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PANORAMA

Russia's Arctic Strategy to be Imminently Revised

Anna J. Davis

October 3, 2025

Executive Summary:

- Russian President Vladimir Putin has seemingly reversed the Kremlin's position toward cooperation with the United States and Ukraine at the Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant (NPP) on September 2 on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit.
- The Kremlin, until now, has been claiming that cooperation is not possible and the status of the plant is non-negotiable. Russian state nuclear corporation Rosatom, in the meantime, has been requesting cooperation with the United States since at least 2023 and has been waiting for Moscow to make the "political decision."
- While Putin's new alignment with Rosatom may be a tactical move to strengthen Moscow's position ahead of any potential talks or negotiations, Rosatom may have been influential in changing Putin's mind, a possible indication of new influence on Russian nuclear foreign policy.



(Source: Izvestiya)

Recent reports suggest that the Russian State Council is preparing a new long-term plan for Russia's Arctic zone, which will set the country on a path of securitization and economic and resource consolidation over the next 25 years, while reflecting Russia's view of its special status in the region ([Murman](#), September 7). A draft decree by Russian President Vladimir Putin on the new strategy for Arctic zone development and national security for the period until 2050 was reportedly prepared earlier in September, according to Alexey Chekunkov, director of the Ministry for the Development of the Russian Far East and Arctic ([RIA Novosti](#); [Sever-Press](#), September 2). Later in September, Andrei Chibis, chair of the State Council Commission on the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and the Arctic and governor of the Murmansk Oblast, confirmed during a September 25 meeting in Moscow that the State Council Commission on the NSR and the Arctic was finalizing the content

and implementation mechanisms of the new Arctic development strategy ([Government of the Murmansk Oblast](#); [SeverPost](#), September 25).

New discussions and proposals regarding Arctic policy have been circulating for months. Chibis said in July that the Commission was already reviewing a draft of Russia's new Arctic development strategy to 2050 (RIA Novosti, July 9, 31). Earlier in December 2024, Nikolai Patrushev, aide to Putin and head of Russia's Maritime Board, said that the country needed to establish a new project on the development of the Arctic zone and the NSR due to the "evolving military and political situation" ([TASS](#), December 18, 2024; see [EDM](#), June 18). In February, Russia's State Council Commission on the NSR and the Arctic proposed a national development project that takes into account foreign and domestic political and economic challenges ([President of Russia](#), February 28). At the International Arctic Forum in March, Patrushev stated that the Arctic is strategically significant in strengthening Russia's international position and domestic development, as well as preserving Russian sovereignty ([Government of the Murmansk Oblast](#), March 26). Following Patrushev's claim, Igor Levitin, an advisor to Putin, said that Russia needs a unified project "as quickly as possible" under Putin's authority for the period to at least 2050, with relevant funding and investment ([Government of the Murmansk Oblast](#), March 26).

The Ministry for the Development of the Russian Far East and Arctic was meant to submit some of these changes to the Russian State Duma after the Eastern Economic Forum on September 3–6 to introduce a corresponding bill to be adopted in 2025/2026 ([SenateInform](#), July 11; see [EDM](#), September 8). The bill is intended to consolidate tax regimes in Russia's Far Eastern Federal District and Arctic zone, and provide preferential treatment to businesses operating in these areas ([SenateInform](#); [RBC](#), September 3; [TASS](#), September 6).

Russia's current Arctic policy is rooted in the 40-page Strategy for the Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and Ensuring National Security for the Period to 2035, which was adopted in October 2020 ([President of Russia](#), October 26, 2020). Accompanying this is the 17-page Basic Principles of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic for the Period to 2035, adopted earlier in March 2020 ([President of Russia](#), March 5, 2020).

Compared to the current strategy, the new one is likely to reflect Russia's antagonism toward the West, particularly given the repercussions of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, as well as opportunism in respect to global supply chains and natural resources. It is also likely to reflect imperialist narratives toward the Arctic as an area of Russian exceptionalism and mastery. In this vein, Russian officials have been using the buzzword "development" (*освоение*, *osvoenie*) at an accelerating rate in recent years when discussing and making policy related to the Arctic (President of Russia, [September 23, 2024](#), November 6, 22, 2024, March 10, 26; [Government of Russia](#), accessed September 30). The noun *osvoenie* typically refers to development in terms of exploration, pioneering, discovery, experience, and mastery (President of Russia, [November 4,](#)

[2019, March 10](#); [Rosatom](#), September 5). The term differs from the verb *razrabotat'* (разработать), which typically conveys a more tactical connotation of development, such as creating, designing, or formulating. At the International Arctic Forum in March, Putin stated that the mastery (*osvoenie*) of the Russian north was an endeavor pursued for generations of Russian ancestry and that the development (*razrabotat'*) is now a “sovereign, historical decision” (President of Russia, March [10](#), 27 [\[1\]](#), [\[2\]](#)). The two terms go hand in hand, while Western observers typically focus only on the tactical aspect, rather than the parallel ambition of mastering a treacherous frontier in a way that no other state has done.

Putin prides Russia on its status as the largest Arctic power and claims that the country’s future “lies in the Arctic” and in Arctic development (see [EDM](#), March 21; [President of Russia](#), March 27; [Izvestiya](#), June 28). Russia does hold a number of advantages in the Arctic, not least given its control of about 53 percent of the world’s Arctic coastline (about 15,000 miles). Russia also operates the world’s largest icebreaker fleet, which, due to nuclear power, can facilitate year-round shipping capabilities via the NSR, which Russian official policy claims is a “historically established national transport corridor of the Russian Federation” ([President of Russia](#), amended July 28, 2012; see [EDM](#), November 25, 2024; [Bellona](#), 2025). The 2020 policy positions Russia as the sole authority of transportation through the NSR. It frames this authority as valuable, given the guarantee that the rate of international use of the NSR is expected to increase with the melting of sea ice ([President of Russia](#), October 26, 2020).

Still, Russia faces several challenges in the Arctic. Since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia has been largely isolated from its former Arctic partners and cooperation forums. The Arctic Council members boycotted Russia’s chairmanship in 2022 and 2023, the Council of the Baltic Sea States suspended both Russia and Belarus in 2022, and in 2023, Russia withdrew from the Barents Euro-Arctic Council ([U.S. Department of State](#), March 3, 2022; [European Union External Action](#), May 3, 2022; [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia](#), September 18, 2023). This has contributed to Russia’s reliance on the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as its primary Arctic partner, which declares itself as a “near Arctic” state despite not being in the Arctic ([State Council of the People’s Republic of China](#), January 2018). The PRC, however, with its own ambitious Arctic programs, presents a potential threat to Russia’s dominance in the region (see [EDM](#), February 18).

At the tactical level, Russian capabilities are not always up to scratch in Arctic conditions. It lacks adequate emergency Arctic rescue capabilities and the necessary infrastructure to respond quickly and effectively to incidents ([Sever-Press](#), August 27; [Bellona](#), 2025). Russian shadow fleet oil tankers and liquefied natural gas (LNG) carriers, which are ill-equipped to operate in extreme Arctic conditions, have recently become stranded in sea ice en route to and from Russia and its international export partners, primarily the PRC ([Shipsupply.ru](#), September 15; [The Barents Observer](#), September 23). The latest incident occurred when the Oman-flagged *Lynx* got stuck in

sea ice in early September for several days while transporting oil from Murmansk to the PRC ([Shipsupply.ru](#), September 15). Additionally, Russia's Northern Fleet regularly experiences delays in construction and commissioning new submarines due to changes in construction terms, supply-chain and financing problems, and Western sanctions (see [EDM](#), May 30).

Russia's militarization of the Arctic has been on an incremental yet steady rise despite these challenges. Russia has reportedly installed two air surveillance systems and supportive infrastructure on the remote Wrangle Island, which it claims is part of its Chukotka Autonomous Okrug ([The National Interest](#), September 3). Russia's nuclear-powered submarines, which are part of the Northern Fleet, have recently been used to provoke the United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies operating in the High North. One hypersonic-capable Yasen-class nuclear-powered submarine reportedly came within firing range of the USS Gerald R. Ford, the United States' newest and largest aircraft carrier, while on recent NATO exercises off the coast of Norway ([The Barents Observer](#), August 27; [The National Interest](#), September 30).

Beyond militarization, Russia has increased its socio-economic influence in the Arctic. In the energy sector, Russia exported the first shipments of LNG from the sanctioned Arctic LNG 2 terminal to the PRC in August (Kommersant, [August 28, September 12](#)). On Spitzbergen, the largest island of the Norwegian archipelago, Svalbard, Russia has been more active than usual, recently announcing new research cooperation with the PRC, promoting "anti-fascist" propaganda, and toeing Norway's criminal code that bans the use of marks of a foreign public authority (see [EDM](#), September 16). Last year, Russia expanded the administrative boundaries of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation to include Beloyarsky and Belozersky districts of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug–Yugra (see [EDM](#), June 18). The two districts are set to receive approximately \$97.9 million in government investment to improve their socioeconomic development ([NEFT](#), May 6).

