

EDM Special Report

**A Perfect Storm:
Russia Losing Its War Against
Ukraine May Lead to Regime
Change**



Taras Kuzio

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Executive Summary

- Russia is entering a perfect storm of military setbacks, economic deterioration, public dissatisfaction, elite fragmentation, and growing fears of political instability. These conditions could ultimately threaten the durability of Russian President Vladimir Putin's regime.
- The Russian military is facing mounting manpower challenges as casualties reportedly exceed volunteer recruitment, forcing it to rely on convicts, indebted citizens, migrants, and increasingly coercive recruitment practices that lead to reduced battlefield effectiveness.
- Ukrainian long-range drone and deep-strike operations are increasingly disrupting Russian logistics, damaging energy infrastructure, degrading air defenses, and undermining Moscow's ability to sustain offensive operations.
- Russia's economy is increasingly strained by wartime expenditures, declining energy revenues, labor shortages, and sanctions-related costs. Public confidence in the Kremlin appears to be weakening as economic hardship, battlefield losses, internet restrictions, and direct Ukrainian strikes inside Russia make the war more visible and difficult for ordinary citizens to ignore.
- Influential military bloggers, nationalist figures, and former Kremlin regime supporters are increasingly questioning the war's objectives, criticizing leadership failures, and openly debating scenarios involving Russian defeat, political upheaval, or leadership change.
- The past months have seen a widening gap in Kremlin rhetoric and battlefield realities. Russia's maximalist demands remain unattainable while military, economic, and social pressures steadily erode the foundations of Putin's power. Converging military failures, economic stress, social discontent, and elite divisions could lead to regime change or significant political transformation in Russia.

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Introduction

The growing crisis in Russia and the potential for defeat in its war against Ukraine will be welcome to those who support a ceasefire and a quick end to the war ([Kyiv International Institute of Sociology](#), April 30). The Kremlin's insistence on Russia's inevitable victory is out of touch with reality ([Interfax](#), April 29). In a dictatorship such as Russia's, however, it is risky to deliver bad news to the leader.

The current situation holds some parallels to 1990–1991. The West feared a disintegrating Soviet Union, leading to a Yugoslav-style civil war, but worse because the Soviet Union had nuclear weapons. U.S. President H. W. Bush gave his well-known “chicken Kyiv” speech to the Ukrainian parliament, where he urged Ukrainians to refrain from breaking away from the Soviet Union ([YouTube/@TheBush4ILibrary](#), August 1, 1991, uploaded June 23, 2021). Twenty-four days later, Ukraine declared independence. Today, Ukraine is again ignoring Western calls that urge Kyiv to not to strike Russia's energy sector, which could be linked to Western fears of the unknown if Russia is substantially weakened ([Ukrinform](#), April 9).

Andriy Kovalenko of Ukraine's Center for Countering Disinformation outlined how out of touch with reality the Russian leadership is. One of the Russian scenarios is to continue the special military operation until 2028, which Russia may not have the manpower or financial resources to do. Russian leaders consistently and publicly repeat their goal of occupying all of Ukraine, which is an unrealistic goal in light of Russia's inability to occupy the entire Donbas after four years of war ([Telegram/@akovalenko1989](#), April 16).

Another scenario for the war, moving to a ceasefire and a frozen conflict, has been supported by Ukraine and opposed by Moscow.

In 2025, the Kremlin believed that the end of U.S. military and financial aid, combined with pressure from Washington, would force Ukraine to capitulate to Russian demands. This did not happen, and Ukraine has turned the situation around in its favor and is gaining strategic momentum. Ukraine aims to pressure Russia into entering negotiations from a weakened position and to be more willing to accept a compromise ceasefire.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's proposal for a one-day ceasefire on May 9, “Victory Day,” was countered by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who said Ukraine sought a permanent ceasefire ([Radio Svoboda](#), April 30). A Victory Day ceasefire was established for May 9–11 following pressure from U.S. President Donald Trump after a phone call with Putin ([Komsomol'skaya Pravda](#), April 29). Zelenskyy issued a tongue-in-cheek decree permitting Russia to hold a parade on May 9 ([President of Ukraine](#), May 8). A largely scaled-down Victory Day parade was held in Moscow, which the Kremlin announced was due to the “current operational situation”—meaning the threat of long-range Ukrainian strikes ([RIA Novosti](#), April 28). This year's Victory Day celebrations were the first in eighteen years not to hold a military parade. The scaled-down parade is a clear sign of the strain the war is placing on Russia and of its presentation of military might (see [EDM](#), May 11).

Throughout U.S.-led peace negotiations, Russian leaders have stuck to their original maximalist demand for Ukraine's capitulation, which Kyiv has rejected. Russian leaders continue to demand Ukraine's legal recognition of Russian sovereignty over Crimea and the four oblasts of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has repeatedly demanded that any peace agreement deal with the “root causes of the war” ([Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), February

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9). The Kremlin’s “root causes” should be understood as a demand for de-Ukrainization (which they frame as “de-nazification”), a limit on the size of Ukraine’s army, renouncing the goal of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) membership and neutrality (“demilitarization”), removal of Zelenskyy, and a regime change that together would transform Ukraine essentially into a Russian puppet state like Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s Belarus (see [Strategic Snapshot](#), February 24). Russian Security Council Deputy Chairman Dmitry Medvedev recently emphasized Russia’s original war aims, predicted Russia’s victory, and portrayed the war as an existential conflict with the West ([RIA Novosti](#), April 30).

