

# Russian attitudes to the war in Ukraine – a case study of Kyrgyzstan

an empirical study by Ulukbek Beishekeev

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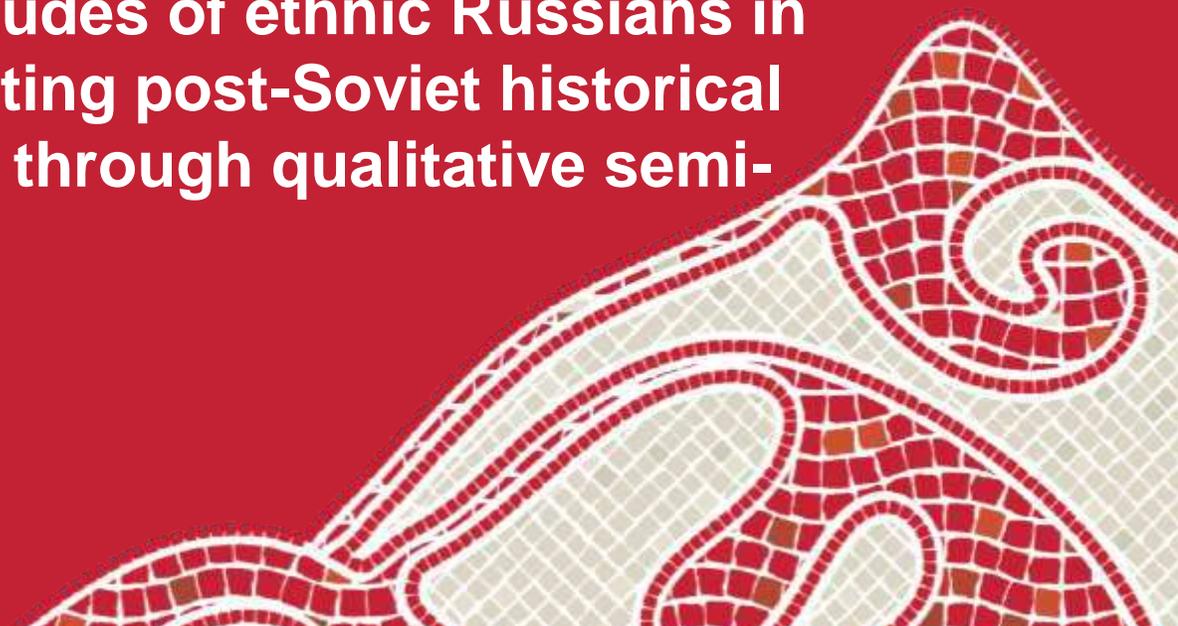
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# Introduction

The study examines whether the war in Ukraine has affected the identity and, consequently, the attitudes of ethnic Russians in Kyrgyzstan toward Russia, contrasting post-Soviet historical adaptation with current sentiments through qualitative semi-structured interviews.



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# Research Question:

Does support for the war in Ukraine revitalize ethnic Russian identity?



# Literature Review

## Identity and ethnicity

- Kolstø's (2011) insights on Russian identity in post-Soviet states
- Hale's (2004) concept of ethnicity as a social radar
- Huddy's (2015) perspectives on identity and group cohesion
- Slezkine (1994) How the USSR promoted ethnic particularism
- Slezkine (2000) Imperialism as the highest stage of socialism
- Poppe (2001) Types of Identification among Russians in the "Near Abroad"

# Literature Review

## Contextualization of War in Ukraine

- Ordukhanyan (2023) Impact of Russia's War in Ukraine on Post-Soviet Space
- Dunay (2022) Impact of the Russian War in Ukraine on the Former Soviet Space
- Werkner (2022) Krieg in der Ukraine: Hintergründe - Positionen – Reaktionen
- Gerber&Zavisca (2016) Influence of media narratives and Russian propaganda particularly in the context of Kyrgyzstan, relevant

## Language politics in Kyrgyzstan

- Kosmarskaya (2015) The Russian language in Kyrgyzstan
- Zamiatin (2008) Russia's Geographic Image and Problems of Linguistic Identity in the Former Soviet Republics

# Problem Statement

- fill up the research gap where previously seen their limitations
- Kolstø's (2011) claims of passive group identity among Russians
- Huddy (2015) articulates the preconditions when cohesive group identity emerges namely threatened group status

# My prompts

- to test the theoretical claims with the help of my empirical data
- **Kyrgyzstan is an extreme example to contrast Baltic** countries in the context of ethnic Russians
- **Can the war in Ukraine be considered as threat to the status of the ethnic Russians?**

# Key theories to form the Theoretical research assumption:

- In response to the **Ukraine war**, **ethnic Russians in Kyrgyzstan** are likely to **strengthen their Russian identity** as a defensive reaction to perceived external threats, fueled by the cultural significance of the **Russian language** and reinforced by **supportive pro-Russian media narratives**.
- utilized to prepare an Interview guide for semi-structured qualitative interviews (Diekmann, 2018)



