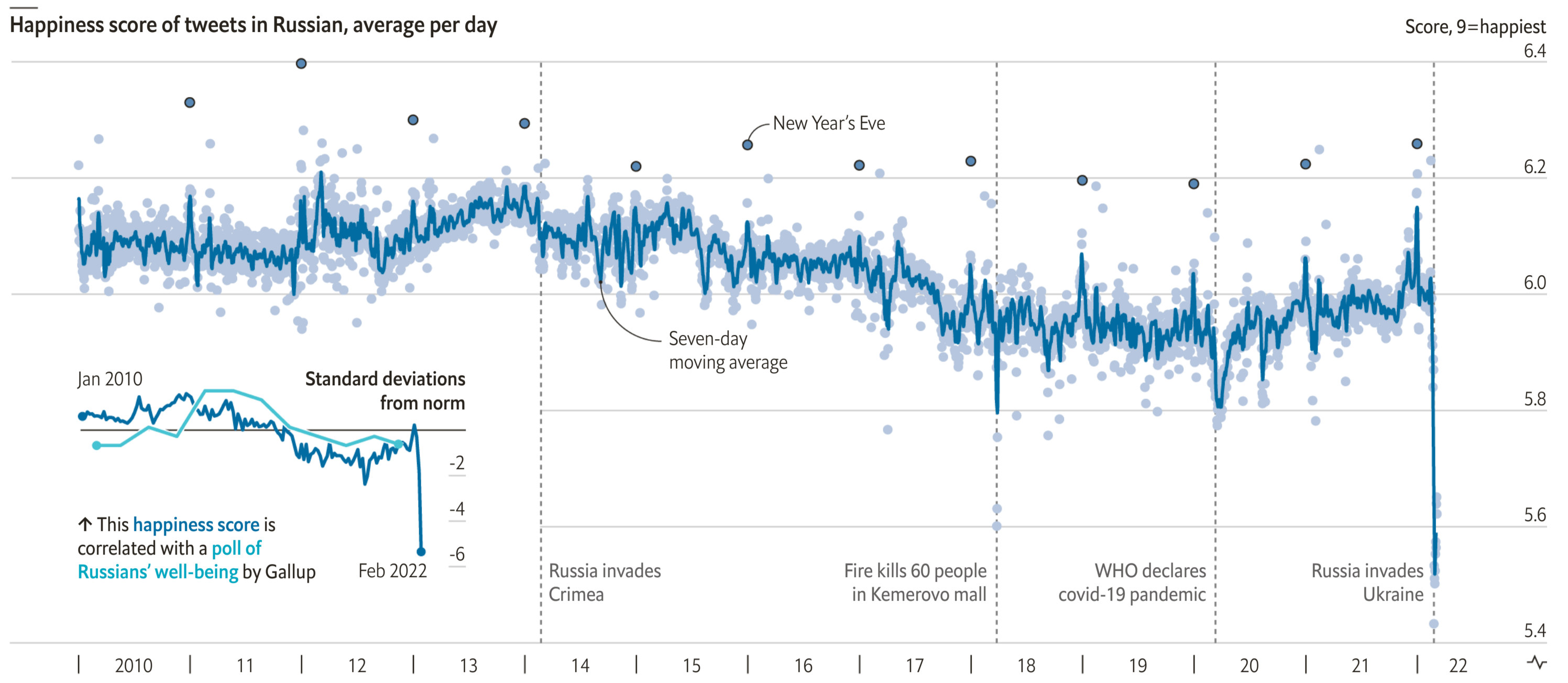


A house divided

The war in Ukraine has made Russian social-media users glum

Posts on Twitter are far sadder today than at the start of the covid-19 pandemic

MAR 12TH 2022



THE OUTCOME of the war in Ukraine depends on the mood in Moscow as well as the fighting near Kyiv. Vladimir Putin, Russia's president, did not need popular support to launch his invasion. But should enough ordinary Russians turn against it, he might be forced to change course.

