
The Evolving Concerns of Russians After the Invasion of Ukraine EVALUATING APPEALS TO THE PRESIDENTIAL ADMINISTRATION

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Throughout President Vladimir Putin’s war on Ukraine, the attitudes of the Russian public toward the regime and the conflict have been the subject of much scrutiny as information about popular opinion becomes less accessible. This memo addresses this issue by analyzing data released by the Presidential Administration that summarize monthly correspondence received from the public between January 2021 and December 2022. While the identity of these correspondents is not known, their decisions to send non-anonymous appeals to the president suggest that they support or tolerate the Putin regime. The data demonstrate that after an initial period of uncertainty about the war’s economic impact in early Spring 2022, these concerns quickly abated. Since mobilization in September, the appeals portray a Russian public that is increasingly worried about the conditions of military service and the war’s impact on service members and their families. At the same time, the data indicate that the Kremlin’s strategy to shift the blame for mobilization from the president to regional authorities appears successful.

Though popular demands drive neither Putin’s domestic nor international policies, Russians’ attitudes about the conflict remain important. To forestall opposition, the regime intensified repression of freedom of speech and released a flood of propaganda. While the unprecedented wave of sanctions and promised corporate departures had many objectives, among them was the desire to apply pressure on Russians to withdraw support from Putin. The first year of the war has seen a troubled military performance by Russia and powerful counteroffensives by Ukraine. The [unwilling](#) mobilization of around 300,000 citizens and the emigration of half a million more has altered Russian society. Yet still, a large majority of Russians are [supportive](#) of the “special military operation,” and around 80 percent of them [trust](#) Putin. Understanding how opinion within this group has evolved since February 2022 can provide critical insight into the domestic problems that the population will expect the government to address as the war continues.

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Appeals to the Presidential Administration

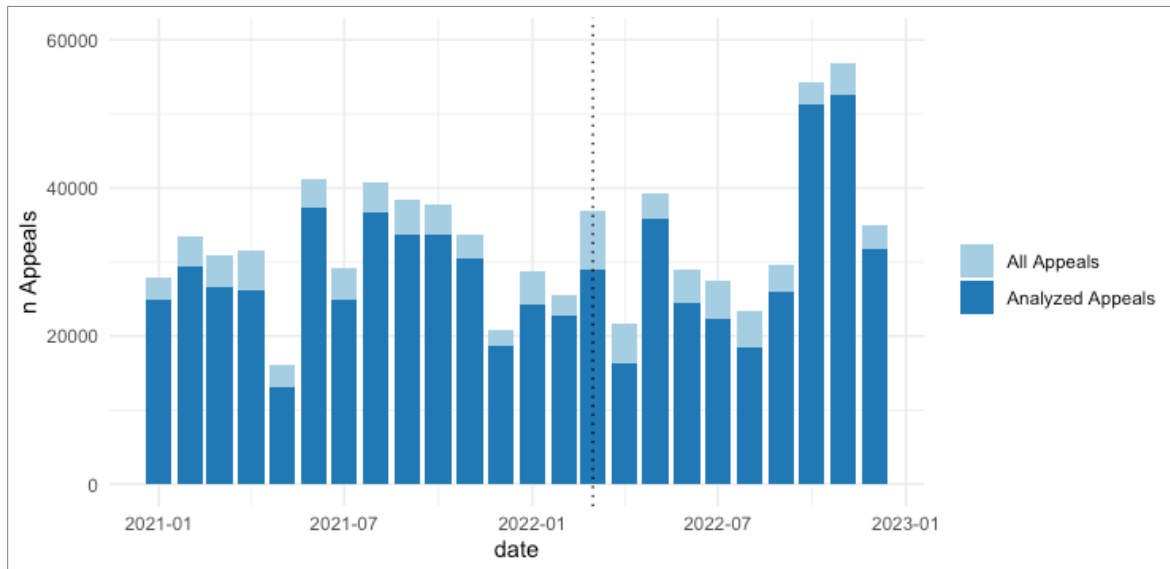
Correspondence from Russian citizens, foreign citizens, stateless persons, foreign governments, and other entities are regularly submitted to the Presidential Administration. Per federal law, that institution is required to respond to all messages and to release regular reports summarizing their content.² Appeals can take the form of proposals, complaints, or applications for assistance. Minimal data about who submits correspondence is provided, but this process is not anonymous, meaning that any correspondent must identify themselves with their appeal. They must also believe that appealing is worth the time to submit and the potential other risks of identification. Taken together, these individuals likely comprise regime supporters, those who feel neutral about the regime, those with grievances they perceive as less sensitive, and those who feel the regime is responsive to public concerns. Regime opponents are probably a minority of correspondents. Because these correspondents voluntarily send these messages, the data also avoid concerns about preference falsification common to opinion polling.