Russia's 2020 Arctic policy has not aged well, and it is little wonder that the Kremlin is signaling that an update is coming soon. The Arctic remains a proving ground not only for Russia's resource extraction and shipping ambitions but also for its broader narrative of exceptionalism and sovereignty. Russia's imminent revision of its Arctic strategy is due to reflect this *osvoenie*, but its effectiveness will hinge on its ability to *razrabotat'* its logistical and technical challenges and international constraints.

To read the article on the Jamestown website, click [here](#).

MILITARY & SECURITY

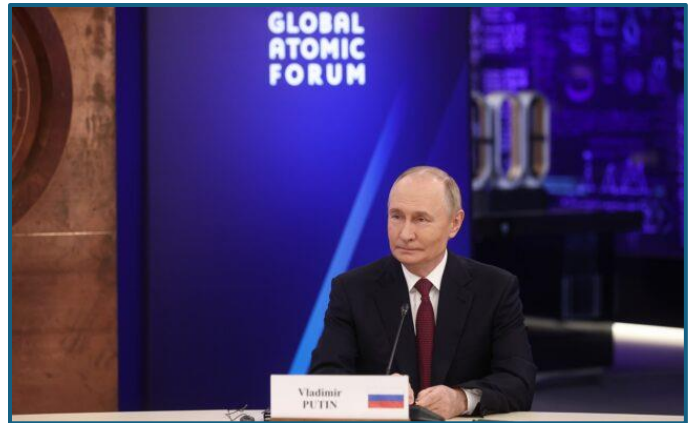
Putin Attempts to Shift Nuclear Brinkmanship

Pavel K. Baev

September 29, 2025

Executive Summary:

- Russian President Vladimir Putin is shifting from overt nuclear brinkmanship to using Russia's nuclear energy program as a "peaceful" tool of influence, especially through technology transfers to developing countries.
- Putin's proposal to extend some terms of the U.S.-Russia New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) projects restraint but lacks real arms control measures. This move is intended to make the Russian posture toward the West more ambiguous against the background of their ongoing war against Ukraine and gray zone tactics in Europe.
- The Kremlin's softened nuclear rhetoric, paired with recent incursions into European airspace, seeks to split opinion and undermine U.S. and European responses to Russian aggression.



(Source: President of Russia)

Instead of following the series of aerial Russian provocations in the Baltic Sea region with nuclear brinkmanship, Russian President Vladimir Putin has taken a more subtle tack. At the so-called Global Atomic Forum in Moscow, Putin praised Russia's nuclear power program and offered to share relevant technologies with "the states of the Global South and East" ([President of Russia; Izvestiya](#), September 25). Only the leaders of Ethiopia and Myanmar were present to applaud this speech, but Rafael Mariano Grossi, Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), who appears to find it important to cultivate connections with Putin, confirmed Russia's leadership in promoting the peaceful use of nuclear energy ([RBC](#), September 26). Putin's tone was notably different from the address to nuclear scientists at the Sarov federal research center last month, where he held a closed meeting on the *Burevestnik* nuclear-propelled drone, emphasizing the role of science in strengthening Russia's strategic deterrence ([President of Russia; Vedomosti](#), August 22; [The Moscow Times](#), August 23).

The key element of Putin's "peaceful" nuclear campaign is his offer to continue observing the limitations on the size of nuclear arsenals set by the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), which is due to expire on February 5, 2026, for an additional year ([Rossiiskaya Gazeta](#), September 22). Putin announced the initiative on September 22 at a special meeting of the Russian Security Council ([President of Russia](#), September 22). State-affiliated media instantly trumpeted this announcement as a major breakthrough, so the Kremlin was disappointed by Washington's slow response ([RIAC](#), September 24; [RIA Novosti](#), September 26). Russian experts have illuminated the risks of dismantling the basic structure of the arms control system, but the Kremlin's offer would not actually resume data exchange or any other confidence-building measures ([Nezavisimaya Gazeta](#), June 29). Putin's approach may not fully account for the history of New START, which U.S. President Barack Obama signed in Prague in April 2010 and U.S. President Joe Biden extended in the first weeks of his presidency ([Kommersant](#), September 22).

The Kremlin's reduced use of the strategic triad, a three-pronged nuclear weapons delivery system, in military exercises underpins Putin's softened nuclear rhetoric. The Kremlin reduced the scale of *Zapad-2025* exercises, which did not feature new tests or deployment of the nuclear-capable *Oreshnik* intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM), which Russia used against Ukraine in November 2024 (see [EDM](#), November 21, 2024; [Novaya Gazeta Europe](#), September 12; [RBC](#), September 16). Russian nuclear-capable Tu-160 and Tu-22M3 long-range bombers performed two short patrols over the Barents Sea, but did not attempt to make an impression comparable with the flight of a B-2 bomber over the red carpet laid for Putin at the start of the Alaska summit with U.S. President Donald Trump on August 15 ([Lenta.ru](#), August 17; [Interfax](#), September 16). The *Knyaz Pozharsky*, a *Borei*-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine that Putin launched in June, joined the Northern Fleet without the previously mandatory test launch of its *Bulava* intercontinental ballistic missile ([Interfax](#), August 2). Germany is concerned about the Kremlin's space activities as Russian *Luch-Olymp* reconnaissance satellites are closely following two Intelsat satellites, but no hostile approaches to U.S. satellites have been reported ([Kommersant](#), September 26).

Russia's relative respect for U.S. satellites is meant to aid the rehabilitation of personal rapport between Trump and Putin following Putin's rejection of the U.S. peace deal at the Alaska summit ([Nezavisimaya Gazeta](#), September 25). The decision of Putin's ally, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, to release some political prisoners—even while repressions against others are expanded—is also supposed to help mend the Trump-Putin relationship ([Carnegie Politika](#), September 12; [Novaya Gazeta Europe](#), September 14). Lukashenka made himself a star presenter at the Atomic Forum in Moscow, and his key topic was impeccably peaceful—the agreement to construct a second nuclear power plant in Belarus ([Kommersant](#), September 25). When questioned

by journalists about the deployment of the *Oreshnik* missile system, however, he confirmed that it was “on the way” to Belarus ([Radio Svoboda](#), September 26).

President of Türkiye Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was not present at the Moscow forum despite placing great importance on Rosatom’s construction of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant, instead opting to travel to the United States for a long-desired meeting with Trump ([Kommersant](#), September 26). The Russia–Türkiye strategic partnership has notably slackened as Ankara shows full support for North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) actions aimed at countering Moscow’s provocations, and Trump prompts Erdoğan to sanction the Kremlin ([Izvestiya](#), September 26). Russia has made no attempt to escalate hostilities in the Black Sea even after the recent Ukrainian drone attack on Novorossiysk, however, because nuclear energy cooperation is Putin’s best instrument for countering U.S. influence on Erdoğan and because the Kremlin counts on profits from Türkiye importing Russian oil and gas ([Meduza](#), September 24).

The Kremlin is using the combination of its air incursions in the Baltic region and Putin’s nuclear “pacifism” rhetoric, including his proposition for extending New START, to confuse and aggravate divisions between the United States and Europe ([Top War](#), September 25). Moscow cannot quite figure out the meaning of the shifts in Trump’s positions on its war against Ukraine, but tends to interpret uncertainty as an opportunity ([Nezavisimaya Gazeta](#), September 25). Russian pro-regime expert commentary on U.S. policy making remains respectful and deferential, while the Kremlin’s media ridicules and vilifies the European political elite ([RIAC](#), September 22). Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov’s speech to the United Nations General Assembly directed warnings about the severe consequences of intercepting Russian aircraft primarily at the Europeans while expressing readiness for a “honest dialogue” with the Trump administration, and taking no immediate issue with Trump’s description of Russia as a “paper tiger” ([Vedomosti](#), September 27; [Forbes.ru](#), September 28).

Putin’s track record of nuclear brinksmanship is so long and rich that his attempt to show self-restraint and advance cooperative ideas is, at best, unconvincing, likely motivated by the assumption that Washington’s strategic memory is short. His insistence on staying the course in Ukraine is undercut by Russia’s failure to win significant territory and by the failure of massive missile and drone attacks to terrorize Ukraine. Nuclear weapons may be Putin’s only means of rapidly altering the course of an attritional war. The Western coalition may soon have to gather again political courage and military means to deter his new attempts at blackmail and intimidation.

To read the article on the Jamestown website, click [here](#).

Russian Military Presence in Mali Contributes to State Collapse

Andrew McGregor

September 30, 2025

Executive Summary:

- The presence of Russian military personnel in Mali has failed to prevent the expansion of the jihadist insurgency into the once-safe central and western regions of the country.
- Fissures have erupted in Mali's ruling military junta over issues related to operational cooperation with Russian military personnel who tend to operate independently of Mali's command structure and are accused of human-rights abuses.
- Russian forces are unhappy with difficulties related to their entry into Mali's lucrative minerals sector and the arrival of Turkish military contractors assigned to train the president's security staff.



