

# EURASIA DIGEST

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## POLITICS & SOCIETY

### Only One Percent of Pupils in Russia Study in Non-Russian Languages

*Paul Goble*

November 11, 2025

#### Executive Summary:

- Only one percent of pupils in the Russian Federation are studying in a non-Russian language school, half as many as nine years ago, and far less than the share of Russian citizens whose primary language is not Russian.
- The decrease in schools teaching in non-Russian languages threatens the survival of minority languages and the cultural heritage of their nations. Russian President Vladimir Putin is pushing homogenization, but has sought to obscure it through the “folklore-ization” of these peoples.
- These policies may backfire if they change the meaning of being an ethnic Russian, angering Russian nationalists, or if they lead to the rise of Russian-speaking non-Russians better able to compete in the job market, who still face ethnic discrimination.



*(Source: Tatar Congress)*

Only one percent of pupils in the Russian Federation are studying in minority language schools. This number is significantly less than the share of Russians whose primary language is not Russian. Additionally, just 11 percent of students are studying a non-Russian native language as a separate subject ([Yesli Byt' Tochnym](#), November 6). As of 2010, approximately 14.3 percent of Russians considered a minority language their “native” language, and 20 percent of Russians identified as ethnically non-Russian ([Minority Rights Group](#), accessed November 11). The share of school-age children who are non-Russian may be even greater, given that fertility rates among non-Russians remain higher than those among ethnic Russians (see [EDM](#), October 31, 2024). In the case of more than three dozen nations, instruction in all kinds of subjects in their native languages has ended, with more likely to be eliminated from school programs in the future ([Vedomosti](#), September 15;

[Yesli Byt' Tochnym](#), November 6). Half as many students are studying in a language other than Russian compared to nine years ago. This decline is even more pronounced as a proportion since the total number of pupils in Russian schools has decreased in the past decade ([The Moscow Times](#), September 1).

These trends have been the direct result of Russian President Vladimir Putin's policies over the last decade, which have banned republics from requiring that all pupils on their territories study their titular languages and nominally gave parents the right to choose to have their children study in Russian rather than those languages. In reality, however, the policies put pressure on students to learn Russian rather than the titular language of their republics by requiring any school graduate who wants to attend university to pass tests in Russian. Additionally, many schools that had offered instruction in non-Russian languages closed, and there is no longer an incentive for replacing teachers who can teach in non-Russian languages when those who do retire ([Takie Dela](#), September 9).

These changes have not been popular among large swaths of non-Russians, who view them as a threat to their language and culture (see EDM, [November 5](#), [December 3](#), 2012; see [Commentaries](#), January 23, 2014). The number of non-Russian parents calling for their children to be given the chance to study their native languages, at least in separate classes for a few hours a week, has risen. Given that Moscow continues to reduce the number of hours allocated for minority language classes and largely confines them to the earliest grades, many non-Russian parents are unsatisfied. One or two hours of language instruction per week cannot compensate for the loss of instruction in all subjects in that language ([Yesli Byt' Tochnym](#), November 6).

The Kremlin is pursuing a policy that some Russian commentators have called the "folklore-ization" of ethnic minorities, using surface-level reforms to assuage continuing non-Russian resistance to its policies. Moscow has created national holidays and other activities that appear to boost the status of non-Russians but, in reality, further reduce them from self-standing nations to marginalized ethnic groups inside a culturally, linguistically, and politically Russian state ([The Moscow Times](#), November 5). Folklore-ization has placated some non-Russians, but has outraged others who see it as part of a drive to eliminate non-Russian nations from playing a key role in the administration of the state, quite possibly leading to the elimination of non-Russian republics as a political entity ([MariUver](#), April 24).

The Kremlin's reduction in non-Russian language instruction and the political power of non-ethnically Russian republics is not without risks for Moscow. The inclusion of an increasing number of non-Russians within the ethnic Russian nation angers some Russian nationalists who fear that this may lead to more intermarriage between Russians and non-Russians, a multiplication of Russian dialects, and even the assimilation of ethnic Russians by non-Russians, all phenomena that

are anathema to these Russians' identities (Window on Eurasia, [June 15](#), [October 7](#)). More worrisome for the Kremlin, Putin's policy of Russianizing education is sparking increased non-Russian protests. Some such protests have been successful, as in the recent case when Moscow was publicly forced to back down on its plans to stop classifying non-Russian tongues as "native languages" (Window on Eurasia, [June 15](#), [August 25](#)). Putin's Russianization and Russification policies may lead to the elimination of some nations and republics, as he hopes, but these policies could also spur the rise of more Russian speakers among ethnic minorities who will be able to compete with ethnic Russians for jobs and benefits. These non-Russians may become radicalized in their nationalism if and when they are blocked from fairly competing with ethnic-Russians for jobs. A non-Russian who is denied a position because they do not speak Russian fluently is one thing, but a non-Russian who speaks perfect Russian and then is denied it is something else entirely ([MariUver](#), November 8; [Idel Realii](#), November 6). As students of nationalism have long noted, the Irish did not become nationalists until they stopped speaking Gaelic, and British control of India was not threatened so much by Hindi-speaking peasants as by English-trained lawyers, such as Gandhi.

Putin shows no sign of letting up on his Russianization drive, increasingly insisting that Russian culture dominates. This relentless preference has alienated non-Russians while empowering some Russian nationalists ([Window on Eurasia](#), November 8). The continuing war against Ukraine has radicalized Russian nationalists and some non-Russians who have been disproportionately affected by the war, setting the stage for more conflicts between Russian nationalists and the non-Russian nations ([Window on Eurasia](#), May 22, 2023). Most non-Russians had their children in Russian-language schools long before Putin began his current push. This means that those who did not are the most radically committed to the survival of their national languages and thus the most likely to react in opposition to Moscow ([Yesli Byt' Tochnym](#), November 6). Putin's language reforms in the schools are likely to have a larger and more fateful set of consequences than he intends, as similar impositions of the language of empire have had throughout history.

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

## Tbilisi Protesters Persist Amid Arrests and Fines

*Khatia Shamanauri*

November 11, 2025

### Executive Summary:

- Amid ongoing protests in Tbilisi, the ruling Georgian Dream party has passed a legislative package under which protesters may face jail time for what the government describes as blocking roads or wearing face masks.
- In recent weeks, the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs has detained dozens of people—including journalists, civil rights advocates, activists, and protesters—for participating in the demonstrations.
- Demonstrators say they remain determined despite these repressive measures and will continue to protest against the government's crackdown.



