

The Media Environment and Domestic Public Opinion in China Toward Russia's War On Ukraine

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Editor's Note: The research presented below was conducted during the week of February 28, with collection and conclusions finalized on March 3. While relevant information regarding China's official position and media environment towards the conflict in Ukraine continues to come to light, we believe our findings are an accurate representation of the situation at the time this report was written and likely continue to be accurate as of the publication date.

China's position on Russia's war on Ukraine is complex, confused, and contradictory, attempting to balance friendship with Russia, opposition to the United States, aversion to the instability caused by the war, and protection of China's international image as a respectable power that advocates sovereignty for all countries. Ultimately, China's position is more supportive of Russia than not. The result is that official public messaging domestically has downplayed Russia's war on Ukraine, limited coverage of anti-war protests overseas, and suppressed dissenting sentiment within China. Pro-Russian, anti-Ukraine, anti-European Union, and anti-US voices and narratives are proliferating under this approach while expressions of support for Ukraine and anti-war sentiments are censored. It is not possible to make a conclusive statement on what the majority of Chinese people believe with regard to the war, but based on our preliminary research it is likely that many genuinely support Russia, in part due to Russian narratives and propaganda, while many genuinely disapprove of the war. The latter group is likely a largely silent or silenced group. Suppression of anti-Russia and pro-Ukrainian opinions may not be limited to China's citizenry alone, as unverified sources suggest that police forces in China are also contacting outspoken Ukrainians in China. Additionally, faced with negative domestic and international reactions to some online content, government authorities are blaming separatist forces in Taiwan and Xinjiang.

Limitations to This Research

This report defines public opinion as opinions outside of government sources, meaning any public expression toward the situation in Ukraine that does not come from policymakers or government spokespersons. Our definition also excludes expressions by organizations demonstrably or almost certainly led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). However, assessing genuine public opinion in China is difficult for several reasons. First, the significant levels of censorship in China, especially online, mean that the most visible and discoverable expressions of public opinion generally fall within acceptable bounds established by the authorities. Several instances of anti-war expression have already been censored, making it more likely that pro-Russian narratives become mainstream. Second, because the CCP places significant emphasis on “guiding” public opinion through overt and covert means, online content and comments are not necessarily reflective of what an ordinary citizen believes. Even without demonstrable proof of a connection to the CCP, it is possible that any particular expression is not organic but is made with an objective in mind that may not conform to the true feelings of the one who expressed it. However, it is also inaccurate to discount all public opinion toward Ukraine that is in line with China’s official position as propaganda. Third, whether social media activity is reflective of broader views toward an issue in any country is debatable; the medium is driven by emotion and the loudest voices are not necessarily representative of general society. All that can be said conclusively as of this writing is that there is a diverse range of opinions in China toward Russia’s war on Ukraine.


The Official Position and Party-State Media

China’s position on Russia’s war on Ukraine is muddled, attempting to balance competing priorities that are in some ways fundamentally opposed to each other, and party-state media promotes and censors content according to this shifting position. Officially, authorities and party-state media outlets have not named Russia’s war on Ukraine an “invasion” or a “war”. Instead, they typically refer to this as the “Ukraine issue” (乌克兰问题), “Ukraine situation” (乌克兰局势), or “Ukraine crisis” (乌克兰危机), and occasionally as a “special military action” (特殊军事行动) by Russia or as “hostilities” (战事). China’s 5-point position on Ukraine, as [explained](#) by Foreign Minister Wang Yi on February 25, 2022, emphasizes a peaceful resolution and “sustainable security concept” (可持续的安全观) that respects the concerns of all parties equally and safeguards territorial integrity and sovereignty. Based on Ministry of Foreign Affairs press conferences, stability is at the forefront of China’s concerns.


At the same time, however, China’s leadership broadly supports Russia’s position that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the US are most at fault for the current conflict. Further, as communicated in a joint China-Russia [statement](#) on February 4, 2022, the 2 countries see themselves as forming a new type of international system that more equitably redistributes power from “the West”. Therefore, China’s leadership likely reluctantly supports Russia’s war on Ukraine while simultaneously wishing it had not taken place and hoping that it will be resolved quickly. Tacitly supporting the war is likely viewed as preferable

to overtly siding with the US and EU against Russia, but it is also the case that some state-owned Chinese banks have begun limiting financing for some Russian entities, despite China's official opposition to sanctions.

