

# Do Russians Want War?: Moscow on the First Day of the Invasion

Monday 28 February 2022, by [SAKHNIN Alexei](#) (Date first published: 26 February 2022).

**Within hours of the Russian army's crossing of Ukrainian borders, there were thousands of Russians protesting in 60 cities. Over 1,800 were arrested by the end of the day—a scale far exceeding the anti-war protests that followed Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its subsequent military support to anti-Maidan rebels in Donbas and Luhansk. A leftist roundtable held yesterday called upon all Russians of leftist and democratic views to conduct anti-war agitation. Alexey Sakhnin's wonderful snippets of Moscow public opinion yesterday suggest that the current situation there is nothing like the Crimean consensus that emerged in Russian society in 2014.**

Unlike the residents of Donetsk, Kharkiv, and Odessa, on February 24, Muscovites did not hear explosions in their city. Russian citizens learned about the outbreak of war, which the spokesperson for the Russian Foreign Ministry described as “an attempt to prevent a global war,” from the news.

Russian presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov sounded confident that “Russians will support the operation in Ukraine just as they supported the recognition of the DNR and LNR.” But on the evening of the first day of the war, several thousand Muscovites gathered on Tverskaya Street to express their disagreement with him. The police blocked Pushkin Square, but people moved in fairly dense crowds along the boulevards, Tverskaya, and the surrounding alleys. Young faces predominated.

The same young faces prevailed ten years ago on Bolotnaya Square and Sakharov Avenue, during the anti-Putin protests of 2011-12. But the atmosphere has changed radically over the years. In 2012, the “angry citizens” were proud of their gushing “creativity”: hundreds of slogans, banners, and chants. Their authors were competing in wit. Now, people mostly moved in silence. They chanted a single slogan: “No to War!” At least 955 people were detained in the evening.

There were not as many protesters as at the biggest rallies in recent years, but not as few as one would expect on a Thursday evening, the first day of the war, when confusion and depression reigned everywhere. But most of these people were, if not hardened protesters, then one way or another a part of the opposition milieu. The politicized middle class is predictably dissatisfied with the radical moves of the country's leadership.

## The real people

– Of course I am against the war, — says a mother walking with her children in Tagansky Park. – Who needs war? I feel very sorry for the people. I cried all day today. I'm afraid for my children. What will happen to them?

Her two children, who look about six and eight years old, meanwhile, happily run around us. But at one point the boy stops, snuggles up to his mother and asks: “Mom, can Snoop become a service dog so that he can protect us?”

I walked from Taganskaya Square to the Pokrovsky Monastery near Abelmanovskaya Zastava. I approached all kinds of people: young girls, grannies selling flowers, workers in yellow municipal vests, and pilgrims going to worship St. Matrona of Moscow. I asked a few simple questions. Almost everyone readily answered. There were those who came up to me themselves. Many spoke hastily, as if they were finally breaking a vow of silence.

- Very bad! - said two girls of about eighteen. - Very bad!

The enthusiasm and support that Dmitri Peskov hoped for is absent. Out of 30-40 respondents only one - a young man of conscription age - spoke about patriotic support to actions of Russian authorities:

- This is our land. It must be protected. If they send me, then I will go where I am told to.

But when I asked him what awaits us in the near future, he answered without much patriotic pathos:

- I think some foreign social networks will be banned. As for the rest... Bread for 500 rubles, a euro for 500. Our government makes a lot of mistakes. But once we've started, we need to see this through to the end.

Everyone else was talking about feelings ranging from fear to resentment. I did not meet anyone who was psychologically prepared for disturbing news from the front. People simply could not explain why Russian troops were digging into Ukrainian territory. No one gave them any convincing answers. Older people remembered 2014 and the Crimean spring.

- It was somehow easier then- said a man in his forties whom I stopped outside a Sberbank branch. - There was a sense of unity. And a sense of justice, or something. Back then our people were offended - and we stood up for them. And we took what was ours. And now I do not understand. Why did we invade?

"Sociologists say that the military action in Ukraine, which began today, came as a surprise to Russian society and formed a situation of mass shock. Analysts are pointing out that people turned out to be unprepared for a military confrontation," admits the pro-Kremlin Nezigar telegram channel.

### **No one asked anyone anything**

Two guys are coming out of a cafe. I turn to them with questions about the war, the exchange rate, the consequences. They, like everyone else, don't understand this war. But:

- We don't want to think about it. We don't think about it. That's why we can't say anything intelligible. — says one of them.

The other adds:

- It's like something divine... Something cosmic. What can you do about it? It just goes without saying, for Christ's sake. We should get out of here. Go to the countryside, to the woods. We should light fires. And not think.

This motif came up very often in my sociological experiment. People encounter something that exceeds their ability to understand. War. Something that does not fit into their moral coordinates. Not a defensive war. For no particular reason. And they shrug off this news that they are unable to do anything about.

- I forbade my mother to watch the news," says a middle-aged woman. - I told her to watch *My Fair Nanny*. It's a good movie! But don't read the news! It's bad for you.

A couple of college freshmen told me that today their classmates are unwilling or afraid to discuss politics. "There's a feeling that they just don't notice. They try not to notice." A lot of people have the same impression.

- It amazes me that everyone is silent, as if this is normal—says an indignant worker with a mustache from the municipal energy company. - They're just glued to their cell phones, that's all!

But this feeling of general indifference may be deceptive. Almost all of my respondents told me they had discussed the shocking news in one way or another. Many admitted to spending "all day" on it. But the heated conversations with loved ones contrasted with a city that (for now) continues to go through its daily routine. And many feel like they are the only ones here experiencing anxiety, powerlessness, and loneliness. Although in the passing crowd, almost everyone is probably experiencing these feelings right now and for the same reason.

No one has asked these men and women - or anyone else in the country - what they think. Do they think they should send Russian tanks and planes into the former brotherly republic? Are they willing to make sacrifices for the sake of "denazification of Ukraine"? Do they believe that the security of the country requires extreme measures? It was only one day into the war, but many already felt the need to talk about it, to voice their opinions. At least just to be heard.

- Will you really write that I am against the war? - an old woman outside a grocery store naively asked me.

### **The main problem**

- It's as if there are no other things [the state] could be doing! — the elderly flower-seller told me in a low voice. - Yesterday my neighbor's son had a major accident because the road just collapsed from underneath him. Well really, is it so necessary for them to start a war somewhere? Wouldn't it be better to lay the asphalt normally? Here I am, an old woman, standing here peddling. My pension is not enough. Well, at least I lived somehow. And now? Like under the Germans, is it war again?

Six women in their fifties stand in a circle near the metro station "Marxistskaya" with their bags on pedestals.

- Yes, it's alarming, of course. - said the most boisterous among them. - And I am very afraid. For our husbands, for our children. They may be drafted. But we hope that it will all come to an end soon. That our people will quickly restore order there. But there's a war, guys... It's the XXI century, and we're at war. If it starts on a large scale, it will affect everyone.

- So we're not going to be flying to Egypt anytime soon? - I ask the woman who was just talking about her recent trip.

- Of course we will, God willing—she answers. - Everything will be all right. Everything will be fine! I think we have a strong army, and it won't affect us, the civilians, anytime soon. We have a great president. So it's not the main problem...

The woman stammers. Her stream of optimism can't find an outlet. Her friends shake their heads:

- No, Lena. This is f\*\*\*ed up. This is the main problem now.

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**P.S.**

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