The reality is different. The head of Ukraine’s military intelligence, Oleh Ivashchenko, revealed hacked Russian General Staff documents that secretly acknowledge the inability of the Russian army to fulfill the task of occupying the entire Donbas and the remainder of Ukraine set by Putin ([President of Ukraine](#), April 28). The incompatibility between the Kremlin’s demands for the fulfillment of its war goals irrespective of the costs in human lives and the reality on the ground of Russia losing the war is causing tension and strains within the ruling elites, and with Putin’s paranoia, fears of a coup (see [EDM](#), April 27).

Russia’s growing crisis comprises five interrelated dynamics: military defeat, economic and financial crises, public discontent, Russian nationalists and military bloggers, and fears of a coup.

Military Defeat

Putin initiated a “partial mobilization” in the fall of 2022 in response to failed Russian offensives in Kyiv and Kharkiv (see [EDM](#), September 22, 2022). Nearly a million young, middle-class, and

technically savvy Russians fled Russia ([Re-Russia](#), July 28, 2023). Despite the failure of Russia’s armed forces to occupy more Ukrainian territory, Putin has resisted the demands of Russian nationalists to institute full mobilization, likely fearing its unpopularity would be politically destabilizing and lead to a further mass exodus abroad.

The Kremlin’s reliance on voluntary mobilization, driven by high bonus payouts and the promise of freedom—if they survive—has come to an end. Since December 2025, Russia has suffered a higher number of casualties than the number of Russians who are volunteering ([Kyiv Independent](#), February 12). Meanwhile, with news of a very high death rate spreading to prisons and colonies, fewer criminals are willing to sign up. Additionally, many Russian regions have run out of funds to offer high bonuses to new sign-ups (see [EDM](#), [February 12](#), [March 2](#), [April 7](#), [13](#), [14](#), [29](#)).

The Kremlin’s plan for 2026 to sign up 409,000 soldiers, or 33,500–34,600 each month, is being fulfilled at only 60–75 percent ([Suspline](#), December 27, 2025; [X/@hochuzhit_com](#), April 6). Alexey Chadayev, head of the Ushkuynik Research and Production Center, a Russian drone development company, wrote up his conversation with a Russian lieutenant general about how Russian recruitment is proceeding at a “lackluster pace” and is down by over 20 percent compared to 2025. Recruitment for Russia’s drone forces, which are viewed as safer to fight in, is also declining, leading to calls to remove them from being part of the army ([Telegram/@chadayevru](#), March [28](#), [29](#)).

The Kremlin has attempted to covertly re-start conscription in numerous ways to continue its war against Ukraine. Russia has gradually removed many categories from the list of grounds for disqualifying a person from participating in the war ([TASS](#), June 29, 2025;

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Kyiv Independent, December 30, 2025). Russians are signed up from the margins of society, released convicts, poverty-stricken from ethnic minority regions, drug addicts, alcoholics, and debtors. Videos on social media have shown crippled, old, weak, and infirm men waiting at deployment centers with little training before being sent to slaughter in “meat assaults”—the Russian term for being sent as cannon fodder (Telegram/@stoparmy, February 3).

Journalist and military blogger Anastasia Kashevarova posted photographs and analysis of alcoholics, incontinent, and brain-damaged Russians who had been signed up for the war (Telegram/@akashevarova, March 16). Pavel Teluk, who assists in retrieving Russians who died in the war, admitted, “Yes, it happens, they send men ... without a foot or without a hand” into assaults. He estimated only 20 out of one hundred Russian soldiers survive these meat assaults as they are unable to retreat, because they would be shot by Russian Storm V and Storm Z blocking units manned by convicts (Telegram/@ne zhdi novosti, April 16). These poor-quality troops do not lead to Russian advances on the battlefield.

In a video clip on social media of five Russian prisoners of war (POWs), only one had volunteered, while the other four were detained for drugs and debts, and offered deals of no criminal charges if they agreed to be sent to war against Ukraine. Twenty-four percent of Russian soldiers were formerly under criminal investigation or about to be convicted, and 40 percent had been in debt (United24 Media, April 16).

Ukrainian forces claim daily sightings of Russian soldiers committing suicide after drone attacks or when drone swarms surround them. Ukrainian troops believe that untrained Russian soldiers cannot deal with the horror of 21st-century warfare in the kill zone, and have been

indoctrinated that surrendering is dishonorable (United24 Media, March 30).

Ukrainian military commentators have noticed since mid-2025 that Russian forces are exhausted. A Russian commented on Ukrainian attacks, saying, “They said this would be an operation, so I thought it would be a short conflict. That was my mistake.” Steve Rosenberg of the BBC in Moscow reported a growing “sense of fatigue in Russia as the war in Ukraine drags on and drones target southern Russia” (X/@BBCSteveR, April 30).

Russian officers continue to send their soldiers into meat assaults each day. Their intensity, however, has declined (Euromaidan Press, February 5). Between 2024 and 2025, the yearly number of Russian deserters doubled to 70,000. There has been a 30 percent increase in the number of Russian troops using the opportunity offered by Ukraine’s program to encourage desertion or avoid military service (Telegram/@agentstvonevs, September 28, 2025).

