

## **The Russian Strategic Calculation: Geopolitics Dynamics and Domestic Challenges during the Ukraine Crisis**

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### **Abstract**

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has significantly affected Russia's strategic calculations, influencing its geopolitical dynamics and domestic concerns. A network of power struggles and historical legacies contributes to Russia's careful maneuvering during the crisis. Concurrently, internal challenges play a crucial role in shaping Russia's strategy. Public opinion, influenced by state-controlled media and nationalist sentiment, has become a key factor in the Russian government's decisions and actions. Balancing domestic expectations to protect ethnic Russians abroad with the potential economic and political repercussions of escalating conflict presents a formidable challenge for Russian policymakers. The paper explores the domestic factors, such as economic pressures, political stability and public opinion that influence and constrain Russia's decision-making processes. The analysis highlights the balancing act Russia faces between asserting its influence on the global stage and addressing internal socio-political and economic issues. Through the review of policy documents and expert analyses, the research provides an understanding of how Russia deals its dual challenges of maintaining domestic stability while projecting power in the international arena. The conclusion contribute to the broader discourse on international relations and

conflict resolution, offering insights into the complexities of state behavior in the time of crisis.

**Key Words:** Geopolitical Dynamics, Historical Legacy, Domestic Challenges, Economic Challenges, Public Opinion, Nationalist Sentiments.

## **Introduction**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has revealed a complex landscape of geopolitical and domestic challenges. Despite the military campaign and intensified Western sanctions targeting Russia's economy, the influential elite in Moscow have maintained a facade of stability. However, a series of events has highlighted significant vulnerabilities within Russia. In September 2022, a successful Ukrainian counteroffensive in the Kharkiv region exposed the weaknesses in Russia's military strategies (Khurshudyan, May 11, 2024). This prompted the Kremlin to initiate a military mobilization, leading to notable but brief social unrest. Ukraine's attack on the Kerch Strait Bridge between Crimea and mainland Russia demonstrated the fragility of Russia's borders, which had previously seemed invulnerable. The lack of a robust response from the Russian state instilled a growing realization among the elite that Russia's aggressive actions could backfire domestically.

The situation escalated further when Ukrainian security forces attacked Moscow using drones and paramilitary groups crossed into Russia's Belgorod region. The most alarming development came in June when supporters of Yevgeny Prigozhin, leader of the private military group Wagner, openly rebelled. They took control of large parts of Rostov-on-Don and advanced towards Moscow, even shooting down several Russian planes, resulting in the deaths of many pilots. This rebellion drew

global attention and caused significant concern among Moscow's leadership (Cooney & Seales Rebecca, June 24, 2023).

Despite publicly condemning Prigozhin as a traitor, the Russian government paradoxically allowed him considerable freedom, including negotiating in the Kremlin later in June. These events marked a significant departure from the norm in Russia. Yet, daily life for many Russians remained largely unaffected by these tumultuous developments. Some high-ranking military officials have begun to express their grievances more boldly, but the overall situation within the armed forces remains stable, with no major reshufflings or detentions of military personnel by the authorities (VoA, May 26, 2024).

The Kremlin's ability to ignore unwelcome events is becoming increasingly strained. The conflict has initiated a process of transformation within Russia, signaling substantial internal shifts. These changes include alterations in the Putin government, shifts in the elite's perception of Putin and a changing public attitude toward the war (Mittal, April 20, 2024). The increased militarization of Russian society has empowered hardline ultranationalists within the elite class. The public as out of touch with the realities of the conflict now sees the older generation of ideologues. The erosion of Putin's authority has exposed fundamental flaws in the regime, such as underestimating domestic political risks, prioritizing immediate challenges over long-term developments and reluctance to take responsibility for the growing number of incidents linked to the conflict (Kuszner, 2016).

