

Russians Increasingly Polarized by Syria Intervention – Poll

By [Matthew Bodner](#)

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According to the Levada Center, 48 percent of respondents said Russia's air force is hitting Islamic State positions, while 13 percent said they were bombing Syrian opposition targets.

Russian society is increasingly polarized by President Vladimir Putin's ongoing military intervention in Syria's 4 1/2-year-old civil war, according to a survey released Thursday by the Levada Center, an independent pollster.

Moscow launched a surprise bombing campaign against rebel groups and Islamic State fighters on Sept. 30, following a rapid buildup of military hardware in territory controlled by Syrian President Bashar Assad. Putin's approval rating has since soared to nearly 90 percent, according to a study released by state-run pollster VTsIOM last week.

But the Levada Center poll showed that Russians were not unified behind Putin's intervention in Syria. Instead, the number of respondents both supporting and opposing government policy in Syria rose sharply following the start of the air strikes, while the number of people

saying they were undecided fell by half.

The poll, conducted from Oct. 23–26, found that 53 percent of respondents approved of Russian policy in Syria, up from 39 percent a month earlier, before the bombing began. Those who said they did not approve doubled to 22 percent from 11 percent.

Meanwhile, the percentage of respondents who said they either did not care or did not know about Russia's actions in Syria fell to just 24 percent in October from 50 percent in September.

The poll surveyed 1,600 adults in cities, towns and villages across Russia. The margin of error did not exceed 3.4 percent.

However, the polarizing effects of the conflict — Russia's first military intervention outside the former Soviet Union since the collapse of communism — are not likely to restrict Putin's freedom of action, argued Pyotr Topychkanov, an associate at the Carnegie Moscow Center, a think tank.

“This won't be an obstacle for Putin's actions in Syria. He didn't seek domestic support before sending the air force to Syria, and he doesn't appear to need it for his later decisions regarding Syria,” Topychkanov said.

He added that Russian support for the campaign is rooted in a national identity that takes pride in seeing the military deployed in action, regardless of the reason or cause.

As for those opposed to the operation, they are unlikely to ever become a serious deterrent for further action in Syria because “the campaign just doesn't impact a significant part of society in the way that the Ukraine crisis did,” he said.

Also, “the threats that Russia says it is fighting in Syria do not feel close to many Russians,” he added.

The Levada Center poll also asked respondents a series of questions about the objectives and motivations behind Russia's intervention in the Syria conflict — which has been presented by state media as a highly effective campaign against Islamic State militants.

Western officials have challenged Russia's version of events, claiming that the majority of Russian air strikes in Syria are aimed at non-IS targets, and have instead focused on the so-called moderate opposition forces battling President Assad. These officials have also alleged that Russia is using unguided weapons and hitting civilians during their bombing missions.

However, the Russian media campaign to paint the Syria operation as a high-precision anti-terrorist fight appears to be working.

According to the Levada Center, 48 percent of respondents said Russia's air force is hitting Islamic State positions, while 13 percent said they were bombing Syrian opposition targets. Seventy percent of respondents also said these strikes were effective.

Likewise, more than 50 percent of respondents said information in the Western media about Russian bombs falling on civilian targets in Syria was not true, compared to 22 percent saying it was.

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