Moscow is also drawing on 20,000 troops from strategic reserves for its war against Ukraine. This small number of additional Russian troops will not change the tide on the battlefield as they will likely soon become casualties (Euromaidan News, April 17). Russia is also filling its ranks by deceiving migrants from developing countries in Africa and Asia who come to the country after seeing adverts for employment. Instead of jobs, they are forcibly mobilized and sent as cannon fodder to the frontline. According to Ukrainian intelligence, Russia plans to recruit about 20,000 foreigners into its army this year from Central Asia, Bangladesh, Chad, Sudan, Burundi, and other African countries (Euromaidan Press, April 28).

Russia is also moving toward pushing more sectors of Russian civil society not previously

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priority targets into the conscription process. In March, Governor Pavel Malkov of Russia's Ryazan oblast signed a decree requiring businesses with 150–300 employees to provide two employees to sign up for mobilization, businesses with 300–500 employees to send three employees, and businesses with over 500 employees to send five employees. This policy is valid from March 30 to September 30 of this year ([Russian Federation Official Publication of Legal Acts](#), March 20; [The Moscow Times](#), March 31). Russian students are also being pressured to enlist in the military ([Vazhnye Istorii](#), April 10). Nearly 200 higher education institutions and colleges in Russia are recruiting students, and some even have recruitment quotas ([Vazhnye Istorii](#), March 3; [Telegram/@groza_media](#), March 13).

Ukrainians are hacking recruiting meetings of these students to disrupt the Kremlin's covert mobilization. Military blogger Alexander Vaskovsky was detained after revealing the failure of the Kremlin's student recruitment for drone troops, writing that the only students who signed up were those who were poorly performing in their studies ([Meduza](#), April 14). A closed meeting of students at the Kuban State Agrarian University to recruit for the war failed when it was hacked by a Ukrainian soldier pretending to be a Russian drone operator. After dropping his pretense, he said, "I'm actually a serviceman—just not Russian, but Ukrainian. And I want to tell you: God forbid you come here, because I'll have to kill you, every single one of you who signs that contract" ([UNIAN](#), April 25). He pointed to the number of Russians killed filling a cemetery the size of "two countries."

Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Oleksandr Syrskyy described Ukraine's strategy this year as maintaining the strategic initiative by exhausting Russia, holding territory, building

reserves, striking where Russia is weakest, and liberating occupied land ([Militarnyy](#), March 31).

Zelenskyy said Russia and the attackers brought the war, and that the attackers should be pushed back into Russia ([Kyiv Independent](#), March 23). Ukrainian attacks on Russia are aimed at reducing support for the war by bringing the war to the Russians, one they had wanted to ignore. The ability of many Russians to ignore their country's war against Ukraine is now over. Russia's last remaining independent polling organization, the Levada Center, reported in April that nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of Russians believe it is time to negotiate an end to the war. In comparison, only 24 percent support continued military action ([Levada Center](#), April 2; see [EDM](#), April 13).

Russians have also begun to hear and see Ukrainian attacks, which are coupled with Kremlin-implemented internet blackouts and a growing economic crisis (see [Strategic Snapshot](#), May 8). Secretary of the Russian Security Council and former Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said, "No Russian region can feel safe." Until now, many Russians were able to ignore the war, which was far away. With Ukrainian attacks, shortages, and higher prices for goods and fuel, this is no longer true. Oleksii Melnyk, the co-director of foreign policy and international security studies at the Razumkov Center, believes the Kremlin is ignoring the growing threat of a popular explosion combining "dissatisfaction with the authorities, a growing sense of insecurity, and increased instability" ([Kyiv Independent](#), March 23). Assassinations of senior Russian military and security officers in Moscow have added to Russian insecurity (see [EDM](#), March 18).

With overflowing cemeteries, Russians are increasingly noticing the high number of casualties. In March, former pro-Kremlin

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lawyer and propagandist Ilya Remeslo—who is primarily known for his aggressive legal campaigns against late Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny—posted on Telegram, wondering if Russia had reached 1.2 million casualties in the “dead-end war,” which could drag on for 10–15 years, “solely to satisfy Putin’s self-interest” ([Telegram/@ilya_remeslaw](#), March 17). Russians are showing signs of acute stress, which, with nightly mass attacks by Ukraine, will only increase. Mental health disorders are on the rise. Alcoholism has increased by 30 percent since 2022 and is rampant among Russian soldiers ([Vazhnye Istorii](#), April 16). Hacked Russian communications by Ukrainian military intelligence found large-scale poisoning from alcohol among Russian troops ([TSN.UA](#), May 20).

Ukrainian Minister of Defense Mykhaylo Fedorov said Russian casualties in March were 36,000, of which 90 percent were from drone attacks, a figure that exceeded volunteer recruitment in Russia ([United24 Media](#), April 24). There were 206 Russian casualties for every square mile of newly occupied territory compared to 61 in the summer of last year ([Euromaidan News](#), April 2). In April, Russia was losing 1,470 casualties per day ([Ukrainska Pravda](#), April 30).

Robert “Madyar” Brovdi, the commander of Ukraine’s Unmanned System Forces, said in an April interview that took place in a drone operating center, “The greatest mass killing of the enemy in the history of humanity is happening in this room” ([BBC](#), April 27). Rubikon, Russia’s elite drone unit, has pursued a different strategy of targeting Ukrainian equipment and fortifications, rather than soldiers, which it now says was mistaken.

“Madyar” said Ukraine has instituted a 1,000–1,500-mile kill zone in Russia. Almost half of Ukraine’s drone attacks since March 19, 2025

have targeted Russian air defense systems. In Winter 2025–2026, Ukraine damaged or destroyed 78 Russian air defense systems, 77 surface-to-air missile systems, and 23 radar stations. This opened “corridors” for swarms of long-range drones to attack energy infrastructure and military factories up to 1,000–1,500 miles from Ukraine ([Institute for the Study of War](#), March 19).