The reports contain the Presidential Administration's classification of correspondence by topic. The typical monthly report identifies 275-325 topics; however, the lack of standardization resulted in the use of approximately 1,200 unique topics over the two years of reports assessed here. The lack of standardization and large number of topics may be meant to prevent the easy identification of trends in the data. It also produces a large number of topics with an extremely low number of appeals. I cleaned and standardized the data, then analyzed the 203 topics that received at least 500 appeals over the two years. This captures 75-94 percent of all appeals and covers approximately 690,000 items of correspondence (see **Figure 1**).

As with all data, we cannot know what has been omitted or censored from these reports. The state-defined topics are relatively generic and uncritical. For example, appeals can refer to the "activities of the executive authorities" but include no assessment of those activities. The terms "war," "Ukraine," or "special military operation" do not appear in the data, but the reports do refer to participation in international conflict. Finally, from October to December 2022, they include 3,900 appeals submitted from four regions that Russia annexed from Ukraine in September.

² The process of corresponding with the Presidential Administration, and the release of these reports, is governed by a federal law passed in 2006, "On the procedure for considering appeals from citizens of the Russian Federation." From January 2021 to August 2022, the Presidential Administration received 1,440,503 electronic, postal and oral submissions. These submissions are then coded into five thematic areas and 1,164 unique topics; around 100 of these received 5 or fewer pieces of correspondence.

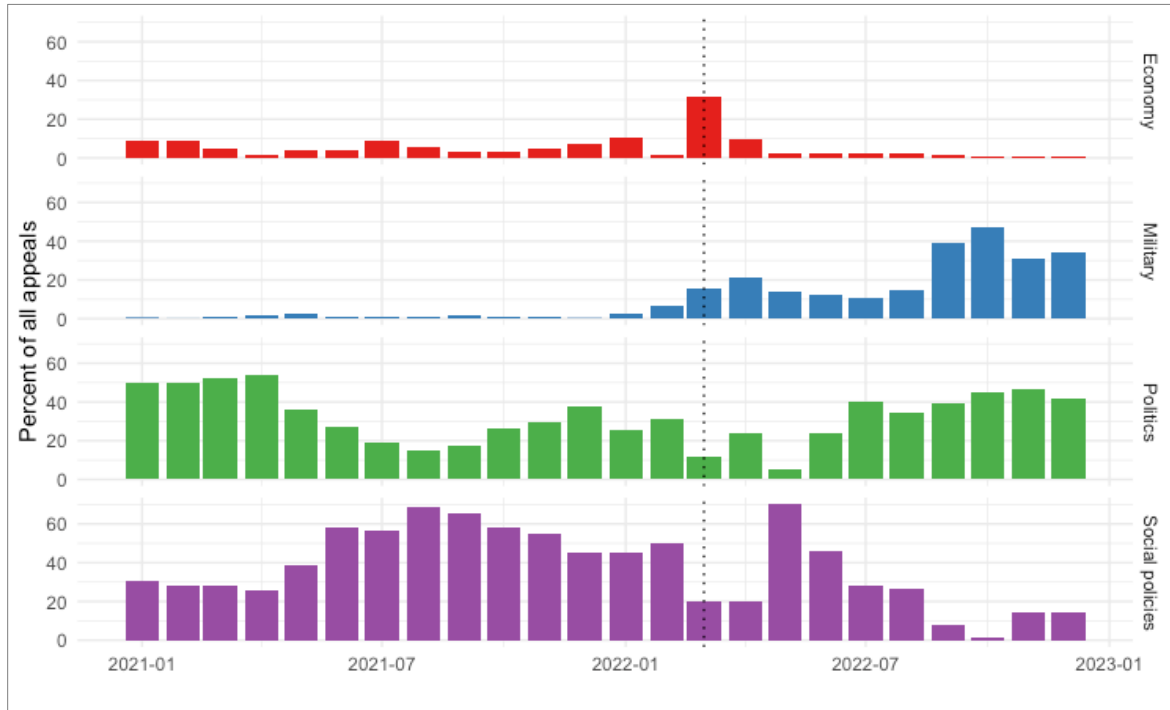
Figure 1. Appeals Analyzed Compared to Total Appeals Submitted to Presidential Administration, Jan. 2021-Dec. 2022 (Dashed line represents March 2022)