China's official domestic public messaging is linked to, and sways with, the country's overall political stance. In the current context, it has downplayed Russia's war on Ukraine and limited coverage of anti-war protests overseas. Although foreign-facing, English-language outlets like China Global Television Network (CGTN) display news about Ukraine relatively prominently on their homepages, domestic media is much more muted. For example, China Central Television (CCTV) allotted only the last 2 and half minutes of its news broadcast to Ukraine on February 28. The front page of Xinhua's website on March 1 had only 4 relatively buried links to stories about Ukraine and its special page for Ukraine coverage, titled the "Ukraine situation" (乌克兰局势). The People's Daily's print edition first page has not made any reference to Ukraine since the start of the war. On February 25, Wenhao Ma, a reporter with Voice of America, shared via American social media his analysis of Ukraine war coverage on Chinese domestic outlets The Paper, Beijing News, and Caijing, finding no coverage of anti-war protests in Russia. Ma also found that while CGTN discussed anti-war protests on foreign social media, it was not doing so on Weibo (a prominent Chinese social media platform). Ma and others further assert that smaller domestic outlets that had previously covered the protests had begun deleting this content. Corroborating this finding, a branch of Beijing News shared, almost certainly by accident, internal corporate censorship instructions regarding its media activity on Weibo. The instructions stated: "Do not post anything unfavorable to Russia or pro-Western. ... Pay real attention to which comments are allowed. Keep an eye on [responses to] each post for at least two days. ... If using hashtags, only use those started by People's Daily, Xinhua, or CCTV".

 **Figure 1:** Internal censorship orders for a Chinese media outlet (Source: [China Digital Times](#))

Pro-Russia, Anti-Ukraine, and Anti-West Public Opinion

It is almost certain that some portion of the general public in China genuinely supports Russia's war on Ukraine, Putin's leadership, the stated reasons for the war, or some combination of these aspects, in line with China's official position. For example, a now-deleted Weibo post shared on American social media shows how a businessperson in China had a text conversation with a business client in Russia in which the poster (the Chinese businessperson) expressed praise for Putin and "everything he has done for" Russians. The client responded, per screenshots shared in the posts, that Putin is "not a hero, he is just a crime person", to which the poster stated they "had not thought" that Russians would be opposed to Putin. Some responses to this post continued to argue that they supported Putin's action as a preemptive strike to protect Russia against NATO aggression.  **Figure 2:** Chinese social media user expresses surprise that a Russian client did not support their positive views toward Putin (Source: [Weibo Screenshot Shared on American Social Media](#))

Searching Weibo for “real-time” posts mentioning “Ukraine”, which tends to filter out the posts by large media and CCP-led organizations, reveals largely pro-Russian and anti-Ukraine comments. Examples of such commentary include:

- Reacting to a video titled “War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity Committed by the Ukrainian Military-Political Leadership in Donbass”, a social media user asserted that “Ukraine is against humanity! ... Foreign media are completely silent”. This video was posted on February 28 and has more than 2.5 million views as of this writing; it is reportedly distributed by the Russian Foreign Ministry.
- A separate post asserts “I ... sympathize with the Ukrainian people, and hope that Russia will win. Russia is much more humane than Ukraine when it treats prisoners well and considers the safety of civilians. I admire Putin!!”
- Reacting to the hashtag “Russia will host the first international anti-facist conference”, a social media user said “God, in the 21st century I still have the opportunity to see the words anti-facism. Russia is so powerful”.
- Responding to a video posted by a Ukrainian woman about why Ukrainians elected President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, a post asserts: “Invite this pretty girl to quickly transmit to the ... president of Ukraine, you must immediately stay away from evil America and NATO. Sincerely stop acting and give a peopleful life to all the Ukrainian people!”
- Another post amplifies Russian justifications for the war on Ukraine, reading: “Ukrainian Azov Battalion, you can see from the picture that they are a force of evil. Therefore, I don’t need to say more about what kind of opponent Russia is facing. #Russian foreign minister says Ukraine is preparing to launch a provocation#”.

A series of linked posts highlight how one-sided the narrative on Weibo has likely become: a post with 17,000 likes states that “reading Weibo really makes [a person] angry, [I] almost believed that the whole world is uniting to contain Russia”. Presumably, this is due to the high number of comments lamenting international backlash against Russia’s actions. However, this post continues, many countries are now or have been previously against the Russia sanctions, including India, Pakistan, many South American countries, all of Africa, and China. In reply to this post, a separate social media user joked that “I read Weibo, [and] I almost thought it was not Russia fighting Ukraine, but Ukraine fighting Russia”. This reply post itself garnered 15,000 likes, a possible sign that many Chinese social media users get the same impression and likely know this is not the case despite the preponderance of pro-Russian content.