Prigozhin's uprising has taken the situation to unprecedented levels, potentially leading to a more radical and aggressive and inflexible government structure. Threats to the Kremlin, the Wagner revolt and the exposure of governmental weaknesses may not necessarily incite public opposition to Putin or

trigger the collapse of the regime. Instead, these events are driving Russia toward greater internal fragmentation and volatility. Amid this turmoil, there may be limited space for discourse on the Ukrainian conflict, though not extending to overt dissent. Domestically, the established order crafted by Putin will likely descend into greater disorder, posing a more perilous and unpredictable threat to the global community (Covington, July 5, 2024).

### **Geopolitical Dynamics and Historical Legacies**

At the heart of the Russia-Ukraine conflict are intricate geopolitical dynamics. Russia's historical ties with Ukraine, particularly Crimea added complexity to the situation. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 highlighted Russia's willingness to redraw borders in its perceived sphere of influence. This act reverberated across international relations, challenging established norms and raising concerns among neighboring countries. Russia's strategic calculations, in part, aimed to safeguard its regional dominance and influence, especially in Eastern Europe (Yurchenko, July 2, 2024). Historical legacies play a pivotal role in shaping Russia's behavior in the conflict. The Soviet era left deep imprints on the region, with complex ethnic, linguistic and cultural ties between Russia and Ukraine. Historical grievances and the memory of the Holodomor, a devastating famine in Ukraine, continue to influence perceptions and attitudes. These legacies have contributed to tensions and shaped domestic and international narratives. Internal problems within Russia have also become a significant factor influencing its strategy in the conflict. Public opinion, often shaped by state-controlled media and nationalist sentiment, is a key variable influencing the Russian government's choices and actions. The government must balance domestic expectations to protect ethnic Russians abroad with concerns about the potential economic and political consequences of an escalating conflict. This has tested Russian

policymakers' ability to maintain public support while avoiding excessive costs. Russia's energy dominance in Europe has conditioned its actions and made it susceptible to countermeasures (Sakela, December, 2022). The role of energy resources as a geopolitical tool and economic lever is a critical aspect of the conflict. Russia's energy exports to Europe provide not only economic advantage but also political influence. Europe's efforts to diversify energy sources and reduce dependency on Russian gas have affected Russia's strategic calculations in the conflict. The reaction of the international community, including sanctions and diplomatic efforts, has played a crucial role in shaping Russia's strategy. Sanctions imposed by Western countries have targeted key Russian figures and sectors, exerting economic pressure. Diplomatic efforts, including the Minsk agreements, have sought to find a peaceful resolution (Aljazeera, February 09, 2022). Understanding the effect of these international responses on Russia's calculations is essential in assessing the conflict's trajectory.

### **Unforeseen Challenges on Russian Soil**

During Prigozhin's rebellion, Russia found itself in an unforeseen predicament, bearing witness to the encroachment of the conflict onto its own soil. In the early days of May, shortly before the annual Victory Day parade on the hallowed grounds of Red Square, unidentified assailants deployed aerial drones in an attempt to strike strategic targets within Moscow, including the iconic Kremlin edifice. As May transitioned to June, paramilitary groups affiliated with Ukraine crossed into the Russian territory of Belgorod, resulting in disorder and a brief period of control over various settlements. Concurrently, neighboring areas experienced continuous artillery attacks. The Kremlin's reaction to these events has been notably restrained, marked by a tendency to downplay the alarm (Bailey et al., May 31, 2024). Media encompassing television broadcasts and talk shows

shifted toward highlighting the perceived effectiveness of Moscow's aerial defenses, promoting a narrative centered on the alleged aggressiveness of Ukrainians and their Western handlers. With few exceptions, President Putin himself has offered minimal commentary on these breaches occurring within Russian borders, choosing instead to delegate such matters to the Defense Ministry's jurisdiction (Reuters, June 17, 2024).