I recoded the topics into four key thematic areas that are similar to the government’s own classification³ (see **Figure 2**): Appeals related to economic concerns; military topics, such as foreign policy, conflicts, and military service; political issues, including the activities of various branches of government, and social policies, which encompasses social security benefits, housing, healthcare, utilities, and the like. In all, the dashed line indicates March 2022. I also consolidated the topics within each area. I discuss these areas in turn.

³ This analysis omits correspondence related to honorifics, audience requests, and follow-ups on previous appeals.

Figure 2. Appeals Submitted to Presidential Administration, Jan. 2021-Dec. 2022 (By Topic Area)



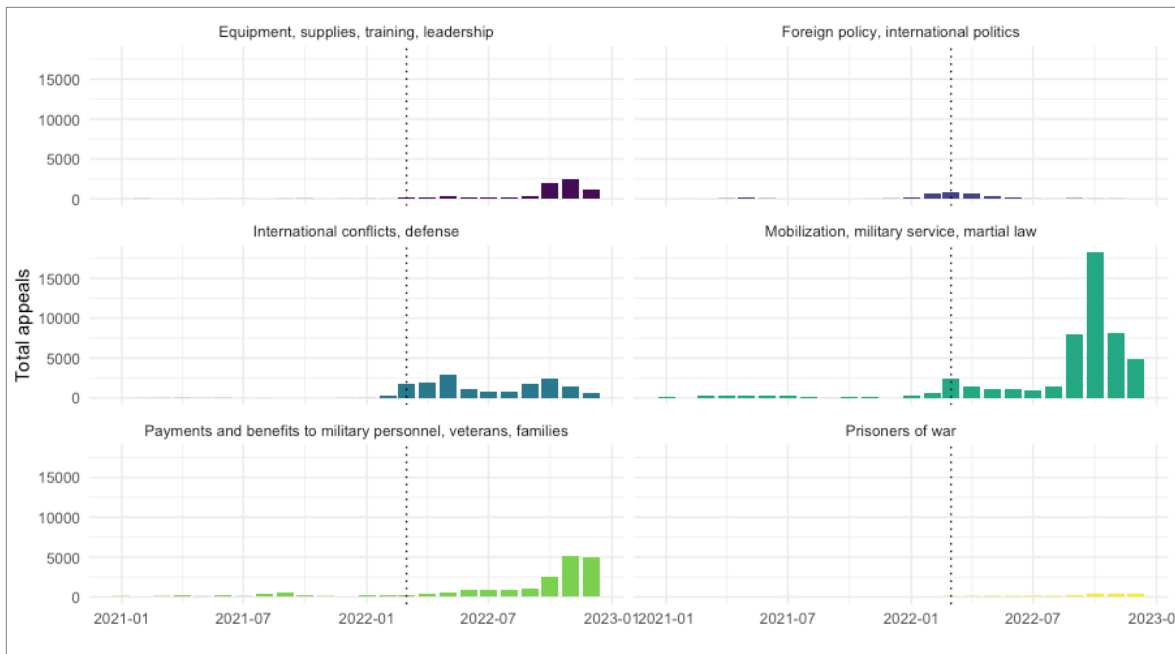
Foreign Policy, Military Action, and Service