(Source: Russian Ministry of Defense)

Four years into the Russian military deployment that began with the arrival of Wagner personnel, Mali has become less secure and the jihadists have grown stronger, more numerous, wider ranging, and more daring attacks on urban centers and military bases (see EDM, [September 6, 2023](#), [March 12, 2024](#); see Terrorism Monitor, [June 26, 2020](#), [December 11, 2024](#)). Three months after Wagner withdrew in June and Russia's Africa Corps began its Malian deployment, the Russian military presence is not only failing to quell Mali's 13-year-old Islamist and separatist insurgency, but is now adding to Mali's political turmoil (see EDM, July 9). Russian forces have both failed to retake the jihadist homeland in northern Mali and to prevent a large-scale infiltration of Islamist gunmen into the once-safe central and western regions of the country. The inability of foreign forces, such as the recently expelled French military, to repress the insurgency is beginning to create fissures in Mali's five-year-old military junta.

Recently, the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa'l-Muslimin (JNIM) movement scored a victory over Forces Armées Maliennes (FAMa) and the allied Russian Africa Corps when it ambushed a Russian convoy near Ténenkou in the central Malian region of Mopti on August 1. An

estimated 14 Russians and over 35 Malian soldiers died ([France24](#), August 13). The bodies of three white combatants were shown in the video, including one wounded soldier who was executed with a shot to the head. A second video showed JNIM fighters rummaging through a damaged Russian Ural-4320 truck ([X/@Permafr95699535](#), August 1). The scene was reminiscent of the Wagner/FAMa defeat at Tinzawatène at the hands of JNIM and Tuareg separatists of the Cadre stratégique pour la défense du peuple de l'Azawad (CSP-DPA) on July 25, 2024 (see [EDM](#), September 11, 2024).

The region around Ténenkou is dominated by the Fulani, cattle-herding Muslims whose regular clashes with farming communities have led to reprisals by government forces and local militias. This leads to recruitment by Fulani-dominated jihadist groups such as the al-Qaeda-aligned Katiba Macina (MLF) ([CTC](#), February 2017). Fulani fighters from the Katiba Macina were at the forefront of a September 17, 2024, raid on Russian and Malian military personnel in Mali's capital, Bamako (see [EDM](#), October 9, 2024). MLF leader Amadou Koufa stated that the raid was a response to civilian massacres by FAMa and their Russian allies ([X/@SaladinAlDronni](#), September 17, 2024).

The Russian military presence has failed to prevent the expansion of jihadist operations into parts of Mali that were previously unaffected by such. JNIM's June to September offensive in western Mali climaxed with the September 3 announcement of a JNIM blockade of imports from neighboring Senegal and Mauritania (Africa Report, September 7). The blockade of the Kayes and Nioro regions is intended to prevent the import of fuel and other goods to landlocked Mali and Bamako, where fuel is already in short supply, affecting both military and commercial flights ([Anadolu Ajansı](#), July 10). Mali's regime responded with airstrikes in Kayes on September 8 after jihadists stopped and emptied fuel tankers from Senegal ([TRT Global](#), September 8).

The regime's inability to restore security to Mali, even with the aid of Russian troops, has created an atmosphere of distrust in the highest levels of the military. An unauthorized early August meeting of senior officers to discuss issues related to cooperation with the Russian Africa Corps led to a wave of arrests of front-line officers and other ranks that began on August 10 and continued for days. At least 55 soldiers were arrested, including two popular generals, on charges they were preparing a coup against the junta with the help of "foreign states" ([Africa News](#), August 11; [Al-Jazeera](#), August 15; [L'Essor](#), August 19).

One junta leader who escaped arrest was Minister of Defense and Veterans Affairs Lieutenant General Sadio Camara, the individual responsible for arranging the arrival of Russian contractors in Mali. Camara has acted as the point man for the junta's dealings with both the Wagner Group and its successor, the Africa Corps, which operates under the direction of Russia's Ministry of Defense. Camara, however, has come under suspicion after the mass arrests of suspect officers, most of whom belong to Mali's Garde Nationale, known as the "Brown Berets" ([RFI](#), August 10).

The Garde and its leaders are closely tied to Camara, who founded the force. Disagreements between junta leader General Assimi Goïta and Camara over the allocation of Malian mines to Russian interests may have contributed to the growing rivalry between the two men ([The Sentry](#), August 2025). Camara is seeing much of his network of supporters dismantled, leaving him in a precarious position regarding his former ally, Goïta. While Goïta still approves of the Russian presence and has even authorized its expansion through recent talks in Moscow, he is wary of allowing a transfer of resources and national authority to the Russians, as has occurred in the Central African Republic.

Only days after the purge of many of his followers, Camara represented Mali in Moscow during a meeting of defense ministers of the Alliance des États du Sahel (AES – Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso) and their Russian counterpart, Andrei Belousov, as well as Africa Corps leader Yunus Bek Yevkurov (see [MLM](#), April 18, 2024; [The Moscow Times](#), August 14; [Bamada.net](#), August 15). During the proceedings, Camara declared his support for Russia’s “special military operation” in Ukraine ([APA](#), August 14). In Mali, Camara has the support of Modibo Koné, the powerful pro-Russian leader of the Agence Nationale de Sécurité de l’État (ANSE) and a product of Camara’s Garde Nationale ([Bamada.net](#), March 24).

Complicating the Russian relationship with the regime is the arrival in Bamako of SADAT, a self-proclaimed Turkish private military company providing “military training and defense consulting” ([Sadat.com.tr](#), accessed September 28). SADAT’s main role in Mali appears to be the provision of training to Goïta’s security detail, though there are reports of Syrian SADAT members finding themselves on the front lines of the war against the Islamists ([Le Monde](#), June 7, 2024). SADAT relies heavily on recruitment from Syrian fighters of the Syrian National Army (SNA, a coalition of Turkish-aligned Syrian rebels) and Turkmen from Syria’s Sultan Murad Division ([NATO Defense Foundation](#), April 9). The organization was founded in 2012 by Erdoğan’s former military advisor, Brigadier General Adnan Tanrıverdi, and is believed to still enjoy Erdoğan’s patronage ([Medya News](#), June 25, 2023; [Le Monde](#), June 7, 2024; [Gazete Duvar](#), December 27, 2024). Türkiye’s main opposition leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu (leader of the Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi – CHP), stated in June that “Russia’s Wagner is Türkiye’s SADAT Inc” ([Duvar](#), June 24). SADAT’s role in protecting the junta leader suggests Goïta has some degree of suspicion regarding the ultimate intentions of the Russians or their supporters in Mali.

The junta appears to have been under the impression that Russian forces might enable it to escape the neo-colonialism inherent in the French and UN military presence in Mali. Instead, they have found a new partner set on accessing Mali’s natural resources, and that is even more selective in choosing which operations or actions it should carry out than the French.

The Russians so far appear to be disappointed by the lack of access to Mali's lucrative mining sector, with the expected lucrative mining licenses failing to materialize for the most part ([The Sentry](#), August 2025). One-half of Mali's tax revenues derive from its gold mining industry ([Reuters](#), July 19, 2023). Russia looks toward gold revenues from its activities in Africa to help fund its ongoing and costly war against Ukraine (see [EDM](#), July 16).

The replacement of Wagner with the Africa Corps has not meant a wholesale replacement of Russian troops. Some 80 percent of Mali's Africa Corps consists of Wagner personnel who chose to transfer into the new Russian Ministry of Defense unit rather than return to Russia, where they would likely find themselves on the front lines of the war against Ukraine ([Africa Business Insider](#), August 28). There is growing friction between FAMa and the Russian troops, who tend to operate outside the Malian chain of command, appropriating resources, weapons, and transport for their operations. The Russian contractors are disliked for selectively intervening in support of FAMa.

As Mali endures economic, political, and military crises, the country's ruling junta is seeking scapegoats. As ruptures appear in the ruling junta, it may only be a matter of time before the largely unproductive experiment with Russian security assistance offers Mali's inept military rulers a new target for blame.

To read the article on the Jamestown website, click [here](#).

Maritime Drones Becoming Flagship of the Ukrainian Navy

Yuri Lapaiev

October 1, 2025

Executive Summary:

- The September 24 Ukrainian naval drone attack on oil terminals in Novorossiysk and Tuapse marked the first time that Ukraine has used maritime drones to attack Russian oil industry facilities.
- Ukraine's development of advanced maritime drones like the Magura and SeaBaby have demonstrated high effectiveness, sinking ships, striking aircraft, and even damaging infrastructure like the Kerch Bridge.
- With proven combat success, Ukraine plans controlled exports of naval drones, while Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC) advance their own programs, intensifying competition in unmanned maritime warfare technologies.



(Source: United24)

On September 24, Ukrainian drones attacked the Russian cities of Novorossiysk and Tuapse. Cyber Boroshno, a Ukrainian open-source intelligence (OSINT) team, analyzed video footage and found that the drone struck oil loading piers within the port of Tuapse ([Cyber Boroshno](#), September 24). The attack damaged infrastructure for the Transneft oil terminal and the Caspian Pipeline Consortium terminal near Novorossiysk. Both terminals paused operations following the attack, but allegedly resumed loading tankers the next day ([Bloomberg](#); [United24 Media](#), September 25). The Defense Intelligence of Ukraine (GUR) was behind the attack, according to an unnamed source from the agency ([Radio Svoboda](#); [Kyiv Independent](#), September 25).