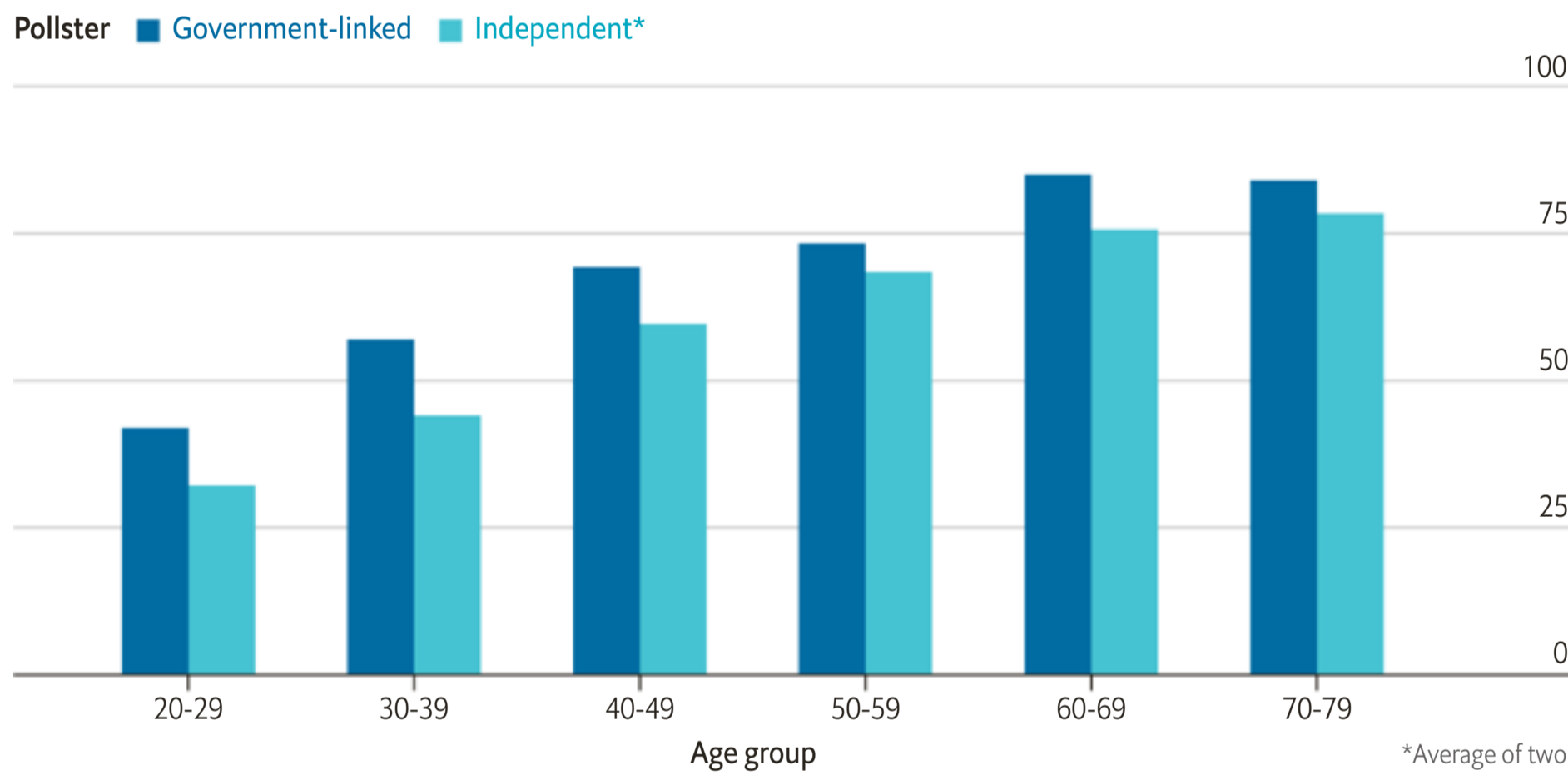
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Most data on the Russian home front are unreliable. The government has limited freedom of speech and arrested thousands of protesters. A few polls do show support for the war. In two surveys last month run by government-linked firms, around 65% of respondents backed the "special military operation". Later independent polls found that 55-59% supported the military "action" or "operation".

Such results must be taken with a cellar of salt, since the Kremlin has criminalised statements about the war that it deems false. But they still reveal political cleavages and trends over time. One poll found that being young or female, living in a big city, having a degree and not watching TV predicted anti-war views. Support may also be waning. In surveys of internet users in Moscow run by Alexei Navalny, an opposition leader, the share of people blaming Russia surged during the war's first week.