In April, Ukraine launched 18 attacks against Russian oil infrastructure and 40 attacks against Russian military assets in 19 Russian regions. Between May 1 and May 20, the Kstovo, Moscow, Ryazan, Taman, Yaroslavl, Perm, Kirishi, Samara, Primorsk, and Tuapse refineries were attacked and were no longer able to operate. Since Russia launched its full-scale invasion, Ukraine has attacked Russian oil refineries 158 times ([Votatak.tv](#), May 21).

The Russian oil refineries in the Black Sea port of Tuapse, operated by Rosneft and ranked among Russia’s top 10 refineries with a 12-million-ton annual capacity, have been attacked numerous times ([Euromaidan Press](#), April 28). The ensuing pollution, damage, and fires have caused panic in Tuapse. Ukrainian drones have damaged or destroyed 28 of the 47 tanks at the Tuapse oil refinery ([Kyiv Independent](#), April 28). Russia has declared a regional state of emergency in the Krasnodar krai, where Tuapse is located, because the fire from Ukraine’s attacks has continued since April 16 ([RG.ru](#), April 29).

The Russian oil refinery in Primorsk, which exports through the Baltic Sea, has also been severely damaged ([Kyiv Post](#), April 6). Ukraine has struck Russian energy facilities in Orsk and Perm, 1,500 kilometers (932 miles) from Ukraine ([Kyiv Post](#), April 29). Ukrainian long-range drones struck Russia’s Transneft pumping station close to Perm near the Ural Mountains, also over 1,500 kilometers (932 miles) from the

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Ukrainian border ([Security Service of Ukraine](#), April 29).

The decline in Russian oil exports has dented the benefits of higher oil prices resulting from the U.S.–Israeli conflict with Iran. Sanctions, Ukrainian drone strikes on refineries, and a strong ruble have halved oil revenues in the first quarter of this year in comparison to a year ago ([Euromaidan Press](#), April 28).

In January, Ukraine created a Deep Strike Command Center to manage and coordinate drone attacks through the planning and sharing of real-time information. This was undertaken to enable an increase in heavy-payload medium-range drones, such as the Nemesis (which the Russians have nicknamed Baba Yaga, a figure from Slavic folklore), that hit targets 30–170 miles from the frontline. Medium-range drones have replaced the U.S.-supplied HIMARS multiple rocket launchers, which were important for Ukraine’s defense in 2023–2024. Fedorov’s goal of tripling deep strikes into Russia was fulfilled by March, which was the first month Ukraine fired more drones and missiles into Russia than Russia fired into Ukraine ([Euromaidan News](#), April 11). May was the first month in which the Ukrainian army conducted more military operations than Russia did.

These attacks are a turning point in the war. They have created havoc in the Russian military rear and foiled Russia’s Spring 2026 offensive by attacking troop deployments, repair bases, warehouses, drone operators, logistics, and transportation behind Russian lines. Russia is having more difficulties in moving troops to the front line. When it attempts to do so, entire columns are destroyed by Ukrainian drones.

Ukraine’s increased use of unmanned ground vehicles (UGVs) saves the lives of Ukrainian soldiers and rescues wounded soldiers and

civilians (see [EDM](#), January 26). In the first of its kind military operation, ground and air drones captured a Russian position with Russian POWs surrendering to a UGV ([TSN.ua](#), April 23). Ukraine is contracting 50,000 UGVs this year, with Zelenskyy calling them “the next major step” in modern warfare after aerial drones ([Euromaidan Press](#), April 28).

In Russia, the opposite is taking place. Demand for UGVs has collapsed, and their developers are “facing bankruptcy for lack of demand” following the blocking of Starlink and the “absence of a communication network” ([United24 Media](#), April 10). One Russian military blogger wrote, “In short: while the enemy is ramping up their use, the Russian Armed Forces are scaling back” ([Telegram/@chadayevru](#), April 28).

Russia’s military defeat has been assisted by its poor investment in military communications. Russia, which in 2022 touted having the “second best army in the world,” did not prioritize investment in modern military communications and instead relied on U.S. technology—Starlink. Elon Musk’s decision to deny Starlink access was an issue for the Russian military ([BBC](#), February 19). This setback has been coupled with the Kremlin’s banning of Telegram, which was also used by the Russian military, and WhatsApp, as well as the closing down of the internet toward the goal of building a sovereign internet (see [Strategic Snapshot](#), May 8). The Kremlin’s methods of control over the Russian people are also hurting its military capabilities.

Economic and Financial Crisis

Russian exile Vladislav Inozemtsov described Putin’s economy as “deathonomics” where Russians volunteer for the military, they are killed in Ukraine, and their families receive compensation. He believes deathonomics has run its course ([Riddle](#), March 5). In March, Putin

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demanded, at a closed meeting, that big business help finance Russia's war against Ukraine ([The Bell](#), March 26; [Forbes.ua](#), March 27). Remeslo wrote that the war had brought "enormous damage to the Russian economy and the well-being of citizens. Sanctions, destroyed infrastructure, loss of trading partners. Even according to official statistics, this represents trillions of dollars" ([Telegram/@ilya_remeslaw](#), March 17).