The September 24 attack is the first time Ukraine has used maritime drones, also known as unmanned surface vessels (USVs), in addition to traditional unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to attack Russian oil industry facilities. Several USVs broke through Russian defenses and successfully reached their targets, demonstrating the growing role of maritime drones in Ukrainian strikes on Russian targets. These drones have already proven their effectiveness, having destroyed or damaged approximately 15 ships from Russia's Black Sea Fleet. This constitutes almost a third of the total Russian Black Sea Fleet, according to Roman Pogorily, OSINT researcher and co-founder of the DeepState team ([Ukrinform](#), May 30).

Naval drones are not just effective on ships. In December 2024, the GUR announced that a Magura V5 naval drone struck an Mi-8 “Hip” transport helicopter, the first-ever naval drone strike on an aerial target ([GUR](#), December 31, 2024). On May 2 of this year, a Ukrainian USV from the GUR’s Group 13 unit destroyed a Russian Su-30SM “Flanker” multirole fighter jet ([GUR](#), May 3). These instances confirmed the significant potential and flexibility of naval drones.

Ukraine began actively developing unmanned maritime systems after Russia’s full-scale invasion in February 2022. Today, several systems have been developed (see EDM, [October 16](#), [August 13](#), 2024; [Covert Shores](#), June 20). Some USVs remain prototypes or scale models, but others, such as the Magura and SeaBaby, have already scored a large number of successful operations, including the famous Kerch Bridge attack ([TSN](#), June 3).

Another Ukrainian project is the Toloka family of underwater drones ([Militarnyi](#), September 22). These include the Toloka-200—a small drone with a range of 200 kilometers (approximately 124 miles), a payload capacity of 20 kilograms, and a speed of over 15 knots, essentially analogous to small first person view (FPV) drones); the Toloka-400—a reconnaissance and strike drone with a range of 1,200 kilometers (approximately 745 miles), a payload capacity of over 500 kilograms, and a gasoline engine, capable of diving to a depth of 30 meters (approximately 100 feet); and the Toloka-1000—a diesel-electric autonomous vehicle with a composite hull. The Toloka-1000 is designed for monitoring, reconnaissance, surveillance, and strike missions, featuring a 2,000-kilometer (approximately 1,240-mile) range, a five-ton payload capacity, speeds ranging from 5 to 15 knots, and a diving depth of 1,000 meters (approximately 3,280 feet). Currently, the company is testing onboard equipment for the Toloka-1000, while the Toloka-200 and Toloka-400 are being prepared for serial production. There is no publicly available information regarding the possible combat use of these underwater drones.

As with other cutting-edge defense developments by Ukrainian engineers, marine drones, which have already proven their effectiveness in real combat operations, may be of interest to buyers abroad. They could become an important element of Ukrainian arms exports (see EDM, [October 8](#), 2024, [September 17](#)). Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy announced the possible opening of exports this year during his meeting with representatives of leading American companies on September 24 in New York. He noted that Ukraine has around 30 large manufacturers of unmanned systems ([President of Ukraine](#), September 25). Earlier, during his evening address, Zelenskyy announced that the first proposals had been made regarding the export of Ukrainian weapons, stressing that it would be “a controlled export of our weapons, including naval drones” ([President of Ukraine](#), September 21).

The Kremlin has noticed the advance of Ukrainian naval drones, and Russian engineers are working to create their own fleet of maritime drones. The “Rubicon” Center for Advanced Unmanned Technologies is currently the primary operator of USVs in the Russian Armed Forces and is gaining

recognition for its effectiveness and technological prowess in the field of UAVs ([Radio Svoboda](#), September 17).

On August 28, the Russian Ministry of Defense published a video showing an unnamed USV attacking the *Simferopol*, a Ukrainian medium reconnaissance ship that was located at the mouth of the Danube River. According to a statement by the Russian ministry, their USVs sank the ship ([Russian Ministry of Defense](#), August 28). Dmytro Pletenchuk, the Ukrainian Navy spokesperson, later confirmed the attack without providing details on the ship's status. According to him, one member of the crew was killed in action, several were injured, and a couple of sailors are still missing ([Ukrinform](#), August 28).

The Russian military actively shares its modern combat experience, particularly in the use of unmanned systems, with the People's Republic of China (PRC) (see [EDM](#), June 4; [Reuters](#), September 25). It is not surprising that the PRC is interested in data on the technical characteristics of Russian systems and tactics for their use against Ukraine. Beijing has its own program of marine drones, which could play an important role in a potential conflict over Taiwan (see [China Brief](#), December 20, 2024; [Naval News](#), September 18).

Ukrainian naval drones have become a revolutionary weapon, proving their effectiveness and versatility in a wide range of missions. Precision strikes on ships, air defense, and even strategic long-range strikes are just some of the capabilities of these systems. Such drones could be of great interest to Ukraine's partners if Kyiv opens its arms exports. At the same time, Russia has begun developing and deploying its own systems. Russia's advances in maritime drones pose a threat to Ukraine and other countries facing aggression from Russia or its allies.

The Fidesz government is scrambling to maintain domestic support and trigger short-term economic growth in the lead-up to the April 2026 parliamentary elections. Orbán's tenuous hold on power and a failing economy may mean he is willing to "play ball" with Beijing when it comes to the surveillance and extradition of Chinese citizens in Hungary. Hungarian law enforcement's use of Huawei and ZTE technology has already raised alarm bells of PRC surveillance ([24.hu](#), February 18, 2019; [Atlatszo](#), August 15, 2023). The extradition treaty may further weaponize those tools as the Hungarian authorities increase coordination with their PRC counterparts. In a wider sense, Beijing's growing security presence in Hungary means that the PRC now wields not only significant economic leverage but also an intelligence and surveillance foothold on the soil of an EU and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member.

To read the article on the Jamestown website, click [here](#).

POLITICS & SOCIETY

Kremlin Expands Youth Indoctrination in Russia and Occupied Territories of Ukraine (Part Two)

Maksym Beznosiuk

September 29, 2025

Executive Summary:

- Russia's youth organizations have played an important role in the Kremlin's indoctrination effort, with Russian President Putin himself facilitating their development.
- Groups such as Yunarmia, Avangard camps, and the "Movement of the First" serve as platforms for indoctrination and militarization of their members, preparing children as future soldiers.
- In Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories, the Kremlin imposes these programs forcefully, combining a Ukrainian language ban, identity erasure, and forced participation of Ukrainian youth in Russian-run camps.



(Source: President of Russia)

Russia's youth organizations have played an increasing role in the Kremlin's indoctrination effort, with Russian President Putin himself facilitating their development. One of the latest steps undertaken by Putin was the inauguration of six new youth centers across Russia on June 28, including in Khabarovsk, Novy Urengoy, Arkhangelsk, Dagestan, Karachay-Cherkessia, and the Russian-occupied city of Henichesk in Kherson Oblast ([RBC](#), June 28). These centers serve as gathering points for students and young people, part of the broader "Youth and Children" national project, which aims to launch more than 500 such spaces by 2030.

Putin's efforts to militarize the Russian youth can be traced back to 2016, when the Yunarmia, a military-patriotic movement aimed at militarizing youth, was launched ([TASS](#), February 22, 2018). Today, the movement claims more than 1.7 million members and operates in Russia and occupied Ukrainian territories, with its members marching in parades, training with weapons, and attending specialized military camps ([Yunarmy](#), 2025).

A recent Russian poll from the Institute of Social Marketing claims that 76 percent of respondents supported recreating the pioneer organization on the centenary of its founding ([Telegram/insomar](#); [Kommersant](#), May 19). While support was higher among older generations (81 percent) and rural residents (82 percent), two-thirds of younger respondents also expressed support for such a policy. The positive associations cited patriotism, discipline, unity, and respect for elders, showcasing how the Kremlin can efficiently utilize nostalgia for the Soviet past to legitimize its activities to indoctrinate the youth.

The “Movement of the First” (MoF), established in 2022, is regarded as the successor to the Soviet Pioneers and now has branches operating in numerous Russian regions, as well as in occupied Ukrainian territories ([TASS](#), December 19, 2022). Unlike Yunarmia’s explicit military profile, it aims to encompass all patriotic extracurricular activities from volunteer projects to cultural events under a single Kremlin-controlled umbrella ([RBC](#), December 19, 2022). The Russian authorities continuously facilitate events to instill patriotic feelings and support for the Russian military invasion in Ukraine. On September 10, there was an event organized in the city of Tula between MoF members and Russians participating in the military invasion of Ukraine. As part of this event, over 1,000 youth members from 60 different Russian regions painted portraits of Russian soldiers while also engaging in patriotic discussions with them ([Gazeta-Don](#), September 11).