# Methods



# Methods

- **Data Management Tools**

  - Transcription: f4x

  - Analysis: MAXQDA

- **Interviews are guided by a set of core questions (thematic fields)**

  - to capture individual perceptions on the topic

  - flexible probes, follow-up questions for in-depth insights

  - conducted individually to encourage open and personal responses

  - each core question focuses on a particular topic of the study

  - later to build the thematic and theoretical categories for the analysis of Data



# Interview guide



## 2. Identity

### Central question

**Изменилось ли восприятие себя либо окружающих по отношению к вам за последние 30 лет независимости КР? (Has self-perception changed over the last 30 years of Kyrgyzstan's independence?)**

#### Better

- Do you feel that your identity is connected to Russian culture, Kyrgyz culture, or a mix of both?
- Do you think that speaking Kyrgyz is a good advantage?

#### Just as good

- Have you noticed any changes in how society views Russian speakers in Kyrgyzstan?
- What language do you communicate daily?

#### Worse

- Do you experience any sense of pressure to identify more closely with either Kyrgyz or Russian culture?
- Do you feel like Russian is less spoken now?

## 4. Perception of the war between Ukraine and Russia

### Central question

**Что вы думаете о последних событиях конфликта между Украиной и Россией?** (what do you think about the latest developments in the conflict between Ukraine and Russia?)

Pro-	-neutral-	Anti-
<p>— What (Russian) media channels do you consume, can you recall them for me?</p> <p>— What are your thoughts on the following statement: <i>“Russia was compelled by external circumstances to undertake a special military operation in the name of justice.”</i></p>	<p>— Как вы информируете себя о текущих событиях? (Where do you get your information from?)</p> <p>— Have you discussed the conflict with friends or family? If so, what were their perspectives?</p>	<p>— What are (western) media or -opposition media channels can you recall</p> <p>— Do you think the conflict between Ukraine and Russia has affected how Kyrgyz people view Russia?</p>

# “Information Power“ approach of sample Justification

- **Research Aims** is focused (ethnic Russian identity + war influence), which supports sampling size
- **Sample Specificity** represents a range of socioeconomic statuses, ages, urban-rural or media consumption habits
- **Data Quality** interviews detailed, and explore media consumption, identity shifts, and attitudes toward the war thoroughly, this sample size is adequate, themes keep recurring after several interviews, and the sample size is sufficient
- **Comparative Design** two groups (Russians vs. Kyrgyz)
- **Testing** Chapman & Zhandayeva's (2025) assumptions, e.g., war-related attitudes over time on ethnic Russians by examining the influence of the media on war perceptions and identity



ID	Sex	YOB	Nationality/ Ethnicity	Date	Duration (min)	Education	Languages	Occupation	Residence
K1	m	1960	Kyrgyz	23.11.2024	41:51	Engineering	Kyrgyz, Russian	Director of a branch office	Issyk Kul
K2	f	1965	Kyrgyz	23.11.2024	36:06	Economics	Russian, Kyrgyz	Retired	Issyk Kul
R3	f	1989	Russian	23.11.2024	50:36	Economics	Russian	Head of local NGO	Issyk Kul
R4	f	1959	Russian	28.11.2024	27:59	n/a	Russian	Nurse	Issyk Kul
R5	m	1957	Russian	28.11.2024	40:20	Economics	Russian, Kyrgyz	Manager	Talas
R6	m	1982	Russian	28.11.2024	40:43	a (unspecified)	Russian, English, Chinese	Self-employed	Bishkek
K7	m	1941	Kyrgyz	30.11.2024	33:19	Medicine	Kyrgyz, Russian	Retired	Issyk Kul
D8	f	1994	Dungan	08.12.2024	51:58	a (unspecified)	Russian, Dungan, English, Spanish, German, Turkish, Chinese	Data analyst	Spain
K9	f	1997	Kyrgyz	30.11.2024	47:57	Religion studies	Russian, Kyrgyz, English	Project coordinator	Bishkek
R10	m	1985	Russian	28.11.2024	28:02	n/a	Russian	n/a	Kara Balta
R11	f	1998	Russian	11.12.2024	43:02	Philosophy	Russian	Analytical expert	Bishkek

## Overview of respondents





# Analysis



# Analysis

- **Qualitative content analysis** as outlined by Kuckartz & Rädiker (2023)
  - hermeneutics is a crucial component of the analysis part
  - *Summary Grid* function of MAXQDA, case-related thematic summaries
- **Multilevel coding process**
  - deductively created codes based on thematic and theoretical categories
  - during the second coding cycle i.e., fine-coding inductively constructed subcategories 'miscellaneous' (Kuckartz 2023)

