

# The Influence of Communism on the Bulgarian Attitude Towards the Russia-Ukraine War

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## ABSTRACT

Studies have shown that older Bulgarians display an attachment to Russia and nostalgia for the communist era. Younger generations have not lived through communism and therefore are not as emotionally attached to Russia. Prior research analyzes the Bulgarian population's view of the Russia-Ukraine war. However, there is a lack of research on how separate age groups differ in perspective on the conflict. This study aimed to examine the impact of communism on older generations of Bulgarians regarding their view of the Russia-Ukraine war compared to younger generations. It also uncovered additional information on the Bulgarian opinion of the Russia-Ukraine war. To explore this, a survey was conducted with 19 questions on 200 Bulgarian participants from the ages of 18 to 75. Some of the questions included an open-ended aspect for more context into the thought processes of the participants, which were selected using the snowball method. Analysis of the data showed that older generations feel nostalgia towards communism, which explained the differing responses between age groups. Often, older participants viewed Russia more favorably than younger participants. Despite this, some of the questions did not show a significant difference in opinion. The results also showed that Bulgarians feel they should be neutral regarding the war due to the country's small government and military.

## Introduction

Bulgaria is a small Balkan nation in Southeastern Europe officially established in 681 AD. While Bulgaria has endured extensive historical changes throughout its development, the most important recent date is November 10, 1989, when one of the quickest European revolutions occurred. The Communist party, ran by dictator Todor Zhivkov was removed after 45 years in power, precisely one day after the Berlin Wall fell. However, in contrast to the previous revolutions in the area, it was more of a coup among the Bulgarian Communists over whether to carry out the perestroika's changes (RFE/RL, n.d.). "Perestroika" is the reconstruction and the reforming of the economic and political system in the Soviet Union during the late 80s, typically linked to General Secretary Mikhael Gorbachev after 1985.

Communism is a political and economic ideology created by Karl Marx. It promotes a classless system where all property is owned by the public, and people are paid according to their specific needs. In a society where an increasing percentage of young people do not remember the dramatic early years of democracy, let alone communism itself, the division between communists and anti-communists is consistently reaffirmed. Compared to the crime and corruption that followed after the collapse of communism, some Bulgarians are inclined to romanticize the era, viewing the 33 years of Todor Zhivkov's administration as a golden age ("November 10: It's Bulgarian Democracy's Birthday," 2016).

Regarding their opinions of state communism, the youngest and oldest have stark generational gaps and even polar opposite views. Unlike other countries formerly part of the Soviet Union, Bulgarians are taught that Russia has saved them from Ottoman Turkish rule, which had been tormenting Bulgaria for 500 years. The older generation consisting of people above the age of 50, has been taught that Russia saved Bulgaria from history books in school, and most were taught Russian. As a result, older people view themselves as being in a brotherhood with Russia and

associate communism with positive memories. Despite close ties with Russia, Putin's popularity significantly decreased from 58% in March 2020 to 25% in April 2022 ("Ukraine war tests Bulgarians' pro-Russia sentiment," 2022). Even with Putin's popularity decrease, 44% of Bulgarians think that NATO has taken a greater part in the responsibility of the war compared to only 23% blaming Russia. Of the 16 countries surveyed, Bulgarians had the highest percentage of people claiming that NATO is at fault (Stolle & McGill, 2022). While younger Bulgarians understand Bulgaria's long history with Russia, they lack the direct connection their seniors have with the country through the communist regime. As a result, younger Bulgarians often do not have a strong opinion on communism, making them less likely to form biases in support of Russia.

Russia employs journalists in Eastern European nations to take advantage of and distort internal discussions about Westernization, the US, and NATO. Russian disinformation tactics, for instance, have primarily targeted Bulgaria, where misinformation has become so ingrained in the media environment that it was translated and reprinted in the Bulgarian tabloid *Trud*, which compared Ukrainian soldiers to Nazis. This story went viral and gave Russian fans a voice in the national conversation. Disinformation works to discredit Western media outlets while emphasizing pro-Russian narratives (Ivanova & Sullivan, 2022). Bulgarians are particularly prone to Russian propaganda due to the shared cultural beliefs and long history Bulgaria has with Russia. Since older generations of Bulgarians grew up with Russian culture, they are more susceptible to the regular consumption of Russian propaganda, especially when taking into account the high level of proficiency in the Russian language.

This research was conducted by selecting a group of Bulgarians of varied ages currently residing in the country. Through recent studies, Bulgaria's divide between NATO and Russia supporters is evident. Older Bulgarians generally have a similar positive outlook on communism and are more inclined to support Russia in comparison to the younger generation. This paper aims to examine the contrasting views of different age groups in Bulgaria on the Russia-Ukraine war to explain why Bulgaria is the least pro-western out of all the Eastern European countries. This review is essential since research on Bulgaria regarding the Ukraine conflict is largely limited to just the general Bulgarian population and lacks data on specific age groups.

## Literature Review

Several studies demonstrate the pro-Russia mentality of Bulgarian citizens compared to other Eastern European nations. The Summer 2022 Standard Eurobarometer titled "The EU's response to the war in Ukraine" conducted during the peak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict shows that Poland and Bulgaria stand out from the 28 EU countries surveyed, with 93% of Polish people supporting sanctions compared to only 46% of Bulgarians. This statistic shows the extreme difference in the public opinion of Northeastern European versus Southeastern European countries. Sanctions are an effective instrument to make the Russian government suffer financially if they continue the war, but they may be perceived as less of a direct challenge to Russia than deploying troops or weapons to Ukraine. This may show why public opinion on penalties is not as divided as it is about some other programs (Ivanova & Sullivan, 2022). Import sales from Russia for natural gas and solid fuels surpass 75% in Bulgaria (Russia's invasion of Ukraine: assessment). Since Bulgaria relies on Russia for resources, Bulgarians are more hesitant to impose sanctions on Russia.