The Kremlin has also expanded militarization via Avangard camps, where children and teenagers undergo training that resembles battlefield conditions. Participants are instructed in trench-digging, handling explosives, assembling weapons, and operating drones, often while dressed in combat uniforms and performing patriotic rituals ([The Insider](#), September 2, 2024). These camps blur the line between extracurricular activity and paramilitary preparation, incorporating military skills, indoctrination, and war symbolism into everyday youth culture ([ISW](#), December 21).

Beyond schools and camps, the Kremlin uses museums and their digital collections to spread propaganda about Slavic unity and to reinforce patriotic education. Since February 2022, Russian museums—including those in occupied territories—have hosted over 50 online exhibitions depicting Ukraine as inseparable from Russia and framing the war as a struggle against Nazism and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ([University of Exeter](#), June 6). Moreover, since 2023, Russian schools have been opening interactive “special military operation” museums to convey pro-Russian narratives about the causes of the Ukrainian invasion to children through quizzes, videos, and virtual reality simulations ([BB.LV](#), February 16).

Together, these initiatives illustrate how the Kremlin has methodically mobilized both cultural institutions and the education system into a unified indoctrination infrastructure that feeds pro-Russian propaganda and sows animosity towards the West and current Ukrainian statehood.

In occupied Ukrainian territories, Russian authorities seek to fuse patriotic education with identity erasure (see [EDM](#), September 3). There, from September 1, the Kremlin not only banned the Ukrainian language entirely in schools but also confiscated Ukrainian textbooks to replace them with pro-Russian narratives depicting Ukraine as an artificial state ([Ukrainer](#), July 15, 2024; [BBC](#), June 26). Parents are also unable to access online education through Ukrainian schools due to threats of fines and prosecution, forcing them to enroll their children in Russian schools ([Human Rights Watch](#), July 20, 2024).

Moreover, in the occupied territories of Ukraine, Russian authorities have been opening “special military operation” museums at schools, financed through grants from the Putin administration ([ZN](#), October 8, 2024). Despite being officially presented as exhibitions about World War II, the displays overwhelmingly focus on the Kremlin’s war against Ukraine, equating the current invasion with the Soviet fight against Nazism. The Kremlin has made these museums mandatory in occupied schools, with occupation officials standardizing exhibits to reinforce propaganda narratives ([Krymr](#), July 29, 2024).

Kremlin’s occupational authorities have sent thousands of Ukrainian children to summer camps, university shifts, and military-sports programs to indoctrinate and militarize them (see [EDM](#), September 3). Recently, there have been new documented cases of abducted teenagers from Kherson and Zaporizhzhia who were transported to camps in Volgograd in Russia to study trench warfare techniques, gun handling, and simulate medical evacuations ([The Guardian](#), September 10). In many cases, the Kremlin implements these training programs to eventually proceed with conscription, eradicating the boundary between childhood and military service.

In two decades, the Kremlin has turned patriotic education into a well-structured propaganda system, merging schools, youth organizations, cultural institutions, and religion into one unified indoctrination system. Unless challenged, Moscow’s indoctrination campaign will further solidify its authoritarian resilience and normalize the militarization of Ukrainian children under occupation, a legacy with severe implications for European security and human rights for the next decade.

To read the article on the Jamestown website, click [here](#).

Belarus's Political Prisoner Problem Attracting Renewed International Attention

Dmitry Bolkunets

September 29, 2025

Executive Summary:

- The first phone call between U.S. President Trump and Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka in August, followed by high-level meetings in Minsk, marked a surprising shift after 15 years of estrangement between the two countries.
- The issue of political prisoners has become the central focus of U.S. policy toward Belarus, and with over 1,300 people jailed on political grounds since 2020, Lukashenka uses their release as a bargaining tool.
- The United States now plays the leading role, while Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC) remain critical external actors, and Poland's transit blockade in 2024 forced partial prisoner releases, highlighting Warsaw's outsized influence.
- Lukashenka seeks sanctions relief, room to maneuver beyond Moscow, and international legitimacy. Without a comprehensive release of prisoners and genuine reforms, however, any U.S.-Belarus rapprochement will remain fragile and limited.



(Source: Clemens Bilan / Getty Images)

On August 15, U.S. President Donald Trump held his first telephone conversation with Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka ([President of Belarus](#), August 15). The call marked an unexpected turning point in the relations between the two countries, which had been in a state of political estrangement for more than 15 years. The renewed initiative emerged almost spontaneously. Just two hours before the call, the White House received a letter from the organization Belarus Democratic Forum requesting assistance in securing the release of more than 1,300 political prisoners in Belarus ([Sota](#), August 15).

On September 5, Trump called Lukashenka a “very respected” person and a “strong leader,” praising him for releasing 16 hostages. On September 11, a public meeting took place in Minsk between Lukashenka and U.S. Deputy Special Envoy to Ukraine, John Coale. The central topic of their talks was the fate of political prisoners, demonstrating the importance of human rights and political repression in bilateral discussions ([Belta](#), September 11).

Amid growing external pressure and worsening domestic conditions, Lukashenka has found himself in a situation where the release of prisoners has become not only a humanitarian task but also a strategic tool for building new foreign policy ties and ensuring his own political survival.

According to human rights organizations, Belarus currently holds more than 1,300 political prisoners ([Dissidentby](#), September 15). The number has remained almost unchanged in the face of continued repression. Many citizens have been imprisoned since 2020, when, after contested presidential elections and mass protests, the authorities launched a sweeping campaign of repression (see [EDM](#), August 9).

The category of political prisoners encompasses a wide range of individuals, including journalists from independent media, human rights defenders, students, activists, and even ordinary citizens who have left critical comments on social media. Numerous cases of torture, abuse, and inhumane treatment have been documented. Families of prisoners face pressure, while lawyers are stripped of their licenses ([Dissidentby](#), accessed September 28). For Lukashenka, these individuals have become a reserve of political capital. He uses their fate as a bargaining chip with the outside world. Domestically, the existence of prisoners helps maintain an atmosphere of fear, stifling the development of business and civil society alike.

Trump's direct involvement radically altered the dynamics of U.S.–Belarus relations. Trump's referring to Lukashenka as a “strong leader” sparked mixed reactions, but served as an opening for negotiations ([Belta](#), September 6).

On September 12, another U.S. delegation met with Lukashenka in Minsk. Shortly afterward, Washington lifted sanctions on the airline *Belavia*. In response, Minsk released 52 prisoners, who were sent to Lithuania ([Charter97.org](#), September 11). One of the prisoners, opposition figure Mikalai Statkevich, refused to leave the country, however, and was most likely returned to prison ([Charter97](#), September 11). Minsk is willing to bargain with human lives but remains unwilling to undertake systemic changes. Lukashenka and his inner circle fear opponents and view the forced exile of ideological adversaries as the only acceptable option.

For Lukashenka, such negotiations offer a double benefit. They allow him to demonstrate to domestic audiences his international recognition, while also opening the door to potential economic concessions from the international community.

At the strategic level, Lukashenka pursues several goals:

- Sanctions relief: The most painful restrictions for Minsk remain the ban on potash exports and limitations on the financial sector, and their removal is seen as a primary objective.

- Balancing Russia: Since 2020, Belarus has become increasingly dependent on Moscow—both militarily and financially. Opening a communication channel with Washington offers Lukashenka a chance to partially restore room for maneuver.
- Image and legitimacy: Hosting meetings with U.S. representatives bolsters Lukashenka's image as a leader with whom world powers engage in negotiations.

Nobel Prize winners have played a notable role in maintaining international attention on Belarus. In total, 75 laureates have signed four appeals demanding the release of political prisoners. In August 2025, a group of 24 laureates sent a letter to Trump, thanking him for his attention to the issue and urging other world leaders to join efforts to free prisoners ([Bolkunets.org](https://bolkunets.org), August 19). Such initiatives are largely symbolic, but they amplify pressure on political decision-makers.

Despite signs of a “thaw,” the prospects for an immediate improvement in relations remain uncertain. Currently, there is an absence of diplomats on both sides. Since 2008, Belarus and the United States have not filled their respective ambassador positions ([U.S. Embassy in Belarus](#), accessed September 26). A full restoration of diplomatic relations will likely only be possible after the release of all political prisoners. Additionally, Russia sees Belarus as part of its sphere of influence and has no interest in its rapprochement with the West. Any independent steps by Minsk toward Washington could trigger a harsh reaction from the Kremlin. Past experience shows that Lukashenka has released prisoners cyclically, when convenient, but has never embarked on systemic reforms. It remains unclear whether current moves will lead to lasting change. Finally, Lukashenka is keen to maintain his image as the sole source of authority and decision-making. Making concessions too rapidly could be perceived as weakness, undermining his authority within the system.

Poland played a particularly important role in the past in securing the release of political prisoners. In July 2024, Warsaw took an unprecedented step by effectively freezing the transit of goods from Belarus to the European Union by rail and road. The conditions for reopening the border were the end of the hybrid migration crisis and the release of political prisoners ([RMF24](#), July 8, 2024).