*(Source: Parliament of Georgia)*

The ruling Georgian Dream party has intensified its targeting of protesters as demonstrations in Tbilisi persist after Georgia's October 4 municipal elections (see [EDM](#), October 6). Georgian Dream recently adopted a bill under which protesters can now face up to 15 days in jail for wearing a mask, carrying tear gas, or standing in the middle of the road during demonstrations ([OC media](#), October 16; see [EDM](#), October 22). In just the past few weeks, the police in Tbilisi arrested dozens of protesters, and between October 27 and 31 alone, 29 people were detained ([Radio Tavisupleba](#), November 3). Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have reported multiple violations of detainees' rights throughout the process ([Netgazeti](#), October 23). Despite the ongoing crackdown, daily protests continue on Rustaveli Avenue in the center of Tbilisi.

On October 20, Vakho Sanaia, a news anchor and journalist at TV Formula, was set to present the main developments of the day during an 8 p.m. broadcast. That night, however, his colleague had to lead the news program without him. The previous day, a Tbilisi court had sentenced Sanaia to six days in custody for allegedly blocking Rustaveli Avenue on October 18 ([Radio Tavisupleba](#), October 20).

A few days before Sanaia's detention, Georgian Dream adopted a bill further restricting freedom of expression. Under the new law, judges are no longer allowed to impose fines on protesters. Instead, demonstrators are to be sent directly to jail for up to 60 days if they are found carrying

firearms, flammable materials, cold weapons, or pyrotechnics at a protest, or if they refuse police orders to disperse ([OC media](#), October 16). Additionally, protesters may face up to 15 days in jail for wearing a mask, possessing tear gas, or what the government describes as blocking a road. First-time participants can face up to 15 days of administrative detention—a measure previously used as an alternative to fines. Continued participation in protests is treated as a criminal matter, punishable by up to one year in prison, while subsequent offenses can result in up to two years behind bars ([OC media](#), October 16).

Sanaia recalls attending the October 18 protest in front of the parliament building, where demonstrations have been ongoing for more than 340 days. “When I arrived, it was already blocked, but I joined others and stood there with them. The Ministry of Internal Affairs said the police had ordered us to move off the road—but that never happened,” he recalls. “This was my right to express myself. It wasn’t an artificial blockade. For me, this is the most natural process. This is our freedom of expression.” The next day, Sanaia was detained in front of his seven-year-old daughter and taken first to a police station and then to court, where Judge Manuchar Tatsua sentenced him to six days in jail. “I couldn’t call my lawyer until I got to court. The entire process was a complete formality. I even told the judge to deliver the verdict quickly—the court doesn’t have that much independence; everything was decided in advance,” he noted (Author’s interview, October 31).

Since the law was adopted in mid-October, dozens of protesters have been detained for allegedly blocking roads and wearing face masks. NGOs report that after police or the security service detains a protester and before transferring them to either court or temporary detention facilities, the Ministry of Internal Affairs does not provide information about the detainees’ whereabouts to lawyers or family members. In most cases, lawyers cannot meet their clients before the court hearing. Court hearings are then expedited, and detainees receive case materials only during the session ([Netgazeti](#), October 23).

Saba Khomeriki, a computer engineer and protest participant, was recently detained under the new law. Previously, he had received multiple penalties for participating in protests, totaling 85,000 GEL (approximately \$31,430), and his bank accounts had been frozen. He argues that the penalties are disproportionate, unconstitutional, and illegitimate, and he refuses to pay (Author’s interview, November 1).

On October 19, Saba was detained again and sentenced to eight days in jail ([TV Pirveli](#), October 19). He recalls that protesters blocked the road twice that day. The first time, at 8 p.m., police asked protesters to clear the road, and everyone complied. Later, at around 10 p.m., the crowd grew and the road was blocked again. Police were present but did not order people to disperse. Saba said:

This is not only a mechanism of intimidation, but also of blackmail. When I asked the Ministry of Internal Affairs representative in court, if, for example, at 8 p.m., there are 5,000 people, enough to block the road, and by 10 p.m. only 2,000 remain, do I get fined at 10 p.m.? The Ministry of Internal Affairs representative was unable to



answer. Do I have to count every person every five minutes? (Author's interview, November 1).

Saba also says his rights were violated on multiple occasions:

I may not know every detail of legal procedure, but I know one thing clearly—a detainee must be able to contact a lawyer before going to court. When I was taken to the police station and then directly to court, I had no chance to call a family member or a lawyer. Another detainee's lawyer took up my case on the spot. There was no opportunity for me to personally choose a lawyer (Author's interview, November 1).

The introduction of this restrictive legislation marks the latest escalation in a series of measures against protesters, despite statements by senior officials downplaying the significance of the daily anti-government demonstrations (see [EDM](#), October 29). On October 6, Georgian Dream Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze stated that demonstrators who gather in front of the Parliament building in Tbilisi and block the road "will face consequences." He described some protesters as "agents" and others as "sincere fools" ([Radio Tavisupleba](#), October 6).

According to protesters, these threats have not had the intended effect. Sanaia says the government's measures have failed in deterring the demonstrators. "Everyone who comes out of prison is more motivated—myself included," he says. "The first question people ask in the cells is always: What's happening outside? Is there a protest on Rustaveli? Has the road been blocked? It gives people additional motivation" (Author's interview, October 31).

Saba shares the same determination. "I fundamentally believe that the law exists to arrest as many people as possible. Their motivation is twofold: to arrest people and to blackmail them. But despite that, my determination has only grown," he says. (Author's interview, November 1).

Since November 28, 2024, demonstrators have gathered daily in front of the Parliament building in Tbilisi, demanding new elections and the release of all protesters detained on criminal charges by Georgian Dream. Protesters have long been targeted by the government, which has, over time, banned laser pointers and pyrotechnics, prohibited face coverings, increased fines for road blockades, and introduced administrative and criminal detention measures. Despite these escalations, demonstrations will continue on the main avenue in Tbilisi.

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

## Russian National Unity Day Extolls the Cossacks

Richard Arnold

November 13, 2025

### Executive Summary:

- Russian National Unity Day, celebrated on November 4, has undergone significant ideational changes since its revival in 2005.
- Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Kremlin has elevated its own loyal nationalist group, the Russian Cossacks, positioning them as a "faithful support of Russia" and a "human shield of the Orthodox faith."
- Russian National Unity now promotes a new state ideology, with paramilitary Cossacks celebrated by religious, political, and cultural leaders as a "spiritual *spetsnaz*" symbolizing a militaristic, holy patriotism rallied around Russian President Vladimir Putin.



