

WAR IN UKRAINE

SOCIOCULTURAL RUNNING ESTIMATE

Peripheral Impacts: Immigration as a Weapon of Instability



In This Running Estimate...

- Putin's popularity in May and June matched his previous high of 78% from March during the Russian presidential election. Consistently high support for the "Special Military Operation" (SMO) into its third year may indicate the Russian population has normalized the conflict. This is despite a record high 58% of Russians in favor of a negotiated end to the war.
- Since 2021, Russia and Belarus have facilitated a surge of illegal immigration into NATO/EU border states with the intent to overwhelm and destabilize security and government services in these areas.
- Multiple EU/NATO countries have experienced a raft of destructive and intimidating incidents, including arson, sabotage, attempted assassinations, cyber-attacks, and bomb threats, many linked to Russia.
- EU migration policies have created difficulties in tracking illegal migrants once inside the EU. These same policies reportedly have placed unforeseen burdens on member nations with major points of entry for migrants, and have hardened the left-right political divide.



Poland-Belarus border barrier built 2022–2023. It was built by Poland to stop the illegal migration from Belarus.
Source: <https://kam.lt/sienu-sankirtoje-susitike-lietuvas-ir-lenkijos-krasto-apsaugos-ministrai-abi-salys-aiskiai-suvokia-kylancius-saugumo-issukius-regione/>; Attribution: GNU Free Documentation License

DOMESTIC RUSSIAN PERCEPTIONS

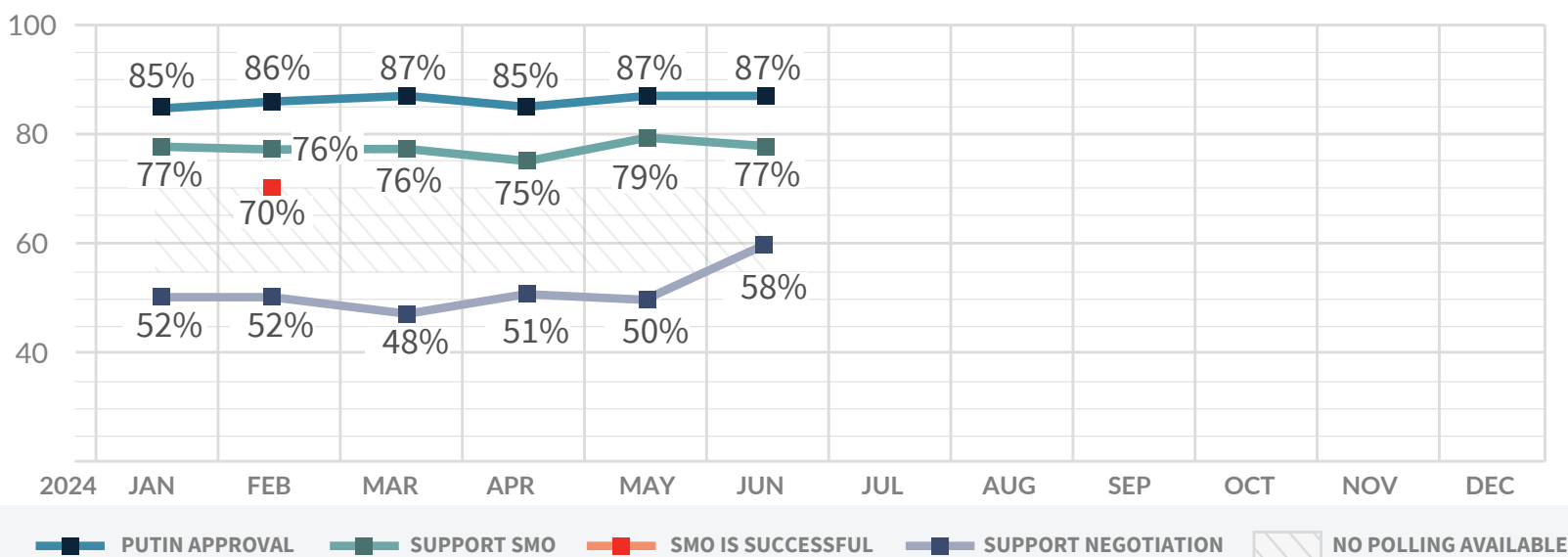


Figure 1. *Domestic Russian Perceptions*, GCKN.¹

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

Russian President Vladimir Putin's approval rating was 87% in May and June, up from 85% in April.² This equaled his 2024 high of 87% in March during the controversial Russian presidential elections, when Putin secured 88% of the vote—the highest in a post-Soviet race.³ His approval rating has stayed strong despite the ongoing war with Ukraine having created domestic upheaval and provoking an unlikely mutiny. Putin's high approval aligns with polling that shows 75% of Russians believe the country is headed in the right direction. The most supportive demographics are women (88%), Russians aged 55+ (89%), the wealthy (89%), residents of cities with 100,000-500,000 inhabitants (89%), television viewers (94%), and those confident in the country's direction (97%). Conversely, those least supportive are men (13%), those aged 40-54 (15%), the poor (16%), YouTube viewers (22%), and those who believe Russia is on the wrong track (46%).

