

WAR IN UKRAINE

SOCIOCULTURAL RUNNING ESTIMATE

Belarus: New Strategy, New Threats, More Suppression



In This Running Estimate...

- In Russian popular perspectives, Putin's popularity dropped two points to 83%, while support for the SMO steadied at 76% after a dip in November. Belief that the SMO is successful rose four points to 66% in November, with no data for December, and support for negotiation dropped four points to 53%.
- Belarus released a new military strategy defining the United States and NATO as "unfriendly" while declaring willingness for dialogue.
- Belarus both perceives the West as a threat and displays a threatening posture to the West.
- The Lukashenko regime has waged a harsh domestic political suppression campaign since the 2020 elections yet resists mobilization or direct involvement in the war in Ukraine.



President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko meeting with President of Russia Vladimir Putin at the Bocharov Ruchei residence in Sochi, Russia.
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lukashenko-Putin_meeting_\(2022-09-26\)_02.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lukashenko-Putin_meeting_(2022-09-26)_02.jpg)

DOMESTIC RUSSIAN PERCEPTIONS

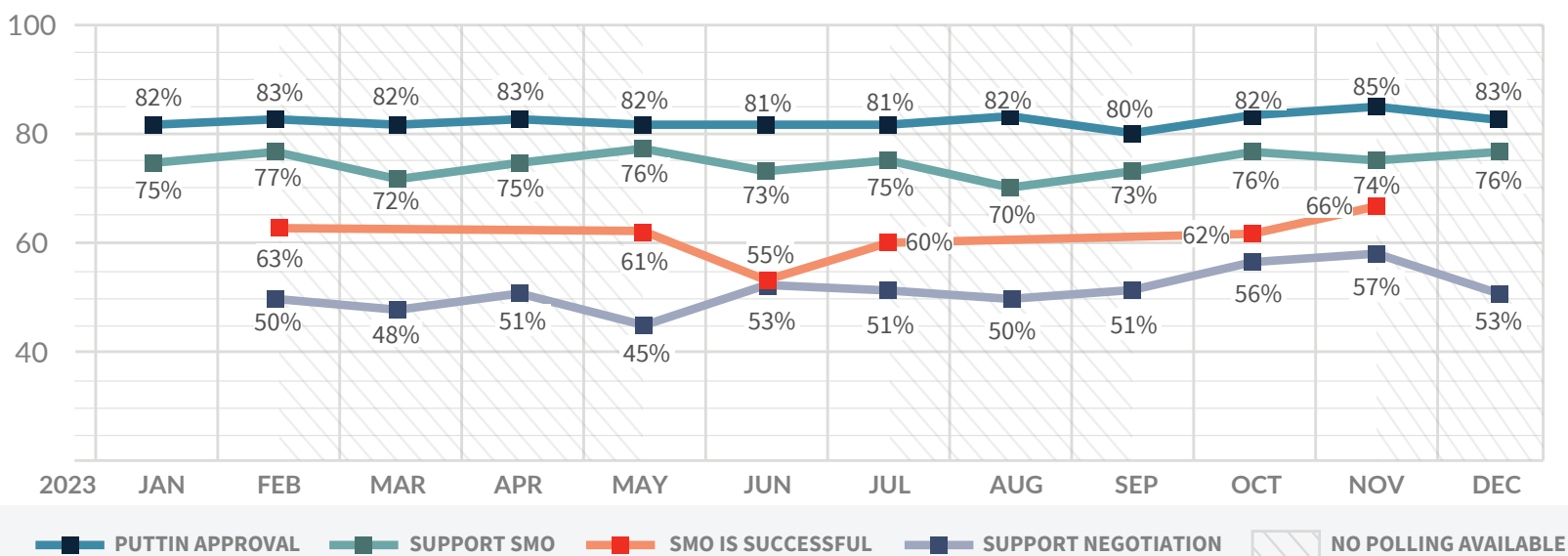


Figure 1. Domestic Russian Perceptions, GCKN.¹

NOTE: Russian opinion polls are immediately instrumentalized by the Kremlin, repeated by the Russian media, and used to claim that the invasion is supported by the Russian public and conducted in its name.