(Source: Stavropol Center of Culture)

November 4 marked the 20th anniversary of Russian National Unity Day, and the manner in which the government celebrated it speaks volumes about the country's future ([Lenta.ru](https://lenta.ru), November 4). The holiday is close to the symbolic date of the Bolshevik Revolution, but has been used by the current government to promote a different kind of ideology. The religious significance of the holiday, its coincidence with the 2018 founding of the all-Russian national Cossack movement, as well as the regime sending specific messages to Cossacks, are all consistent with Russian political scientist Sergei Karaganov's view of Russians as a "God-bearing people" with "Russia as the new Israel" ([Higher School of Economics](https://www.higher-school-of-economics.com), June 2025). The combined religious and national significance of the holiday was acknowledged by the church this year, which published an article reporting on Patriarch Kirill's celebration of the "divine liturgy" at a Kremlin cathedral ([Russian Orthodox Church](https://www.russian-orthodox-church.ru), November 4). This framing holiday is another example of Moscow's mythologization of cultural symbols such as the Cossacks to promote its militaristic goals (see EDM, [September 9, 2014, January 30, July 16](https://www.edm.com)).

The ostensible purpose of the holiday's founding was to celebrate the anniversary of the liberation of Moscow by Dmitry Pozharsky and Kuzma Minin in 1612, marking the revival of a practice



established by Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich in 1649, when he declared November 4 a church holiday ([Lenta.ru](https://lenta.ru/2017/11/04/), November 4). The probable cause for its modern resurgence, however, was the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, which prompted the Kremlin to sponsor various “patriotic” movements, such as the infamous youth group Nashi ([openDemocracy](https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/2007/08/07/), August 30, 2007). Over time, Russian National Unity Day was commandeered by the right-wing opposition of skinheads, liberals, oppositionists, and neo-Nazis who tried to subvert the holiday into a protest against Russian President Vladimir Putin through the so-called “Russian March,” before the marches were finally repressed just before the pandemic (see EDM, [November 1](https://www.edm.org/2013/11/01/), 2013; [November 9](https://www.edm.org/2015/11/09/), 2015; [November 6](https://www.edm.org/2017/11/06/), 2017; [November 24](https://www.edm.org/2020/11/24/), 2020; [Gazeta.ru](https://www.gazeta.ru/2017/11/04/), November 4). With its leaders imprisoned or in exile, the chances of a renewed right-wing attempt to co-opt the holiday are minimal. There have been no significant attempts by the nationalist opposition to do so since the war began.

These chances are further diminished by the Kremlin’s co-optation of its own tame nationalist movement, the Russian Cossacks, who combine hostility to foreigners with loyalty to the regime. In recognition of this, Patriarch Kirill of Stavropol and Nevinnomyssk sent an open letter to the Ataman of the all-Russian Cossack society, Vitaly Kuznetsov, on the “day of the Kazan icon of the Mother of God, the day of national unity, and the day of the founding of the all-Russian Cossack society.” In the letter, he described the Cossacks as having “always been a faithful support of Russia, a human shield of the Orthodox faith” ([Synodal Committee of the Russian Orthodox Church for Cooperation with the Cossacks](https://www.synodal.ru/2017/11/04/), November 4). The All-Russian Cossack Society was established in 2018 and, in hindsight, telegraphed preparations for a broader conflict in Eurasia by preparing children for the coming sacrifices and struggles that would be required (see EDM, [October 17, 2022](https://www.edm.org/2022/10/17/), [February 27, 2024](https://www.edm.org/2024/02/27/), [October 30](https://www.edm.org/2024/10/30/)).

Articles on the All-Russian Cossack Society’s website further recognize the centrality of the Cossacks to Russian National Unity Day. One singer from the male-voice choir Russian Format described the role the Cossacks play in modern Russia by citing a song, which says, “Where there is a Cossack, there is truth and God,” continuing, “Where there are Cossacks, there is a real Russian spirit, there are real Russian soldiers. There is truth, there is strength, there is all our Russia.” Similarly, actor Ivan Okhlobystin referred to the Soviet era, saying, “Even when the Cossacks were repressed for decades, they still maintained their culture ... And now how they show themselves at the front!” Finally, the lead singer of the music group “Agatha Christie,” Vadim Samoilov, referred to the Cossacks as “the military and spiritual *spetsnaz* of Russia” ([Vsko](https://www.vsko.ru/2017/11/04/), November 4). Other interview subjects expressed similar sentiments, including the director of the Russian State Academic Theater and member of the Presidential Council on Cossack Affairs, Nadezhda Babkina, who said, “Cossacks are absolutely spiritually free people ... First off, they are believers ... today they help people rally together—and this is the most powerful force” ([Vsko](https://www.vsko.ru/2017/11/04/), November 4). As

avatars of the Kremlin's new ideology, the Cossacks play an important role in the state's promotion of Russian militarism.

For his part, Kuznetsov wrote an open letter congratulating the Cossacks on Russian National Unity Day. In it, he claimed that "the unity of the Russian Cossacks is of particular importance on this day, from Kaliningrad to the Far East." Going on to describe the Cossacks as an "indestructible brotherhood," he extolled the virtues of the Cossacks as epitomizing many of the values which the new ideology claims to celebrate—resilience, steadfastness, and holy patriotism ([VsKO](#), November 4). Underlining their proximity to the power structures, a letter from the presidential plenipotentiary to the North-West Caucasus Federal District, Yuri Chaika, also congratulates the Cossacks on the occasion, claiming:

Four centuries ago, thanks to cohesion and sincere deep love of the Motherland, which has not faded, our ancestors did not allow the state to lost its sovereignty... today, having once more rallied around President Putin we have once again proved to the world that Russia's strength lies in the unity of its multi-ethnic people, respect for the common past, and desire to serve the Fatherland" ([VsKO](#), November 4d).

Cossacks, in other words, symbolize Russia's positive attributes.

As the new Russian ideology continues to gain ground, sacralized times such as Russian National Day construct new roles for paramilitary groups such as the Cossacks (see EDM, October [14](#), [30](#)). The Kremlin's attempt to co-opt authentic Cossack traditions and supplement them with fabricated ones is further evident in the scant attention paid to the ancestral Cossack holiday of Pokrova on October 14, when only a single article was published ([VsKO](#), October 14). This is yet another reminder of how important the Kremlin's version of the Cossacks is becoming to the regime.

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

## FOREIGN POLICY & INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

### Talks On Peace Deal for War Against Ukraine Can Still Rebound

*Pavel K. Baev*

November 11, 2025

#### Executive Summary:

- The failed attempt to organize a summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and U.S. President Donald Trump in Budapest deepened tensions over the war against Ukraine, prompting renewed Russian nuclear posturing and strategic unease.
- Putin's reliance on exaggerated battlefield "successes" and nuclear brinkmanship reveals his effort to project strength amid domestic stagnation and waning military momentum.
- Mounting economic decline, elite discontent, and Western sanctions are pressuring Putin toward potential ceasefire flexibility, but his fear of appearing weak may limit genuine compromise despite the possible appeal of renewed negotiations.



