

**Transcript of our interview with Dr Ian Garner, Russian War Propaganda Specialist:**

I don't really see the tenor of the conversation moderating in any meaningful way. What I see happening is that the state is starting to permit different narratives to be floated to move away from this idea of there is going to be a total defeat of Ukraine and instead soften up public opinion in some way for some sort of negotiated compromise that falls short of 100 per cent victory at some point.

... bear in mind that the compromise may not be a complete peace, it may not be a long-term peace, it may just be a ceasefire or a pause that would give Russia time to re-arm itself, to get better-trained conscripts to the front, to make sure that they can cement the gains that it's already gained and stop losing territory as it seems to be doing foot by foot and kilometre by kilometre to the Ukrainian forces who are better equipped and better trained.

I'm pretty sceptical on this. I don't really see much movement, especially from the elite and from the Kremlin in terms of making real offers of peace, real offers of negotiation. We still see senior figures making pretty outlandish claims about Ukraine needing to be de-Nazified, needing the Zelenskyy government to fall, Zelenskyy shouldn't be trusted and so on and so forth. It doesn't really seem like it's turning itself into an honest deal-maker.

I think there's an element of cherry-picking. However the fact that there is, there are cherries to be picked is significant in and of itself because that certainly wasn't the case in late February and March. What we're seeing is a return to an older style of propaganda that Russian TV has always worked with and that is dissenting voices are allowed to be aired on television, the existence of alternative opinions is considered but right now those alternative opinions tend to be then shouted down and proven wrong publicly by the host, by the other guests on these chat shows and discussion shows that you see. And that's a way of just showing the public that you may have this opinion, you may have heard your brother, your uncle, your father air this view, however here's why they're wrong and here's this sort of Greek chorus telling you that it's wrong to have these opinions and that you're not in the majority if you do.

Well of course independent media is still available if you choose to use something like a VPN to access media from abroad. But increasingly throughout the Fall the state has made sure to shut down more and more of those networks within Russia and it's doing a pretty effective job of closing down VPNs so Russians are finding it harder to access information from abroad. However, what they're doing a very good job of is pouring doubt into the veracity of foreign news so that yes you may be getting news from abroad but all foreigners, all westerners, all non-Russian and non-state news is inherently suspicious because it is on the side of Ukraine, at least in this reality that's being constructed. And therefore while you may be able to get it, there's always that whisper of doubt while you're reading it that 'well, it's probably propaganda and it's all lies'.

I think it's really put the cat among the pigeons when it comes to the pro-war crowd, but they're perhaps not responding in the way you might imagine. They are not responding by saying 'well, the way is morally wrong or misconceived in the first place', they're responding by saying 'we need to regroup, we need to rethink this and we need to execute the war properly'. You'll read on Russian social media groups and amongst the Russian public lots of statements along the lines of 'well now we need to launch the proper war, the real war, we need to end the special military operation, we need to decide what we're going for and we need to throw the whole weight of society behind it'. Of course this is a complete fantasy. This is impossible majestically and practically for Russia but that's where public opinion I think is going.

So I think we're seeing that public opinion is ever so slightly erring towards getting tired of the war, feeling that like, maybe, there should be some sort of end to this. There is some sort of discontent coming through. But still a majority of the public feel like they support the war, a majority of the public feel like the country is going in the right direction and perhaps don't link the country's direction with the state of the war, and a majority of the public trust Putin and trust the government to do the right thing on their behalf. And that's why sometimes you see what are seemingly completely contradictory polls in which a majority of Russians argue, I agree that the war should end and I agree that the war should be continued because the caveat is always 'if Putin says so'.

What I can tell you is that this is not going to end with mass public discontent. Not anytime soon at least. The public will trail along in the wake of the Kremlin and the wake of the warmongers that are surrounding Putin for really quite a long time. There was a lot of upset and a lot of disquiet about conscription around the mobilisation. A lot of people left. And yet the government reached its goals. They managed to conscript enough people and there's every sign that at the end of the winter, should they choose to, they'll be able to do these again. So we see snippets, we see bits and pieces of discontent that there's no sense this is turning into a mass protest movement or that there's any means for the opposition to turn it into a mass protest movement. Therefore I think the war in some fashion will continue and that the public will follow and fall behind the Kremlin as it decides to either sign a ceasefire or agree to a ceasefire, pause for a few months or even a couple of years or five years, start it up again, or if the government decides to continue its attacks on Ukraine civilians and Ukrainian citizens and Ukrainian cities.

Of course I can't say whether this is going to happen or not, but there is a danger that Putin is either deposed violently or much more likely ushered out into a sort of more, let's say a grandfather of the nation sort of role that's much more ceremonial and the right-wingers actually take charge and uphold the leavers of power. And of course those right wingers, many amongst them are genuine ideologues who would like to see the quote unquote full war against Ukraine be launched.

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