In April, during a speech at the International Economic Forum in Moscow, Russian economist Robert Nigmatulin stated that Russia is heading towards a "double-digit economic decline." He said that no presidential decrees on the economy had been implemented since 2012, when Putin returned to the presidency after four years as prime minister. Nigmatulin demanded officials in charge of the economy and education be removed because they are "completely useless" ([Telegram/@zhivoff](#), April 16). Vladimir Boglaev, director of the Cherepovets Foundry and Mechanical Plant, lamented Russia's ruling elites' lack of understanding about the dire economic reality at the International Economic Forum in Moscow ([YouTubeYouTube/@chlmz](#), April 15).

Russian Minister of Economic Development Maxim Reshetnikov revealed to the All-Russia "My Business" Forum in April that Russia's economic reserves were nearly all depleted ([Vedomosti](#), April 17). Russian Member of Parliament Georgy Fedurov thanked the war against Iran for rescuing Russia's economy by increasing oil prices ([X/@NatalkaKyiv](#), April 11). With Ukraine's devastating attacks on Russia's energy infrastructure, he spoke too soon.

Russia is entering a full-scale debt crisis due to very high spending on the war, estimated at \$198.8 billion last year, or \$2.7 billion per week ([Telegram/@CenterCounteringDisinformation](#),

December 21, 2025). The dire state of Russian finances is evident in the growing number of shops and businesses closing, rising unemployment, and layoffs and redundancies in the public sector and state companies ([Telegram/@polit_doklad](#), April 23).

Russia's higher tax burden due to military spending during the war has led to deteriorating conditions for small businesses, with half of them operating at a loss ([The Moscow Times](#), April 28). This is coupled with declining revenues from the closure of advertising and online sales on Telegram.

Russia has a deficit of 2.5 million workers, audit firm FinExpertiza found ([The Moscow Times](#), April 27). "We have never, until now, in the history of modern Russia, lived with such a deficit of labor force," Bank of Russia chair Elvira Nabiullina said at the Alfa Summit on April 28 ([Interfax](#); [The Moscow Times](#), April 28). Rosstat, Russia's Federal State Statistics Service, recorded one of the largest declines in Russian business profits in history. In January and February of this year, Russian businesses earned 33.1 percent less than in the same period of 2025 ([Rosstat](#), April 29; [The Moscow Times](#), May 1).

One of the main ideological pillars of Putin's regime is that he rescued Russia from the humiliation of not being respected by the West in the 1990s. This ideological pillar is now under threat. Russians are becoming increasingly concerned that Russia is returning to the economic crisis and chaos of the 1990s, when they lost their savings. Central Bank officials and politicians are floating the possibility that Russia will resort to confiscating deposits above a certain threshold and issuing credit notes ([Telegram/@rustroyka1945](#); [Telegram/@beard_tim](#); [Telegram/@zhivoff](#), April 29). Video evidence leaked to social media shows mass-produced irrevocable savings

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certificates prepared by Russia's Central Bank that would freeze Russian citizens' money. These are to be used by major Russian banks, such as VTB Bank, Sverbank, and possibly other banks ([X/@EuromaidanPR](#), April 28).

Russia has excelled in evading Western sanctions. They have, nevertheless, affected Russia's economy. The Latvian Bureau for Protection of the Constitution (SAB) reported that sanctions in 2022–2025 forced Russia to spend \$130 billion on illicit purchases of sanctioned Western commodities. Additionally, SAB estimates iron ore exports declined by 40 percent, ferrous metals by 20 percent, chemicals by 35 percent, and wood and pulp by 50 percent compared to exports before February 2022. Russia has lost access to international markets, and this loss is not being replaced ([Ukraine Business News](#), April 15).

Sweden's chief of military intelligence, Lieutenant General Thomas Nilsson, estimated that Russia understated its budget deficit by \$30 billion. Russia requires oil prices to remain above \$100 per barrel throughout this year to cover its budget deficit. In the long term, Russia's energy sector, suffering from the loss of the European market and Ukrainian military attacks, is heading for financial decline ([Kyiv Independent](#), April 20).

Russia's state-controlled military-industrial complex, which is unable to compete with Ukraine's rapidly developing and largely private defense sector, is loss-making, plagued by corruption, and dependent on loans from state banks. In a post-war world, Ukraine is on the path to becoming a world leader in defense production, with an already growing number of export markets. Sergey Chemezov, CEO of Rostec, a Russian state-owned defense consortium, said Russia's military exports have halved since 2022 because of the war against Ukraine, largely because Russia is using its

military equipment rather than selling it. The failure of Russian military equipment in Ukraine, Venezuela, and Iran against Western and Israeli military equipment has shown it to be of poor quality ([Ukraine Business News](#), November 20, 2025).

Public Discontent

The Levada Center reported in April that only 36 percent of Russians held a positive view of political developments, with nearly two-thirds expressing a negative view ([Levada Tsentr](#), April 16). VTsIOM, Russia's Public Opinion Research Center, reported that when asked to name a Russian politician they trusted, only 29.5 percent of Russians named Putin ([VTsIOM](#), April 10).

Some recent reporting argues that Russians are less inclined to trust state media, especially state television, as the Kremlin's war against Ukraine grinds on. Before 2022, 60 percent of Russians received their news primarily from state television. That figure has declined to 47 percent. State television was a major source of the Kremlin's indoctrination of Russians, dehumanization of Ukrainians, and preparation for war against Ukraine. A war that has lasted longer than the Great Patriotic War and that Russia is not winning has contributed to this decline in public trust ([Re-Russia](#), March 25). A Russian in Perm, watching Ukrainian attacks on his city's oil refineries, stated, "Is that what you call a victory? Comrades, why are you giving your lives for this? Is our greatest enemy perhaps not in Ukraine at all, but here in Russia, in the offices?" ([X/@nexta_tv](#), May 1).