A notable statistic reveals that only 24% of Bulgarians advocate for financial support for those affected by the war. Moreover, 44% of Bulgarians advocate for humanitarian support for those affected by the war, the second-lowest percentage (Romania is the lowest) of the 28 countries surveyed. In addition, only 28% of Bulgarians "totally agree" that the European Union should reduce its dependency on Russian sources of energy as soon as possible. The North and South are also divided in their support for aiding Ukraine. While 54% of Estonians think Ukraine should be assisted with finances and military equipment only, 14% of Bulgarians agree (The EU's response to the war in Ukraine, 2022). Bulgaria is the most anti-Western out of all the Eastern European countries surveyed by GLOBSEC, and it is the only nation where the number of people that would like to leave NATO increased in 2022 to 38%. Despite the invasion of Ukraine, 57% of Bulgarians still do not see Russia as a security danger, and 30% see Russia as their top strategic ally. It was also found that only 33% of Bulgarians perceive Russia as a threat, the lowest out of 9 Eastern

European countries surveyed (Hajdu et al., 2022). Furthermore, 23% of Bulgarians older than 55 and 22% between the ages of 35-54 view NATO as a threat. Almost cutting this number in half, only 12% of Bulgarians aged 18-34 feel threatened by NATO (Kazaz & Smilov, 2022).

Bulgarians are still susceptible to conspiracies. The GLOBSEC study titled "GLOBSEC Trends 2022: CEE amid the war in Ukraine" shows that, on average, three conspiracies about democracy were believed by 54% of respondents. Additionally, an average of 20% of people in Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland were unsure that their nation would benefit from a liberal democratic system "based on equality, human rights and freedoms and the rule of law." The majority of people (54% each) in Slovakia and Bulgaria think there is no such thing as a democracy because, in practice, unelected elites control everything. This proves that Slovaks and Bulgarians are most susceptible to conspiracy theories. In addition, the study found that 35% of Bulgarians believe Ukraine is a puppet of the West.

A study titled "Young People in European Bulgaria: A Sociological Portrait 2014" by Petar-Emil Mitev and Siyka Kovacheva showed that 77% of the population that is 65 and over had a positive attitude towards Bulgaria's social development between September 9th, 1944, and November 10th, 1989. This percentage decreased by every age group, with 56% of people aged 55-64 as well as 22% of people aged 28-40 having a positive view of communism. About 57% of Bulgarians surveyed between 18-27 have no opinion on communism. The same study also discussed that 72% of Bulgarians 65 and over have a negative view of the period since November 1989, but this number hardly differed between the other age groups. Unsurprisingly, the younger generation lacks the close ties to Russia and the Kremlin that the older generation has built. Older Bulgarians feel a connection to Russian culture and feel a sense of nostalgia for the Soviet Union. Currently, Bulgarians feel a sense of distrust of the government, further pushing the emotional connection to Russia forward, especially in Bulgarians in their 60s. Bulgarians tend to view the current governmental system as corrupt, explaining why its negative perception stayed constant throughout the different ages.

The works I have read are in conversation with one another in various ways, all supporting the idea that Bulgaria's close historical ties to Russia correlate to greater support for Kremlin views from the general public compared to the rest of Eastern Europe. The role that age plays in this bias towards Russia is crucial to recognize since older generations grew up with communism and often associate Russia with nostalgia and pleasant memories. Russian culture's influence on the older generation of Bulgarians is critical for understanding the political beliefs of Bulgarian citizens that make the country the least pro-western of all its Eastern European counterparts.

## Methodology

This research project's main purpose is to identify the relationship between different age groups of Bulgarian people and the Bulgarian population's view on the Russia-Ukraine conflict. To conduct the research, I used both quantitative and qualitative elements. All questions had a numerical aspect that could be precisely measured and analyzed statistically, but some also included an open-ended aspect where participants could elaborate on their opinion.

Firstly, the research plan was submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval to conduct the project. Each survey response was recorded on Google Forms with the same questions for every participant. The survey consisted of seventeen questions that everyone could respond to. However, an additional two questions applied only to respondents born before November 10th, 1989, who have conscious memories of life in Bulgaria before communism. Those who did not meet the criteria were asked to skip these questions. For that reason, the survey included a total of nineteen questions. The participants were informed that the survey is anonymous and the only personal information collected comes from the first two questions asking for gender and age as they are relevant to this study. Since the survey was anonymous, the respondents felt safer expressing their personal beliefs in a relaxed manner without feeling the need to give the answer they deemed politically correct. They were asked to provide more details on open-ended questions in addition to their yes or no response to gain the insight needed for important conclusions.

This study was conducted using a sample size of 200 people. The survey was sent to multiple Bulgarian people from both the younger and older generations, who then spread the link to different friends and family members,

creating a snowball effect. Therefore, this study uses the snowball method. "Snowball sampling is a recruitment technique in which research participants are asked to assist researchers in identifying other potential subjects." (Oregon State University, 2010).

Since the participants were not all fluent in English or fully comfortable expressing their opinions in another language, all the survey questions and responses were written in Bulgarian. The younger generations of Bulgarians typically have some level of fluency in English, while older Bulgarians remain largely unacquainted. Therefore, the Bulgarian language was used to ensure that the entire sample size could comprehend the questions and fully express themselves in their native language.

I used my proficiency in the Bulgarian language to translate the responses as closely as possible to convey the same message the respondent intended. The survey questions in Bulgarian can be found in the appendix of this research project. The participation requirements include being 18 or older and of Bulgarian descent. It should be noted that not all the participants surveyed resided in Bulgaria at the time. However, all the participants have in-depth knowledge of life in Bulgaria, allowing them to formulate their opinions.

## Survey Questions

**Table 1.** Survey Questions (Questions 18 and 19 apply only to people born before November 10, 1989, who have conscious memories of life in Bulgaria during communism)

<b>Question 1</b> Your age
<b>Question 2</b> Gender
<b>Question 3</b> Do you think that Russia is a threat to Bulgarian national security? Why?
<b>Question 4</b> Do you like Russia? Why do you like or dislike it?
<b>Question 5</b> Should Ukraine be accepted into the EU and NATO? Briefly explain your opinion on the matter.
<b>Question 6</b> Do you think Bulgaria should remain a member of the EU and NATO?
<b>Question 7</b> Do you prefer communism or democracy?
<b>Question 8</b> Do you approve of the actions of the President of Ukraine Zelensky regarding the war? (Please answer on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being completely disapproving and 10 being completely agreeing).
<b>Question 9</b> Do you approve of the actions of the President of the Russian Federation Putin regarding the war? (Please answer on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being completely disapproving and 10 being completely agreeing).
<b>Question 10</b> Do you believe in the theory that the war is not between Russia and Ukraine, but between Russia and the Western world, and Ukraine is just a field for military action?
<b>Question 11</b> Do you think the western world deliberately provoked Russia to start this war?
<b>Question 12</b> Do you believe in conspiracy theories regarding world order?