 **Figure 3:** Chinese social media user expresses support for Russia’s fight against the neo-Nazi Azov Battalion (Source: Weibo)

Anti-Russia and Anti-War Public Opinion

Not all social media users are overtly supportive of Russia. For example, in the same searches performed above were multiple posts that lamented China’s friendship with Russia

since Putin's actions would create trouble for China. Other posts expressed concern for Chinese people in Ukraine, asserting that evacuation work needs to be accelerated. Still others online express concern that inflammatory topics and overtly pro-Russia statements could lead to Chinese people in Ukraine becoming targets of armed citizens.

Anti-war sentiment on Weibo has been highlighted by other researchers since Russia's war on Ukraine began; for instance, journalist Wilfred Chan shared on American social media a now-deleted February 24 Weibo post that asserts: "As Chinese people who has also been invaded by foreign powers, we should be able to experience the anguish of being violated by a country that's several times stronger than you. ... If we are still cheering on Russia, how are we different from those who cheered on Japan when they invaded our country". This same post nevertheless attributed the current situation to Ukraine wanting to join NATO. While discoverable, such posts are much harder to find and appear less frequent than pro-Russia content. This is probably due to a combination of censorship and peer pressure; as documented by the Washington Post, "Antiwar views have been met with derision online, with critics referring to such peace proponents as sanctimonious "Virgin Marys" or as hypocrites that oppose all wars except those launched by the United States".

 **Figure 4:** Chinese social media user expresses sorrow over Russia's war on Ukraine (Source: Weibo Screenshot Shared on American Social Media)

Beyond Weibo, other forms of anti-war public opinion can be found in a variety of actions. Examples of these actions are listed below, but in general such actions are very likely subject to censorship:

- A poem published on WeChat is titled "I pray a poem can stop a tank".
- Public display of "STOP WAR" signs by individuals in China. A specific case in Hangzhou ended when authorities forced the demonstrator to put down the sign and leave the area.
- Publication of a joint statement by 5 professors on Wechat stated: "Autocracy will not only destroy the progress of civilization and the principle of international justice but also bring enormous shame and catastrophe to the Russian people ... We stand against an unjust war". The statement has been removed and is no longer available.
- Taobao stores are selling pro-Ukraine and anti-war T-shirts.

 **Figure 5:** Alleged letter from the Ukrainian consulate in Shanghai to provincial governments (Source: China Digital Times)

Like censorship of anti-war expressions by Chinese people, vocal Ukrainians are also allegedly being interrogated by police. This allegation comes from a consulate note sent by Ukraine's consulate in Shanghai to provincial authorities in China. We cannot independently verify the letter as of this writing, but it appears genuine. It states that Ukrainians have received in-person visits and phone calls from Chinese police about their opposition to Russia's leadership. The letter does not state where the Ukrainians are located or how they were expressing their opinions. The letter only says that it has received "a high volume" of

complaints from overseas (meaning outside of China). Presumably, the Ukrainians targeted by police are located in China, were using Chinese social media, and told their overseas relatives about the police action, who subsequently contacted the Shanghai consulate.

Other Opinions, Mockery, and Official Response

The South China Morning Post reported on February 26 that several Chinese social media platforms, including WeChat and Douyin, were removing “objectionable” content related to the situation in Ukraine. Examples cited include “false information alleging that [overseas] students can receive course credits for enlisting to fight in Ukraine, as well as ‘vulgar’ messages calling on ‘beautiful Ukrainian women’ to go to China”. The latter category of statements, some of which advocate “capturing” Ukrainian women, has garnered negative attention and criticism within China. In an article originally posted by a unit of the Cyberspace Administration of China on WeChat on February 26, this strain of commentary has been attributed to “Taiwan and Xinjiang independence forces”. The article highlights other examples of “adopt a Ukrainian” rhetoric accompanied by images of women on foreign social media platforms. This article, and others such as this Global Times screed attacking SupChina (a media outlet that highlighted the proliferation of misogynistic comments), are likely meant to defend China’s reputation internationally.

Outlook

Strident pro-Russian, anti-Western voices in China are the most visible, driven in part by the positions of official party-state media early in Russia’s war on Ukraine and very likely influenced by real belief in Russian narratives that attempt to justify its actions in Ukraine. However, harder-to-hear but clearly present anti-war voices are also making themselves heard as best they can, despite significant censorship. Highly visible online public opinion will almost certainly change as (or if) China’s confused but ultimately pro-Russian stance, and its attendant domestic public messaging, on Russia’s war on Ukraine shifts. Our findings and the anti-war protests documented by others serve as a reminder that there is a diverse array of opinions in China (as in any country) despite the CCP’s propaganda apparatus.