Formerly pro-Kremlin lawyer Remeslo issued a radical statement in March, bluntly stating, "Putin does not respect his voters and does not want to listen to them." He further wrote, "Vladimir Putin is not a legitimate president. Vladimir Putin must resign and be brought to trial as a war criminal and thief"

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([Telegram/@ilya_remeslaw](#), March 17). In April, in an interview with journalist Ksenia Sobchak, Remeslo was asked who he blamed for Russia's crisis. He replied, "It is Vladimir Putin. It is obvious. Everyone knows it." Talking about Russian elites, Remeslo said, "They simply hate him because he took everything away from them." He predicts there would be "profound changes" in late 2026–early 2027. There would be a "collapse of the previous system, and the birth of a new system" as a "palace coup" or "revolution" ([YouTube/@sobchak](#), April 27; [Meduza](#), April 28).

A growing number of Russians are concluding that a quarter of a century of Putin's rule is too much and should be ended. Boglayev stated at the Moscow International Economic Forum that elites are in power for a limited period ([Topwar.ru](#), April 19). Remeslo said Putin had brought huge damage to the Russian economy and a reduction in the standards of living, and should go. This was because, as he stated, "everything comes to a limit. We need a new, modern president" who listens to the people, is respectful to them, and is not afraid of elections ([YouTube/@sobchak](#), April 27; [Meduza](#), April 28).

Influencers are also speaking up. Fashion influencer Viktoria Bonya, who is not involved in Russian politics and living an oligarchic lifestyle in Monaco, posted a video with the caption, "An appeal to Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin. From all caring Russians." She said to Putin that "people are afraid of you" and that "there is a huge wall between you and us ordinary people" ([Instagram/@victoriabonya](#), April 14; [The Moscow Times](#), April 22). Bonya has 13 million followers on Instagram, and her posts on the crisis in Russia were viewed over 30 million times with nearly two million likes ([BBC-Russian Service](#), April 20). The Kremlin issued a diplomatic but non-committal reply while state media and a dwindling number of pro-Kremlin bloggers lambasted her ([RBC](#), April 16). Well-

known Russian television presenter Vladimir Soloviov called Bonya an "old slut" while Member of the State Duma Vitaly Milonov called her a "Dubai escort" ([Lenta.ru](#), April 14; [Meduza](#); see [EDM](#), April 27). Unlike a growing number of nationalists and military bloggers, however, Bonya continued to peddle the myth of "bad boyars" and the good "tsar" Putin. Her post ignored Russia's war against Ukraine.

Russian Nationalists and Military Bloggers

Some Russian military bloggers and nationalists are transitioning from Russia's traditional criticism of "boyars" hiding the real state of affairs from the "tsar" to direct criticism of the leader—Putin. Russian military blogger and veteran Egor Guzenko described Putin and his entourage as spreading "with reckless consistency" lies leading to distrust in Russian leaders ([Telegram/@Z13_Separ](#), April 24).

Some Russian military bloggers and nationalists have begun debating and speculating what Russia will resemble after the war ends, and Putin is removed. Russkii Mir Ukraina and Maxim Kalashnikov, a Z-blogger and so-called "Z-Futurologist," posted lengthy predictions ([Telegram/@russsmir09](#), April 27; [Telegram/@ve4niyvoy](#), April 28). Russian military bloggers and nationalists predict chaos, strife, repression, and violence in post-Putin Russia, with a return to how Russia resembled a dysfunctional state in the 1990s. They do not discuss what the reaction of the national minorities will be, but some could demand greater sovereignty, as in the "parade of sovereignties" and "war of laws" during the 1990s.

Russia continues to have a Soviet-style single vertical for research and development, with corruption and bureaucracy inhibiting innovation and speed. Some military bloggers have blamed the poor government response to

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Ukrainian attacks on oil refineries, as in Tuapse, “official buck-passing, corruption, cover-ups, and a reluctance to take responsibility” and a “direct result of bureaucratic negligence and the desire to profit from the budget” (see [EDM](#), April 27; [Telegram/@federation_towers](#), April 29).

Russian military bloggers have expressed discontent at the ineffectiveness of Russian air defense to foil Ukrainian drone and missile attacks, with one Telegram channel under the name Fighterbomber asking if it was due to “maybe sabotage or betrayal, maybe a lack of sufficient ammunition, or its low effectiveness.” The channel added, “But the Ukrainians turn out to be far more effective and hurtful with weapons that are much simpler and used in much smaller quantities” ([Telegram/@bomber_fighter](#), April 29). Ukraine has overcome its manpower deficit vis-à-vis much larger Russia through faster innovation and superior military technology. The growth of hundreds of private defense companies in Ukraine since 2022 is consolidating into larger consortia, enabling greater production scale. Ukraine has hundreds of research and development companies that compete and produce defense equipment.