This move exerted enormous pressure. Within just 48 hours, the transit of goods from Belarus, Russia, and the People's Republic of China (PRC) was brought to a standstill ([RMF24](#), July 4, 2024). Within hours, Lukashenka began releasing some prisoners and dismissed Belarus's foreign minister (Belta, [June 27, July 2](#), 2024). Moreover, a crisis erupted in relations with the PRC, which is vitally dependent on stable transit through the Belarusian corridor into the European Union. As a result, hundreds of prisoners were released over the following months ([The Insider](#), September 18). The process was deliberately protracted, however, as Lukashenka wanted to demonstrate that decisions stemmed solely from him and not from outside pressure.

From September 12 to 25, Poland fully closed its border with Belarus, officially citing joint Belarusian-Russian military exercises ([DW](#), September 25). In response, Minsk detained 1,453 Polish trucks ([Belta](#), September 17). The Belarusian rail corridor remains a vital land route connecting the PRC and the European Union, handling 25 billion euros (about \$29 billion) in goods in 2024 ([Zerkalo](#), September 18). Over 130 PRC–Europe freight trains were stranded following the closure, and potash exports faced delays ([Pozirk, September 22; PAP](#), September 25).

The situation became a key issue at a September 15 meeting between the foreign ministers of Poland and the PRC in Warsaw, which ended without concrete results ([Belsat](#), September 18). On September 22, Lukashenko met in Minsk with Li Si, a member of the Standing Committee of the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee, criticizing Poland's actions as unfriendly and a "springboard for other states" ([Belta](#), September 22).

The issue of political prisoners in Belarus has become a point of intersection for the interests of Minsk, Washington, Moscow, Warsaw, and Beijing. For Lukashenka, it presents an opportunity to break free from total dependence on the Kremlin and reopen channels of communication with the West. For the United States, it is an opportunity to promote a humanitarian agenda while simultaneously curbing Russian influence. For Poland, it is confirmation of its role as a key regional actor. For the PRC, Belarus remains a crucial transit zone requiring guarantees of stability. Despite Lukashenka still seeking to control the process and exploit it for his own interests, pressure from the United States, Poland, the PRC, and the wider international community has created a unique window of opportunity for real progress.

To read the article on the Jamestown website, click [here](#).

The Trust Lives! Moscow Uses Early Soviet Cheka Operations as Model

Paul Goble

September 30, 2025

Executive Summary:

- The Trust, the Soviet secret police's first great intelligence operation in the 1920s, is making a comeback under Russian President Vladimir Putin, with Moscow setting up Federal Security Service (FSB) groups to penetrate, hamstring, and ultimately discredit emigres opposed to his regime.
- These groups typically falsely present themselves as independent opponents of the Kremlin, enabling Moscow to divide the emigration and advance warning on the plans of the émigrés, allowing the FSB to take action against them.
- Moscow's most important victory via the Trust came not while it was operating but when it was exposed as a Soviet operation, which discredited those who accepted the operation as genuine and reduced the willingness of others to help, an outcome Putin clearly hopes for.



(Source: RIA Novosti)

Most people in the West recall the Trust from the dramatization of the life and death of the Odessa-born British intelligence agent Sidney Reilly in the 1983 television program, *Reilly, Ace of Spies*. The show portrays a 1920s Soviet counterintelligence operation, in which Soviet intelligence agents, known as Chekists, formed a fake anti-Bolshevik organization to lure out and identify genuine members of the resistance within and outside the Soviet Union (see [EDM](#), September 15, 2022; Simpkins and Dyer, [The Trust](#), July 1989). The Trust successfully lured Reilly back to the Soviet Union in 1925, where Soviet secret police arrested, tortured, and eventually executed him. The Trust has had an enduring legacy as a model for understanding Soviet and Russian counterintelligence tactics, as Western intelligence services and Russian diaspora organizations discovered in 1927 that the operation and its supporters in the emigration were not authentic. Now, more than ever, the Trust mirrors Russian President Vladimir Putin's approach to the Russian political opposition in exile, which grew following the Kremlin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine to its largest size since the 1920s ([Window On Eurasia](#), July 2, 2020; [Harbin](#), 2022; [Idel Realii](#), December 9, 2024). Understanding the Trust operation helps to contextualize modern Russian intelligence

tactics regarding political opposition in exile and national diaspora populations, most prominently, the Circassians.

The Trust was the code name the Soviets gave to a dissident organization they created in 1920, known as the Monarchist Union of Central Russia (MUCR). Consisting of a mix of some anti-Bolshevik Russians and many intelligence service agents, the Trust claimed it was ready to use violence to overthrow Lenin's government. In reality, the Soviet secret police—first the Cheka from 1920 to the agency's dissolution in 1922, and then the State Political Directorate (GPU) from 1922 to 1927 when the Kremlin terminated the operation—completely controlled the organization. This arrangement advantaged the Soviet intelligence services by splitting the Russian diaspora between those who fell for the Trust's claim of being the true champion of a free Russia and those who argued for a more cautious approach. The operation also ensured that the Trust's Soviet handlers always knew the opposition in exile's plans and allowed the Trust operatives to argue that, since they were on the ground, only they, and not the émigrés, should decide when and where to subvert the Soviet government, neutralizing the influence of the Russian émigrés. When the Trust was exposed in 1927, almost certainly by the Soviets themselves, those in exile who worked with the organization were discredited in the eyes of others in the diaspora and in Western governments, giving Moscow another positive outcome (see [EDM](#), September 15, 2022).

Upon becoming president, Putin, who began his career as a Soviet Committee for State Security (KGB) officer, used Trust-style operations against Russian nationalists and dissident Russian Orthodox groups inside the Russian Federation ([Window on Eurasia](#), October 26, 2018). More recently, he extended Trust-style tactics to selected non-Russian groups within his country ([Window on Eurasia](#), April 29). After Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine drove thousands of Russians to flee the country, Putin expanded the "Trust" approach to the Russian opposition in exile as did his Cheka and GPU predecessors with dissidents outside of the Soviet Union in the early 1920s ([Window on Eurasia](#), September 10, 2022; [Ekho](#), September 14, 2024; [Window on Eurasia](#), December 11, 2024). Few have noticed the return of Trust-style tactics under Putin because his groups, unlike the Trust, often acknowledge, sometimes openly, that they work with the Russian government, and because they operate in an inherently murky environment that allows for plausible deniability about official connections or control. Dimitry Savvin, editor of the Riga-based conservative Russian *Harbin* outlet, however, examined the situation closely and concluded that Putin is engaged in the same kinds of operations against the new Russian diaspora that the Cheka used against Soviet emigrants a century ago ([Harbin](#), 2022).

Over the last several weeks, a spate of articles about the Trust on the centenary of Sidney Reilly's 1925 execution highlights the Kremlin's fixation on emigration and Soviet efforts to counter it ([Gazeta Rassvet](#), September 19; [Komsomolskaya Pravda](#), September 23; [Svobodnaya](#)

[Pressa](#); [MKRU](#), September 25; [73 Online](#), September 26). It is no surprise that Russian leaders with a Soviet bent think more about emigration than leaders of other countries, given that Lenin and the Bolsheviks went from a tiny and mostly émigré group at the start of 1917 to the rulers of Russia less than a year later. The surge of pro-regime articles about the Trust, in particular, highlights the Kremlin's confidence in the operation's effectiveness during its active and exposed period. These articles about the Trust feature a hallmark of Russian commentary under Putin: blaming others for Moscow's actions or plans. In many of the articles, Russian writers of today accuse the West of using Trust-style tactics and argue that Russia must revive these Soviet tactics in response ([Sputnik Abkhaziya](#), September 22; [RIA Novosti](#), September 23).

This pattern strongly suggests that the Kremlin will seek to link any violence against the Putin regime to the Russian opposition in exile and any foreign governments that support them. The Kremlin will continue emphasizing ties between opposition in Russia and dissidents abroad to justify domestic repression at home and pressure other countries to provide less support to the émigrés or even cooperate with Moscow for their extradition ([Idel Realii](#), December 9, 2024). This strategy was successful a century ago, and it is likely that Putin remembers and expects it to be effective now. The Trust is not just of historical interest, but an active tactic that remains alive. Trust-style tactics are perhaps even more dangerous now than during Soviet times, as the Putin regime has shown itself comfortable working with radical groups shunned by the Soviet system.

To read the article on the Jamestown website, click [here](#).

Government Pressure Puts Georgian NGOs on Brink

Khatia Shamanauri

September 30, 2025

Executive Summary:

- Georgian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) say they are enduring one of the most difficult periods in the country's history, yet they vow to continue their work despite the financial restrictions.
- Georgia's Prosecutor's Office has frozen the bank accounts of seven prominent Georgian civil society organizations, while their leaders have been summoned for questioning.
- The growing pressure on civil society, including the recent freezing of assets, has raised alarm among Western partners, who view these measures as incompatible with European Union standards.



