



More in  
Common

# Britons and the invasion of Ukraine

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Briefing Paper Series

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Briefing 1: Focus Groups in Long Eaton and West Bromwich

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## Britons and the invasion of Ukraine

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, More in Common has held two focus groups in Long Eaton and West Bromwich East with people drawn from three of our seven British segments (Disengaged Battlers, Disengaged Traditionalists and Loyal Nationals). In the next week, we will speak to people from the remaining four segments. How people from these three segments (who make up 47 per cent of the British population) engage with the invasion is particularly important given their high levels of threat perception, strong sense of insecurity, as well as their relatively weaker commitment to democratic principles – and in the case of two of the segments (Loyal Nationals and Disengaged Traditionalists) their significant scepticism towards immigration.

The purpose of the groups was to get an immediate sense of how the British public is responding to the invasion of Ukraine – and to help our partners in civil society and government in their responses to the crisis. The following memo highlights key findings and is the first of a series of briefing memos from More in Common to track changing attitudes to the invasion in real time.

### High levels of engagement

Across both groups, it was clear that people – even those who are usually disengaged – are closely following the news and updates about the war in Ukraine on TV news and on social media. Compared to other international crises, engagement over the last fortnight has been significantly higher. That engagement doesn't just extend to adults – parents shared stories about having to answer their children's questions about the war and how they tried to use analogies about playground bullies. Unlike other conflicts, people are following events in Ukraine in real time. Our group in Long Eaton occurred shortly after news broke of the maternity hospital bombing, and participants had already heard about it by the time of the focus group, that level of rapid public dissemination is unusual.

**I saw a good thing on Facebook yesterday where someone explained it as a playground – where Russia was just the big bully of the playground and trying to take over another bit of the playground...so I just read that to my daughters, and it seemed to explain it really well to them, without being too scary**

- **Claire, Disengaged Traditionalist, Long Eaton**

### This is Putin's war

Almost everyone we spoke to identified Putin as the sole provocateur of this war – and there was also little sympathy for anti-NATO sentiment. Several participants labelled Putin as the 'new Hitler', and others thought he was power mad and overly macho. Beyond that,

there was real fear and frustration that one man could cause so much damage in such a short period of time. No one could understand what Russia could hope to gain in this war, and several participants believed reports that Putin is mentally and physically unwell.

**Putin, the new Hitler, as I call him...I have no idea what Putin is trying to do here, but I think he's trying to get access to a certain corridor through the Ukraine, by doing what he is doing, but I just cannot understand why, it's very unclear to me**

- **Raj, Loyal National, West Brom East**

### **Call for stronger action on refugees**

In both groups, there was strong support for a more welcoming approach to refugees from Ukraine and a growing frustration with what they saw as unnecessary government bureaucracy and paperwork standing in the way of helping Ukrainians who need our support. The groups we spoke to are traditionally more sceptical about welcoming immigrants and refugees into Britain – indeed many in these groups voted for Brexit to gain control of immigration policy – but for them this crisis is different.

- There was strong support for the government's family reunification scheme, and the announcements on work visas will resonate well with these groups who believe Ukrainians will work hard and make a contribution when they come to the UK.
- Participant after participant shared that 'we have to do our bit' and 'get this right' just as other countries across Europe are doing their bit to take in refugees.
- Most participants did not understand why the government was obsessing over the paperwork and they did not buy the government's line on security concerns – they view these risks as small compared to the risks experienced by Ukrainians today.
- Interestingly, for some, the perceived security concerns are lower because – unlike the Syrian refugee crisis – most refugees are women, children or elderly people, given that most adult Ukrainian men are required to stay and fight.
- Most people saw refugees coming to Britain as a temporary measure – and expect that when war is over, Ukrainians will want to return to their home and rebuild their lives. This should inform the framing of any sponsorship or settlement scheme to maintain support among these segments.
- Where people did have concerns was the impact of refugees on the NHS and housing – but they felt this was Government's problem to solve. They did not think that there should be an arbitrary cap on numbers as long as other countries were also doing their bit.