Moscow's restrained response to ostensibly jarring occurrences resonates with Putin's personal perception of the conflict. Rooted in a steadfast conviction, Putin maintains that the populace's fervent patriotism endures, the loyalty of the elite class to the state remains unwavering, a pathway to triumph in Ukraine remains viable and Russia's economy possesses the resilience to endure until his objectives are achieved. As a result, high-ranking officials in the presidential administration, reflecting Putin's calm demeanor and reluctance to panic, often deceived themselves into thinking that everything was going smoothly and that being overly concerned would do more harm than good. However, a warning emerged, advising against complacency in case of any setbacks in the military operations. The discussions also pointed out the consistent increase in public support for the special military operation in Ukraine, as well as strong approval for both Putin and his administration (Jensen & Hffiman, May 15, 2024).

### **Russian Economy during the Ukraine Crisis**

Russia's ongoing conflict in Ukraine must be understood in the context of its economic situation. In September, the Russian government approved a draft state

budget for 2024, which reveals its near-term priorities. Significantly, defense spending will surpass social expenditures for the first time in modern Russian history. This prioritization of military spending over social needs will have notable repercussions for the Russian economy.

The Constitution Protection Bureau (SAB) has examined the state of the Russian economy, the factors influencing it and its future prospects. Contrary to initial expectations, Russia's economy has shown more resilience than anticipated. Despite a diminished presence in Western markets, Russia has found alternative export and import routes, mitigating the impact of lost market share and ensuring the procurement of essential goods. The Russian business environment has adapted to new economic conditions, reflecting this resilience.

Several factors underpin this economic resilience. Firstly, while United States and European Union sanctions have posed significant challenges, they have not isolated Russia as intended. This is evident in the financial sector, where transactions involving US dollars or euros have been difficult. However, Russia has strengthened cooperation with countries in Central Asia, China, India, the Middle East and others, redirecting exports and securing imports, sometimes clandestinely circumventing sanctions. Thus, while sanctions have caused complications, they have not severely hampered Russia's ability to mobilize its economy for the ongoing war effort, at least in the short term. Secondly, a surge in global oil and gas prices has stabilized Russia's federal budget and currency, enabling increased defense funding. Income from oil and gas exports makes up about a third of Russia's total budget revenue, a crucial pillar of the economy. Thirdly, increased defense spending has become the Kremlin's top political priority and a significant driver of economic growth, especially in the regions.

Even if the conflict's intensity decreases or it becomes frozen, high defense spending is expected to persist for the next few years to rebuild Russia's military arsenal and capabilities. The 2024 draft budget anticipates defense spending to be around 6% of GDP, a significant increase from this year's 4%. However, SAB estimates the total war-related expenditure could be as high as 9% of GDP, amounting to about 40% of the total state budget, assuming budget income reaches the planned 36.6 trillion rubles next year.

Securing federal budget income presents considerable challenges for the Russian government. Current information suggests that the government is exploring options for raising or introducing new taxes, focusing on large corporations and excisable goods. A notable example is the windfall tax already implemented in several sectors, though it only partially offsets rising defense expenditures. War-related expenses also burden regions and large Russian companies, which finance the reconstruction of Russian-occupied territories and support local military units. Additionally, specific state-owned companies are directed to fund private military companies.

Despite these challenges, the Russian government remains committed to ambitious long-term goals. This spring, it approved a technological development concept aiming to reduce dependence on Western-produced high-tech components by 2030. The plan targets that by 2030, 75% of high-tech goods consumed in Russia will be domestically produced. However, SAB questions the feasibility of this objective, given Russia's heavy reliance on foreign-produced components.

The resilience of Russia's economy and its ability to sustain the offensive in Ukraine are closely tied to the potential of its military-industrial complex. The past year has seen high optimism from Russian leadership about the military industry's



effectiveness. In June, President Putin announced that arms production had more than doubled, with higher demand categories increasing tenfold. However, this assertion does not fully align with reality. Available information does not indicate such an exceptional increase in the military-industrial sector's performance.