(Source: Daro Sulakauri/Getty Images)

Georgian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are facing unprecedented challenges amid one of the most severe crises the country's civil society has ever encountered. A series of recently adopted laws, including amendments to the Law of Georgia "On Grants," now effectively bar NGOs from receiving foreign funding without prior government approval ([Georgian Parliament; Civil Georgia](#), June 10). Meanwhile, the new Foreign Agents Registration Act requires any individual or organization deemed to act on behalf of a foreign entity to register as a foreign agent, further complicating their operations ([Civil Georgia](#), May 31). Additionally, at the end of August, the Prosecutor's Office froze the assets of seven leading organizations, leaving many to operate largely on a voluntary basis ([Radio Tavisupleba](#), August 27). With their capacity dwindling, these groups face an unprecedented struggle to continue defending human rights, providing legal support, and sustaining civil society in Georgia.

On September 17, Eka Gigauri, the head of Transparency International-Georgia, an NGO dedicated to combating corruption by promoting transparency and accountability, was questioned at the Tbilisi City Court. After leaving the court building, Gigauri told reporters that investigators focused on transactions from her personal bank account and her public calls for sanctions against

government officials. “They brought information about transfers from my personal account to various other accounts,” she said. “The purpose of those transfers was to cover the fines of people who had been detained. Apparently, this is what worries them the most” ([Radio Tavisupleba](#), September 17).

Gigauri’s questioning is part of a process that began on August 27, when Tbilisi City Court upheld a motion by the Prosecutor’s Office to freeze the bank accounts of seven leading Georgian civil society organizations. The groups are accused of “funding” protest rallies held at the end of 2024 as part of what authorities have called the “sabotage case” ([Radio Tavisupleba](#), August 27). According to the Prosecutor’s Office, the organizations “coordinatedly” financed participants of last year’s demonstrations, allegedly encouraging “violent actions against law enforcement officers.” The statement goes on to allege that the funds were used to buy equipment—including “special gas masks, protective goggles, respirators, face-covering masks, pepper spray, and other items”—which prosecutors say were “actively used by protesters during violent confrontations with the police” ([The Prosecution Service of Georgia](#), August 27).

The frozen accounts belong to some of Georgia’s most prominent civil society groups, including the Civil Society Foundation, International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI), Defenders of Democracy, Georgian Democracy Initiative (GDI), Sapari, and the Social Justice Center (formerly EMC). In response, the affected NGOs issued a joint statement, vowing to continue their work despite the financial restrictions. The statement read:

The enemies of the Georgian people want us to be no longer able to defend the rights of children, women, people with disabilities, students, illegally detained individuals, workers, and the elderly. Their aim is not only to sabotage the country’s future European integration but also to strip the Georgian people of one of their greatest achievements—the right to visa-free travel ([Radio Tavisupleba](#), August 27).”

Sapari, a leading women’s rights organization in Georgia, is among those whose accounts were frozen. Its executive director, Baia Patariaia, was also summoned for questioning. In an interview with this author, Patariaia described the process as “disgraceful,” emphasizing that investigators “practically had no questions” and failed to point to any procurement that might raise legitimate concerns. Instead, she said, much of the questioning centered on her personal Facebook posts—particularly those in which she had called for public officials to go on strike. She stated:

They asked me why I attended protests. I told them that the country had stepped outside the constitutional framework, the elections had been rigged, and I wanted Georgia to return to constitutional order. They also asked whether I had been trained abroad on how to organize

protests or whether I had received money from abroad to fund them. My answer was ‘no’ (Author’s interview, September 18).

Giorgi Mshvenieradze, Chairman of Democracy Defenders Georgia, told this author in an interview that the country’s NGOs are enduring one of the most difficult periods in Georgia’s history. He said, “We know—based on hints we receive from the authorities—that if we do not leave Georgia, we may be arrested. But we are prepared for that. We are citizens of this country, and we share its burdens and responsibilities.” Mshvenieradze added that his organization is preparing for every possible scenario and plans to ensure they can continue supporting people under any circumstances. He stated:

There is the near-total destruction of our resources—our bank accounts have been frozen, we can no longer pay rent for offices or cover utility bills, let alone compensate the people who work with us. Taken together, these measures critically undermine the work we have dedicated ourselves to—helping the Georgian people—and threaten to dismantle the strong civil society we have built over so many years (Author’s Interview, September 17).

Georgia’s non-governmental sector relies heavily on foreign donors for funding (see EDM, [April 9](#), [May 1](#), 2024, [March 12](#), [April 15](#)). With the ruling Georgian Dream party’s adoption of new laws and the freezing of accounts, however, they now face mounting financial pressure and uncertainty about their future.

“We are already partly working on a voluntary basis. Within a few months, we may have to move entirely to volunteer work, which would radically reduce our capacity,” Pataria told this author. She explained that Sapari currently employs more than 10 full-time lawyers, all of whom rely on their salaries to support their families. She stated, “They are no longer working full-time with us, which means they can only partially fulfill their responsibilities to the organization. Their involvement is gradually declining” (Author’s interview, September 18).

The growing pressure on civil society organizations in Georgia, including the recent freezing of their assets, has raised alarm among the country’s Western partners (see EDM, January 23; [X/@SFRCdems](#), August 27). Such measures are widely seen as incompatible with European Union standards for democratic governance and the protection of fundamental freedoms (see EDM, September 23). The Georgian Dream party’s current policies could further undermine Georgia’s prospects for EU integration, casting a shadow over the country’s aspirations to align with European democratic norms.

To read the article on the Jamestown website, click [here](#).

Kazakhstan Prioritizes Development of Technological Innovation

Fuad Shahbazov

October 2, 2025

Executive Summary:

- Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, in his annual address to the nation on September 8, announced sweeping reforms, including digitalization and the creation of a Ministry of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to modernize governance and boost efficiency.
- The new “Digital Qazaqstan” strategy aims to unify all national AI and digital initiatives, promoting innovation-driven growth.
- Through initiatives such as Alatau City and investments in cryptocurrency, Astana envisions Kazakhstan as a regional digital hub, diversifying partnerships beyond Russia and the People’s Republic of China, while requiring transparency and effective fiscal management for success.



(Source: President of Kazakhstan)

On September 8, President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev proposed, in his annual address to the nation, hosting a referendum to return to a unicameral parliament, mirroring the single-chamber Supreme Council of the early post-independence years ([President of Kazakhstan](#), September 8; [Times of Central Asia](#), September 10). While some argued that this decision aims to enhance governance and offer better solutions to bureaucracy within the state apparatus, the president’s proposal highlighted a commitment to major reforms. These reforms extend beyond the parliament, such as digitalization and the development of a national strategy for Artificial Intelligence (AI) ([Qazinform](#), September 9). In a broader global context and shifting priorities in the region, Tokayev’s speech shed light on rising geopolitical contradictions, conflicts, economic inequality, and new threats, including weapons based on AI.

During his address, Tokayev emphasized that Kazakhstan must adapt to the global transformation driven by rapid digitalization and AI ([President of Kazakhstan](#), September 8; [The Astana Times](#), September 8). Within this proposal, Tokayev announced the establishment of a new Ministry of

Artificial Intelligence, which will steadily pave the way for the implementation of a new digital strategy and the use of big data in all strategically important fields.

To effectively implement this goal, the government will develop a single conceptual document, Digital Qazaqstan, which will combine all initiatives and projects on digitalization and AI into a national strategy ([The Astana Times](#), September 8). Astana acknowledged the necessity of the growing role of modern technologies and digitalization in restructuring the entire system of public administration and carrying out economic reforms ([Eurasianet](#), September 1). Kazakhstan's deep interest in high-tech-related projects and AI is not a new phenomenon, as, according to available data, local startups attracted over \$250 million in venture capital in 2024, more than triple the 2023 figure ([Qazaqstan Investment Project](#), March 2024; [The Astana Times](#), July 10).

Tokayev's announcement of a new AI ministry and a new fund for digital assets is part of a broader plan to boost the importance of the recently established Alatau city, a futuristic Singapore-style city in northeastern Kazakhstan, slated for 2024 ([The Diplomat](#), June 24). The new city concept is designed to attract more foreign investment in digital projects and infrastructure, aiming to transform Kazakhstan into a future hub for cryptocurrency investments and AI. To foster the development of the new concept, the government launched a Special Economic Zone in Alatau, planning to attract around 170 projects at this stage, mostly related to the cryptocurrency market ([Kazakh Invest](#), accessed October 2).

In July, Timur Suleimenov, the chairman of the Kazakh National Bank, announced that Kazakhstan was considering investing a portion of its gold and foreign currency reserves in cryptocurrency to "maximize investment returns" ([Kursiv Media](#), July 14). Considering Tokayev's speech and Suleimov's proposal together, Kazakhstan will focus extensively on developing the crypto market in the coming years by making significant investments in it. Unsurprisingly, the topic of the new digital development strategy and AI in Kazakhstan has been placed at the top of the agenda for the upcoming Astana Think Tank Forum on October 15–16 ([Astana Think Tank Forum](#), accessed October 2).

Tokayev's new digital strategy aims to put the country on the world map, turning it into a fully digital nation. This decision will pave the way for Kazakhstan to explore new economic opportunities, thereby strengthening Astana's portfolio. In turn, this will help diversify economic partnerships away from Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC), as the latter has long maintained the status of the primary economic partner. Moreover, as the world, including the neighboring PRC, is rapidly digitizing, Kazakhstan is steadily diversifying its economic potential to the outside world ([Vlast](#), September 18).

