

WEEKLY DIGEST

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R.Politik's Weekly Digest is the definitive weekly guide to Russian politics. Each week, we examine the major developments, shifts and trends unfolding across the country to keep you abreast of the ever-changing situation.

Putin in Belarus

On 23-24 May, Russian President Vladimir Putin [visited](#) Minsk, an important symbolic gesture given that this was his second international trip after China following his re-election. This visit highlighted the significance of Belarus in Russian foreign policy. It is noteworthy that Putin arrived on the evening of 23 May alone while the rest of the Russian delegation followed only the next day. He wanted a one-to-one talk with Lukashenko that lasted for many hours.

The immediate purpose of the meeting focused on security issues, particularly joint exercises involving tactical nuclear weapons. These exercises [began](#) (Rus) on 21 May at the Akhtubinsk air base in Astrakhan oblast, 470 km from the Ukrainian border. The base [involves](#) facilities frequently used by Russian aircraft, such as the MiG-31K and Su-34, to take part in the war. However, [according](#) to nuclear expert Pavel Podvig, Akhtubinsk is quite far from any weapon storage. There is an Iskander battalion in Kapustin Yar but no weapons. On 24 May, Putin attempted to minimise the significance of these drills, stating that Russia regularly conducts nuclear exercises and that the only new element is the involvement of Belarus.

Dive Deeper:

[Bulletin No. 9 \(139\) 2024:](#)

New Escalation with the West & Tactical Nuclear Weapons Drills

Coinciding with Putin's arrival, Lukashenko [replaced](#) (Rus) the Belarusian Chief of the General Staff. The new chief, First Deputy Minister of Defence Pavel [Muraveiko](#) (Rus), is known for his hawkish outlook and is deemed to be closer to Russia. Previously serving as First Deputy Secretary of State of Belarus's Security Council, Muraveiko made headlines in 2023 by [threatening](#) (Rus) the West with nuclear retaliation and [caused](#) (Rus) a diplomatic incident in October by suggesting the creation of a "breakthrough corridor" for the transit of goods through Lithuania. His predecessor, Gulevich, was more cautious. Notably, Muraveiko is a 2008 graduate of the Russian Military Academy of the General Staff.

A lot of [speculation](#) was also caused by the [presence](#) (Rus) of Viktor Yanukovych, the Ukrainian president who was toppled and forced into exile during the 2014 Revolution of Dignity, in Gomel, Belarus, at the same time as Putin in Minsk. This timing aligns with Putin's statements regarding Volodymyr Zelensky. He declared that Zelensky's term expired on 20 May and so in Putin's view, Ukraine currently lacks a legitimate leader for Moscow to engage with. Many have suggested that Moscow sees Yanukovych as a potential candidate who could be imposed on Kyiv, especially given that Moscow views him as the last legitimate president of Ukraine before the "coup d'état" in February 2014. However, this appears unlikely.

According to a source close to the Kremlin, there is no definite plan regarding who Russia would most like to position as Ukrainian president and how exactly they might go about installing them. Everything at the moment depends on how circumstances develop. Putin's strategy is highly flexible, focusing not so much on any specific individual but rather on the structural constraints of the political system that he intends to impose on Ukraine. Additionally, it is well-known that Putin has little regard for Yanukovych, making it highly improbable that the latter would play any prominent role in the Kremlin's future schemes. However, as the last "legitimate" president of Ukraine, he might be earmarked for a minor, symbolic role, such as mediating between Russia and Ukrainian elites to promote Moscow's terms of capitulation.

Dive Deeper:

Digest No. 15 (29) 2024:

The Istanbul Agreements

As of today, the Kremlin's informal stance—suggested by hints from Putin and other officials—is that Zelensky's term [cannot](#) (Rus) be [extended](#) (Rus) as it is not provided for by the Ukrainian constitution. Zelensky [could have](#) (Rus) petitioned the Constitutional Court, but he chose not to pursue this option. Andrey Kolesnikov of *Kommersant* [suggests](#) (Rus) that Putin may be open to engaging in talks with Zelensky if he appeals to the Constitutional Court to legitimise his position.

The Kremlin's position is in essence that the only currently legitimate governing body in Ukraine is the Verkhovna Rada.

The Battle Around June Peace Conference In Switzerland

In a video [message](#), Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky invited US President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping to attend a peace conference in Switzerland scheduled for 15-16 June. He mentioned that over 80 of the 160 invited countries have already confirmed their participation. President Biden will likely miss the Ukraine summit, [reported](#) Bloomberg.

