

February 2023

ANNIVERSARY OF THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

Survey of British Public Opinion



New survey research conducted by Policy Exchange's Head of Foreign Policy and UK Resilience, Sophia Gaston, with research partners Opinium, ahead of the first anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Fieldwork:

2,000 GB adults aged 18+, nationally representative.

Fieldwork conducted by Opinium: Wednesday 15th – Friday 17th February 2023.

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Top Lines

- The British people remain deeply invested in the war in Ukraine, and are positive about the UK's contribution – believing it to be world-leading.
- However, there is ambiguity about the precise motivations behind the UK's commitments to defending Ukraine, as well as confusion around the nature of the victory we should pursue.
- This to some extent reflects the complicated nature of these questions, but also suggests the opportunity for greater consistency and clarity in UK Government messaging to the British people.

Key Data

1. When asked when type of 'victory' the UK Government should support in Ukraine, **the largest group of Brits (36%) is keen to see Russia pushed entirely out of the nation's borders**, including returning the separatist regions in the East and Crimea to Ukrainian control – twice as many Brits who support the next most-popular option.
 - However, the lack of a clear majority position indicates a degree of ambiguity about the intentions of Britain and its allies, as well as what might be practically feasible as the conflict drags on.
 - Focus groups make clear that Brits remain fearful of the potential for Putin to pursue escalation.
2. **Brits believe that the UK (71%), the United States (55%) and Poland (50%) have been the best-performing nations in responding to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and China has been the worst-performing nation (11%),** aside from the antagonist Russia itself.
 - Despite the negative media attention drawn towards Germany and France's responses to the conflict, just a quarter of Brits believe Germany has mishandled its response and only a fifth believe France has done the same.
 - It is Conservative voters who are more likely than Labour voters to assess all countries as having responded well, including France and Germany.
 - Brits do not feel confident in their assessments beyond Europe's borders, with around 60% of the population unclear about how our allies like Australia or India have performed.
3. When asked to identify the number one reason why the UK Government is investing such significant resources in the defence of Ukraine, **the British people are most likely to believe (23%) that HMG is seeking to send a message to Russia that it's not acceptable to undermine another country's sovereign territory.** This is followed by concern that if Russia succeeded in its mission to dominate Ukraine, then it may seek to expand its empire further into Europe (20%).
 - These results make clear that the British people think the UK Government is responding to the invasion to support our defence and security interests, as well as to uphold our commitments to the global order.
 - Moreover, the spread of responses suggests that HMG has not been able to craft a dominant message about its motivations.

Full Results and Demographics of Note

What Form of 'Victory' Should the UK Government Support?

- The largest single group of Britons (36%) want the UK Government to support Russia leaving all Ukrainian territory, including Crimea and the separatist regions in the East. A further 18% want the Russians returned to their territory before the invasion last year, which would see President Putin continue to hold Crimea and the Donbass.
- Just 12% of Britons want the Eastern separatist regions restored to Ukraine but Crimea to stay in Russian hands, and 7% are comfortable with Russia securing all Russian-speaking territory.
- The lack of overall majority or large plurality demonstrates the lack of clarity Britons hold about both the intentions of the UK Government, and the possibility for the conflict to be resolved.
- **Politics:** Brits intending to vote Conservative at the next election are slightly more likely than Labour voters to support Russia being stripped out in full from Ukraine (39% vs. 36%), but also more likely to support a return to the current state of January 2022 (24% vs. 18%). Labour voters are much less sure about their positions overall (24% vs. 15%).
- **Age:** Older Britons aged 65+ are much more inclined to support the full expulsion of Russian forces from all Ukrainian territory than younger Britons aged under 35 years (46% vs. 23%).
- **Region:** Britons living in the South of England are the most likely to support the full expulsion of Russian forces from all Ukrainian territory (42%) with Britons in London the least likely to support this (28%). Britons in the Midlands and London are the most likely to support Russia maintaining control over both Crimea and the Donbass (20%). Britons in Scotland are the most likely to be unsure about their position (34%).

