

# 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.

## Summit of the CIS Heads of State

On 8 October, a [meeting](#) of the CIS Heads of State Council, chaired by Russian President Vladimir Putin, took place in Moscow. The presidents of Belarus, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, as well as the prime minister of Armenia, attended. Speculation arose as to whether the leaders of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, Kasym-Jomart Tokayev and Serdar Berdymukhamedov, attended a pre-summit dinner to celebrate Putin's birthday. Presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov [assured](#) (Rus) Kommersant's correspondent that they were present.

Institutionally and politically, the CIS summits has limited utility, functioning primarily as an opportunity to exchange updates. However, for Putin, especially because of the war, these summits carry reputational importance. He views the "post-Soviet space" as Russia's "traditional sphere of influence". As such, the presence of the CIS leaders in Moscow while Russia is waging war on Ukraine is a signal that Russia is not isolated. Putin traditionally uses these events to assert Russia's role as a regional broker and to advocate for integration projects. For the CIS leaders, it is an opportunity to raise pressing issues, such as, for example, Russia's [anti-migrant policy](#) (Rus), a matter of considerable concern for Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

### Dive Deeper:


[Bulletin No. 16 \(146\) 2024:](#)  
Migration Policy and Politics

In this context, the attendance of the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan, fierce geopolitical opponents, was symbolic, especially given the cooling relations between Yerevan and Moscow (which have been worsened by Armenia's [alignment](#) (Rus) with France and the EU). Tensions were evident in small details: the Kremlin reportedly resented Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan's public bicycle [ride](#) (Rus) through central Moscow, which was seen as a provocative contrast to Putin's more distant PR image. Armenia, for its part, expressed informal [dissatisfaction](#) (Rus) over images posted by state-run press agency RIA Novosti that showed Nikol Pashinyan bowing to Ilham Aliyev alongside the Azerbaijani flag. On 9 October, the offending photos were [removed](#) (Rus).


In late September, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov [stated](#) (Rus) that Russia had proposed a trilateral meeting, Armenia and Azerbaijan at the head of state level, but this meeting has not materialised. Instead, the two leaders had a brief informal conversation and each met with Putin individually. On 8 October, Russian presidential aide Yuri Ushakov [commented](#) (Rus) that a trilateral meeting did not occur because the idea "was not supported by someone", a statement clearly aimed at Armenia. In the wake of Azerbaijan's successful takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh, demarcation and delimitation processes have stalled, while key transport routes remain blocked.

A major point of contention is Azerbaijan’s demand that Armenia remove from its constitution’s preamble a reference to Armenia’s Declaration of Independence, which includes a clause on “Armenia’s reunification with Nagorno-Karabakh.” Armenia has indicated it will consider amending its constitution only after a peace treaty is signed.

The summit [adopted](#) (Rus) a resolution favourable to Azerbaijan, designating the town of Lachin—formerly under the control of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKAO) until 2020—as the CIS Capital of Culture in 2025. Azerbaijani authorities have invested heavily in Lachin’s restoration, with an international airport [set](#) (Rus) to open there next year. For Armenia, the loss of Lachin was a significant blow, preceding the complete dissolution of the NKAO. In contrast, the selection of the Armenian city of Meghri as the CIS Capital of Culture in 2026 is not much by way of consolation.

 **Dive Deeper:**  
[Bulletin No. 16 \(124\) 2023:](#)  
 Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

After the summit, it emerged that the leaders of Armenia and Russia had agreed that Russian border guards would withdraw from the Armenian-Iranian border by 1 January 2025—less than three months away. This decision irritated ultra-nationalists, who view it as a reduction of Russia’s presence within its traditional sphere of influence. The Rybar Telegram channel [reported](#) (Rus) to its audience of 1.3 million people that the positions vacated by Russian border troops (which are a part of the FSB) along the Iranian border in Armenia’s Syunik region are already being prepared for takeover by American intelligence teams. The channel expects these teams to monitor Iran’s activities, including missile launches.