The resulted from difficulties in aligning military production with limited import possibilities and reallocating industrial capacities for technical repairs. Additionally, Russia's production data includes repaired combat equipment and the reconstruction of existing assets, creating a misleading impression of actual productivity. Secondly, the military-industrial complex faces labor shortages due to a declining population, conscription of working-age men and emigration of skilled labor. Unemployment figures reached a historic low of 3% in 2023, but the specific need for highly skilled labor in the military industry remains unaddressed. This issue is highlighted by military factories advertising job openings for candidates as young as 16 years old. Private sector companies, offering more competitive salaries also compete for the same workforce. Instead of addressing these challenges effectively, the government is criminalizing the failure to meet production targets. Over 400 military industry personnel have been accused of obstructing national defense orders, with the highest numbers from the aviation and shipbuilding sectors.

The Russian military-industrial complex, predominantly state-owned, operates under a Soviet-era command-economic planning model. Decisions are made at the central government level, leading to inefficiencies and persistent structural challenges. Despite increased defense investments, the desired returns remain elusive. The substantial increase in defense spending primarily offsets prior financial losses and unrealized revenues from military goods exports, rather than expanding production volumes. However, Russia can rely on substantial military

reserves built up before February 2022. This uncertainty complicates estimating how long Russia can maintain the current war intensity, given significant labor and equipment losses. Active efforts to secure support from allies like Iran and North Korea to compensate for expended munitions and lost equipment further highlight this issue. As some Russian officials indicate, China also plays a key role.

As the conflict continues and the demand for ammunition grows, Russia increasingly uses lower quality or expired ammunition and equipment from reserves. This has led to incidents of defective munitions, hindering combat tasks. Such incidents are expected to rise as the conflict endures. A noticeable trend during the summer months was a more conservative approach to ammunition use, suggesting potential challenges in obtaining munitions or preparations for heightened attacks in the upcoming autumn and winter, particularly targeting Ukraine's critical infrastructure.

### **Growing Dissatisfaction and Mutiny**

The dissatisfaction among Prigozhin's followers leading up to the mutiny was largely unnoticed by Kremlin insiders. As late as June 2023, when Prigozhin's rebellion was already unfolding, many within the Kremlin circles believed that no significant disruption was occurring. They held the view that Prigozhin remained a valuable tool for achieving certain political objectives, including managing ultranationalist sentiment. Additionally, a substantial number of officials were convinced that individuals close to Putin within the Kremlin were monitoring Prigozhin's activities, ensuring that the Wagner group would not challenge the Russian state.

However, this belief was starkly contradicted by later events. Wagner units had seized control of the key military command center for Russian operations in

Ukraine, located in Rostov-on-Don. There were also reports of Wagner forces moving toward Moscow in a threatening manner. In a surprising turn, Wagner was linked to the destruction of Russian helicopters, defying the expectations of many observers. (Schmitt, June 26, 2023).

These events led to a significant realization: Putin's assessment of Prigozhin and his subsequent anger were flawed. He had underestimated the threat posed by Prigozhin, a talkative and unpredictable figure who had transitioned from caterer to mercenary leader. The revolt not only highlighted Putin's leadership deficiencies and the neglect that had embittered and motivated Prigozhin, but also exposed the damage inflicted on the state by its own actions. Wagner had evolved into a formidable force with tens of thousands of soldiers, primarily due to state funding, access to state resources and connections to influential officials who supported the mercenary group's operations (Bouzo, July 21, 2023).

### **National Security and Public Perception**

President Vladimir Putin made an unexpected visit to Dagestan, surprising his team and displaying impulsive behavior. His actions, which included holding babies, shaking hands and taking selfies with the crowd, were notable given his limited public interactions since the COVID-19 pandemic. Observers interpreted this as an attempt to reconnect with ordinary Russians and highlight his emotional investment. However, it also hinted at his vulnerability and desire for public admiration amid a series of domestic challenges. The Kremlin's mishandling of the Ukraine conflict and the subsequent Prigozhin uprising have exposed the government's ineptitude, making the state appear fragile (Banghal, September 21, 2023). Questions about the effectiveness of Russian defense systems, especially after drone attacks, have led to doubts among Russians about the state's ability to

ensure security. This has been compounded by speculations of sympathizers within Russia aligning with Ukraine, willing to betray their country. (Stanovaya, October, 2023).

Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the focus in Russia has shifted from domestic stability to a pursuit of geopolitical security against a perceived antagonistic West. Nationalist sentiments have surged and following the 2022 incursion into Ukraine, Russians have increasingly entrusted Putin with the authority to confront Western threats. Despite severe sanctions and domestic upheaval, Putin's approval ratings have risen significantly, with surveys indicating an increase in public admiration for him and a higher desire for his reelection (Covington, July 5, 2024). The Support for state institutions, including the cabinet, regional governors, parliament and the ruling party, United Russia, has also increased. However, Putin's passive response to internal military threats and his detachment from direct engagement have raised concerns about the political leadership's effectiveness (Zaheer D. M., 2024).

Questions are arising about the political class's ability to fulfill its duties. Towards the end of May, a drone strike targeted Rublyovka, a prestigious suburb of Moscow inhabited by numerous affluent and influential Russians. Many pro-Kremlin bloggers and ordinary Russians hoped that this attack would serve as a wake-up call for the elite, pushing them to take a more active role in resolving the conflict with Ukraine and responding decisively to threats on Russian territory (Stanovaya, October, 2023). Anti-elitist sentiments have played a significant role in the rise of Yevgeny Prigozhin. The success of the Wagner group in Bakhmut catapulted Prigozhin into the ranks of the most trusted political figures in Russia. His bold confrontation with the Defense Ministry and vocal complaints about inadequate ammunition supplies for his troops resonated with many Russians, who

viewed him as a crusader against corruption and entrenched elites. An eyewitness account from the takeover of Rostov-on-Don described Prigozhin as a modest individual challenging the wealthy magnates, reflecting the support Wagner fighters received from the local residents. This dissatisfaction with the existing establishment, perceived as detached and corrupt, partly explains Prigozhin's ability to assert control over the city, revealing a significant disconnect between the state and its citizens. (Stanovaya, October, 2023).

The domestic reception of Mr. Prigozhin's bold actions during the Ukraine crisis reveals significant undercurrents of discontent with the ruling establishment. Ordinary Russian citizens were notably impressed by Mr. Prigozhin's direct confrontation with the Defense Ministry and his outspoken complaints regarding the lack of ammunition for his troops. His actions were perceived as those of a crusader fighting corruption and bravely challenging the entrenched elites. (Chance & McCluskey, June 26, 2023). Eyewitness accounts, such as one posted on Facebook, depicted Mr. Prigozhin as a "modest, unassuming individual taking on the wealthy magnates across the spectrum". This portrayal resonated strongly with the public and mirrored the warm reception Wagner fighters received from the residents of Rostov-on-Don. The dissatisfaction with the current establishment, derisively referred to as the "wealthy magnates", explains in part how Mr. Prigozhin was able to assert control over the city with such apparent ease (Soldatov & Borogan, July 06, 2023). Amid these domestic challenges, Russia's strategic calculations are heavily influenced by its geopolitical dynamics. The desire to counter Western influence and assert its power on the global stage drives much of its foreign policy, especially in the context of the Ukraine conflict. The Kremlin's actions are aimed at consolidating power internally while projecting strength externally, despite the inherent vulnerabilities exposed by recent events.

## The Impact of Military Challenges on Russian Society

Recent military challenges in Russia have led some analysts to speculate that these difficulties might drive the ruling class and society at large to seek peace. However, the reality is starkly different. Historically, crises tend to bolster Russia's resolve, leading to more aggressive military strategies and suppressing internal dissent. The defiance shown by figures like Mr. Prigozhin is not a call for peace but a reaction to the ineffective conduct of the military campaign. This is evidenced by events such as drone attacks and paramilitary incursions in the Belgorod region in the spring, which have fueled popular support for the ongoing conflict rather than diminishing it (CSIS, June 26, 2023).

