

When war shapes our willingness to share: insights from our study of the Russo-Ukrainian war

Description

Philipp Chapkovski

What happens to people's attitudes about social welfare when their country goes to war? In our recent survey experiment conducted in Russia during the invasion of Ukraine, we found that simply reminding citizens of the conflict can reshape both their trust in government and their support for redistributive policies – yet in very different ways depending on whether they back the war.

Research design: eliciting opinions with a simple prompt

In designing our study, we drew on nearly 4,000 Russian adults recruited online. We randomly assigned participants to one of three groups:

1. **Control:** They answered questions in a neutral sequence, with no early mention of the conflict.
2. **War reminder:** Early in the survey, we asked about support for Russia's military operation and expectations of victory.
3. **War+costs reminder:** Alongside the support questions, we prompted participants to consider specific human and economic costs of the war, such as the prospect of conscription or economic hardship

Later on, all respondents reported their views on whether the government should guarantee housing, food assistance, or income support, and how they would allocate a hypothetical social-spending budget.

War reminders and the “Rally-Round-the-Flag” effect

Our findings reveal a classic “rally-round-the-flag” phenomenon – but with a twist. For participants who already supported the military operation, being reminded of the conflict led to:

- **Higher trust in institutions**

They rated their confidence in Russian president Putin, regional authorities, and state services significantly above the control group.

- **Stronger redistributive preferences**

They were more willing to back programs for the unemployed, the elderly, and families in need, and allocated larger shares of the hypothetical budget to social assistance.

By contrast, those who were skeptical or opposed to the war reacted in the opposite direction: reminders of the conflict made them less trusting of government and less supportive of welfare measures, especially when they reflected on the war's toll on people and the economy.

Solidarity or Self-Interest?

We also explored whether war reminders would make people more generous to strangers. To do this, we used:

- A **dictator game**, where participants could split a small cash endowment with an anonymous other.
- Questions about **charitable giving**, both hypothetical and real.
- Self-reports of willingness to help various causes.

Overall, reminders of the conflict did not boost generosity across the board. Instead:

- **Charitable Intent rose Only Among Pro-War Participants** when we highlighted the conflict's costs, suggesting a heightened desire to "do good" in times of perceived crisis.
- **Anonymous Allocations Stayed Flat**, indicating that wartime solidarity may lean toward in-group unity rather than universal altruism.

Interestingly, participants who expressed a strong national identification ("I trust all Russians") were marginally more generous in the dictator game, hinting that shared identity can channel generosity toward fellow compatriots even in anonymous settings.

Trust as the key driver

To understand why war reminders shifted welfare attitudes, we ran mediation analyses focusing on two channels:

1. Trust in Government

2. General Prosociality

The results were clear: it was the change in trust rather than any newfound altruism, that explained most of the variation in redistributive support. In other words, when supporters of the war felt the government was worthy of confidence, they became more open to state-led social programs. Skeptics grew more resistant as their trust eroded.

Implications for policy and scholarship

Our research offers three broad takeaways:

- 1. Context-dependent preferences:** Attitudes toward redistribution are not fixed traits. They can swing dramatically when citizens perceive external threats or national triumphs.
- 2. Polarization of welfare attitudes:** In deeply divided societies, making conflict salient risks driving a wedge not only over foreign policy but also over domestic social spending, thus amplifying existing cleavages.
- 3. Implications for democracy:** While increased welfare support among some citizens may seem promising for social safety nets, autocratic leaders might exploit these effects to cement power without genuine policy reform.

As global conflicts continue to reverberate at home, our study underscores the power of psychological primes (such as this simple reminder of war that we used) to reshape opinions on core economic policies. For scholars, this means integrating emotional and identity-based factors into models of policy preferences. For policymakers and civil society, it highlights the need to recognize how narratives and framing around national security can have unintended consequences for social cohesion and the welfare state.

Ultimately, by showing how the battlefield of ideas interacts with everyday policy attitudes, our research invites both academics and citizens to rethink the stability of public opinion. That also reminds us that we should remain vigilant about how wartime rhetoric can sway our views on sharing resources.

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Author

politikwissenschaft_h1c5yk