PUTIN APPROVAL

Putin's Popularity and Presidential Ambitions: From September to November 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin's popularity reportedly increased from 80% to 85%, before slightly decreasing to 83% in December.² His approval rating has remained steady for the last six months, sitting above 80% since July 2023. As Putin contemplates a fifth presidential term in March 2024—a process criticized by some as lacking genuine competition—his justification of the war with Ukraine as part of a broader struggle with the West in defense of Russian civilization seems to resonate with many Russians. His consistent aggressive rhetoric and policies align with his strongman image, potentially influencing public perception and contributing to his sustained approval ratings. A notable example is a 2014 NORC survey by the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, which showed Putin's approval at 81% following the annexation of Crimea.³ Despite rising casualties and economic challenges, Putin's control over the media narrative, particularly framing the Ukraine conflict as a defense of Russian civilization, appears to reinforce his strongman image and his ability to shape public opinion amid ongoing conflict.

SUPPORT SMO

Support for the Special Military Operation (SMO): Support for the SMO decreased slightly to 74% in November before increasing to 76% in December, aligning with trends observed from May to October 2023. Patriotic sentiments bolstered by Kremlin messaging contribute to the consistent approval of the war, despite its impacts on Russian communities. Most Russians view the war as part of a larger conflict with the West and continue to support it, although concerns about societal, economic, and geopolitical repercussions persist. Notably, support for the SMO continues to consistently vary across demographics: support is higher among older age groups, state TV news viewers, those optimistic about Russia's direction, and Putin supporters. Conversely, younger individuals, YouTube viewers, and those critical of Russia's direction or Putin's presidency tend to show lower levels of support.⁴

SMO IS SUCCESSFUL

Perception of SMO's Success: Since June 2023, there has been a gradual increase in the proportion of Russians who perceive the SMO as successful, reaching a high of 66% in November from 55% in June 2023. This increase in positive perception, despite vague war objectives and timelines, might reflect a mix of patriotism, effective state messaging, and public adjustment to the war's perceived inevitability. The variation in perceptions of success is notable among different information sources and attitudes toward national direction and Putin. Notably, the share of non-respondents decreased from 18% in October 2023 to 14% in November. This shift may have influenced the apparent rise in positive perceptions. In contexts like Russia's, where expressing dissent can be risky, people often choose not to answer sensitive questions or align their responses with the official narrative. Therefore, these figures should be interpreted with caution, acknowledging the potential impact of self-censorship and response bias in authoritarian settings.⁵

SUPPORT NEGOTIATION

Persisting Support for Negotiation: Support for a negotiated end to the war fell significantly from 57% in November 2023 to 53% in December. This decrease ends a trend of consecutive month-to-month increases in support for negotiation, which began in June 2023. Support for negotiation is particularly strong among women, young adults, villagers, internet news and YouTube consumers, Putin critics, and those pessimistic about the country's direction. The persistent inclination towards negotiation may indicate an increased public awareness of the conflict's prolonged nature and its impacts both domestically and internationally. It suggests a broader desire across various segments of Russian society for stability and a return to normalcy, beyond political loyalties and media influences.⁶

BELARUS' NEW MILITARY STRATEGY

Belarus' 2024 military strategy delineates NATO and Ukraine as "unfriendly" while signaling openness to dialogue and solidifying Russia as a key ally. This strategy, alongside the transfer of tactical nuclear weapons from Russia to Belarus, escalates tensions, threatening regional stability. The doctrine explicitly identifies the United States, the United Kingdom, Poland, the Baltics, and Ukraine as adversarial, accusing them of antagonizing Belarus, and thereby complicating the geopolitical landscape.⁷