<b>Question 13</b> Do you approve of more sanctions against Russia?
<b>Question 14</b> Should Bulgaria be neutral regarding the war? Why?
<b>Question 15</b> In your opinion, how strong is Russian propaganda in Bulgaria? (Please answer on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being No Russian Propaganda At All and 10 being Extremely Strong).
<b>Question 16</b> Which great power should Bulgaria adhere to? Russia or USA?
<b>Question 17</b> Should Bulgaria send more weapons and aid to Ukraine?
<b>Question 18</b> Are you nostalgic for communism?
<b>Question 19</b> Do you think you lived better under communism?

## Results

These results are based on the survey data collected from questions 1-19 providing an analysis of 200 people of a Bulgarian ethnic background, residing anywhere as long as they were raised in a Bulgarian culture. Excel was used to provide graphs and further analyze the data. In addition to numerical values in the form of percentages, direct quotes from the participants who provided answers to open-ended questions are shown to provide context into their thought processes. This research aims to test the hypothesis regarding how different age groups of Bulgarian people perceive the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

### Question 1 Analysis

**Table 2.** Gender of Participants

Gender	Number of Participants
Male	92
Female	108

### Question 2 Analysis

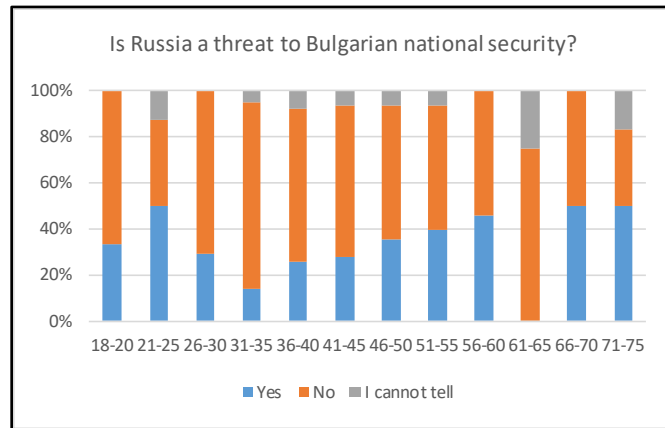
**Table 3.** Age of Participants

Age	Number of Participants
18-20	6
21-25	8
26-30	17
31-35	21
36-40	27
41-45	32
46-50	31

51-55	33
56-60	13
61-65	4
66-70	2
71-75	6

### Question 3 Analysis

*Do you think that Russia is a threat to Bulgarian national security? Why?*



**Figure 1.** Percentages of participants separated into age groups and if they believe Russia is a threat to Bulgarian national security based on question 3.

The results from Figure 1 show that most Bulgarians do not view Russia as a threat to Bulgarian national security. Overall, 32% of respondents answered "yes," and 62% answered "no" to this question. Most people had a strong opinion on the matter, and only 6% of respondents said they "cannot tell" if Russia is a threat. Since question 3 was open-ended, the written responses revealed that people who view Russia as a threat generally conclude that Russia is a corrupt dictatorship that would go against Bulgaria since the country supports Ukraine and NATO. Participants who do not view Russia as a threat stated that Bulgaria and Russia have a long history of being brotherly nations and have always had a positive relationship. The opinions of the age groups surveyed stayed consistent throughout each group in the sense that most of the participants did not perceive Russia as a threat. Less than half of the participants falling into the ages of 18-55 felt threatened. The age group of 21-25 was an outlier here, as 50% did feel a threat. Of the participants aged 31-35, only 14.3% viewed Russia as a threat, the lowest percentage of all the groups. The participants between 56-75 demonstrated a much stronger fear of Russia and its potential to hurt Bulgaria. An outlier in this category was people between 61-65. From this group, 75% of participants did not feel any threatening presence from Russia.

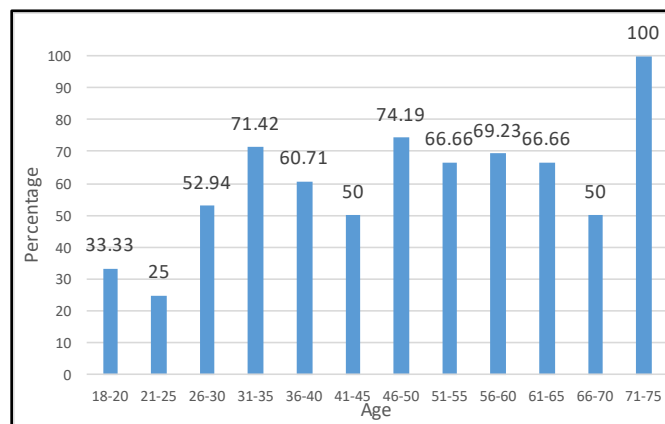
**Table 4.** Open-ended question responses based on question 3.

Yes	No
"Yes, because when announcing support for Ukraine and the USA, Bulgaria stands against Russia. Our country does not have enough reinforcements and resources to fight against Russia. I do not think that Ukraine or the	"No. Bulgaria and Russia have been on good terms until now. If this happens, the reason may lie in the support of Europe's politics. Because of this, our politicians must be very careful and more diplomatic and not give in to

USA will protect Bulgaria in case of a possible attack by Russia." 29-year-old female	Europe's aggressive policy towards Russia." 55-year-old female
"Yes, because of the systematic interference in the internal affairs of Bulgaria through provocations and corrupt practices." 24-year-old male	"Russia is not a threat to Bulgaria because we are connected by a strong historical bond forever, which no one and nothing can destroy even if they want to." 34-year-old female

### Question 4 Analysis

*Do you like Russia? Why do you like or dislike it?*



**Figure 2.** Percentage of people separated into age groups who positively view Russia based on question 4.

According to Figure 2, a general increase is prevalent in the number of people who positively view Russia as age groups get older, with 33.33% of 18-20-year-olds and 100% of 71-75-year-olds liking Russia. The middle age brackets of 41-45-year-olds are divided in half on the question, while 74.19% of 46-50-year-olds have a bright outlook on Russia. Of the 200 participants, 35 answered with a definite yes to the question, while 15 provided a definite no. An additional 22 people perceive Russia in a neutral manner stating they have "no opinion" on the country. An interesting trend emerged between 29 of the participants who expressed that they differentiate between Russian culture and politics. These people have a favorable view of Russian people, cultural activities, and the arts but do not condone the current political system. Furthermore, 66 participants conveyed an unconditional love for Russia, failing to mention the country's current political state or the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Respondents frequently expressed gratitude to Russia for saving Bulgaria from Ottoman-Turkish rule. Of the respondents, 32 showed absolute disapproval of Russia concentrating on political affairs and disputes over the years, including the war between Russia and Ukraine.