In 2021, concerns about foreign policy, the military, and Russia’s role in international conflicts, typically constituted just 0.1-2.7 percent of correspondence with the Presidential Administration. This began to change in the winter of 2022, and since that time these issues have comprised as much as 47 percent (October 2022) of all appeals. Undeterred by the sensitivity of discussing the war, correspondents were concerned with international conflict and military activities. **Figure 3** breaks out correspondence about military issues by topic area.

Beginning in January 2022 and through April, citizens exhibited an increased interest in Russia’s foreign policy, international cooperation, and participation in international organizations. This coincided with attempts to avert or resolve the conflict. Since this period, however, these appeals have almost entirely abated, which suggests rising acceptance of the war and the lack of a peaceful resolution. At the same time, correspondence about Russian defense and the use of its military abroad has grown. These appeals appear sensitive to poor Russian performance on the battlefield. They peaked in April and May, covering up to 8.9 percent of correspondence, when Russia’s progress on the southeast front stalled, and spiked again in September, at the time of Ukraine’s counteroffensive.

Yet vastly outpacing Russians’ concerns for peace or battlefield victories are their concerns about mobilization, the conditions of military service, and benefits to servicemembers. These worries were persistent from March through the end of the summer but rapidly escalated with the announcement of mobilization in September. In October 2022, one-third of all communications included some mention of military service, for example, medical exemptions, the termination of military contracts, the activities of military commissariats, and martial law. The alleged completion of mobilization at the end of October did not reduce these worries to earlier levels. Additionally, appeals that relate to military service conditions, such as providing food and clothing to military personnel and combat training, have persisted. Even by December 2022, one-third of appeals—over 60,000 items of correspondence—related to these concerns about mobilization, military conditions, military benefits, and prisoners of war.

Figure 3: Appeals Submitted to Presidential Administration Related to Foreign Policy and the Military, Jan. 2021-Dec. 2022



In sum, among Russians who are regime supporters or regime-tolerant, initial correspondence about Russia’s foreign policy and performance on the battlefield has given way to worries about the conditions of military service, the benefits associated with military service, and mass mobilization. Even those plausibly supportive of the military action in Ukraine, then, are increasingly concerned about the war’s cost to regular Russians. Though mobilization is currently suspended, these concerns remain active.

Economic Concerns

The invasion of Ukraine was followed by an unprecedented wave of sanctions, the withdrawal of many businesses from Russia, and currency restrictions that produced immediate concerns of economic collapse. While the invasion itself may have felt remote to many Russians, these economic concerns hit home and dominated correspondence submitted to the Presidential Administration in the fallout of the invasion. In March, 31.3 percent of appeals, or 11,559 messages, addressed economic issues like banking, currency regulations, financial and economic management and development, industry, the supply of drugs, the standard of living, prices, and trade.

Yet the outpouring of worries about the economic impact of the war did not persist: by April, just over 2,000 items of correspondence referred to economic issues, and by the end of the summer, numbers had fallen below pre-invasion levels. Just 291 appeals about the economy were received in December 2022. In fact, there were so few economic appeals outside of March 2022, and it was not possible to create topic-specific graphs on the same scale as other topic areas. It may be the case that Russians' fears for their economic future were assuaged by the government response, such as propping up the ruble and shifting to new trade partners, or that they found it easier than feared to adjust to the new economic conditions. Still, it is surprising that Russians in the latter half of 2022 referred fewer economic concerns to the Putin administration than at any time since January 2021.