- Belarus champions an "open-door policy" toward citizens of the Baltic states and Poland, clearly differentiating between the governments it deems "unfriendly" and their populations, signaling a strategic readiness for dialogue. This delineation, as highlighted by a Belarusian official in state media, underscores a nuanced approach to international relations. Belarus affirms Russia, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO),^a and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)^b as allies, and aims

a The CSTO is the Russia-led equivalent of NATO. Created by Putin in 2002, the CSTO is a military alliance between Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (Afghanistan and Serbia have observer status) "to ensure the collective [defense] of any member that faces external aggression." It also governs arms manufacturing and sales, training, and exercises. The CSTO uses an annual rotating presidency system between the member states. SOURCE: Karena Avedissian, Fact Sheet: What is the Collective Security Organization?" EVN Report, October 6, 2019, <https://evnreport.com/understanding-the-region/fact-sheet-what-is-the-collective-security-treaty-organization/>

b The CIS "is a regional intergovernmental organization focused on cooperation on political, economic, environmental, humanitarian, cultural and other issues between a number of former Soviet Republics" created with the 1991 Minsk agreement between Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine when the USSR dissolved. Current members are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Moldova suspended participation following the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and stated it would withdraw from CIS after the European Union announced accession negotiations in 2023. SOURCES: "Commonwealth

to expand its diplomatic outreach toward the “Global South” and the Organization for the Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), reflecting its intent to diversify and strengthen international partnership^{c,8}

- Belarus’ military strategy articulates a critical view of the West and NATO, portraying Western military policies as overtly aggressive, rather than defensively oriented, accusing them of seeking global and regional dominance. It specifically highlights NATO’s role as a tool for American expansionism in Europe, with official documents naming Belarus among states perceived by the West as adversaries. This portrayal underscores Minsk’s perception of being directly targeted by Western strategic ambitions, setting the tone for its defensive posture and diplomatic relations.⁹

- A 2022 study reveals Belarusian popular preference for neutrality, with favorable views of Western Europe but mixed feelings about the United States and Russia, and critical perspectives on neighboring EU states. Despite the government’s non-neutral military strategy, its diplomatic outreach to populations of labeled “unfriendly” nations mirror these complex public sentiments, suggesting an underlying strategy to align governmental actions with the nuanced views of its populace.¹⁰

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c For more on the OSCE, see <https://www.osce.org/whatistheosce>



Figure 2. Belarus and Eastern Europe, map, GCKN.¹¹

THE UNION STATE

The Union State Treaty between Belarus and Russia, signed on December 8, 1999, aimed for deep integration, including a joint constitution, monetary union, a single energy market, and a common economic space—goals largely unrealized. Despite official narratives of mutual economic partnership, Belarus’s economy relies significantly on Russia, granting Putin considerable influence over Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko. Jointly funded Union State programs span various sectors, yet Lukashenko strives to maintain Belarusian autonomy, resisting the full implementation of the treaty’s integration aspects.¹² Nonetheless, foreign policy alignment and military cooperation with Russia continue to advance, underpinning Lukashenko’s reliance on Russian support for his political survival.¹³

- According to the detailed findings of the aforementioned 2022 Belarusian identity study, a nuanced perspective on integration with Russia emerges among the populace. While a slender majority favor integration with Russia, their support is specifically tailored toward areas of “scientific and technological cooperation and a common visa area.” This indicates a selective approach to integration, where Belarusians see value in collaborating on innovations and easing travel restrictions to foster social and professional exchanges. However, this support distinctly stops short of endorsing the merger of state institutions. Belarusians appear cautious to preserve their national sovereignty and administrative independence, reflecting a desire for collaboration that benefits from shared advancement and mobility without compromising the integrity of their state’s governance structures.¹⁴
- A leaked 2021 document reveals Russia’s detailed plans to advance the Union State with Belarus by 2030, aiming to extend the 1999 Treaty’s scope. Key initiatives include harmonizing laws, enhancing trade and economic links to favor Russian interests, and establishing Russian dominance in socio-political, economic, information, and cultural spheres. The strategy emphasizes the creation of a unified cultural space, with a particular focus on predominance of the Russian language.¹⁵
- The leaked document also outlines expansion of the “passportization” process, which makes it easier for Belarusians to obtain Russian passports—a move toward Russification of Belarusians that provides justification for intervention based on supposed violation of rights of Russian passport holders.^d Additionally, plans for an expanded Russian military presence in Belarus include a joint command system and Russian weapons depots, marking a significant step in military integration.¹⁶