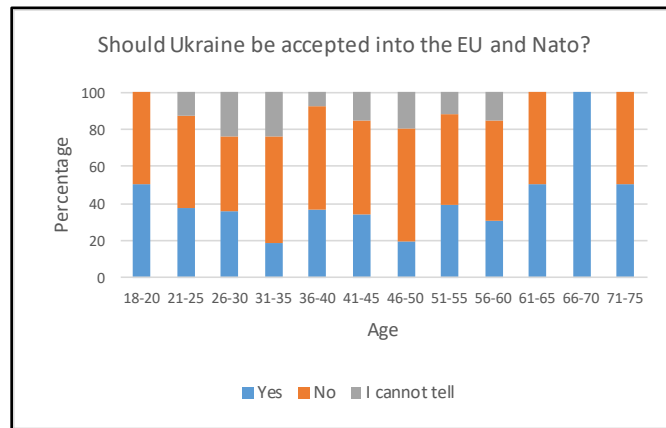
**Table 5.** Open-ended question responses based on question 4.

Like	Dislike
"I have respect for Russia since the country has helped us in difficult times." 52-year-old male	"I don't like it because of the mentality of its citizens." 18-year-old female

"Yes, I like Russia. I remember what it did for Bulgaria." 38-year-old female	"At the moment, any country that starts a war with another country, I cannot support and I have a negative opinion of it." 24-year-old female
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Question 5 Analysis

*Should Ukraine be accepted into the EU and NATO? Briefly explain your opinion on the matter.*



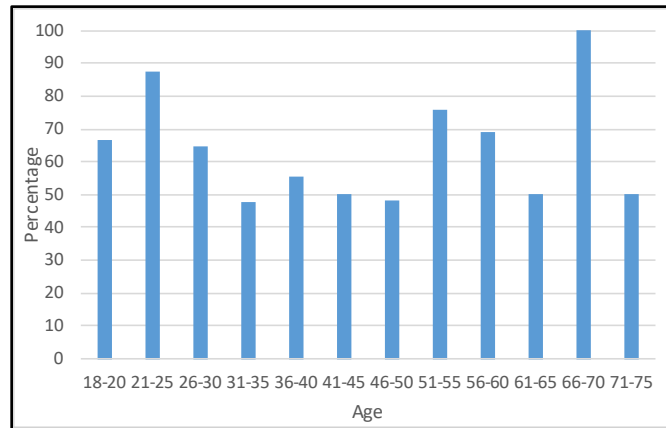
**Figure 3.** Percentages of participants and their belief on if Ukraine should be accepted into the EU and NATO based on question 7.

Figure 3 indicates that participants do not believe Ukraine should be accepted into the EU and NATO. This is shown by the 104 out of 200 respondents that answered "No" to this question. Another 67 people had the opposite opinion, believing that Ukraine should be accepted into the EU and NATO, and 29 people had no opinion. Of the 18-20 year age group, half condoned Ukraine joining the EU and NATO, while the other half supported the opposite. Only 19% of 31-35 year-olds support the idea of Ukraine joining. As shown through the written responses, people between 31 and 60 had noticeably much stronger opinions on the matter than the other ages.



### Question 6 Analysis

*Do you think Bulgaria should remain a member of the EU and NATO?*

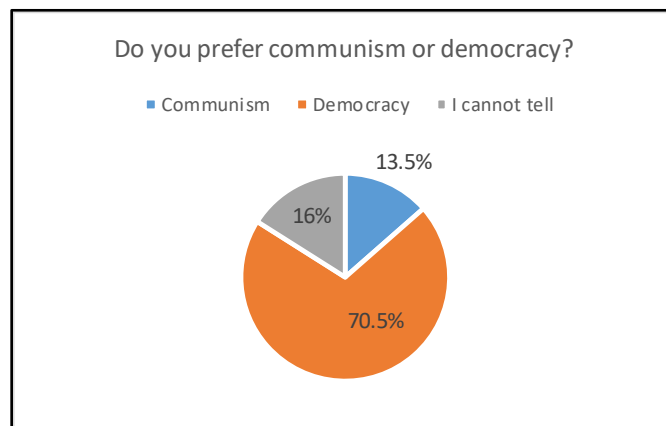


**Figure 4.** Percentages of participants who believe Bulgaria should remain a member of the EU and NATO based on question 6.

As shown by Figure 4, the respondents overall believe Bulgaria should remain a member of the EU and NATO. In total, 119 respondents agree with this statement. An additional 50 participants express complete disapproval of Bulgaria's membership in the EU and NATO. The leftover 31 participants indicated that they were unsure of their stance regarding this question. The age group that demonstrated the least support for the EU and NATO was respondents between the ages of 31-35 (47.62%). Nevertheless, this percentage falls very close to half of the age group and is not a huge outlier compared to the other groups.

### Question 7 Analysis

*Do you prefer communism or democracy?*



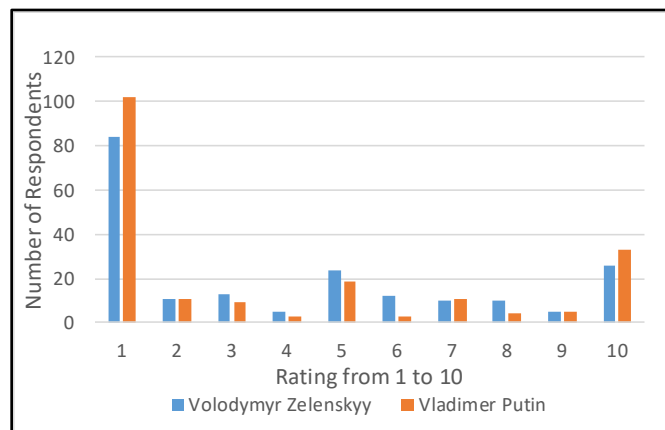
**Figure 5.** Percentages of participants who preferred communism, democracy, or did not have an opinion based on question 7.