(Source: Getty Images / Andrew Harnik)

The fallout from the failed Russian plan to organize a meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and U.S. President Donald Trump in Budapest was so significant that any prospect of bringing the war against Ukraine to an end any time soon appeared to disappear. Trump's statement that a follow-up summit would be a "waste of time" seemingly negated the "Anchorage Impulse," to which Putin had referred up to mid-October, implying that Trump acknowledged at the Alaska summit the Russian interpretation of "root causes" of the war ([Nezavisimaya gazeta](#), October 10; [TASS](#), October 22). Putin subsequently resorted to nuclear posturing, a move he had uncharacteristically abstained from for most of the first year of Trump's presidency ([Meduza](#), October 30; see [EDM](#), November 3). Some new currents in the political atmosphere have, nevertheless, rehabilitated resilient hopes for a new round of results-oriented talks.

Nuclear brinksmanship has not delivered the results that Putin expected. Trump's vague order to resume nuclear testing immediately, on par with other great powers, has left Russian experts puzzled and worried ([RIAC](#), October 31; [TopWar.ru](#), November 6). Putin convened an emergency meeting of his Security Council on November 5, which, contrary to usual protocol, was open to the media. In the orchestrated debate on the proposal for preparing the Novaya Zemlya test site for underground nuclear explosions, the predictably hawkish voices advocated instead for a wait-and-see approach ([Kommersant](#), November 5). The Russian autocrat can still claim to have gained a new position of strength and deterred the U.S. attempt to put pressure on Moscow ([Novaya Gazeta Europe](#), November 5). Russian-style nuclear deterrence is not exactly a "mind game" with calculated moves, but rather a vanity fair for demonstrating hugely expensive weapon systems of dubious military value ([Meduza](#), November 5).

Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov reported perceived newly-gained advantage on the Donbas battlefields to Putin in the same meeting where he described the successful test of the Burevestnik nuclear-propelled cruise missile ([Kommersant](#), October 26). His presentation of two large-scale encirclements of 31 Ukrainian battalions was a figment of strategic imagination, and even the maps of combat operations published in the Russian mainstream media show nothing resembling that report ([Kommersant](#), November 7). The situation around the twin cities of Pokrovsk and Myrnohrad, however, is very difficult for the Ukrainian forces, and the relentless Russian attacks may compel them to retreat to the next belt of trenches ([Re: Russia](#), November 7). A military rationale for such a withdrawal has been apparent for at least a few weeks, but the stubborn defense that has inflicted tens of thousands of casualties on the Russian storm troops has also acquired great symbolic importance ([Novaya Gazeta Europe](#), November 6). The Ukrainian command can prioritize strategic calculations, but Putin can present the capture of a few dozen square miles of smoldering ruins as a great victory ([Radio Svoboda](#), November 7).

The combination of imagined nuclear advantages and inflated gains in protracted battles may make it possible for Putin to show flexibility in renewed bargaining on a peace deal ([RBC](#), November 7). Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has seemingly been made to disappear, perhaps as a signal of a softening of Russia's rigid stance, for which he was not actually responsible ([Vzglyad](#), November 7). A significant incentive for resuming talks with the United States is the positive outcome of the meeting between Trump and President Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China, where trade matters were at the top of the agenda. Ukraine, however, was also discussed ([RIAC](#), November 5). The impression that the matter of crucial importance for Russia is discussed behind the back of its ruler has been aggravated by Trump's invitation to the White House of five leaders of Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—and their acknowledgement of his key role in making a peace deal ([Carnegie Politika](#), November 7).

All these parties are aware of the steady degradation of the Russian economy. Putin remains in denial, despite the Russian Central Bank's revised forecast predicting zero growth ([The Moscow Times](#), November 7). The official macroeconomic data is carefully manipulated, but the sustained decline in the volume of goods transported by railroads proves the real depth of the recession ([The Insider](#), November 5). New U.S. sanctions on Russian oil exports target the most vulnerable economic sector, as budget revenues from the oil and gas industry shrank by 26.7 percent in October compared to the same month in 2024 ([Neftegaz.ru](#), November 6).

The Russian war machine can only be sustained by increased taxation of other businesses and selective confiscation of private savings ([Radio Svoboda](#), November 5). Business elites struggle to preserve their fortunes, but their private survival strategies clash with the state's demand for more income and are squeezed by the sanctions regime ([Carnegie Politika](#), November 6). Oil giant Lukoil sought to circumvent the latest U.S. ban by selling its international assets to the Swiss trader Gunvor, described by the U.S. Treasury Department as "the Kremlin's puppet," resulting in a no-deal outcome ([Forbes.ru](#), November 7). Both government officials and business leaders recognize that the factors driving the economy down are intensifying, but public opinion continues to expect improvements in the coming months ([Levada Center](#), October 30).

Putin cannot completely depart to the parallel reality of military victories, economic stability, and mass adulation, and so proceeds with elite reshuffles and repression of discontent. His risk calculus related to accepting a ceasefire deal was shaped by the fear of showing weakness, which would be detrimental to the long-cultivated image of a strong leader. The recent demonstrations of strength may alleviate this fear and grant him some time-limited space for accepting compromises and freezing the hostilities. This flexibility could be instantly popular with most elites and the majority of Russians, but to prevent questions about the costs and purposes of the war from eroding this popularity, he needs to deliver the economic benefits of his concessions. The lifting of sanctions is likely to be Moscow's key demand in a potential new round of talks, and the partners in the Western coalition will have to weigh the difficult choice of rewarding Putin's aggression.

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

## Putin and Aliyev Meet in Dushanbe

*Yunis Gurbanov*

November 12, 2025

### Executive Summary:

- The October 10 meeting between Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Russian President Vladimir Putin marked a cautious re-engagement following a period of tension in Azerbaijan–Russia relations.
- Baku reaffirmed its strategy of pragmatic, balanced diplomacy—engaging Moscow without compromising independence, reflecting growing confidence and the pursuit of multivector diplomacy centered on autonomy and practical cooperation.
- The meeting signaled continuity in Azerbaijan’s foreign policy diversification through partnerships with Türkiye, the European Union, and the United States rather than a strategic realignment toward Moscow.



*(Source: President of Azerbaijan)*

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Russian President Vladimir Putin met on October 10 in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, amid a deep crisis in bilateral relations between their two countries ([President of Azerbaijan](#), October 10). The previous year has seen an avalanche of tensions in the diplomatic, informational, and political spheres that tested what had long been perceived as a pragmatic and effective relationship (see EDM, [May 20](#), [July 7](#), [September 9](#); [Azemedia](#), August 1). The Dushanbe summit, however, revealed a controlled readjustment, not a reset. It was an indicator of pragmatic moderation rather than a fresh partnership ([Azernews](#), October 15). Baku reaffirmed the guiding principle of its foreign policy—engagement without subordination—by reestablishing contacts with Moscow without giving up independence.