Several questions related to the Alatau City project remain, as the location of the new futuristic city, 60 kilometers (approximately 37 miles) outside Kazakhstan's largest city, Almaty, is currently in a rural area and hosts a military base ([Alatau City](#), accessed October 2). While this transformation of this area into a futuristic high-tech city is underway, it will require substantial efforts and significant funds.

Tokayev's recent speech, accompanied by the proposed new digital development agenda, aims to reposition Kazakhstan as a digitally driven and innovation-centric state. If executed successfully, the new rigorous agenda could diversify the country's economic partnership beyond traditional partnerships, turning Astana into a significant regional tech hub. The successful implementation, however, will hinge on pragmatic delivery, namely transparency in attracting foreign investors, accurate fiscal management of new urban projects, and necessary coordination and accountability of governmental institutions to create a durable competitiveness amid growing regional and global rivalry among different geopolitical actors.

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ENERGY & ECONOMICS

PRC Investment in Russian Economy Increasingly Important as Sanctions Deepen

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Executive Summary:

- Russia has become increasingly dependent on trade with the People's Republic of China (PRC) since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, with more than a third of Russia's total trade turnover being generated by the PRC.
- The recent memorandum on the development of the "Power of Siberia 2" pipeline could secure long-term PRC purchases of Russian gas. The PRC's purported aim for severely discounted prices, however, could ultimately render the project unprofitable for Russia.
- U.S. President Donald Trump's recent pressure on countries buying Russian oil could imperil Russian energy exports, an issue of major concern in both Russia and the PRC, and ultimately deter continued PRC purchases.



(Source: Gazprom/RIA Novosti)

The People's Republic of China's (PRC) dominant role as Russia's largest energy customer has only increased since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine three and a half years ago. Determining the scope of this bilateral trade presents difficulties even as it increases. While the topic of Russia-PRC trade is regularly covered by the Russian media, after the start of the war, Russian government data on its foreign trade was partially classified, leaving analysts primarily with statistics from the PRC customs service. According to the PRC's General Administration of Customs, in 2024, the trade turnover between Russia and the PRC totaled \$244.81 billion, representing a 1.9 percent increase from 2023 ([RBC](#), January 13). According to PRC customs data, in 2024, the Russian Federation's exports to the PRC, which were primarily in the energy sector, remained practically unchanged from the previous year at \$129.32 billion. During the same period, the PRC's exports to Russia increased by 4.1 percent to \$115.49 billion ([RIA Novosti](#), January 13).

The positive balance of the Russian side in trade resulted in a \$13.83 billion surplus, 23.8 percent less compared to 2023 ([TASS](#), January 12).

According to the Central Bank of the Russian Federation (CBRF), in 2024, the PRC's share in Russia's exports was 31 percent, compared to 30 percent in 2023. In imports, the PRC's share was 39 percent, compared to 37 percent the previous year. At the end of 2024, more than a third of the Russian Federation's total trade turnover was generated by the PRC. For the PRC, Russia's share in trade is modest, accounting for 4–5 percent of total turnover ([Strategic Culture Fund](#), September 13). According to the CBRF, at the beginning of 2022, the volume of foreign direct investment (FDI) in the Russian economy was \$497.7 billion, which by mid-2025 had diminished to \$216 billion. This means that since the war began, FDI in Russia has more than halved, decreasing to 43 percent of its pre-war level, demonstrating the impact of Russia's war against Ukraine's economy. Following the imposition of sanctions against Russia, led by the United States and the European Union in February 2022, and the subsequent abrupt curtailment of trade with the West, Russia's initial trade losses were largely offset by increased trade with the PRC, India, and other friendly and neutral countries (see EDM, [November 13, 2024](#), [January 27](#), [April 28](#), September [8, 10](#); see [China Brief](#), July 18). This would diminish over time, however, as more sets of sanctions were imposed, increasing the importance of energy sales to the PRC as options dwindled.

The American Enterprise Institute's China Global Investment Tracker (GIT) estimates that the total value of PRC assets created to date through capital exports and construction in all countries worldwide has exceeded \$1.5 trillion ([American Enterprise Institute](#), July 22, 2024). A small amount of this was invested in Russia. According to data from the PRC's Ministry of Commerce, by the end of 2022, the PRC's accumulated foreign investment in Russia had reached \$9.9 billion, representing a mere 0.3 percent of the PRC's total foreign investment ([Vedomsti](#), July 29, 2024).

At the end of 2024, Russia was only fifth in the PRC's foreign trade turnover, after the United States, South Korea, Japan, and Vietnam ([Al Jazeera](#), September 3). In terms of the size of accumulated PRC investments, however, Russia is now second in the world after the United States. The PRC has accordingly become an increasingly essential prop of the Russian economy since the sanctions regime began (see [EDM](#), November 13, 2024). Neither Russia nor the PRC appears interested in disclosing the true scale of PRC investment in the Russian economy, especially as sanctions against Russia continue.

The bilateral camaraderie conceals an unsettling truth for Russian President Vladimir Putin's government. Russia now appears more dependent on the PRC than at any time in its history. In 2024, the PRC represented 34 percent of Russia's total trade, while Russia accounted for just 4 percent of the PRC's ([The Economist](#), May 12). Harsh Western sanctions have left Russia with fewer

customers for its raw materials, particularly energy exports, and reduced its options for essential imports (see EDM, [November 29, 2022](#), [October 18, 2024](#), [April 1](#)).

Further strengthening the PRC's role as a trading partner of necessity, earlier this month, the European Commission, under the 1996 Wassenaar Arrangement—signed by 42 nations including the United States and Russia—restricted EU exports of “dual-use” technology equipment that can have both civilian and military applications, including quantum computers, semiconductor-making machines, and integrated circuits. Even though the Wassenaar Arrangement includes Russia, which has previously blocked listing products it wants for its war, the decision marked the first time since the war began that the European Commission proceeded without first securing international consensus from agreement signatories ([European Commission](#), September 8).

The upcoming litmus test for future PRC purchases of Russian natural gas is the proposed \$50 billion, 1,700-mile “Power of Siberia-2” (PoS-2) pipeline, designed to transport 50 billion cubic meters (bcm) annually of Russian natural gas from the Iamal peninsula in western Siberia through Mongolia into the PRC's northern regions ([Kommersant](#), September 2).

On September 2, Gazprom Chairman Aleksei Miller announced that a trilateral meeting between Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping, Putin, and Mongolian President Ukhnaagiin Khurelsukh in Beijing reached an agreement on the construction of the PoS-2 gas pipeline. Miller told journalists, “now it will be the largest, largest and most capital-intensive project in the gas industry in the world” ([Interfax](#), September 2). True to the opaque nature of Russia's energy trade with the PRC, however, the day after Miller's announcement that a “legally binding memorandum” had been signed, the state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), a buyer of Gazprom's gas, remained silent about the agreement, while PRC state media also did not write anything about the memorandum ([The Moscow Times](#), September 3).

A potential cause of the PRC reticence to discuss the PoS-2 is that the natural gas price may remain a point of contention. According to Aleksei Gromov, Principal Director on Energy Studies at the Institute for Energy and Finance, the PRC earlier demanded that gas cost the same as in Russia, \$120–130 per thousand cubic meters (tcm), a severe fiscal haircut 3.2 times lower than current prices in Europe of \$390 per tcm ([Vedomsti](#), September 2). According to the Russian Ministry of Economic Development, Gazprom currently pumps gas to the PRC at \$247 per tcm, 36 percent cheaper than the price charged to European customers ([The Moscow Times](#), April 22). In a worst-case scenario, such severely discounted prices could ultimately make the project unprofitable for Russia.

The wild card for the Russian economy remains the U.S. President Donald Trump administration, which is currently intensifying its campaign against foreign purchasers of Russian energy exports, particularly the PRC, India, the European Union, and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members ([Euronews](#), September 24). Should the U.S. government's pressure campaign succeed in curtailing or ending these purchases, the PRC's withdrawal because of sanctions against Russia would have an immediate and catastrophic effect on the Russian economy.

Far more potential disruption to the Russian and PRC economies may now be imminent. On September 23, following a meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on the sidelines of the 80th UN General Assembly in New York, Trump announced a complete reversal of his previous policy toward Ukraine ([President of Ukraine](#), September 23). In a post on Truth Social after the meeting, Trump wrote that he thinks "Ukraine, with the support of the European Union, is in a position to fight and WIN all of Ukraine back in its original form." Furthermore, he called Russia a "paper tiger" and noted the effects the war has had on Russia's gas production. He finished the message by stating that the United States will continue to supply weapons to NATO, which NATO could then give to Ukraine ([Truth Social](#), September 23).

The PRC remains Russia's largest energy customer. Many obstacles, however, remain before the PoS-2 pipeline can impact future exports. While the implications of Trump's Truth Social Ukrainian pronouncement are currently murky, it contains the possibility of genuine sanctions imperiling Russian energy exports, an issue of major concern in both Russia and the PRC. Both countries are likely waiting to see if and when Washington might follow through.

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