^d Russia has used the justification of protecting Russians and “Compatriots” (Russian language speakers and Russian passport holders) for interventions in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Crimea, and Eastern Ukraine. SOURCE: Michael Weiss, “Revealed: Leaked document shows how Russia plans to take over Belarus,” yahoo!news, <https://www.aol.com/revealed-leaked-document-shows-russia-230035032.html>

Development of the Union State

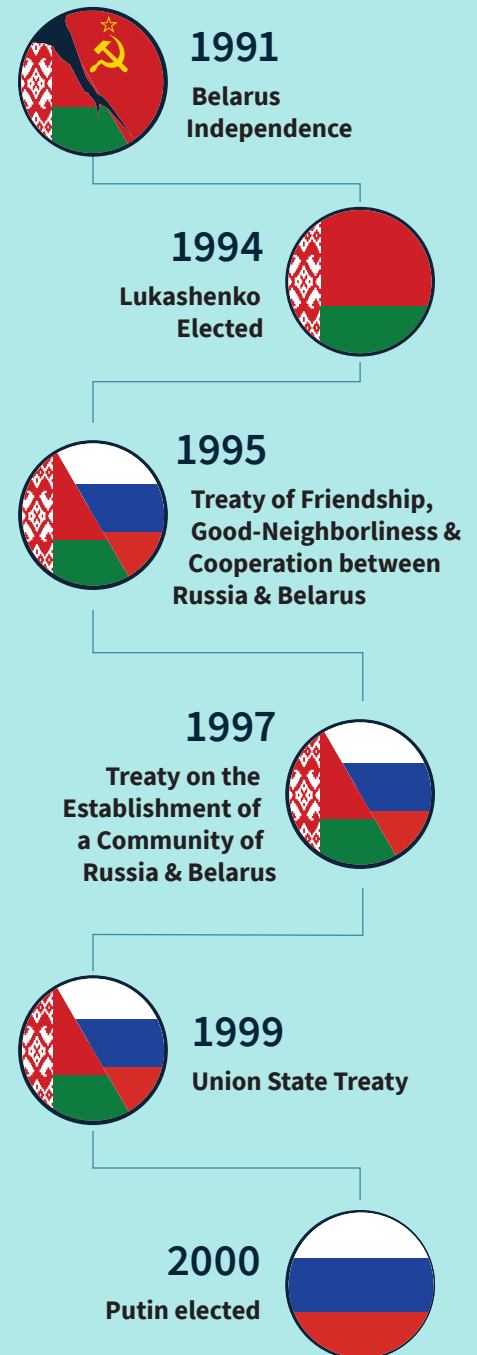


Figure 3. SOURCE: “Timeline of the development of the legal framework of the Union State and preceding Russian-Belarusian integration projects”¹⁷

PERCEIVED THREATS FROM AND TO THE WEST

Belarus has acted as a strategic buffer for Russia in the Ukraine conflict, providing a multifaceted threat to NATO's eastern flank while offering indirect support to Russian military operations. Russia's strategy of 'provoking a provocation' is designed to justify its military actions, aligning with strategic goals, and keeping NATO border states on high alert. Post-February 2022 significant developments include the deployment of Russian tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus, the movement of large Russian military contingents in and out of the country, the relocation of PMC Wagner to Belarus for military training, and circulating rumors of new offensives into Ukraine from Belarusian territory. Additionally, repeated border violation accusations between Belarus and Poland underscore the heightened tensions and strategic positioning in the region.¹⁸