The roots of the rift date back to the end of 2024, when a Russian missile defense system shot down an Azerbaijani civilian commercial aircraft near the Russian border, resulting in the plane crashing in Aktau, Kazakhstan (see [EDM](#), January 15; [Caspiannews](#), August 9). The incident shocked Azerbaijani society and triggered a tidal wave of diplomatic protests. Baku suspended several joint projects and refrained from top-level visits for several months. According to most commentators, Azerbaijan–Russia relations have reached an all-time low since the beginning of the 1990s ([Azemedia](#), July 26). Putin took responsibility on Russia’s behalf for the shoot down and professed



regret ([Meduza](#), October 9). Aliyev publicly took up Putin's acknowledgment of error. The episode demonstrated Baku's ability to extract diplomatic advantage from challenging circumstances, a capacity that is increasingly central to its geopolitical strategy ([Azertag](#), October 10).

The October Dushanbe meeting was less about sensational breakthroughs than about tone and timing. Azerbaijani media reported the meeting as "constructive." The meeting emphasized trade, transportation links, and local stability, topics that diplomatically avoided more sensitive political issues, such as Russian media interference or the treatment of Azerbaijanis in Russia ([Azernews](#), October 15). The symbolism was deliberate. Baku signaled openness to dialogue, but only on its terms, by downplaying contentious topics and stressing practical cooperation ([Azerbaijan Today](#), October 11).

The Dushanbe summit brought Azerbaijan's general strategy of multivector diplomacy into the limelight—a balance between competing centers of power with the greatest possible freedom of action ([Azemedia](#), May 2). Baku will need to strike a balance between caution, negotiation, and cautious cooperation in response to Moscow's weight in the region ([Topchubashov Center](#), August 23). While Azerbaijan has maintained good relations with Russia, working to strengthen energy and security cooperation with Türkiye, fostering partnerships with the European Union, and maintaining robust dialogue with the United States ([Topchubashov Center](#), April 2022; [AIR Center](#), July 11, 2024). The Dushanbe meeting precisely aligns with this trajectory of re-engagement with Russia to maintain peace, albeit without any commitment or ideological connotations ([Caspianpost](#), October 10).

Azerbaijan reaffirmed its sovereignty in the relationship by focusing on economic issues instead of defense or integration. Baku will negotiate, exchange, and coordinate, but does not appear to be willing to be involved in any military bloc at this juncture ([Bakuws](#), October 11). This strategy reflects Azerbaijan's growing confidence in the region. Azerbaijan's position among regional nations and its role on the Middle Corridor transport corridor provide Azerbaijan with negotiating leverage vis-à-vis Moscow. The meeting in Dushanbe demonstrated that Baku could negotiate pragmatically with Russia without losing initiative ([Caliber.az](#), September 26).

For Russia, the Dushanbe meeting was for other reasons. Under pressure from sanctions and overextension in Ukraine, Moscow had to demonstrate that it was still a player in the South Caucasus. Attracting Azerbaijan, one of the few post-Soviet nations to retain its balance, was a necessary diplomatic step ([Caspianpost](#), October 10). Russia, however, came with weak arms. Its economic power to offer incentives has weakened, and security dependence, its traditional shield, has diminished since the end of the Second Karabakh War and the subsequent Russian pullout of peacekeepers from the region in May 2024 ([BBC](#), October 9).

The Dushanbe summit was more symbolism than substance. No new strategic partnerships were signed, nor were any collaborative projects announced. Even symbolism, however, is better than nothing. For Moscow, it confirmed that dialogue remains an option. For Baku, it reaffirmed its position as a sovereign player able to act without needing to compromise ([Azertag](#), October 13).

Pragmatic diplomacy focused on ensuring stability is also a risk. Presenting Dushanbe as a technical, rather than a political, meeting reduces the risk. Baku maintained the session within the context of functional cooperation, rather than through geopolitical identification ([TRT Russian](#), October 16). At the same time, Azerbaijan is also strengthening its cooperation with Türkiye under the Shusha Declaration, with North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies through peacekeeping and training efforts, and with the European Union through diversification of energy initiatives such as the Southern Gas Corridor ([President of Azerbaijan](#), June 16, 2021; [Caspiannews](#), April 8). Azerbaijan's foreign policy is not drifting toward Moscow, but rather strengthening difficult relationships ([AIR Center](#), July 11, 2024).

For Moscow, this limited re-engagement is better than exclusion. For Baku, it is an insurance policy, keeping doors open while maintaining flexibility in line. There remain, however, lasting uncertainties. Russia's capacity to influence processes in the South Caucasus with political, media, or economic instruments remains high. Azerbaijan will have to reconcile with prudence ([Geopolitical Monitor](#), August 19). Dushanbe was a pause, not a pivot. It reopened communication after a year of separation, but did nothing to change the bedrock of the relationship. Baku remains wary of Moscow's reliability, and Moscow is aware that its influence in the region has diminished. The summit reaffirmed that Azerbaijan's foreign policy rests on pragmatism, flexibility, and sovereignty ([Azemedia](#), August 1).

Azerbaijan's policy may serve as an example for Eurasian governments amid the region's shifting geopolitics ([Caliber.az](#), October 15). Facing great powers whose desire to lead often exceeds their ability, small and medium-sized states increasingly pursue "strategic equilibrium," an approach founded on autonomy, wise engagement, and continuous adaptation ([Azerbaijan.az](#), October 9). The meeting demonstrated that distance is not incompatible with diplomacy, and that a measured approach can accomplish more than a zealous breakdown, as evidenced by the meeting with Putin in Dushanbe. In a world where alignment has a tacit cost, pragmatism remains Azerbaijan's best bet for success ([Azernews](#), October 15).

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# INFLUENCE OPERATIONS

## Kremlin Builds Patronage Economy in Ukraine's Occupied Territories

Maksym Beznosiuk

November 12, 2025

### Executive Summary:

- The Kremlin has turned reconstruction activities in the occupied territories of Ukraine into a patronage system that enriches federal elites and loyal local governors.
- Deputy Prime Minister Marat Khusnullin oversees a vast federal program that channels millions of dollars via opaque procurement and "patron-region" partnerships.
- State corporations, such as Rostec, and companies tied to the Kremlin's circle benefit greatly from seized assets and inflated contracts, while actual reconstruction remains slow and symbolic.