Again it is worth stressing that these attitudes to refugees are unusual among these audiences - both Loyal Nationals and Disengaged Traditionalists cite channel crossings and small boats as one of the major (if not the top) problems facing the country. However, when it comes to these Ukrainian refugees, people's views are completely different - these

usually sceptical groups want the government to do all we can to welcome those fleeing from Putin's war.

### **Little appetite for boots on the ground**

Appetite for deploying British troops to Ukraine varied between the two groups.

The Loyal National group (at the end of the first week of the war) had no desire to see British troops on the ground. Perceived foreign policy missteps in Afghanistan and Iraq had led to a sense, shared by many in this group, that British military intervention has not worked elsewhere and would not work in Ukraine. For this group, conflict escalation was a real fear and to be avoided at all costs.

The second group of Disengaged Battlers and Disengaged Traditionalists (at the end of the second week of the war) had slightly different views about military intervention, while they were equally keen to avoid it, they were more inclined to see it as an inevitable escalation of the conflict.

**But sending in troops to help? To me, it's a big no, because it doesn't work. We've seen it in other countries. We've seen it in everywhere. It just doesn't work.**

- **Mark, Loyal National, West Brom East**

**I think we've given them all the help that they need with flying in the weapons and I think the support that we've given is that something to be proud of. But I don't think that we really know what the right way of going about this is. Because we don't want to have a knock on effect on us, and that's why I believe they haven't gone in with the troops, because they don't want it to come over here.**

- **Mel, Disengaged Battler, Long Eaton**

**I think that's the only way we're going to stop them (British troops deployed to Ukraine) because I don't think you will get there with being sanctioned, it is not enough. And it's horrible because I don't want our troops going over there and fighting, but I do think we need to get rid of him (Putin) before anything gets better.**

- **Vicki, Disengaged Battler, Long Easton**

### **Reliance on both traditional and social media**

Most people, in both groups, were following the developments of the war on the BBC – and were supplementing this with scrolling and searching on social media – a sign of their high engagement in the war. Some had turned off the news (particularly those with children) given the worry and anxiety that was coming from following it. However, a minority felt that the mainstream media was giving them a partial view, so they turned more to

Facebook and Twitter to give them unfiltered, unvarnished and direct accounts of what is happening on the ground in Ukraine.

**Going back to what Chris was saying about the media, we don't ever get the full picture. They're owned by the big wigs and tell us what they want us to hear and give us enough to keep us from kicking off I guess”**

- **Nicky, Disengaged Traditionalist, Long Eaton**

**I find Twitter quite helpful because you can search, for certain things, let's say Ukraine, and they will come up with individuals, that of those two videos of where they live and the House being bombed and stuff like that, so you can see from their personal point of view.**

- **Dan, Disengaged Battler, Long Eaton**

### **Heightened concern about cost of living**

As with many of our groups in recent months, our conversations quickly turned to how Britons are struggling with the rising cost of living. When asked about the biggest stories of the past week – the first group of Loyal Nationals shared stories about the war in Ukraine, while the second group (made up of more economically insecure participants) focused more on rising prices at petrol pumps and supermarkets checkouts.

In both groups, people talked openly about struggling to make ends meet and shared worries about how they were going to heat their homes. There was a recognition that sanctions were likely to make this worse – and a worry that ordinary people will end up paying the price (both in the UK and in Russia). While in the first group participants agreed higher cost of living was a price worth paying for tough action against Putin, the second group's participants were more sceptical about how effective the sanctions would be on those they were meant to target – Putin and his oligarchs. Participants in the second group were aware of the recent action taken against Roman Abramovich and Chelsea FC – they wanted to see more action like this that showed the super-rich being punished.

While there was some awareness about the government's plan to help with the cost of living (including knowledge of the Council Tax rebate and the energy bills loan), there was universal agreement that the government was not doing enough, and an equally clear expectation that the government ought to do more. The recent rise in MPs pay had gone down badly.