There are a few possible causes of the drop-off in economic concerns. First, it may have less to do with government performance than with Russians' historical tendency to put their heads down to weather a tumultuous period and adapt to a new economic reality. Recessions in 2014 and 2008, as well as the economic upheavals of the 1990s, have provided plenty of experience in doing so. The fading salience of these economic issues may simply be the result of tolerance rather than satisfaction. Second, it could be that these economic worries are not fully managed but are supplanted by the more pressing concerns of mobilization or the social and political concerns explored below. Finally, Russians may no longer feel that raising economic issues with the Presidential Administration is an avenue to achieve change. Russia is under one of the most severe sanctions regimes in history, and the sanction-imposing states have been clear that the relaxation of these restrictions can only occur if Russia ends hostilities in Ukraine. Citizens may understand that the government now has less economic maneuverability than before, but also that these issues – like currency regulations – are more politically charged than previously.

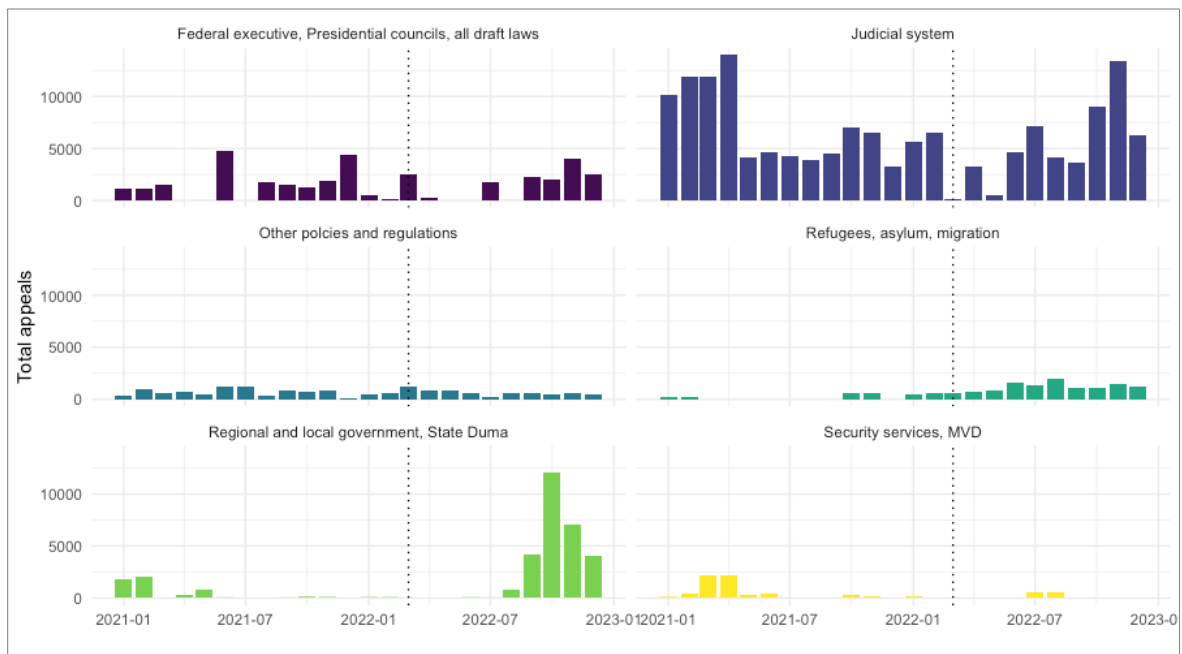
Political Grievances

A substantial share of appeals to the Presidential Administration address topics the Administration identifies as related to "Government, society, and politics." Most topic areas exhibit little variation before and after the invasion – until the onset of mobilization. The appeals data illustrate the successful effort to shift blame for mobilization from Putin,

who announced the program, to regional and local officials, who implemented it. In this case, as with other unpopular or difficult policies, regional authorities were tasked with implementing the federally-determined targets so that these lower-ranked officials receive any blame or reputational blowback while Putin himself remains insulated.