(Source: Government of Russia)

In October, the Russian government quietly announced plans to cut reconstruction spending in the occupied territories of Ukraine by 22 percent due to falling oil and gas revenues ([The Moscow Times](#), October 1). At the same time, Russian officials unveiled several new showcase projects. They reopened facilities in Mariupol and Melitopol, demonstrating that reconstruction has become a tool of political theater and elite enrichment rather than genuine efforts at recovery ([Komsomolskaya Pravda](#), October 30; [Krym.Realii](#), November 2). The Russian government seeks to cement annexation through a patronage system in the occupied territories while pursuing personal enrichment. This approach prioritizes political visibility and control over genuine reconstruction that could improve the lives of residents of the occupied regions.

Top Russian officials have increased their visits to the occupied regions over the past year. Deputy Prime Minister Marat Khusnullin, the Kremlin's chief curator for a state program for the restoration and socio-economic development of new regions through 2030, frequently travels to the occupied areas to inaugurate new housing blocks and inspect funded projects (Government of Russia, [December 22, 2023](#), [November 5](#)).

First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration Sergei Kiriyenko and Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Chernyshenko have likewise appeared in televised ceremonies to inaugurate university and school facilities and sports centers erected by occupation authorities ([Government of Russia](#), April 30; [Gazeta.ru](#), September 4; [TASS](#), November 1). Russian President Vladimir Putin sometimes joins remotely to open healthcare, social, and residential facilities ([Dan-News](#), June 10). These visits often coincide with the announcement of new subsidies to support the narrative of the successful integration of occupied regions.

The Kremlin's state program for the restoration and socio-economic development of annexed regions, launched in December 2023, aims to ensure that social and economic standards in these regions align with those in Russia by 2030 ([Government of Russia](#), December 22, 2023).

Since its launch, it has been gradually institutionalizing a multi-tier patronage network comprising 41 federal bodies and more than 80 regional administrations. These institutions are engaged in the reconstruction and integration of the occupied territories into Russia's economic and legal space. Specifically, the Russian Ministries of Construction, Energy, Transport, and Housing lead sectoral programs, while state-controlled companies such as Russian Railways, Rosseti, and Rostec are responsible for executing strategic projects via long-term contracts ([TASS](#), September 13). Since 2023, Russian authorities have also paired Russian regions and cities with occupied territories, such as Tatarstan with Luhansk, Chechnya with Mariupol, and the Moscow oblast with Donetsk, to allow decentralized financing and ensure political co-branding of reconstruction achievements ([Fedpress](#), May 18, 2022; [Tatar-inform](#), October 21; [Komsomolskaya Pravda](#), October 28).

The Russian government channels funding to regional budgets via direct federal subsidies. At the same time, the Single Customer in the Construction Sphere (PPK), a public-law company, handles capital construction allocations, which are later approved by the Russian Ministry of Construction ([PPK-EZ](#), November 5). The federal autonomous organization "RosKapStroy" then oversees implementation and verifies spending ([Roskapstroy](#), November 5).

The Kremlin allocated 411 billion rubles (about \$5.2 billion) in 2023 and 303 billion rubles (about \$3.8 billion) in 2024 for reconstruction, while pledging nearly 940 billion rubles (about \$11.8 billion) for 2025–2027 ([RBC](#), April 21, 2023; [Forbes.ru](#), January 22, 2024; [TASS](#), September 13). Independent assessments, however, indicate a slow pace of reconstruction. For instance, at the current pace, rebuilding Mariupol alone would take almost 18 years, underscoring the symbolic nature of the campaign ([Meduza](#), April 30).

The Kremlin has deeply embedded federal officials in the occupied governance structure. About 90 percent of senior appointees in regional administrations are Russian citizens, mostly drawn from

the security services or the Russian Presidential Administration's domestic policy bloc ([Radio Svoboda](#), September 29, 2022). Graduates of Kiriienko's "Leaders of Russia" and "School of Governors" programs hold key positions in the occupied regions, ensuring the Presidential Administration's direct oversight ([Proekt.media](#), September 29, 2022). Additionally, local governors serve as public figureheads and administrative cover, with real authority residing with Kremlin-appointed federal curators.

Reconstruction in the occupied territories is carried out under simplified, non-transparent procurement rules that fail to ensure competition and accountability. The Kremlin's federal oversight ensures that only trusted local and federal players receive contracts and federal transfers, forming a network of Kremlin-appointed curators and favored contractors that dominate reconstruction efforts. Khusnullin oversees the majority of the reconstruction funding allocated from the federal budget, with his companies receiving direct transfers from Moscow and selecting subcontractors to implement projects in cities such as Mariupol ([24TV](#), May 2, 2024).

Most large-scale reconstruction contracts go to corporations linked to senior officials and oligarchs close to the Kremlin. For instance, in 2024, Rostec, a state-owned corporation chaired by Sergey Chemezov, a longtime associate of Putin, took over industrial assets from the occupied territories ([TASS](#), July 10, 2017; [Senat.inform](#), October 23, 2024). The Stakhanov Railway Car Building Plant and the Luhansk Aircraft Repair Plant were re-registered as subsidiaries of Rostec in 2024 ([Senat.inform](#), October 23, 2024). These takeovers grant Rostec privileged access to federal funding and strengthen the Kremlin's industrial presence across the annexed regions.

Moscow's decrees on "abandoned property" and "federal integration" legalize the transfer of confiscated housing and businesses to Russian citizens or state enterprises. In October, the Russian government formally legalized such confiscations, allowing local proxies to redistribute property to imported teachers, police, and bureaucrats ([RBC](#), October 23). Overall, 40,000 companies have been re-registered under Russian law, many functioning as mirror entities under the control of Russian directors ([Youcontrol](#), December 16, 2024). This process enables businessmen from Moscow, Rostov, Chechnya, and Crimea to take over Ukrainian industries at minimal cost while gaining access to subsidies and tax incentives under newly established special economic zones ([Re-Russia](#), March 28, 2023).

The governors of the occupied territories—Leonid Pasechnik (Luhansk People's Republic), Denis Pushilin (Donetsk People's Republic), Vladimir Saldo (Kherson oblast), and Yevgeny Balitsky (Zaporizhzhia oblast)—act as intermediaries in a vertical chain supervised by Kiriienko and Khusnullin, with RosKapStroy serving as the main contractor ([Dan-news](#), February 14, 2023). These governors oversee the local distribution of federal funding and receive minor shares in return, with the most significant profits flowing back to the Kremlin's elite networks ([Freedom](#), March 5, 2023).