 **Dive Deeper:**  
[Digest No. 16 \(30\) 2024:](#)  
 Withdrawal from Nagorno Karabakh

Additionally, Armenia’s Foreign Ministry declined to sign two statements at the ministerial meeting: “On the Principles of Ensuring Eurasian Security” and “On the Inadmissibility of Using Unilateral Restrictive Measures in International Relations.”

Moscow is signalling its willingness to transition to more explicitly pragmatic relations with Yerevan, accepting Armenia’s increasing distance and closer ties with the West, provided Armenia maintains its partnership with Russia in other areas. This move will facilitate Russia’s rapprochement with Baku, which Putin is prioritising as more strategically important at this time.

Interestingly, Kommersant correspondent Andrey Kolesnikov [noted](#) (Rus) that the CIS summit appeared to be the most amicable that has taken place in years, although, he added, this might be due to the fact that there is now so little left to share.

## Putin in Ashgabat: First meeting with the new Iranian leader

On 11 October, President Putin [participated](#) (Rus) in the international forum “Interconnection of Times and Civilisations – the Basis of Peace and Development” in Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan. This event marked the 300th anniversary of the birth of prominent Turkmen poet and thinker Makhtumkuli. A key highlight of the trip was Putin's first meeting with newly elected Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, who was also there at the forum.

### Dive Deeper:

[Bulletin No. 14 \(100\) 2022:](#)  
Putin's Visit To Iran

Putin's attendance at the forum was announced only on 7 October, with no prior information available. His meeting with Pezeshkian had originally been scheduled for the BRICS summit in Kazan on 22-24 October, where both sides are expected to sign a bilateral strategic partnership agreement. Importantly, this agreement was mostly prepared during the tenure of the late president Ebrahim Raisi (who was killed in a helicopter crash this May), with its terms finalised in July.

### Dive Deeper:

[Bulletin No. 8 \(138\) 2024:](#)  
Russia and the Israel-Iran Conflict

Over the past two and a half years, cooperation between Russia and Iran has been primarily military. Iranian armaments, especially Shahed drones, have seen unprecedented demand. Production of these drones is now underway in Tatarstan, driven by their cost-effectiveness and ease of use. There has been a role reversal in training cooperation, as Iranian instructors now teach their Russian counterparts. Historically, the opposite was normally the case.

At the same time, the Kremlin is still reluctant to share military, space and especially nuclear technology with Iran. Deliveries of Su-35 aircraft have been delayed, confusing the Iranian side, as the Kremlin fears these weapons could potentially be used against Israel—an outcome Moscow seeks to avoid. Western media outlets have [reported](#) that Iran is particularly interested in satellite intelligence cooperation. However, Russia is still trying to [balance](#) (Rus) this policy with Israel's interests, despite escalating tensions between Tel Aviv and Moscow. Moscow also has to consider the positions of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, both of which [would oppose](#) the sale of advanced weapons to Tehran.

### Dive Deeper:

[Bulletin No. 18 \(126\) 2023:](#)  
Russia's Middle East Interests

Notably, trade volume between Russia and Iran [fell](#) (Rus) by nearly 17 percent last year, underscoring the mistrust Russian businesses have toward their Iranian partners, though the situation [improved](#) (Rus) in 2024. However, Tehran values Moscow's

alignment with its proxies in the Middle East, including Hamas, Hezbollah and Ansar Allah (the Yemen-based Houthi movement), even if this support offers little in the way of tangible assistance in Iran's confrontation with Israel. Speculation about expanding Iran-West contacts and a potential revival of the nuclear deal is likely to be too optimistic, given the current hostilities between Israel and Iran.

### Dive Deeper:

Bulletin No. 21 (129) 2023:  
Putin's Middle East Tour

Ruslan Suleymanov, a prominent Middle East expert, told R.Politik that Pezeshkian, who represents Iran's reformist camp, is unlikely to make significant changes to Iranian foreign policy, even if he wishes to. The Iranian establishment, dominated by hardliners, has been making key decisions—such as arms sales to Moscow—without consulting the diplomatic corps. As such, Pezeshkian will probably continue the policy direction set under Raisi, although the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) may face waning popular support in part due to their failure to prevent the assassination of Hezbollah leaders. This continuity suits the Kremlin's interests well. In September, both countries [intensified](#) (Rus) their contacts, and Putin's visit appears to be an attempt to get personally acquainted ahead of the more important meeting in Kazan.