- In December 2023, Putin and Lukashenko acknowledged the deployment of Russian tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) in Belarus. Lukashenko's request—or demand, as some Western sources suggested—for these TNWs was meant to deter Western military action against Belarus. For Russia, the presence of any nuclear weapons near NATO member states and Ukraine provides Putin with the lever of a 'dreaded threat' to the West. Despite being under Russian control and requiring Putin's authorization for activation, the TNWs presence has escalated concerns among NATO members, especially Poland, due to its contentious border with Belarus. This strategy, intended as a deterrent by Lukashenko, has paradoxically increased regional tensions, potentially exacerbating the very political and military instabilities he seeks to mitigate.¹⁹
- Since July 2023, PMC Wagner, at Lukashenko's behest, has operated training camps in Belarus. This move followed Lukashenko's pivotal role in defusing Wagner's June 2023 mutiny and proposing its deployment in Belarus to enhance military readiness against Western threats.²⁰ The Wagner presence has heightened fears among NATO's eastern members, particularly Poland

and the Baltic States, of potential incursions and destabilization activities by Wagner or Wagner-trained Belarusian forces. These nations have expressed concerns over the security risks posed by Wagner's activities, indicating that provocations could lead to escalated tensions.²¹ This situation aligns with the narrative promoted by Belarus and Russia of being besieged by Western aggression.

- In June 2022, Lukashenko indicated the potential involvement of Belarusian forces in western Ukraine, based on purported NATO strategic objectives. He speculated that NATO aims to realign the conflict front to extend from Smolensk through Pskov, Bryansk, Kursk, and onwards to Rostov, suggesting a broader geographical scope of military engagement. Lukashenko implied that the West's ambitions would not be limited to the current conflict zones, hinting at a long-term strategy to reshape the regional security landscape. This assertion reflects concerns over expanding NATO influence in Eastern Europe and underscores Belarus' positioning within the broader geopolitical tensions between NATO and its eastern neighbors.²²

Belarus is a state for the people. Everything we have already created or will put into life serves exclusively this purpose.

-Belarus President Lukashenko²³

The law does not work. The message is clear: Anyone who is against the government must be disposed of.

-Anonymous former lawyer who was disbarred by the Belarus government²⁴

UNDER LUKASHENKO'S THUMB

Since the 2020 elections, Lukashenko regime suppression tactics have effectively subdued widespread public dissent in Belarus, with only a handful of opposition groups managing to remain covertly active. Despite this, Lukashenko has deliberately maintained an ambiguous stance regarding Belarus' direct involvement in the Ukraine war. This suggests that Putin values Belarus as a strategic buffer and a means to distract the West, rather than as an active participant in hostilities. The cautious approach by both leaders indicates a recognition that the potential for domestic unrest, even if minimal, poses a significant risk to the stability of the Union State, outweighing any perceived benefits of more direct Belarusian involvement in the war.

- Following his disputed 2020 election victory, Lukashenko has aggressively quashed opposition, targeting activists, NGOs, and independent media under the guise of combating “extremism.” The Belarus KGB leverages accusations of “extremist activities” and “financing of extremist groups” to justify detentions and harassment of regime critics.²⁵ Even using the Belarusian language has become a risky act of defiance, as the Russian language is promoted and expressions of Belarusian culture are equated to political dissent. This highlights the regime’s intolerance toward any form of challenge.²⁶
- Belarusian legal experts and opposition voices assert that Lukashenko has repurposed the judicial system as a mechanism to suppress opposition under a legal façade. A disbarred lawyer’s testimony reveals a judiciary complicit with the regime’s crackdown, indicating a blatant disregard for the rule of law and an environment where dissent is ruthlessly eliminated.²⁷ Contrary to this oppressive landscape, a 2022 poll shows nearly 70% of Belarusians believe laws should protect citizens’ rights and freedoms over state interests, underscoring a deep divide between governmental conduct and public conviction.²⁸
- Despite stringent suppression within Belarus, Lukashenko has avoided mobilization and Putin

has not exerted pressure for such measures. Analysts forecast social unrest, potentially leading to instability, should Belarus mobilize or directly engage in the war in Ukraine. The adverse social response to Russia’s flawed mobilization in September 2022, combined with the memory of unrest following Lukashenko’s disputed re-election in 2020, has intensified the regime’s crackdown. Consequently, both Lukashenko and Putin have explored alternative methods for Belarus to contribute to the war effort without triggering widespread domestic upheaval.²⁹

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ENDNOTES

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