Russian military blogger Andrei Medvedev described low levels of bureaucracy in Ukraine and direct interaction between producers and consumers ([Euromaidan News](#), April 11). Military blogger Yuri Podolyaka admitted that Ukraine is militarily and technologically superior, learns quicker, and adopts new tactics faster ([Telegram/@yurasumy](#), February 25, 2024). Moscow and St. Petersburg, the most protected regions of Russia, are increasingly coming under attack from Ukraine’s drones and, later this year, from a new generation of FP-7 and FP-9 ballistic missiles ([Defense Express](#), April 27).

A major complaint from Russian military

bloggers and nationalists is that Russian leaders have never defined what constitutes “victory.” Russian nationalist Pavel Gubarev, a veteran of both the 2014 and 2022 Russian invasions of Ukraine, criticized Putin for not explaining the end goal of the war ([Euromaidan Press](#), April 10). Russian military expert Mikhail Khodoryonok said to state television that the spring 2026 offensive, which Ukraine thwarted, should be the last, as “it’s time to bring [the special military operation] to an end” ([Voennoe Delo](#), April 21).

Imprisoned Russian nationalist Igor Girkin wrote, “Unfortunately, we are heading for military defeat. This is a fact. Let’s not exactly accept it, but let’s at least acknowledge this unpleasant fact and proceed from the assumption that the threat is real.” Girkin further said that new Russian troops would be killed in a full mobilization “will not be able to turn the tide of the war” ([Telegram/@i_strelkov_2023](#), April 27). Orthodox oligarch and founder of the imperial nationalist TV Channel Tsargrad, Konstantin Malofeyev, provided the bizarre explanation, saying, “It is not a shame to lose to Ukraine. After all, Ukrainians are actually Russians. And Russians never lose!” ([24 Kanal](#), May 18).

Girkin, Malofeyev, and Remeslo are not alone. Russian nationalists and military bloggers Zakhar Prilepin and Yuri Kotenok also believe Russia cannot win. Kotenok said that current military officers were more corrupt, opportunistic, and cynical than those in 2022–2023, who were ideologically motivated ([Telegram/@voenkorKotenok](#), April 17 [1], [2],[3], [4]).

Kalashnikov predicted that protests could escalate into unrest, ultimately leading to the collapse of the Russian Federation in its current form, just as the Russian Empire collapsed in 1917. ([Telegram/@roy_tv_mk](#); [Dialoh.ua](#), March

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29). Communist Party (KPRF) leader Gennady Zyuganov warned in the State Duma that Russia is approaching a crisis similar to that of 1917 ([Vedomosti](#), April 23). Russian Communist Party deputy Renat Suleymanov said in a speech to the Russian State Duma, “It is completely obvious that the economy cannot handle the prolonged continuation of the special military operation. Officially, 40 percent of the federal budget goes to defense and security. Therefore, the fastest possible end to the special military operation is simply necessary” ([Kontinent Sibirii](#); [The Moscow Times](#), May 19).

An increasing number of military bloggers and nationalists are criticizing the high number of casualties. Remeslo wrote, “We all thought Putin was the unifier of Russian lands. And now we have come to this: bloody assaults, the luring of contract soldiers by deception, and much more ... A completely dead-end war, enormous losses, and it could go on for another 5–10 years—are you ready for that?” ([Telegram/@ilya_remeslaw](#), March 17).

Russian military bloggers commented on an interview with Gubarev as nationalists preparing a coup in Russia. Gubarev said, “What do we want, what are we doing, what is all this for, and what is the end goal—where does the war end, meaning where have we won—this has not been stated” ([YouTubeYouTube/@vdud](#), April 9; [Euromaidan Press](#), April 10). Gubarev publicly raised the possibility of Russia having suffered “over one million” casualties.

Fears of a Coup

The Russian elite continues to experience reshuffling. There has been a notable rise in nationalization cases and fraud along with corruption convictions since the war against Ukraine began (see EDM, March [18](#), [31](#), May [4](#), [5](#), [14](#), [20](#)). It is unlikely to be a coincidence that the internet was shut down in Moscow on March 5,

the same day that former First Deputy Minister of Defense Ruslan Tsalikov was arrested. Tsalikov was a close ally of Shoigu. Tsalikov and Shoigu are implicated in high-level corruption involving \$81.2 million in the Russian armed forces (see [EDM](#), March 31).

Opposition and criticism of the authorities is spreading beyond the small liberal opposition, which had largely been silenced through repression, assassination, and exile. Previously loyal state officials, nationalists, military bloggers, and Russian citizens are becoming increasingly critical, as commentators compare the situation to the former Soviet Union in the late 1980s. Most Russian state officials appear opposed to the internet shutdown (see [EDM](#), April 23). Some of Russia’s state-sanctioned opposition parties have even criticized these policies ([Meduza](#), April 10). Remeslo wrote, “Putin told me then that we would not follow China’s path—and he lied. Putin himself does not use the internet, which is shameful for a head of state” ([Telegram/@ilya_remeslaw](#), March 17). Russian military media and the Russian imperial nationalist Tsargrad TV channel described a sovereign internet as an impossible goal, since computer manufacturing and artificial intelligence (AI) innovation were already being replicated in Western technology. A Russian sovereign internet would also increase Russia’s dependency on the People’s Republic of China (see [EDM](#), April 27).

Discontent over social media bans and internet closures has broadened the ranks of protestors to include those who were quintessentially Putin loyalists and United Russia Party voters—pensioners, those on low incomes, inhabitants of provincial towns, and small- and medium-sized business owners (see [EDM](#), April 27). Putin’s regime is notorious for election fraud, but there is still concern about public discontent and apathy in the September elections. VTsIOM reported a decline in support for the United

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Russia Party, from 34.1 percent at the end of December 2025 to 27.7 percent at the end of April this year (see [EDM](#), May 6; [VTsIOM](#), accessed May 14).