SUPPORT FOR THE SMO

In June, 77% of Russians expressed support for the war in Ukraine, a slight decrease from 79% in May but still higher than 75% support in April, while 17% of the population admitted opposition to the war.⁴ **Throughout the first six months of 2024, support for the war has remained consistently high, suggesting that Russians have normalized the conflict and aligned their interests with state priorities despite 33% expressing anxiety, fear, or horror concerning the war.** Kremlin messaging, emphasizing military successes and framing the conflict as essential to defending Russian Orthodox civilization against Western aggression, likely bolsters this support.⁵ Demographics with the highest support for the war are Russians aged 55+ (84%), those who believe the country is progressing well (86%), Putin supporters (84%), and television viewers (87%). Conversely, those least supportive are Russians <24 years old (59%), those who believe the country is on the wrong track (41%), Putin opponents (32%), and those who get their news primarily from YouTube (66%).



PERCEPTION OF SMO'S SUCCESS

Recent polling data on the perception of the Special Military Operation's (SMO) success has been inconsistent, with no updates since the last report. The latest data from February indicated a rise in public perception of the SMO as successful, increasing to 70% from 66% in November 2023 and 55% in June 2023. This upward trend likely reflects heightened patriotism, effective state propaganda, and a resignation to the war's perceived inevitability, bolstered by Kremlin narratives highlighting the SMO's achievements. However, views on the SMO's success vary across Russian society, with state TV viewers (82%) and Putin supporters (76%) being the most optimistic. In comparison, those who get their news from Telegram (23%) and YouTube (27%) or who disapprove of Putin (50%) are less optimistic. Notably, the proportion of non-respondents in surveys increased slightly from 14% in November to 15% in February, potentially impacting the overall increase in favorable perception.⁶



SUPPORT FOR NEGOTIATION

More than half of Russians (58%) now favor negotiation over continued fighting, the highest level since the war began, reversing a previous month-to-month decline in support for negotiation.⁷ Previous peaks were 57% in October 2022 and November 2023. From January to May 2024, support for negotiations fluctuated between 48% and 52%. June's mark of 58% is the first significant increase in support for negotiation in six months, likely indicating war fatigue despite generally high approval for the conflict. Only 37% support continued fighting. Those most supportive of negotiations are women (64%), young Russians (66%), the poor (64%), villagers (65%), those who believe the country is headed in the wrong direction (77%), those who disapprove of Putin (75%), and those who prioritize YouTube as their primary news source (65%). Conversely, men (47%), older Russians (40%), wealthier Russians (40%), Moscow residents (56%), those who believe the country is on the right path (44%), Putin supporters (40%), and television viewers (42%) are more supportive of continued hostilities. Additionally, about 40% of Russians believe Russia is more interested in negotiations to end the war, 25% believe Ukraine is more interested, and 30% think both sides are equally interested in negotiations.⁸

IMMIGRATION AS A WEAPON OF INSTABILITY

Russia and Belarus facilitate mass illegal immigration through their territories into NATO-EU countries to foment instability by overwhelming their social and security sectors. Early in 2021, Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko warned EU members that he would unleash migrants and drug trafficking across Belarus borders in response to sanctions imposed after the disputed 2020 national elections and subsequent oppression of political dissent.

- In early 2021, Belarus opened multiple travel agencies in the Middle East and relaxed visa rules to facilitate travel to the West. Advertisements for an easy route into the EU through Belarus flooded social media across the Middle East as early as March 2021.⁹ Middle Eastern migrants attempting to cross into Poland from Belarus told the BBC that Belarus “has an ongoing feud with the EU” over sanctions, and Lukashenko “decided to open its borders with the EU.” A smuggler did not hesitate to state that Belarusian authorities are “facilitating the issue. They’re helping people.”¹⁰
- The EU claims this was meant to create a crisis by increasing migration to Europe so that countries are overwhelmed by the volume. The EU mandates that all 26 member countries must accept migrants or pay other member countries to take their share. More than half of EU members, including Denmark, the Netherlands, Hungary, Poland, Finland, and

Czechia, are contesting this requirement.¹¹ EU members Finland, Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania have employed “Pushback” measures — where migrants are forcibly returned across an international border without any assessment of their claim for asylum or other protection — to counter large influxes of migrants. Pushback measures violate both International and EU law but have received tacit support in the past from the EU and other organizations.¹²

- Since the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, NATO and EU members have been on alert for any indication that the war might spread outside of Ukraine and into EU/NATO territory. Putin has long stated his intent to first stop NATO and EU eastward expansion, and then to dismantle NATO as a “threat” to Russia. In 2023 and 2024, Germany, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and other NATO member countries experienced suspicious fires, cyberattacks, an assassination plot, and clear acts or attempted acts of sabotage against infrastructure, commerce, and defense industries linked to supporting the War in Ukraine. Many of these acts can be tied to Russia as part of a “hybrid Warfare” campaign to disrupt NATO states from their support to Ukraine. However, no link between these acts and illegal migrants has been prominently reported.¹³



“Work of “Kamenyuki” frontier post on Belarus border with Poland”. Soldiers with a service dog patrol along the wire fence at the 3rd “Kamenyuki” frontier post in the Bialowieza Forest on the Belarus border with Poland.