Assessing Nations' Response to Ukraine

- The three countries that Britons believe have had the best response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine are, in order, the United Kingdom, the United States and Poland.
- 71% of Britons believe the UK has responded well to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, including 34% who think we have had a very good national response. Just 10% think the UK has responded badly.
- A majority of Britons (55%) believe the United States has responded well to the invasion. Just 16% believe the United States has responded badly.
- Half of Britons (50%) believe that Poland has responded well to the invasion. Just 10% believe that Poland has responded badly.
- Despite the media coverage of the challenges facing Germany in its shift to become a more engaged national security actor, 40% of Britons believe it has responded well to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, versus 24% who believe it has responded badly. Similarly, 37% of Britons believe France has responded well, and 20% think it has responded badly.
- Close British ally Australia only secures the support of 26% of Britons for its response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, yet this is not the result of Britons believing it has

actively performed poorly – a view held by just 13% of Britons. Rather, 61% of Britons claim they have insufficient knowledge of its response to the conflict.

- A similar number (59%) of Britons are unsure about India's response to the invasion, but nearly a third of the population (28%) believe it has been actively bad, compared to 13% of believe that India have responded well.
- A larger proportion of Britons have noted China's response to the Russian invasion, with nearly half of the population (47%) believing they have performed poorly, and just 11% believing they have performed well. With the exception of the Russian aggressors, China is the country with the worst scorecard on the Russian invasion in the eyes of the British people.
- **Politics:** Britons intending to vote Conservative at the next election are more likely to assess all countries as having responded well compared to their Labour-voting counterparts, including France and Germany.
- In the case of the United States, this is because Labour voters are more likely to mark the country down and give it a poor scorecard. In the case of other countries, it is because they are much less likely to be sure of their positions.
- **Age:** Older Britons are more likely to assess all countries as having responded well compared to their younger counterparts, and much more likely to think China has responded poorly. Just 2% of Britons aged 65+, 4% of Britons aged 50-64, and 9% of Britons aged 35-49 think China has responded well to the Russian invasion. But more than a quarter of Britons under 35 years (26%) believe China has responded well.

The UK Government's Motivations in Defending Ukraine

- When asked to identify the number one reason why the UK Government is investing such significant resources in the defence of Ukraine, the British people are most likely to believe (23%) that HMG is seeking to send a message to Russia that it's not acceptable to undermine another country's sovereign territory. This is followed by concern that if Russia succeeded in its mission to dominate Ukraine, then it may seek to expand its empire further into Europe (20%).
- A further 12% believe the UK Government is motivated by its NATO obligations, 11% believe they Government is motivated to prevent the disruption to food and energy prices. Just 10% believe the number one motivation is to stop a humanitarian crisis and the suffering of the Ukrainian people.
- These results make clear that the British people think the UK Government is responding to the invasion to support our defence and security interests, as well as to uphold our commitments to the global order. Moreover, the spread of responses suggests that HMG has not been able to craft a dominant message about its motivations.
- This is striking because other aspects of UK Government messaging on the invasion, including our intention to stay the course, have been considerably more resonant.
- **Politics:** There are very few distinctions in views on this question between the political parties, with one notable exception. While 27% of Conservative voters and 26% of Lib Dem voters believe that the UK Government is seeking to send a message to Russia that it's not acceptable to undermine another country's sovereign territory, just 18% of Labour voters agree. This may indicate the convergence on this question between respondents' personal views being projected onto Government policy, or it may also

suggest a perception of weakness amongst Labour voters regarding the Conservative Party's approach to Russian business and political interests in the UK.

- **Age:** Younger Britons under 35 years are more than twice as likely to be unsure about the UK Government's motivations than older Britons aged 65 years and over.
- **Region:** Londoners are considerably more likely (19%) than other Brits to think that the Government is being motivated by the costs of the disruption caused by the conflict towards food and energy supplies, and Welsh Brits (20%) are considerably more likely than other Brits to think that the Government is being motivated by the need to stand alongside our NATO allies.