Figure 5 finds the percentage of participants that prefer communism or democracy. Of the 200 participants, 141 people, or 70.5%, preferred democracy making up the majority of the sample size. The second most popular choice was "I cannot tell," making up 32 or 16% of the responses. These people were older respondents torn between when their quality of life was better: before or after communism ended. Some younger respondents were also unsure. This could be because they felt they could not judge due to not living during both periods or because they had heard favorable stories from older family members regarding communism, causing them to feel torn. Lastly, 27 (13.5%) of participants prefer communism, making it the least popular option.

### Question 8 and 9 Comparative Analysis

*Question 8: Do you approve of the actions of the President of Ukraine Zelensky regarding the war? (Please answer on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being completely disapproving and 10 being completely agreeing).*

*Question 9: Do you approve of the actions of the President of the Russian Federation Putin regarding the war? (Please answer on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being completely disapproving and 10 being completely agreeing).*

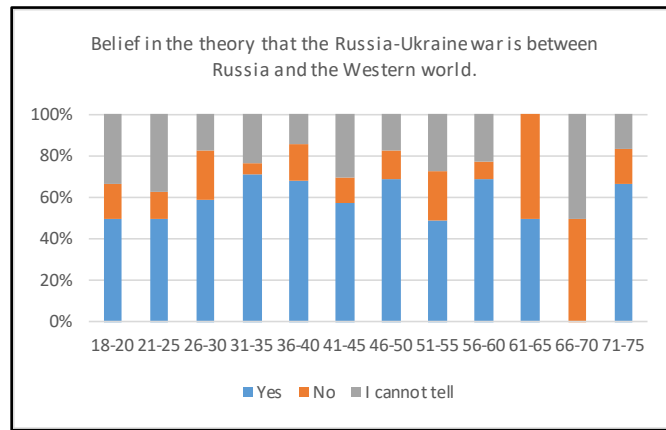


**Figure 6.** The number of respondents (sample size of 200) and their rating from 1-10 regarding the actions President Zelensky and President Putin took in concern with the Russia-Ukraine war.

To compare the attitude of the Bulgarian population regarding the actions President Zelensky and President Putin took, participants were asked to give both leaders a rating from 1-10. The results, shown in Figure 6, revealed strong disapproval of both the Ukrainian and Russian presidents. Of the 200 respondents, 84 rated Zelensky a 1, demonstrating complete disappointment in his actions during the conflict. Additionally, 102 people rated President Putin a 1, meaning more than half of the respondents disapprove. On the other side of the spectrum, 26 people gave Zelensky a 10, and 33 did the same for Putin. These respondents approve entirely of the actions taken by both presidents. While more participants disapprove of President Vladimir Putin, the results show that Bulgarians are not particularly pleased with either leader.

### Question 10 Analysis

*Do you believe in the theory that the war is not between Russia and Ukraine, but between Russia and the Western world, and Ukraine is just a field for military action?*

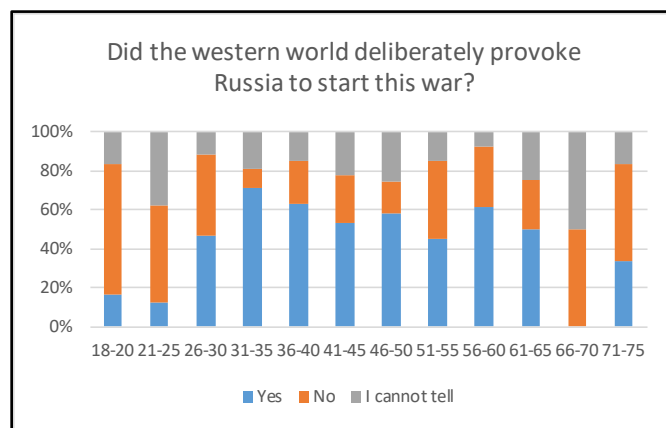


**Figure 7.** Percentage of participants separated into age groups and their belief in the theory that that the war is not between Russia and Ukraine, but between Russia and the Western world based on question 10.

As displayed in Figure 7, the participants predominantly believed in the theory that the Russia-Ukraine war is between Russia and the Western world. Of the respondents, 121 conveyed a belief in the theory making up more than half of the total responses. A further 33 people did not believe in the theory, and 46 of the respondents did not know what to believe. The results stayed relatively constant between age groups, besides the outlier of 50% of 66-70 year-olds who do not believe in the theory. Of the 31-35-year-old age group, 71.4% identified the theory as true, making them the group that signified the most support for it.

### Question 11 Analysis

*Do you think the western world deliberately provoked Russia to start this war?*



**Figure 8.** Percentage of participants separated into age groups and their opinion regarding if the western world deliberately provoked Russia to start the war based on question 11.

The results from Figure 8 show that the younger age groups consisting of 18-25 year-olds usually do not believe the Western world deliberately provoked Russia to start the Russia-Ukraine war. Looking at the statistics, only 16.66% of 18-20 year-olds and 12.5% of 21-25 year-olds think the Western world has purposefully provoked a war between Russia and Ukraine. In comparison, an average of 48.30% of the remaining age groups have the same opinion. Generally, the respondents appeared to believe this theory, with 104 people answering "Yes" to this question. Furthermore, 58 people responded with "No," which leaves the remaining 38 participants undecided.