There is widespread distrust among the Russian public in the official reasons given for the internet shutdown. Without the internet, satellite navigation applications do not work, and Russians are not alerted to incoming Ukrainian military attacks. Former Governor of Belgorod oblast Vyacheslav Gladkov even said in 2025, “Who will answer for the deaths of people who were unable to receive information about drones because mobile internet was shut down?” ([Euronews](#), July 18, 2025; [Kommersant](#), March 19). Many Russians are reaching a rather surprising conclusion that they are living in a dictatorship where they are not allowed to be critical. Applications to protest the bans on social media platforms and the internet shutdown are routinely denied by local authorities, who use dubious excuses ([Novaya Gazeta - Europe](#), March 27).

Russian journalist and military analyst Yuri Baranchik asked, “Why have they started terrorizing the people?” He warned that Russia could repeat 1917 or 1989 scenarios ([TelegramTelegram/@barantchik](#), March 12). Z-blogger Volodya Grubnik asked on his Telegram Channel, “What are these state institutions trying to achieve by such behavior? To show that the state cannot be trusted? That those who, in a disciplined way, obey the law are simply idiots? Well done—they did a great job, they demonstrated it beautifully” ([Telegram/@ghost_of_novorossia](#), March 10).

Alex Kartavykh wrote on his Telegram channel that he believes the Kremlin’s policies are so self-defeating that there must be a hidden influence from the United Kingdom. He asks, “So, you are not even assholes, you are idiots. I do not even know what ... you are doing as if you are British

agents and need to tip the country into a ditch at any cost. There is simply no other way to explain this” ([Telegram/@AlexCarrier](#), March 10).

The Russian elite appear to be approaching a schism (see EDM, April 23 [1], [1], 27, May 4 [1], [2], 13). They are becoming increasingly divided between those who are confident that no more will be achieved in Ukraine and those who believe the opposite. This divide also consists of those who want to continue the war until “the stated goals are achieved” and those who believe that it should end because “the worst-case scenario isn’t even defeat, but an endless special military operation.” Russia’s hawks used to dominate the discourse but are now “persuading, defending, and fighting back” ([Moskovskiy Komsomolets](#), May 25). Well-known Russian specialist Vasily Kashin admitted, “the goal of “liquidating the anti-Russian regime” in Ukraine is fundamentally unattainable at this stage without a complete, long-term military occupation of the entire country (including the western part).” He believes, “For Russia, this is technically impossible.” Additionally, he sees hopes of annexing large Ukrainian territories to Russia as “outlandish” because “Russia lacks the capacity to sustainably control and manage such territories, with their devastated economies and extremely hostile populations.” Kashin asserted, “It is not in our interests to endlessly burn through these resources” that are “in pursuit of imaginary goals” ([Russia in Global Affairs](#), May 21).

Public opinion is increasing the number of Russians who believe Putin is making mistakes domestically—concerning the economy, standard of living, internet shutdowns, blocking of Telegram, and banning virtual private networks (VPNs)—and losing face abroad in Iran, Venezuela, and Syria. These domestic and international issues are on top of a war grinding on against Ukraine without any end in sight (see

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EDM, April 7).

Russian business is increasingly in a state of panic and is critical of economic and governmental policy. The blocking of Telegram, WhatsApp, and the internet is destroying the small- and medium-sized business sectors that rely on Telegram for online orders and supplies (Carnegie Politika, April 21). The ban on advertising on Telegram is disastrous for small businesses, nearly all of which use the social media platform. The Kremlin's Max application lacks the same business-friendly features.

Most Russian volunteer communications with the Russian army in Ukraine, as well as voluntary collections for the Russian army in Ukraine, relied on Telegram. The closure of Telegram, internet shutdown, and clampdown on VPNs have reduced the volume of drones, communication masts, body armor, charging stations, and electronic warfare sent by Russian volunteers to Russian soldiers (Telegram/@UAVDEV, March 16).

Putin's call for "special military operation" veterans to be increasingly brought into the ruling elites is one new issue within broader Russian elite competition. According to reporting in the Kyiv Post from Mikhail Zygar, Defense Minister Andrei Belousov and First Deputy Chief of Staff Sergei Kirienko clashed over which veteran candidates to include in the United Russian Party list in the upcoming election (Kyiv Post, April 11).

It is possible that there is fear of a palace coup among disgruntled Russian military personnel, given the ongoing war with no progress on the battlefield and no breakthroughs in negotiations. The internet shutdown and banning of social media applications reflect the traditionally conspiratorial Putin becoming increasingly paranoid about threats to his grip on power. Anger is growing about the Kremlin's

war against Ukraine, having become an attritional war with huge casualties and the absence of territorial advances on the battlefield.

Conclusion

Russia is increasingly resembling the former Soviet Union in 1990–1991, with a perfect storm of domestic and external factors coming together, mirroring military defeats in Afghanistan in 1989 and Ukraine now. Elites are increasingly voicing dissent, protest feelings are spreading to the broader public, and once loyal Russian nationalists and military bloggers are becoming critical. These trends are combined with disillusionment over the lack of progress on the battlefield, very high casualties, exhaustion with what was to have been a quick "special military operation" that has lasted longer than the Great Patriotic War, and Ukraine's successful deepening of the war into Russia.

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