Recent Levada Center polls indicate a surge in popular support for ongoing hostilities among the Russian population, coupled with increased hostility toward Ukrainian citizens and anxiety regarding the “special military operation's” progress (Levada-Center, March 27, 2024). This paradoxical trend has not resulted in a greater public demand for peace talks or a withdrawal from Ukraine, which is perceived as a critical threat to the Russian state. Instead, the prevailing sentiment suggests that the conflict will persist for a prolonged period. In May forty-five percent of respondents believed the war would continue for over a year, the highest percentage since the conflict's inception (Levada-Center, March 27, 2024). The populace appears to be mentally preparing for prolonged hardships, with anti-war sentiments either subdued or fully suppressed. This shift indicates a deeper commitment to the ongoing struggle, driven not by imperial ambitions but by heightened concerns for national survival.

The faction advocating for a "decisive response" to adversaries is gaining momentum, as reflected in an op-ed by Denis Volkov, the director of Levada,

interpreting recent poll results published in Russian Forbes. Following Yevgeny Prigozhin's insurrection, a substantial portion of the Russian populace now desires a more assertive, consistent and unwavering stance from the state. This trend is supported by the latest Levada surveys conducted in late June, showing a noticeable shift in public sentiment. The insurrection has led to a slight decrease in confidence in Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and a significant drop in trust in Prigozhin. Instead of rallying against a struggling state, the populace has been instilled with unease, fearing destabilization and chaos (Mezey et al., June 24, 2023).

The insurrection and preceding events reveal that the current regime may be less resilient than it appears. Signs of wear within the Kremlin suggest that President Vladimir Putin, who seems increasingly distant and incapable of addressing internal conflicts, is struggling to maintain control. The society, once bewildered by the government's lack of response to unprecedented events, is now frustrated. The elites, nervous and prepared to flee if the regime collapses, add to this instability. Currently, the Kremlin is investigating officials and top members of state enterprises who left Moscow during Prigozhin's insurgency, attempting to understand their motivations.

The military and security forces, shaken by the uprising, will undoubtedly try to address their vulnerabilities and suppress growing dissent within their ranks. However, Putin's complacency, driven by his unwavering belief in his popularity and the loyalty of the elites, could hinder his efforts to address this decline. Simultaneously, the security services may seek to increase their control and quell social unrest. This combination of factors could lead to confusion in government actions, exacerbating the situation. Instead of ousting the current regime, the shockwave caused by Prigozhin's insurgency may result in a more oppressive and

ruthless government, alongside increased chaos and unpredictability (OSW, October 30, 2023).

## Conclusion

The Ukraine crisis has highlighted the complex relationship of geopolitics and domestic issues in Russia's strategic calculations. Throughout this crisis, Russia's actions have been shaped by complex factors, including its historical ties to Ukraine, its desire to maintain influence in neighboring regions and its domestic political challenges. Geographically, Russia has sought to protect its interests by annexing Crimea, supporting separatist movements in eastern Ukraine and using its energy resources to influence Ukraine and Europe. The moves have drawn significant international criticism and sanctions, but they reflect Russia's determination to assert itself in a changing global landscape. Domestically, the Ukrainian crisis has had mixed effects on Russia. On the one hand, it has increased public support and increased the popularity of President Vladimir Putin, portraying him as a strong defender of Russian interests. On the other hand, economic sanctions imposed by Western countries have damaged the Russian economy, highlighting the challenges of maintaining a confrontational foreign policy posture in the long term. Looking ahead, Russia's strategic calculus will continue to evolve as it navigates the complexities of the Ukraine crisis and its broader geopolitical ambitions. The outcome of this crisis is still unclear, but one thing is clear: Russia's actions and decisions in this regard will have far-reaching consequences not only for the region, but also for the global balance of power. As the situation evolves, it will be critical for policymakers and analysts to closely monitor Russia's strategic moves and adapt to the changing dynamics of this complex geopolitical landscape.

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