### Question 12 Analysis

*Do you believe in conspiracy theories regarding world order?*

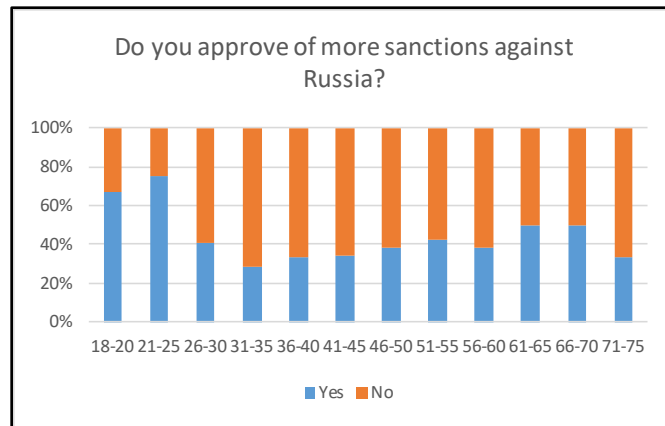


**Figure 9.** Percentage of participants separated into age groups and their belief in conspiracy theories regarding world order based on question 12.

From Figure 9, one can conclude that the responses indicate a strong belief in conspiracy theories. In total, 138 participants stated that they believed the theories; while a mere 62 people exhibited an opposite opinion. The percentage of those believing in conspiracy theories stayed consistently high throughout the groups. Despite this, 18-25-year-olds display more doubt towards these beliefs. Both 18-20 and 21-25 year-olds were divided in half on this question. Of the respondents aged 36-40, 81.48% trust the theories contrasting the significant division in younger generations.

### Question 13 Analysis

*Do you approve of more sanctions against Russia?*

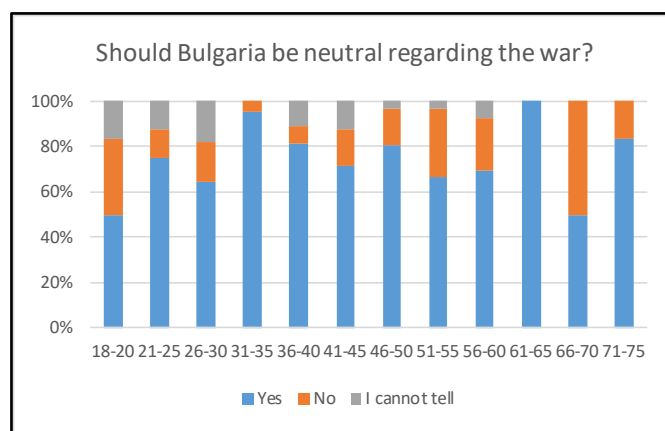


**Figure 10.** Percentage of participants separated into age groups and their opinions on approving more sanctions against Russia based on question 13.

Of the 200 participants, 121 people disapproved of imposing more sanctions against Russia, and 79 supported more sanctions. Made apparent in Figure 10 is the drop in approval following the age of 25. The data shows that a total of 66.66% of 18-20 year-olds and 75% of 21-25 year-olds approve of sanctions. On the other hand, an average of 39% of people aged 26-75 years old express their support for more sanctions against Russia.

### Question 14 Analysis

*Should Bulgaria be neutral regarding the war? Why?*



**Figure 11.** Percentage of participants separated into age groups and their opinions on Bulgaria demonstrating neutrality regarding the war based on question 14.

As shown in Figure 11, most participants agreed that Bulgaria should be neutral regarding the Russia-Ukraine war. Of the age groups, the 31-35-year-olds (95.2%) and the 61-65-year-olds (100%) most strongly felt Bulgaria should stay neutral. Conversely, only 50% of 18-20-year-olds and 66-70-year-olds agree. In total, 151 respondents

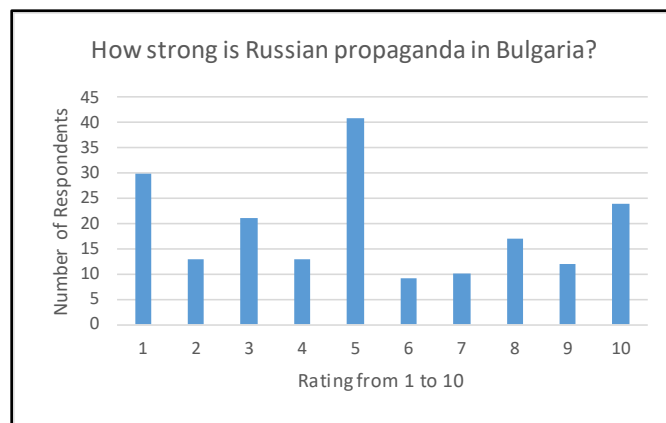
think Bulgaria should be neutral, 34 do not, and 15 could not tell. Besides the data showing that most people think Bulgaria should be neutral, there does not seem to be a noticeable trend among the age groups. Based on the written responses, respondents thought Bulgaria already has enough problems, so it would be in the country’s best interest to stay neutral. The respondents stated that Bulgaria is a small country that lacks a strong government and military, so it is best not to get involved.

**Table 6.** Open-ended question responses based on question 14.

Yes	No
"Bulgaria must be neutral. We do not have the strength to be part of this war. Better to stay away."38-year-old male	"No, Bulgaria must be on Russia’s side."43-year-old male
"Yes, because Bulgaria does not have the geopolitical power to do anything."19-year-old male	"No, because we are a member of NATO." 53-year-old female

### Question 15 Analysis

*In your opinion, how strong is Russian propaganda in Bulgaria? (Please answer on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being No Russian Propaganda At All and 10 being Extremely Strong).*

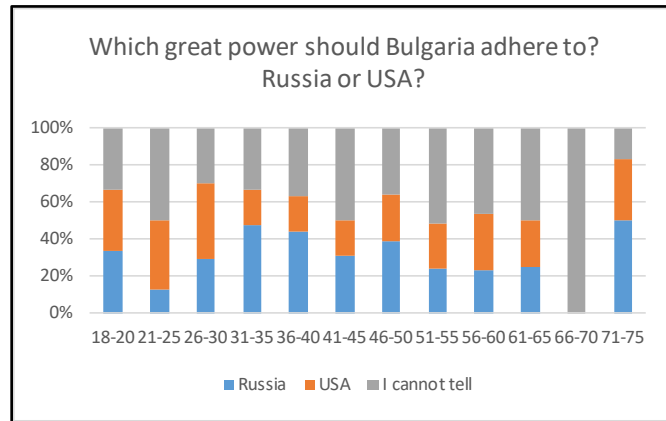


**Figure 12.** Percentage of participants separated into age groups and their rating from 1-10 regarding the strength of Russian propaganda in Bulgaria based on question 15.