With the onset of mobilization in September, there was a sharp increase in correspondence about local and regional government (State Duma deputies are classified in this category but were the subject of very few appeals). Just as appeals about mobilization peaked in October, so too did appeals about regional and local authorities. Mobilization unfolded in a haphazard—even chaotic or terrifying—manner, with numerous tales of young men snatched off the street, exempted individuals being served notices, and even towns where the entirety of the adult male population was sent to the front. Based on the appeals data, Russians blamed this chaos on regional leaders rather than Putin or the federal government. As mobilization rolled out, there was no related increase in correspondence about federal activities, a category which includes the activities of the President’s Office, despite the fact that mobilization was initiated by presidential decree. Only 3.6 percent of appeals in October pertained to the activities of the federal authorities, compared to 22 percent about the performance of regional and local authorities and 33 percent about mobilization. It appears, therefore, that the Kremlin was able to shift blame for mobilization from Putin to regional authorities successfully.

Figure 4. Appeals Submitted to Presidential Administration Related to Political Concerns, Including the Activities of Government Bodies, Policies, and Regulations, Jan. 2021-Dec. 2022



Social Benefits and Services

Finally, typically, a generous share of appeals to the Presidential Administration has addressed issues of social benefits and services, but since the invasion, such appeals have constituted a shrinking share of correspondence, and there are fewer clear trends. As most areas within the social sphere have not seen much variation before and after the invasion, that decline is likely due to the near-cessation of appeals about healthcare and variation in appeals about family benefits. Healthcare (access to care, quality of care, support for medical workers, and epidemiological topics) was a robust concern of those who wrote to the Presidential Administration through early 2022, and at one point was mentioned in around one-third of appeals. Since March 2022, only 614 total appeals have addressed healthcare, and all of these are related to support for public health.

Figure 5 Appeals Submitted to Presidential Administration Related to Social Benefits and Services, Jan. 2021-Dec. 2022



In May 2022, 56 percent of communications to the Presidential Administration addressed family and disability benefits. This represents 22,086 individual messages, the single largest number of appeals addressed to any topic in any month. Further, almost all of these appeals concerned the calculation and payment of benefits to citizens with children. It is unknown

what prompted this precipitous yet brief explosion of correspondence (potentially a letter-writing campaign); it is clear that family benefits are a major concern for the public – and one potentially overlooked by Russia watchers. When it comes to social benefits, pensions and the state’s ability to pay them have attracted the lion’s share of attention, but their well-established political sensitivity has made pensions a government priority. Perhaps as a result, the topic of pensions received among the fewest appeals over these two years, about the same number as appeals about the security services and Internal Ministry. Attention to pensions may result in the state’s overlooking benefits to younger cohorts. Moreover, young families are the same demographics that are most likely to be affected by the war, from mobilization and service to migration to avoid them to the prospect of raising their children in an isolated, ever-more repressive country. It is noteworthy that although appeals about family benefits subsided after spring 2022, inquiries about benefits to service members and their families increased in the fall. At the moment, though, the economy appears stable; if the state must eventually choose between pensions and these benefits to younger social cohorts to sustain war financing, it could spell trouble.

Conclusion

Appeals submitted to the Presidential Administration reveal the evolving concerns of Russians who support or tolerate the Putin regime. In the immediate aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine, they exhibited a sharp increase in concern for Russia’s foreign policy and economic situation. This gave way to worries about the cost of war to individual Russians, specifically the condition of the military, military service, and conscription, and to a lesser extent, state benefits and social services. Though the individuals submitting this correspondence are unlikely to rise up against the regime, managing their changing concerns over the coming months may prove difficult, particularly if additional mass mobilization becomes necessary or the state’s ability to pay benefits is compromised.