The Kremlin's reconstruction system delivers low-quality results. For instance, the Mariupol Drama Theatre began to fall apart within months after its supposed modernization ([RBC-Ukraine](#), August 14, 2024; [Radio Svoboda](#), July 10). Corruption cases, including the 2024 arrest of Deputy Defense Minister Timur Ivanov for embezzling funds allocated to Mariupol's restoration, demonstrate how reconstruction funding has become a tool of enrichment and political loyalty within the Kremlin's patronage structure ([24TV](#), May 2, 2024). Ivanov's associates earned over 17 billion rubles (about \$209 million) from construction contracts in Mariupol alone. At the same time, affiliated firms financed his family's personal expenses ([Novaya Gazeta](#), April 25, 2024). It is not surprising that, following Ivanov's removal, Khusnullin's network efficiently took over construction projects, eliminating any competition and focusing profits within a narrow group of loyal contractors ([RBC-Ukraine](#), August 14, 2024).

By transforming reconstruction into a mechanism of dependency and elite enrichment, the Kremlin is embedding occupied territories within Russia's fiscal and administrative system at the expense of the territories themselves. The Kremlin's continued control over the occupied territories is making any future efforts at reintegrating these territories with Ukraine politically and economically unfeasible.

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## ENERGY & ECONOMICS

### Uzbekistan May Benefit From Herat to Mazar-i-Sharif Railway Project

*Nargiza Umarova*

November 12, 2025

#### Executive Summary:

- Afghanistan, Iran, and Türkiye agreed on October 22 to jointly construct a railway between Afghanistan's cities of Herat and Mazar-i-Sharif as a part of the Five Nations Railway Corridor (FNRC).
- The development of the FNRC—spanning the People's Republic of China (PRC), Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Iran—will greatly benefit Tehran and Kabul as they increasingly facilitate trade to the PRC and seek to diversify their eastern trade routes.
- The Herat–Mazar-i-Sharif line may alter Uzbekistan's transit role, offering it new access to Iran's ports but also risking loss of cargo traffic to Tajikistan and Iran if Tashkent does become involved in the FNRC.



*(Source: Pajhwok Afghan News)*

Afghanistan, Iran, and Türkiye have agreed to jointly construct a railway between Afghanistan's Herat and Mazar-i-Sharif ([Tolo News](#), October 24). Representatives from the three countries reached the agreement on October 22 at the Regional Assembly of the International Union of Railways in Istanbul. Each country will contribute financial, technical, and human resources to the project. A \$10 million technical and economic feasibility study is scheduled for completion by March 2026, with cargo trials to follow a year later ([South Asian Desk](#), October 25).

The extension of railway lines along Afghanistan's northern provinces positions it as a key transit hub in East–West connectivity through Eurasia. The October 22 agreement marks another milestone in the implementation of the Five Nations Railway Corridor (FNRC) concept, which gained momentum in the early 2000s (see [EDM](#), December 15, 2020). The 2,100-kilometer (1,205-mile)

route features a single 1,435 millimeter standard gauge and spans the borders of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Iran, with additional access to Türkiye and the European Union. The FNRC is designed to provide the shortest land connection between East Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, posing serious competition to transit routes from the PRC to the European Union via Central Asia, including the Middle Corridor, also known as the Trans-Caspian International Transit Route (TITR).

The development of the FNRC will have long-term consequences for transit through Uzbekistan. The launch of the railway from Herat to Mazar-i-Sharif could provide Tashkent with additional access to Iran's road transport and port infrastructure, bypassing Turkmenistan. This shift, however, will not have the desired effect unless the country participates in developing the Five Nations Corridor. The FNRC could also negatively impact Uzbekistan's role as a transit hub, redistributing cargo traffic between the PRC and Europe from Uzbekistan to Tajikistan and Iran.

In 2007, Tehran took the lead in implementing the FNRC, launching the construction of a 225-kilometer (140-mile) railway line from the Iranian city of Khaf to Herat, Afghanistan ([Railway Technology](#), December 16, 2020). The final section of this route is expected to be commissioned by next year. Once completed, the project would enable Afghanistan and Iran to transport up to 3 million tons of cargo across their shared border each year, mostly in transit flows. In March, 200 tons of Afghan dried fruit were transported to the European Union via the Khaf-Herat route ([Afghanistan International](#), March 27). The possible extension of the railway to Afghanistan's northeastern provinces, and then on to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, could result in cargo flows traveling in the opposite direction, with final delivery to the PRC. This holds great promise for Iran, which is developing trade relations with the PRC and seeks to diversify its supply routes to the East ([PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), accessed November 12).

In 2017, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan signed an agreement to construct the Mazar-i-Sharif-Sheberghan-Maimana-Herat railway, which could subsequently be connected to the Khaf-Herat railway ([President of the Republic of Uzbekistan](#), December 5, 2017). To complete the Afghan section of the FNRC, the railway would only need to be extended from Mazar-i-Sharif to the Sher Khan Bandar in Kunduz Province, which borders Tajikistan. In 2019, Kabul reached an agreement with Dushanbe to construct a railway from the Afghan Sher Khan Bandar to the Tajik settlement of Jaloliddini Balkhi (Kolkhozobod) through Panji Poyon ([Asia-Plus Tajikistan](#), November 5, 2019). Both projects, however, remain unfinished. In the first case, Tashkent decided to pursue an alternative trans-Afghan route toward Pakistan, known as the Kabul Corridor (see EDM, [January 15, October 16](#)). In the second, the railway line in Tajikistan lacked funding.

Following the Taliban's 2021 seizure of power in Afghanistan, the issue of establishing a railway connection between the cities of Mazar-i-Sharif and Herat was once again on the agenda. In May

2023, the Taliban-controlled government approved the 1,468-kilometer (912-mile) Mazar-i-Sharif–Herat–Kandahar railway project, which they pitched to Russia as the shortest route to India through Afghanistan and Pakistan ([ATN News](#), May 2, 2023). The first phase involves constructing a 657-kilometer (408-mile) railway from Mazar-i-Sharif to Herat. In April, Moscow announced expanded cooperation with Uzbekistan on the Trans-Afghan Railway project ([Russian Ministry of Transportation](#), April 8). This announcement followed a statement by Mullah Baradar Akhund, the Afghan Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, following his visit to Tashkent in February ([RTA](#), February 23). Akhund unexpectedly announced that Uzbekistan intends to extend the railway from Hairatan to Herat—a project that was put on hold in 2017—and will finance preliminary studies along this route. The Uzbek side, however, has not confirmed these plans.

The construction of the Mazar-i-Sharif–Herat railway by Russia or even Uzbekistan would require introducing the railway standards of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), including the 1,520 millimeter gauge, to Afghanistan. These standards would facilitate the objective of connecting northern and central Eurasia with South Asia. If Iran and Türkiye build the route, as recently announced, they would use the European standard gauge of 1,435 millimeters, making the primary purpose of the project to activate the Five Nations Corridor rather than the Trans-Afghan Corridor to Pakistan via Kandahar.