According to Figure 12, the participants most commonly responded with a rating of 5, revealing that people think Russian propaganda is prevalent in Bulgarian media. In total, 41 people gave a rating of 5, indicating that even though Russian propaganda is relatively common, people still believe it is not as strong as it could be. The data suggests that the respondents have widely varied beliefs on this question. The second highest rating is a 1, which 30 people provided as a response. These respondents believe that Russian propaganda does not exist in Bulgaria. Conversely, 27 people believe the Russian propaganda exhibited in Bulgaria is extremely strong.

Question 16 Analysis

*Which great power should Bulgaria adhere to? Russia or USA?*

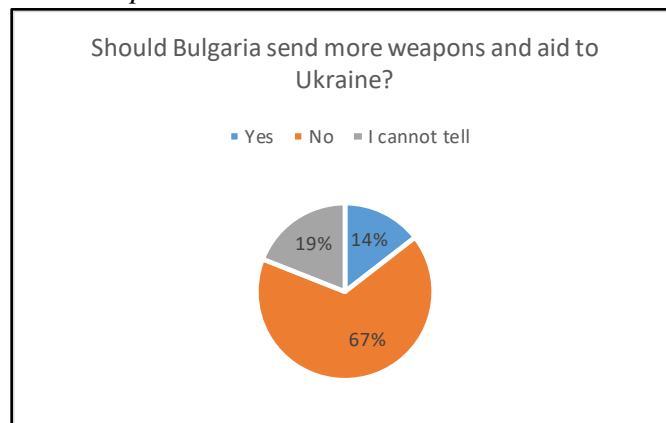


**Figure 13.** Percentage of participants separated into age groups and what great power they believe Bulgaria should demonstrate support for based on question 16.

The figure demonstrates the opinion of different Bulgarian age groups regarding which power they should side with: Russia or the United States. In total, 87 of the respondents could not decide between the two powers. An additional 67 respondents believe Bulgaria would be better off maintaining a good relationship with Russia over the United States. Only 50 respondents think Bulgaria should adhere to the United States, making up the least amount of responses. The most significant support for the USA was demonstrated amongst the younger age groups, consisting of ages 18-30. Only 12.5% of the 21-25-year-old age bracket indicated a preference towards Russia. The middle age groups of 31-50-year-olds strongly favored Russia, while the older generations of people aged 51-75 maintained a relatively equal amount of responses siding with Russia compared to the United States. Even though Bulgarian support for Russia surpassed the support for the U.S.A., the respondents remained largely divided between both powers.

Question 17 Analysis

*Should Bulgaria send more weapons and aid to Ukraine?*

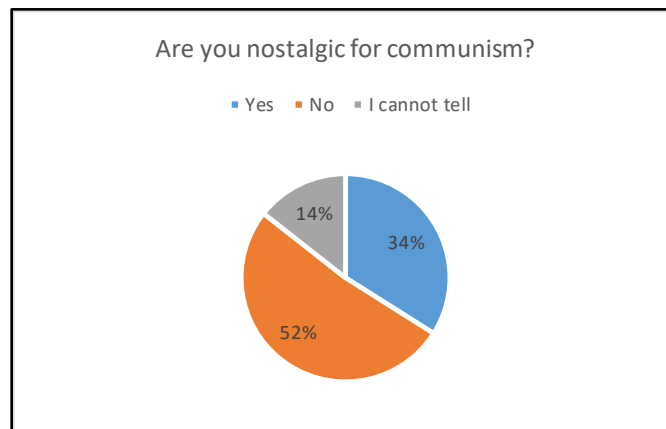


**Figure 14.** Percentages of participants and their belief regarding if Bulgarian should send weapons to Ukraine based on question 17.

The results from Figure 14 show that most participants do not believe Bulgaria should send more weapons or aid to Ukraine. Out of the 200 respondents, 133, or 67%, concluded that more aid is unnecessary. Only 29 respondents, or 14%, think Bulgaria should be doing more to help Ukraine. An additional 38 or 19% of respondents did not have a strong enough opinion to provide a definite answer to the question. Generally, there were no significant differences in the answers from the different age groups. People in each group predominantly thought Bulgaria should not send aid or weapons to Ukraine. Especially demonstrating this is the 31-35-year-old age bracket, with 90.5% of people not supporting aid. Additionally, 83.33% of 71-75-year-olds demonstrated the same.

### Question 18 Analysis

*Are you nostalgic for communism?*



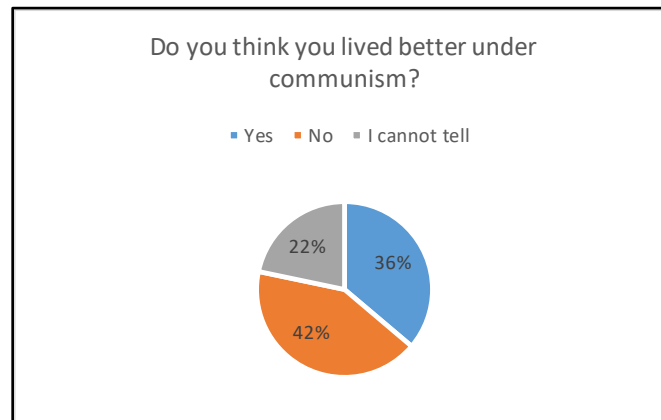
**Figure 15.** Percentages of participants born before the date November 10, 1989, and whether they felt nostalgia for communism based on question 8.

The results from Figure 15 reveal that while most participants were not nostalgic for communism, a notable amount of people nevertheless felt some degree of nostalgia. The participants who responded to this question were born before November 10, 1989, to ensure that they had conscious memories of communism. Of the 153 participants who responded to this question, 52% did not feel nostalgia for communism. In addition, 34% of participants felt nostalgia, and 14% were conflicted when choosing their response.



## Question 19 Analysis

*Do you think you lived better under communism?*



**Figure 16.** Percentages of participants born before the date November 10, 1989 and whether they felt they lived better during communism.

As shown in Figure 16, the participant's opinions on the quality of life before and after communism largely vary. The statistics show that people are almost completely torn in half on this question since out of 153 responses, 36% believed they lived better during communism, and 42% believed the contrary. Further adding to this divide, 22% of the respondents felt they could not tell whether they were more satisfied during communism or post-communism.