## Hacker attack on VGTRK

On the morning of 7 October, the All-Russian State Television and Radio Company (VGTRK) [experienced](#) (Rus) an unprecedented hacking attack. Online broadcasting and internal services were disrupted, internet and phone lines were shut down, and data from servers, including backups, was erased. [According](#) to Reuters, which cited a source within the Ukrainian government, the attack was allegedly carried out by Ukrainian hackers. Anonymous sources connected the attack to President Putin's birthday, although Reuters noted that it could not independently verify this claim.

VGTRK reported that the attack "did not cause significant damage" to the media holding. However, Votak [reported](#) (Rus) that broadcasts recorded by night correspondents could not be aired, some materials remained unprepared, and for a time, Rossiya 24 aired footage from Moscow street cameras while recorded news segments repeated. Internet broadcasting was interrupted for several hours and full broadcasting of "Russia 1" and "Russia 24" channels was only restored by the evening of 7 October. Additionally, VGTRK [faced](#) (Rus) difficulties paying the salaries of its journalists, due to its limited access to corporate servers.

Work on current news operations was quickly restored. VGTRK staff temporarily relocated to the company's complex on Shabolovka, another district of Moscow, which

enabled them to maintain uninterrupted television broadcasting—a priority for the channel’s audience, as fewer viewers access programming online.

The last comparable incident occurred during the night of 3-4 October 1993, amid armed clashes in Moscow between supporters and opponents of then-President Boris Yeltsin. At that time, the VGTRK's management succeeded in maintaining uninterrupted broadcasting, although brief disruptions were noticed by viewers in Krasnoyarsk and Novosibirsk when a programme, “Vesti”, was [interrupted](#) (Rus) mid-broadcast by several minutes of advertisements and on-air announcements.

The National News Service [suggests](#) (Rus) that a cyberattack of this scale would likely require direct access to the system or a leak of passwords—whether accidental or deliberate—both of which warrant investigation. Following the attack, a debate erupted on Telegram over who was to blame. The Nezygar channel, managed by Mikhail Mishustin’s PR team, [alleged](#) (Rus) that VGTRK's multi-billion ruble security system was ineffective and claimed the company’s reports on its performance were misleading. Nezygar further speculated that the leadership could be changed in response, hinting at the possible resignation of VGTRK CEO Oleg Dobrodeyev. Former VGTRK First Deputy and current TASS CEO Andrei Kondrashov was named as a potential successor. The channel also suggested that Alexei Gromov, the official responsible for traditional media oversight at the Presidential Administration, might face repercussions.

Speculation about these positions is important as it suggests that an external cyberattack could be leveraged domestically to undermine the top management of one of Russia's most influential media outlets. The appointment of VGTRK's head lies solely within Putin's remit. He has put his confidence in Oleg Dobrodeyev for over 25 years, as he has also done with Konstantin Ernst at Channel One. However, in wartime, security—particularly cybersecurity within the media—has taken on critical importance, providing Dobrodeyev’s and Ernst’s rivals with an opportunity to question their competence and attack their performance under the guise of security concerns.

## Innovations and arrests

Roman Laas, the director of the Advanced Engineering School Intelligent Energy Systems at Tomsk Polytechnic University (TPU), was [arrested](#) (Rus) by the FSB on 9 October on the charge of embezzling 2.8 million rubles, which he allegedly allocated to himself as salary.