The FNRC is a shorter route than transport corridors passing through Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan to the west. These three Central Asian republics are developing the Southern Railway Corridor to the European Union via Iran and Türkiye. Connecting the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway—construction of which began in April 2025—with the Southern Corridor will shorten the trade route between East Asia and Europe by approximately 900 kilometers (559 miles) (see EDM, [July 17, 2024, April 8](#)). This shortened distance could give Tashkent a competitive advantage in interregional transit transportation, but Uzbekistan risks missing out on this opportunity if the Five Nations Corridor continues to be developed. Tashkent could create a China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan–Tajikistan–Uzbekistan railway corridor, with the possibility of extending it to Afghanistan and Iran. This route would involve Uzbekistan in the FNRC, making it a beneficiary of the Mazar-i-Sharif to Herat railway project.

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## Türkiye Plans Canal That Could Undermine Montreux Convention

*Paul Goble*

November 13, 2025

### Executive Summary:

- Türkiye's parliament is again discussing constructing a canal that would bypass the Turkish straits, undermining the 1936 Montreux Convention. The convention gives Türkiye the right to close the Turkish Straits to foreign military vessels in times of war.
- Moscow sees this potential canal as a threat to its national security because it could allow Western warships to enter the Black Sea in excess of the numbers and tonnage set by the 1936 convention.
- As Ankara moves to realize its goal of creating a canal that would be an alternative to the Bosphorus, potentially threatening the provisions of the Montreux Convention, Moscow is likely to do what it can to prevent this, relying in the first instance on domestic Turkish opposition to the idea.



*(Source: Getty Images)*

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Since the 1990s, Turkish leaders have called for the construction of a canal to the west of Istanbul between the Mediterranean and Black seas to take pressure off the Bosphorus Strait, which passes through the middle of Istanbul. The proposed canal would also circumvent the limitations on the passage of ships established by the Montreux Convention in 1936. In 2011, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan made the construction of the canal a centerpiece of his national policies. The enormous costs of this enterprise (estimates now exceed \$10 billion), environmental concerns within Türkiye, and security concerns from other countries, most notably Russia, have thus far hindered the construction of the canal ([Kazinform](#), May 7). Last month, the Turkish government launched a new initiative to build the canal, having arrested some of its most prominent opponents and claiming that Ankara will secure funding from private sources, as the canal is expected to facilitate increased trade ([Türkiye Gazetesi](#), October 10).

Moscow views this new push as having little to do with expanding commerce between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. It instead sees it as an attempt to annul the Montreux Convention's limitations, which would allow North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) warships to enter the Black Sea and challenge Russia ([Voenno-Politicheskaya Analitika](#), November 6). Russian analysts have signaled that the Kremlin will try to prevent the construction of the canal by playing up Turkish environmental concerns and stressing the consequences of circumventing or annulling the Montreux Convention ([Fond Strategicheskoi Kul'tury](#), October 16). Moscow and its allies inside Türkiye have seemingly been successful in blocking the construction of the canal up to now, they appear to expect that they will be able to do so again, an attitude that may increase tensions between Moscow and Ankara in the coming months.

The 1936 Montreux Convention grants civilian ships from countries without a Black Sea littoral free right of passage through the Turkish Straits in times of peace and times of war. Military ships of non-littoral states can be present in the Black Sea only in peacetime, for a limited period, usually 21 days, and with a specific tonnage that is lower than many of the largest ships in NATO fleets. In recent years, NATO has regularly rotated ships through the straits into the Black Sea to maintain a presence and project power, but it has been unable to insert its largest vessels or submarines. The convention makes Türkiye responsible for ensuring these limits are maintained. The presence of Western navies in the Black Sea has been a constant irritant for Moscow. The Russian government has occasionally favored revising the Montreux Convention to exclude NATO ships from the Black Sea. Most of the time, however, the Kremlin backs this long-standing convention as the best way to constrain an unwelcome Western presence in the sea (see EDM, April [2](#), [23](#), 2019).

Senior Turkish officials now say the provisions of the Montreux Convention will not apply to ships, including military vessels, passing through the new canal, effectively doing away with the agreement once the 100-kilometer (approximately 62-mile) canal is operational ([Voenno-Politicheskaya Analitika](#), November 6). These statements have angered the Kremlin, especially as Russia's relations with the West have tanked following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Last year, Nikolai Patrushev, the former secretary of the Russian Security Council and now head of the Russian Naval Collegium, denounced the canal's potential circumvention of the Montreux Convention as anti-Russian and promised that Moscow would respond unless Ankara changed course ([Window on Eurasia](#), November 6, 2024). More recently, Russian commentators have suggested that the canal is part of a broader Western policy aimed at isolating Russia, stating that Moscow can and will push back, echoing earlier Russian arguments against any changes to the status of the Montreux Convention (see [EDM](#), October 1, 2019; [TopWar.ru](#), August 14).

At present, Moscow appears to have concluded that it has more hope of torpedoing the canal by exploiting domestic Turkish opposition than by attempting to involve the international community,

given that a large part of it would be pleased if NATO could send larger and more numerous military vessels to support Ukraine. The Kremlin has compelling reasons to believe that this approach may yield success. Polls indicate that Turks, in general, and residents of Istanbul, in particular, are opposed to the canal on environmental grounds ([Turkish Minute](#), May 2; [Kazinform](#), May 7; [Istanbul Homes](#), May 8). The mayor of Istanbul, a prominent critic of the proposed canal, as well as other opponents of the idea, have been arrested ([Voenno-Politicheskaya Analitika](#), November 6). Leaders of central Turkish banks have indicated that they will not try to raise private funds for the construction of the canal ([Fond Strategicheskoi Kul'tury](#), October 16). Both the opposition in parliament and numerous former senior Turkish military officers have come out in opposition to the canal ([TASS](#), April 4, 2021). Moscow is likely to try to bring that opposition to a boil if, as expected, Erdoğan presses the case in the coming months.

The Turkish president appears to be fully committed to the canal. Erdoğan has repeatedly said that what he calls the Istanbul Canal is comparable in importance to the Suez and Panama canals. He asserts the current passage on the Bosphorus through the center of Istanbul is not large enough to handle the growing number of ships—now approaching 50,000 a year—passing through it. Erdoğan may be correct on both counts, but that means little to Moscow if the Turkish leader uses the occasion to declare the Montreux Convention a dead letter. Russian opposition to that makes it likely that Moscow will continue to play up or even produce more opposition to the canal within Türkiye. If so, the construction of the canal is unlikely to start anytime soon. If Erdoğan continues to push for it, he may have to compromise on Montreux, possibly by expressing a willingness to extend the convention's provisions to the canal in exchange for Russia's support. Such an arrangement would open the door to more north-south trade between the Mediterranean and the Black seas without unsettling a security arrangement that has been in place for almost 90 years.

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