There was a realism across the groups about the need to find targeted ways to help the poorest in the face of this crisis, and an understanding about the state of public finances post-Covid. But overall, the scale of government help in the face of this crisis is simply too low for most people.

As the invasion unfolds, the link between cost of living and sanctions will likely become a key driver of public opinion and continued public support for the UK's role – placing a premium on the Government to do more to address it.

**I think it's it's hard because they do need to do the sanctions to stop him, but obviously it's going to be hard because after April, we are going to be so dire in this country, anyway, I just I really don't know what it will do, it's quite scary to think about it really... most of the country are just going to be in poverty, if they're not already, it's crazy.**

- **Claire, Disengaged Traditionalist, Long Eaton**

**I'm certainly not looking forward to the fuel going up, I mean it's gone up so many times in the last week or two. Where's it going to stop? Nobody anyone's knows when or where it's going to stop....the government and how they're trying to help is just all over the place.**

- **Matt, Disengaged Traditionalist, Long Eaton**

**Yeah, I heard it was £150 (support from the government) but then that's kind of just a drop in the ocean, isn't it, when your bills are going up by, you know, £800 a year.**

- **Nicky, Disengaged Traditionalist, Long Eaton**

### **Little fear of nuclear war**

In both groups, there was little fear/anxiety about an imminent threat of nuclear war. They considered such a prospect to be a 'daft move' and were confident that the nuclear deterrence policy would avoid World War III, and some participants shared stories of how they reassured their children when asked about this specific threat. Most thought Putin's threats were a bluff or a negotiating tactic, but some still felt NATO had a responsibility to handle these threats with care and find ways to de-escalate the situation.

**Don't you think Putin was clever enough to know if he did do it, his country's on the border of it, isn't it? It's only a few miles in, it would blow, we call it nuclear and radiation would drift into his own people. No one wins a nuclear war. We all know it.**

- **Mark, Loyal National, West Brom East**

**I think nuclear would be a daft move – whichever country did it, it would be such a daft move**

- **Mel, Disengaged Battler, Long Eaton**

### **The difference between this war and others**

## Briefing 1: Focus Groups in Long Eaton and West Bromwich

A narrative dominating progressive circles in recent weeks has been why the war in Ukraine is demanding such a public and media response – when other conflicts raging in Somalia, Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria and elsewhere are not. In both groups, participants turned to this question without prompting by the moderator. Their explanations for why this war is different were:

- The threat is a different one – Putin represents a dangerous and bigger threat to Britain than other conflicts which involved weaker states and terror groups, rather than global powers.
- There is a closer physical and cultural proximity – Ukrainians are our European neighbours with shared experiences and outlooks, similar to many Britons
- Some considered this to be a simpler conflict about territory not religion, compared to those conflicts in the Middle-East.
- The media coverage on this war has been more than previous wars and conflicts.

Some participants also suggested that there was a racial element in the reaction to the invasion - given that most Ukrainian's are white. They expressed some discomfort over admitting this, but attributed it to human nature. Particularly interesting was that among ethnic minority participants who identified that driver, they said they felt more affinity to Ukrainians because of a shared European culture.

**I think we can relate to Ukraine more, even me being of a brown background. I think we can relate to the Ukrainians a bit more because it's kind of society we live in... The clothes they're wearing, what they look like. I think we're relating them a bit more than we would to other countries.**

- **Nanveet, Loyal National, West Brom East**

### **British leadership during this crisis**

There was a mixed verdict on the British government's handling of this crisis. The impact of partygate endures and limits the extent to which the Prime Minister can benefit from a 'rally round the flag' effect. Participants reflected on the fact that the Prime Minister's personal style might make it difficult for other world leaders to take him seriously. In fact, a recurring theme from our focus groups over the past few months, is people saying the Prime Minister doesn't 'help himself' and wondering whether he might now take a more statesman-like approach.