## Discussion

The survey data was analyzed to determine if older generations of Bulgarians who lived through communism differed from younger generations regarding their opinions on the Russia-Ukraine war. First off, Questions 18 and 19 reveal the level of attachment older generations feel to communism and Russia. These questions were only for people with conscious memories of communism born before November 10, 1989. Of the 153 people who answered question 18 of the survey, 34% felt nostalgia for communism, and 14% could not tell. An additional 36% affirmed that their quality of life was better during communism than democracy, and 22% could not tell. Figure 2 shows a major contrast between younger and older generations and their view of Russia. Of the 18-20-year-old group, 33.33% positively view Russia, while 100% of 70-75-year olds feel the same. These results suggest that older Bulgarians often feel an attachment to Russia and Soviet rule.

Despite this attachment, the differences between the age groups varied widely between each question. As Figure 8 showed, 16.66% of 18-20 year-olds and 12.5% of 21-25 year-olds think the Western world deliberately started the war between Russia and Ukraine. An average of 48.30% of the remaining age groups think the Western world started the war, showing a noteworthy difference in opinion between the age groups. In contrast, the beliefs of the different age groups shown in Figure 7 only have slight variations. The majority of the age groups thought that the Russia-Ukraine war is between Russia and the Western world.

In addition, this survey revealed the general opinions of the Bulgarian population on the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The survey showed that Bulgarians are unsatisfied with the actions of both President Zelensky and President Putin regarding the war in Figure 6. It was also revealed that Bulgarians felt they should be neutral and not get involved in the war. The respondents believe Bulgaria's government and military are too small to fight in the war. Of the 200 participants, 151 people think Bulgaria should be neutral, and 121 disapprove of imposing more

sanctions against Russia. Only 14% of the respondents supported offering aid or weapons to Ukraine, while 67% did not, and 19% could not tell. Most participants generally believed in conspiracy theories regarding world order. A total of 138 believed the theories, and 62 did not.

The data indicated that Bulgarians do not feel confident in their country's ability to protect itself, and as the literature demonstrates that many feel distrust for the government and world order. Overall, older generations were more favorable of Russia as a result of communism, and the opinions did differ between age groups depending on the question asked.

## Implications

The importance of my study stems from Bulgaria's rich history with Russia and how it affects the Bulgarian public opinion of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. First, the fact that older subjects showed a significant appreciation for communism shows that Bulgaria associates the era and Russia's rule with positive memories. These positive associations with communism are considered atypical as the majority of the countries previously part of the soviet union think of this time as a negative era. While 85% of people approved of democracy in countries like Poland and the Czech Republic, only 55% felt the same in Bulgaria (Henley, 2019).

Younger generations of Bulgarians have not experienced communist rule and only know what was taught to them at school or through their older relatives. Therefore, this data is of significant value since it adds insight into the beliefs of different age groups regarding the war in addition to the Bulgarian population as a whole.

Since Bulgaria is in close proximity to Russia and Ukraine, the war has also created an impact on the Bulgarian people. Understanding the Bulgarian perspective of the war allows for more context into the thought process of the countries neighboring Russia and Ukraine.

## Limitations

In regard to limitations, survey respondents may have been hesitant to respond honestly to the questions if they deemed it would present them unfairly. To minimize this risk, the survey was made anonymous. The participants were informed of the anonymity of the survey and encouraged to answer openly and honestly as there are no right answers and the questions are purely based on opinion.

I utilized the snowball method to collect survey responses during my research process. One notable limitation of the snowball method is the potential for bias. Since previous participants chose new participants, the initial survey responders significantly impacted the survey. Moreover, The snowball method allows for little control over the participants, which means some groups of people may not be as represented as others. This is prevalent in my study since some age groups had a larger sample size compared to others. The study was initially sent to several people of different age groups to ensure a more diverse sample size. Despite my efforts, the age groups who received the survey were ultimately out of my control.

In-person interviews would help gather more data allowing participants to speak their minds in more detail. They could include more information specifically regarding their situation, and the interviewer can further explore subjects of interest. To help encourage participants to include more details, some of the questions were left open-ended. Participants were allowed to say as much or as little as they desired for these open-ended questions to ensure they felt comfortable with the data-gathering process.

## Conclusion

This research project aimed to examine the role that communism plays in the differing opinions of younger and older generations of Bulgarians regarding the Russia-Ukraine war. I intended to explore the theory that older Bulgarians are

more likely to support Russia than younger generations due to the nostalgia they feel for the communist era and Bulgaria's close relationship with Russia in the past.

Using the snowball method, I conducted a 19-question survey for people who are not just of Bulgarian descent but also exhibit close ties to Bulgarian culture. To help guarantee this, the survey was written in Bulgarian, and all the responses collected were in Bulgarian. After conducting the survey with 200 responses and analyzing the data, it can be concluded that age does impact the Bulgarian population's view of the Russia-Ukraine war.

The differences between the age groups did vary, with older generations having more favorable opinions on Russia; however, the variations were much more minor than initially suspected. Additionally, some questions did not show any significant difference in opinion between the age groups. Previous literature indicated that older Bulgarians have a closer emotional attachment to Russia based on communist rule and the rich history Bulgaria has with Russia, which was taught to them in school. Younger generations have not had the same experience and can only base their opinion of Soviet rule in Bulgaria on stories taught by their older counterparts, whether through their relatives, teachers, or the media. Additionally, as shown through "GLOBSEC Trends 2022: Bulgaria," Bulgarians surveyed in 2021 demonstrated the highest level of "support for an Eastern geopolitical orientation." The 2022 survey conducted after the Russian invasion of Ukraine did not alter this perspective. Based on this information, it was hypothesized that the difference between the age groups would be much more dramatic than the data demonstrated.

The results showed that people with conscious memories of communism are nostalgic for the era, and some even believed the quality of life during this time was better. Regardless of their nostalgia, most older respondents did not demonstrate a significant bias stemming from communism. The written responses, however, provided more context into the answers the respondents gave. Analysis of the written responses showed that older generations reflect more positive views of Russia as a country when disregarding the conflict with Ukraine than younger participants.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Mrs. Loope of Osceola Fundamental High School for her guidance throughout this project. I would also like to thank my family and friends, who supported and motivated me during the research process. Lastly, thank you to those who participated in the study and made this project possible.

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