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Bulletin No. 17 (125) 2023:

Putin's Vision for Future World Order & Nuclear talks

The conference itself appears to be less representative than expected. On 15 May, Swiss President Viola Amherd [said](#) that more than 50 countries are going to attend out of 160 who were invited. Three weeks before the conference, most non-Western countries either refused to participate (for example, Brazil and South Africa) or were slow to decide on the format and level of representation. According to two senior European diplomats speaking to *Politico*, Russia is planning to host a meeting of BRICS

countries, at the level of foreign ministers, at around the same time as the Swiss-brokered peace conference for Ukraine.

The idea of bringing in countries who are not in geopolitical confrontation with Russia, including many from the Global South, China, and the leaders of Hungary and Slovakia, has become challenging. Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico cannot attend due to a recent assassination attempt, while the country's newly elected president, Peter Pellegrini, a nationalist-leftist, will hold his inauguration event only on 15 June. Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia appealed to the countries of the Global South: "Make no mistake. The devious plan of the sponsors of the event is to offer guests a supposedly non-confrontational agenda with special emphasis on nuclear and food security, freedom of navigation, exchange of prisoners and captives, and the return of children, and then present their presence as supposedly joining an unpromising ultimatum to Russia."

Moreover, relations between Western countries and Zelensky are becoming increasingly strained. One immediate issue has been Zelensky's attempts to influence who will participate in the conference, despite Swiss assurances that only Bern will send out invitations. For example, on 21 May, Zelensky called Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed al-Sudani and invited him to attend. [Tensions](#) between the White House and the Ukrainian leader are also under pressure because of Zelensky's persistent [demands](#) for long-range weapons and permission to strike Russian territory with Western weaponry.

Ukraine's peace plan has been set aside, despite Zelensky's objections, and more routine issues are now the focus. Zelensky outlined three key items on the agenda: nuclear security, safety of navigation in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, and the return of Ukrainian children and an all-for-all prisoner swap. These items significantly differ from last year's Ukrainian peace plan, which required Russia's withdrawal from Ukraine.

Currently, Moscow sees and is projecting the Swiss conference as a still-born failure. Initial concerns about the potential for a diplomatic reverse have dissipated. It is also worth noting that there are no illusions or expectations regarding the China-Brazil [initiative](#) to hold an alternative conference with both Russian and Ukrainian participation. A source close to the Kremlin expressed the view that this project is unlikely to succeed either, as substantial Russian involvement would likely preclude

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[Bulletin No. 10 \(140\) 2024*](#):

Putin in China

*Available from 28 May

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[Digest No. 10 \(24\) 2024:](#)

Putin's Meeting with Rafael Grossi

Ukrainian participation. In other words, the concept of these conferences is inherently flawed. As Russian ambassador to Washington Anatoliy Antonov [told](#) Newsweek, Russia is relying on serious diplomatic and legal efforts concerning the Ukrainian issue (implying a focus on the US), and no conference can substitute for this work. He added, "If Russian proposals for peace talks in Washington are again ignored, the Ukrainians will lose much more territory than they currently have."

The Reshuffle in Chechnya

On 24 May, Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov nominated Magomed Daudov, known by the nickname "Lord", for the position of chairman of the republic's government. He resigned as speaker of the Chechen parliament, a position he held for nine years. His predecessor, Muslim Khuchiev, who led the Chechen government from June 2018 until 21 May 2024, was appointed an assistant to Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin—an appointment that carries [no real power](#) (Rus) and is seen as an honorary dismissal. Meduza has [described](#) (Rus) Khuchiev as one of the few members of Kadyrov's circle who occasionally makes independent comments about current events in Chechnya.

Magomed Daudov is widely [recognised](#) (Rus) as Kadyrov's "right-hand man" and a close friend. Before serving as a speaker, he led the administration of the republic's head and government. Daudov has regularly faced accusations of involvement in threats, civil prosecution campaigns and actions against alleged homosexuals. Despite Daudov's influence, this new appointment is unlikely to significantly alter the power structure in the republic, as Kadyrov continues to personally control all important decisions.

Ramzan Kadyrov has [accelerated](#) (Rus) the appointment of his relatives to high-profile positions in recent times. According to some [calculations](#) (Rus), out of 158 major officials in Chechnya, 30 percent are Kadyrov's relatives, 23 percent originate in the same villages, and another 12 percent are friends of the Chechen leader or relatives of friends. As a result of recent reshuffles, his relatives now [occupy](#) (Rus) nine out of the twenty-three posts in the government. This comes amidst rumours of Kadyrov's severe health issues, suggesting he is now looking to secure his power in order to compensate for the fragility of his position.