That said, no one in either group identified anyone who they felt would be better suited - either among the cabinet (with leading contenders dismissed as unsuitable) or in the Labour party. The Prime Minister's experience of handling the pandemic was seen as a positive.

**I'm just thankful he's not Donald Trump**

- **Mel, Disengaged Battler, Long Eaton**

The Foreign Secretary's support for British people taking up arms had cut through in the West Bromwich East group, and resonated strongly with the Loyal Nationals in the group who want to see tough action against Putin. Some participants worried about the unintended consequences of such advice for other conflicts around the world.

**A more united Britain and Europe in the face of Russian aggression**

There was a strong sense in both groups (but more strongly in the Loyal National group) that the country and Western politics and institutions were coming together and acting in a more unified way in the face of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

People shared stories about collecting supplies in their workplaces and schools, and talked with pride about how their businesses had been closing down trade to Russia, and sending supplies to refugees crossing borders in Eastern Europe. There was a sense of pride that UK had done well in supporting Ukraine particularly on supplying weapons and in cajoling the West into action, but many participants were disappointed with our response to refugees and felt ashamed we were trailing behind in this regard.

**What I'm seeing is a lot more of is everybody standing together, there's a lot of countries unified in their viewpoint of this and their actions, which is phenomenal. I don't think since the World War, you haven't seen anything like that really, which is great. And there's been a lot of good stuff in this crisis that's happened of unification. And I think the UK, it is a great one. It is a great Britain and I'm proud to be part of it and the democracy as well. So I like what I see with the direction that we're going unified that I've been privy to this last week, in my job, on the news, everything that I've seen.**

- **Alex, Loyal National, West Brom East**

**I'm a brownie and rainbow leader and we've already started collecting items like first aid kits to make care packages. So even though it's only a very small thing that we can do, it's doing something. It's not just looking at TV and thinking that's terrible and then switching it off. I think all of us could help in a very small way. And it's horrible, because my rainbows are like four to seven year olds, they all know about it and they're all concerned about it and it's just horrible.**

- **Lisa, Loyal National, West Brom East**



## **Annex 1: The British Seven Segments**

More in Common has worked with data scientists and social psychology researchers to build a model that maps the British population not according to their party, age, income or other demographic factor, but according to their values and core beliefs. Analysing a representative sample of more than 10,000 people in partnership with YouGov and conducting focus group conversations and one-on-one interviews with hundreds of Britons, we have identified seven distinct population groups – the ‘British Seven’.

**Progressive Activists:** A passionate and vocal group for whom politics is at the core of their identity, and who seek to correct the historic marginalisation of groups based on their race, gender, sexuality, wealth, and other forms of privilege. They are politically engaged, critical, opinionated, frustrated, cosmopolitan, and environmentally conscious.

**Civic Pragmatists:** A group that cares about others, at home or abroad, and who are turned off by the divisiveness of politics. They are charitable, concerned, exhausted, community-minded, open to compromise, and socially liberal.

**Disengaged Battlers:** A group that feels that they are just keeping their heads above water, and who blame the system for its unfairness. They are tolerant, insecure, disillusioned, disconnected, overlooked, and socially liberal.

**Established Liberals:** A group that has done well and means well towards others, but also sees a lot of good in the status quo. They are comfortable, privileged, cosmopolitan, trusting, confident, and pro-market.

**Loyal Nationals:** A group that is anxious about the threats facing Britain and facing themselves. They are proud, patriotic, tribal, protective, threatened, aggrieved, and frustrated about the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

**Disengaged Traditionalists:** A group that values a well-ordered society, takes pride in hard work, and wants strong leadership that keeps people in line. They are self-reliant, ordered, patriotic, tough-minded, suspicious, and disconnected

**Backbone Conservatives:** A group who are proud of their country, optimistic about Britain’s future outside of Europe, and who keenly follow the news, mostly via traditional media sources. They are nostalgic, patriotic, stalwart, proud, secure, confident, and relatively engaged with politics.