Codes	Count
Attitude toward Russia	46
Anti-Russia	17
Pro-Russia	23
demographic groups	7
labor-migrants	6
neutral	9
Identity and War's perception	96
Identity	48
Soviet identity	13
ethnicity	129
Media influence	30
Internet	27
demographic groups	8
independent media/alternative, western sponsored	18
mainstream media	11
media coverage	15
russian media/russian propaganda	31
Ukraine's fault	13
Language	39
Education system	15
Kyrgyz	46
Russian	60
demographic groups	7
language politics	6
Soviet language policies	15
current Kyrgyz language policies	15
Perception of the war between Ukraine and Russia	33
Concession with Russian leadership	1
Condemnation of war in Ukraine	13
Ordinary Ukrainians	6
prisoners in Russia	2
Putin's image for Russia	11
Miscellaneous	60
Sets	0
Paraphrased Segments	2

Internet

might be seen as opposing to the influence of traditional Russian media appears to be waning due to new information flows in the digital age (Chapman and Zhandayeva, 2025, p. 19)

**The coding pattern that has been developed is the result of interactions with respondents and their understanding of the following description;** contrary to mainstream media, which primarily encompasses traditional TV-channels and other conventional media outlets, Internet platforms, such as Instagram, Telegram, YouTube, and similar content-driven services, operate within a distinct digital dimension. In contrast to TV, social media platforms facilitate a bottom-up approach, wherein users share and interact with content in a more participatory manner, expressing their preferences and providing feedback through likes and comments, and are selective about the content they consume.

**Internet, inductive**

Created: 06/01/2025 12:36 by Ulukbek Beishekeev  
Modified: 10/01/2025 14:17 by Ulukbek Beishekeev

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Linked coded segments (0)

Drop coded segment in memo

## Overview of categories



The table highlights the interplay between identity, media influence, and attitudes toward Russia and the war. Russian identity and language emerge as key drivers, while media (especially propaganda) shapes narratives.

Specific cases (e.g., R11 and R6) exhibit distinct patterns, reflecting deeper engagement with these themes

Code System	K1	K2	R3	R4	R5	R6	K7	D8	K9	R10	R11	SUM
Identity	4	4	5	5	2	10		4	2	2	11	49
ethnicity	6	6	4	1	3	8	2	6	2	8	6	52
russian identity	1	2	7	6	3	7		3	1	7	12	49
Language	14	14	11	3	11	7	11	5	3	6	14	99
Attitude toward Russia	7	2	2	4	3	1	1	6	3	7	12	48
Anti-Russia	1					4		3	3	1	6	18
Pro-Russia	7		2	2		1	3	3	1	2	3	24
Perception of the war between Ukraine	5	3	1	4	7	4	2	4	3	3	5	41
Media influence	2		4	2	3	5	3	2	6	1	2	30
Internet	4	1	4		2			3	6	2	5	27
russian media/russian propaganda	10	4		3	3	1	9	6	3	2	3	44
Identity and War's perception	2	4	5	4	4	8	2	4	6	6	8	53
Anti-war	1				3	3		1		1	1	10
Support the war in Ukraine	3			3	2	2	2	1		1	1	15
Miscellaneous		1	6		7	4	2	3	3	1	3	30
Decolonization of Soviet legacy		3	2	1		2		2	1			11
Narratives from the social circle		1		3	1	4	1		3	3	4	20
Σ SUM	67	45	53	41	54	71	38	56	46	53	96	620

- numbers in cells indicate the frequency of each code in a specific case
- color represents the intensity of frequency, with darker or red hues indicating higher numbers



## Code Matrix Browser Table

# Analysis

**Qualitative content analysis** as outlined by Kuckartz & Rädiker (2023)

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**Multilevel coding process**

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# Insights from Chapman and Zhandayeva (2025)

*Public Opinion Toward Russia's War Against Ukraine: Attitudes in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan*

- the survey data from the Central Asia Barometer (**CAB**) focusing on public attitudes in the early months of the war (**May-June 2022**), capturing initial reactions to the full-scale invasion
- Three prominent factors linked to pro-Russian attitudes— **ethnolinguistic identity**, migration, and **the media**
- **Perspectives in Kyrgyzstan** reflect the **stronger economic reliance on Russia**, highlighting the complex interplay between historical, cultural, and financial factors in shaping public opinion on the war
- **Russia's invasion of Ukraine** has endangered its influence in the region by **accelerating the decolonization narrative** in Central Asia, many reassessing not only their identity but also their relationship with Russia