On 22 May, Kadyrov visited Moscow, where he [met](#) (Rus) with Putin and the following day [participated](#) (Rus) in talks with King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa of Bahrain and

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[Bulletin No. 17 \(125\) 2023:](#)
Kadyrov's Uncertain Future

Prince Nasser bin Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa. According to R.Politik, during his meeting with Putin, Kadyrov attempted to secure Putin's consent to promote Daudov to a position (Rus) within the federal security services (Rus). Putin's response was noncommittal. Shortly after, when responding (Rus) to a journalist from Shot, Kadyrov mentioned they were actively looking for a position for Daudov. The next day, he appointed Daudov as Prime Minister, indicating that the Chechen leader's plans for a federal position for his close ally have been blocked. It seems Kadyrov was preparing someone else for the role of Prime Minister, likely another relative, and had to change his plans abruptly.

All indications suggest that Kadyrov's influence at the federal level is waning, as evidenced by several recent incidents. One such instance involves the case (Rus) of Chechen fugitive Lia Zaurbekova. In May, she discreetly escaped from her home and sought refuge in Moscow, where she hid at a police station from her relatives attempting to return her to Chechnya. Members of the Presidential Council for Human Rights, known for their loyalty and conservative views, intervened (Rus), publicly stating that she had left Russia and was safe. This involvement suggested that the Kremlin played some role in assisting Zaurbekova, despite significant efforts by Chechen authorities to take her under control and bring her back to Chechnya.

Another incident was Kadyrov's conflict (Rus) with the authorities of Dagestan following the aggressive detention of Chechnya's Minister of Emergency Situations Alikhan Tsakayev. While Kadyrov demanded punishment for the regional police officers involved, the federal Ministry of Internal Affairs accused (Rus) Tsakayev of gross misconduct and referred the case to the Investigative Committee.

A source close to the Kremlin mentioned that Putin does not have a predetermined plan for addressing the challenges related to transition of power in Chechnya. However, he does not want Kadyrov's associates to be given positions of influence at the federal level and must work to ensure continuity in the event of Kadyrov's demise. The federal authorities currently believe they are strong enough to handle the consequences; no special arrangements have been discussed with Kadyrov. The source noted that Kadyrov reacts vehemently to any suggestion of his potential demise.



Dive Deeper:

Digest No. 16 (30) 2024:

Kadyrov's Conflict with Dagestan

Veterans Entering Politics

The upcoming regional elections in September may pose an annoyance for United Russia as for the first time, the party is seeing a substantial increase in war veterans participating in its primaries. According (Rus) to *Kommersant*, over a hundred war participants have applied to run in the primaries in which candidates will be selected for legislative assemblies in the elections scheduled for 8 September across 13 regions. Half of these applicants are mobilised soldiers, including those currently at the front. Only three of these participants are members of United Russia, while five support the party. This year, being a war veteran confers an advantage in the primaries—an additional 25 percent to the final score. In his annual address in March, Putin called for reliance on a new elite—veterans—who will receive support through the “Time of Heroes” project.

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Bulletin No. 15 (123) 2023:
Regional Elections

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Bulletin No. 5 (135) 2024:
Putin's State Of The Nation address

This influx of veteran candidates has caused tension within the party leadership, which has its own personnel priorities and plans. The regions with the highest proportions of veteran participants in the United Russia primaries are in Moscow (15 out of 356), Crimea (20 out of 222), Sevastopol (16 out of 173), and Tuva (12 out of 183). In Tuva, this has led to political skirmishes as none of the 12 veterans running are members of United Russia. One is a Hero of Russia and two others are challenging incumbents in constituencies where the speaker of the Supreme Khural (parliament) of the republic, Kan-ool Davaa, and Senator, Dina Oyun, respectively, plan to run.

On 21 May, Sholban Kara-ool, the deputy speaker of the State Duma and former head of the Republic of Tuva, alleged that veterans in Tuva were being threatened and coerced into withdrawing their candidacies. The local party's deputy secretary, Kan-ool Davaa, refuted these claims and warned against escalating the situation. Sergei Perminov, a deputy secretary of United Russia's General Council, told *Kommersant* that the information provided by Sholban Kara-ool did not align with reality.

This incident highlights two significant issues. Firstly, it illustrates the growing influence of the war and its aftermath on domestic politics. Veterans are offered more favourable conditions for political engagement and are beginning to annoy established politicians. Although their presence is still very limited and unlikely to challenge United Russia, it is stirring up local discord. Secondly, these tensions may be one symptom of

broader political dynamics. Tuva is a case in point. Former Minister of Defence and current Secretary of the Security Council Sergey Shoigu maintains informal political influence over his native region. The indignation of Sholban Kara-ool, a longtime ally of his, suggests that Shoigu's recent vulnerability and removal from the Ministry of Defence have weakened his influence, enabling the regional branch of United Russia to be more assertive in selecting its candidates. These local conflicts represent some of the most intriguing indirect effects of the war on Russian political life.

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Political Party discussions