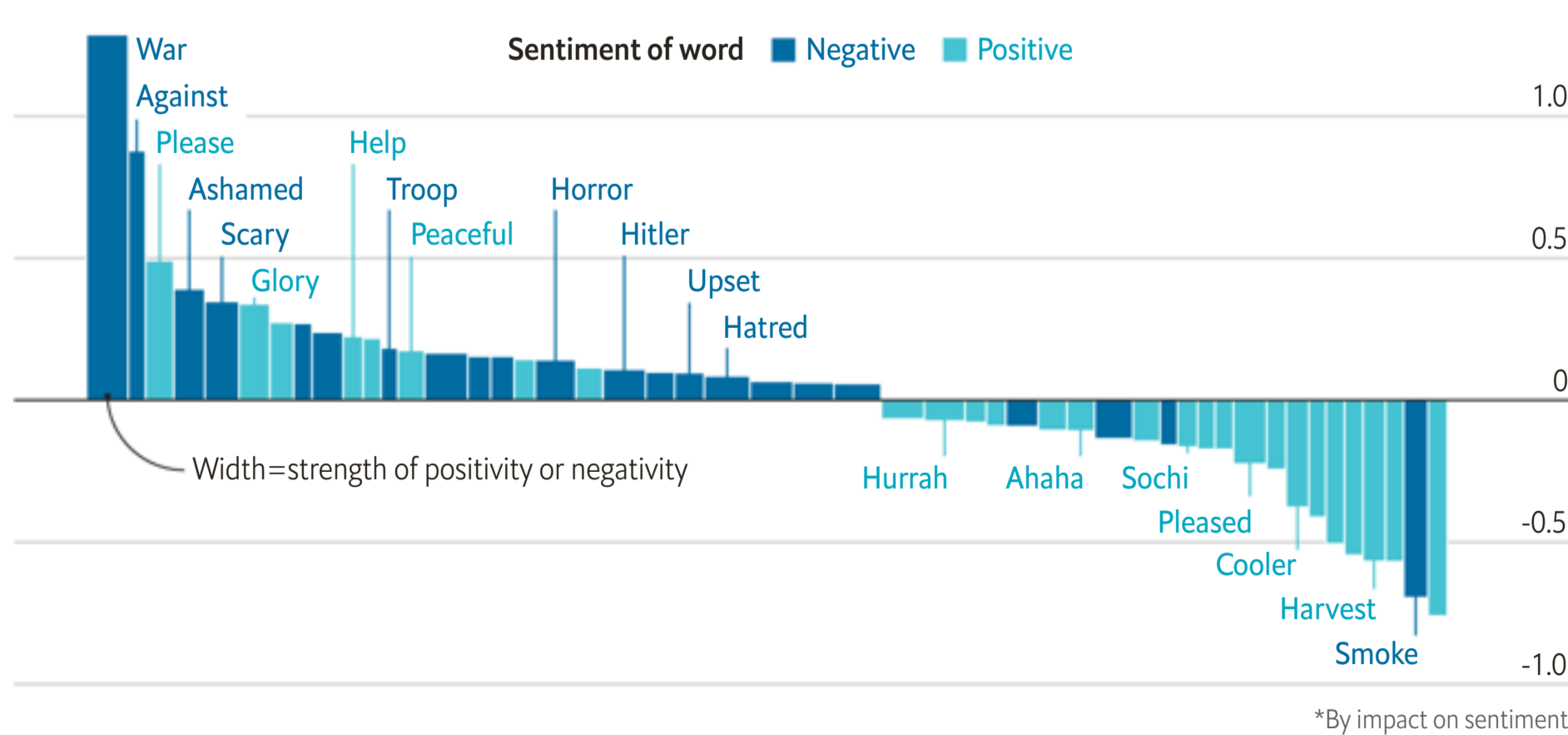
Share supporting military action in Ukraine, %
Selected surveys in Russia, Feb 25th-Mar 1st 2022



Another rich source of data is social media. A team at the University of Vermont has built a measure of sentiment on these sites, using frequencies of various words and ratings of the joy or sadness they convey. Applied to Russian-language Twitter, it accurately detects happy moments like New Year's Eve. And its fluctuations over time line up with those of a conventional poll run by Gallup, an American firm.

This measure finds that Mr Putin has sent Twitter users into deep despair. Mentions of "war", frowned upon by the Kremlin, have risen sharply, as have "scary", "ashamed" and "horror". Overall, posters' mood has worsened eight times more than at the start of the covid-19 pandemic. Based on past trends, this implies a one-point dip on Gallup's one-to-ten happiness scale.

Difference in frequency of words in Russian-language posts on Twitter, %
Between day Russian troops entered Crimea in 2014 and start of current war in Ukraine, top 50 words*



Twitterati tend to be young and pro-Western, and may feel gloomier than the public at large. This bias has probably grown since Russia made it harder to load American social-media sites last month. People who still manage to post may be unusually determined or computer-savvy.

However, no restrictions have been placed on VKontakte (vk), a domestic social network. And among vk posts that mention Mr Putin, the increased use of terms such as "war", "weapon", "death" and "crimes" indicates that, compared with 2014, when Russia sent troops into Crimea, the sentiment today is grim. ■

Sources: Computational Story Lab; dorussianswantwar.com; hedonometer.org; Qualitas; Twitter; VTsIOM

This article appeared in the Graphic detail section of the print edition under the headline "A house divided"