# Insights from Chapman and Zhandayeva (2025)

- **Russian media consumption** correlates with **pro-Russian attitudes**, though its influence is **diminishing** amid shifting information flows in the digital age
- **Future research** could track how **attitudes towards Russia and the war evolve over time**
- **Impact of Demographic Groups:** how **different groups**, including **ethnic Russians**, shift their perspectives as conflicts unfold
- explore **the link between media consumption patterns** and **public opinion** to understand the flow of information
- **establishing causal relationships** might be **the critical next step** between war-related attitudes and factors like **ethnicity** and **media consumption**
- **combining experimental designs with qualitative methods** (e.g., interviews, focus groups) **could provide deeper insights** into how these factors shape individuals' views about international conflicts





# Findings



# Ethnic Russian Identity in Kyrgyzstan and Attitude toward Russia

- Broad spectrum from solidarity with Russia to conscious distancing
  - many identify primarily with Kyrgyzstan, not Russia
- **Cultural Adaptation**, “Asian mentality” reflects integration into local norms
- **pragmatic Attitude**, most remain neutral, Russia seen as culturally close but politically distant
- **Ukraine war sharpened** awareness of **distinct** Kyrgyzstani-Russian **identity**
- Russia retains symbolic value but little desire for return
- Ethnic Russians in Kyrgyzstan form a distinct, locally rooted community balancing Russian heritage with Kyrgyzstan belonging



# Ethnic Russian Identity in Kyrgyzstan and Attitude toward Russia

- **R3:** “Because we're representatives of our state”
- **R4:** “We are Russians, but we are not used to their culture. It's completely different”, “Russian of Russia because they are different from ours”
- **R5:** “Some support Russia, some oppose it, but most remain indifferent – ‘Russia is there, fine; Russia isn't, also fine’”
- **R6:** “I wasn't particularly eager to go to Russia when all my Slavic friends and acquaintances were eager to go there. I was never even slightly interested in Russia in my life when everyone went there”, “Soviet identity mutated into 'Russians' after the USSR's collapse, but many ‘Russians’ are not truly Russian“, “I've always been estranged from Russia. I'm Slavic, but I'm not Russian”
- **R10:** “I, it turns out, am a Russian who was born in Kyrgyzstan; that's where my homeland is”, “Positive you could say, yes. Well, I don't aspire to go there”
- **R11:** “I don't associate Russia with me in any way. I always represent Kyrgyzstan – wherever I go” “When I meet people from Russia, I realize they are different. I have a more Asian mentality” “After the war started, I stopped associating myself with Russia”



# Perception of the War and Ethnic Identity

- Perceptions are shaped less by ethnicity than by media, global views or economic realities signaling distance from Russia's geopolitical narrative. Younger, urban, educated respondents show greater skepticism and favor diplomatic solutions
- **Emotional Detachment**, largely view the war as distant, positioning themselves as observers. Many avoid discussing or following the war, citing emotional exhaustion and lack of agency
- Sanctions and disrupted trade affect those with financial or legal ties to Russia, shaping attitudes beyond political narratives
- Opinions range from neutral to opposing; no unified stance. Some face social pressure to “take sides.”
- **Global Framing**, the war is often contextualized as part of broader global crises (e.g., Israel–Palestine), not a solely Russian issue



# Perception of the War and Ethnic Identity

- **R3:** "I avoid news about Russia-Ukraine, Palestine and Israel. It's mentally draining. [...]well, it's global. And I, being here, cannot influence it in any way. [...] feel sad and even more worried" "The war affects us indirectly. Tourists and foreigners hesitate to visit Kyrgyzstan, considering it's unsafe."
- **R4:** "We're far from it, but we empathize with those suffering. It hasn't changed me."
- **R5:** "I have not heard any of the citizens say that Ukraine is good, or Russia is good, everyone is just oohing and aahing, worried that people are dying everywhere. And, again, they ooh and aah equally. And it doesn't matter if it's Christians dying or Muslims dying."
- **R6:** "Any war is horror. This one feels like imperial ambitions. My circle supports me in condemning it; we've all grown to share the same stance." "War in the name of justice? That's the greatest injustice. Diplomacy exists for a reason. War in the name of justice is like killing for life." "This war makes people rethink their identity. My family is a clear example of this."
- **R10:** "Opinions are divided. Some think it's okay, others see Russia as the aggressor."
- **R11:** "Some believe those undecided on the Russia-Ukraine war are the worst for not taking sides"



# Media influence and perception of the war

- **Mistrust Across Cases** respondents express general mistrust and critical stance towards media coverage in general
- **Demographic groups and Media Consumption (language of consumption)**
  - Older generations rely on state media, supporting Russia's actions
  - Younger, more liberal individuals, exposed to a wider range of sources, are critical of Russia's role.
- **Selective Consumption** based on alignment with their preferences, though a few try to consume all perspectives to counter bias
- **Interest Fade** over time a public focus shifts from the Ukraine war to other global events (e.g., the Israel conflict, and U.S. elections), leading to a decrease in discussions about the war

# Thank You!



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