associated with the invasion to counteract these effects. However, even the mutiny of Wagner PMC on June 24 and the Russian government's disjointed and perplexing response [had little clear effect on Putin's popularity](#).

Why is Putin's popularity both high and resilient? An obvious possible explanation is that it actually isn't: as the case of Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny attests, [the Russian government is willing to poison and imprison its perceived opponents, and brutally repress popular protests of this treatment](#).

Given this context, a Russian might think twice before saying they don't support Putin. However, [there is little evidence that Putin's popularity is due to preference falsification](#), or that Russians are providing the ostensibly politically desirable response instead of their true beliefs.

So what does Putin's apparently genuinely high popularity mean?

The first thing to note is that Russia is an authoritarian country: while there are presidential elections, the ability of actual opposition politicians to organize and contest elections is severely limited. Indeed, as the aforementioned case of Navalny --- not to mention Boris Nemtsov (assassinated) or Vladimir Kara-Murza (imprisoned) --- shows, politicians and activists who pose an a real or perceived challenge to Putin are eliminated before they can become electoral threats.

Within the government itself, Putin predominantly rewards officials for their loyalty over ambition or political talent. [This is a common phenomenon in authoritarian contexts, where talented and ambitious pro-government political figures can easily become threats to an autocrat](#).

As a result, Putin has created a system in which he is for all appearances the only viable political leader. When Russians are asked whether or not they support him, the question is in many ways not whether or not they support him more than other viable candidates (of which there are none); but rather whether or not they support him over some unknown quantity.

[The Russian government has invested a great deal of resources in defining this unknown quantity as terrifyingly bad](#). For example, government-controlled media portray Western governments as being at the root of all opposition to Putin and even the actual opponent in Russia's war against Ukraine. These governments are often quite literally portrayed as being the successors to the Nazis: aggressive and committed to destroying Russia.

Given this context --- and the fact that the Russian government controls almost all mass media within Russia --- Putin's popularity and its resilience during wartime is perhaps not surprising.

Nevertheless, Putin's popularity is neither universal nor invincible. [Perhaps most prominently, after unpopular pension reforms in 2018, Putin's popularity decreased from over 80% to roughly 60-70% by 2021.](#) Even after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, there is substantial variation in support for Putin across demographic groups. Russian youth, in particular, are less supportive of Putin than older generations; [ethnic minorities in some regions are less supportive of Putin than ethnic Russians.](#)

Finally, some of Putin's support is most likely based on perceptions: some Russians seem to support Putin because they believe other Russians do. Intuitively, this makes sense: if everyone supports a leader, that constitutes evidence that he is a good leader (or at least better than the alternative).

However, support based on perceptions is an inherently weak form of support. [In recently published work with colleagues](#) using public opinion data from 2020-2021, I found that telling Russians that Putin is less popular than they might believe reduces support for him by 6 to 11 percentage points. When Russians believe that Putin is losing support, they are less likely to support him.

While 6 to 11 percentage points is not enough to put Putin's popularity underwater, it could indicate Putin's popularity could unravel exponentially as fewer and fewer Russians perceive others as supporting him.

Putin is clearly aware of this problem and, as such, has made it very difficult and dangerous for Russians to publicly [show their opposition to him](#). After embarrassing events such as the Wagner mutiny, he has [taken additional steps](#) to shore up his popularity.

While these steps have worked thus far, [it is anyone's guess how long they will continue to do so.](#)