The TPU School of Engineering, founded in 2022, was the first major project led by TPU’s young rector, Dmitry Sednev (born in 1989), who [assumed](#) (Rus) his position in 2021. Despite his youth, Sednev is the author of over a hundred scientific papers, a recipient of a presidential scholarship and the holder of a medal from the Academy of

Sciences for young scientists. Sednev [collaborated](#) (Rus) with state corporation Rosatom to establish a school dedicated to training highly qualified engineers for the energy sector, with a focus on nuclear power. Vyacheslav Pershukov, Rosatom’s special representative for international and scientific-technical projects, was appointed the school’s director, with Laas, a young engineer born in 1991, as one of its primary managers. The project received a grant from the Ministry of Education and Science along with federal budget support.

It was not long before the school's issues became public. Initially, the prosecutor’s office contested the appointment of Vyacheslav Pershukov as director, as his primary workplace was in Moscow, almost two thousand miles away. Pershukov was consequently forced to step down from the supervisory board, with Laas assuming his position. In 2023, Rector Dmitry Sednev unexpectedly resigned after an FSB investigation implicated him in allegedly bribing the TPU's supervisor at the FSB, Colonel Rustam Kamalov. According to the investigation, Sednev had registered an acquaintance of Kamalov as a TPU employee, resulting in a fraudulent salary payout exceeding 5 million rubles, which Kamalov then misappropriated. Such arrangements are illegal but common, leaving Sednev in a difficult position.

The FSB’s own security division soon launched an investigation into Kamalov himself, [leading](#) (Rus) to his arrest and a sentence of eleven years in prison in 2024. Sednev's criminal case is now before the court. In 2024, additional charges were [filed](#) (Rus) against him for allegedly authorising salary payments to Pershukov during his tenure at the school. Then, in September 2024, Laas was arrested in a case formally unrelated to Sednev’s but widely perceived as a continuation of it. This arrest occurred despite the engineering school being [recognised](#) (Rus) as one of the top institutions in the country under Laas's leadership. Unofficial reports indicate that Laas's salary of 220,000 rubles per month (approximately 2,000 euros) was legally documented.

The situation involving the Tomsk scientists highlights how university administrators and managers find themselves in a “risk zone” that is difficult to navigate, often compelled to create fictitious positions to maintain favourable relations with their supervisors—whether from civilian departments or the security organs. This practice, however, exposes them to the allegation of corruption. Complex funding structures can lead to financial transactions, from payments for government contracts to salaries, being classified as criminal.

 **Dive Deeper:**

[Digest No. 21 \(107\) 2022:](#)

Steady Rise of the State Ideology and the Role of Domestic Policy Overseers

 **Dive Deeper:**

[Bulletin No. 10 \(118\) 2023:](#)

State Ideology And The Constitution

Universities have long been under the heightened scrutiny by the FSB, although they have so far mostly focused on institutions with a “liberal” reputation—such as the [prosecution](#) (Rus) of Sergey Zuyev and the attacks on Shaninka in recent years—or cases directly related to treason. Now, however, these risks have extended to traditionally apolitical yet well-connected university administrators, as seen in Tomsk.

 **Dive Deeper:**

[Bulletin No. 13 \(99\) 2022:](#)

The Politics Behind The Arrest Of Vladimir Mau

This case also underscores the FSB’s considerable influence over the scientific and education sectors, as well as its dominant role and broad enforcement powers in anti-corruption cases.

Another recent [example](#) (Rus) of the FSB's growing activity is the 9 October arrest of Alexander Popelyukh, the deputy head of the Deposit Insurance Agency (DIA). Popelyukh faces fraud charges related to Aquamir, Russia’s largest indoor water park in Novosibirsk, which was pledged to the bankrupt Mezhtopenergobank. The DIA currently manages this bank's assets. Popelyukh is accused of taking part in the embezzlement of approximately 200 million rubles from the water park’s operations, funds that never entered the bankruptcy estate. This sum dwarfs the scale of the alleged fraud in the TPU case.

Unlike the Tomsk case, public [disclosures](#) (Rus) have revealed substantial property holdings associated with Popelyukh's family, indicating wealth well beyond his official income. Previously a high-ranking prosecutor (deputy prosecutor of both Novosibirsk region and the Nenets Autonomous District), Popelyukh's former status has [not shielded](#) (Rus) him from arrest.