Source: RIA Novosti archive, image #1047080, <http://visualrian.ru/ru/site/gallery/#1047080> Attribution: RIA Novosti archive, image #1047080 / Egor Eryomov / CC-BY-SA 3.0, CC BY-SA 3.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons



Figure 2: Map of Europe, map, TRADOC G-2 (OEI, GCKN).¹⁴

The Baltics

Since 2021, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia have reported a surge of migrants attempting to cross their shared border with Belarus. From July-August 2021, Lithuania had 50 times more asylum seekers at its border with Belarus than in all of 2020, but has largely managed the flow of migrants after the initial waves in 2021, including temporarily closing some border crossings.¹⁵ Estonia experienced waves of migrants on its border with Russia and observed that Russian border guards “often instructed, directed and escorted groups of migrants.”¹⁶ This confirms BBC reporting of first-hand accounts by migrants that Russian border guards and soldiers actively assisted them in crossing the Russian border into Poland.¹⁷ As a result of Russian attempts to overwhelm its resources with migrants, since 2022 Estonia has officially considered all Ukrainians attempting to cross its border as “potential enemies” and subjected them to intense vetting. Russia is also known to recruit Ukrainians as agents to infiltrate EU and NATO countries.¹⁸

In September 2022, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia enacted “public security” restrictions on Russian citizens entering the Baltic States from Russia and Belarus after significant increases in border crossings by Russian passport holders. The Latvian foreign minister stated, “This is becoming a public security issue, this is also an issue of moral and political nature.” Exceptions were granted for humanitarian and family reasons, truck drivers, and diplomats.¹⁹

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have all experienced hybrid attacks attributed to Russia and Belarus, including sabotage to undersea gas pipelines

and telecommunications cables, cyberattacks, emailed bomb threats targeting children, espionage, and election tampering.²⁰ In a March 2024 report, the Estonian Internal Security Services (ISS, also known as KAPO) reported that Russian agents conducted hybrid warfare activities within Estonia to sow “confusion and instill fear” in society even without directly threatening the physical health and safety of the population.²¹

The ISS reports that Russia is using these hybrid methods to target areas of Estonia near the Russian border. These regions typically have large Russian-speaking populations,

residents earn up to 27% less than the national average, unemployment can be near 66%, and there is widespread dissatisfaction with public infrastructure including education, transportation, and healthcare. This makes the public more susceptible to Russian influence activities and for recruitment as Russian agents.²²

EU MIGRATION POLICY: SCHENGEN VISAS, DUBLIN REGULATION, AND BEYOND



The Russo-Ukraine War created a surge of immigration into Europe in 2022 by Ukrainians as well as Middle Easterners and Africans whose countries of origin had relied on Ukrainian trade. This surge continued a record-breaking level of immigration that exploded in 2015 due to the wars in Syria and Afghanistan. The COVID-19 pandemic, multiple African coups, and environmental disasters also contributed to the ongoing flood of migration to Europe.³⁶

As part of its collective internal free-transit/free trade structure, the EU established the “Schengen Area” of 29 countries, 23 of which are EU members, and issued “Schengen passports” to residents which allowed unlimited visa-free travel between member countries and external entry to any member. As there are no internal limits on travel, illegal migrants may also travel freely throughout the zone once they gain entry.³⁷

The EU “Dublin” Regulation requires migrants to apply for asylum in the first EU country they enter. Under this policy, Italy, Greece, Malta, and Spain had to bear the heaviest burdens of increased migration as they are the closest geographically to the Middle East and North Africa, the points of departure for the vast majority of the migrant surge.³⁸

Over time, in lieu of immigration reform, the EU made individual deals with non-EU countries (with migrant transit hubs) to block migration.³⁹

The massive influx of migrants into the EU, coupled with the governmental burdens and insufficient EU migration policy, exacerbated the political divide with EU member countries. In simple terms, the EU political left wants to encourage immigration and assist immigrants, while the EU political right wants to restrict immigration and deport illegal immigrants.

In April 2024, the EU Parliament passed new immigration policy that requires all EU states to accept equal shares of migrants or else pay another member country to take on their share of migrants. It also tightens border screening and facilitates rapid deportation. As a centrist compromise, the new policy has done little to appease each political side but does offer some relief. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, activists on the EU political left fear that the new regulations may further motivate the political adversaries to push for more restrictive policies, and paint hardline right wing positions as racist.⁴⁰

Finland

The Finnish government claims the Kremlin is deliberately facilitating massive numbers of migrants from as far away as Syria and Somalia to cross the new NATO member's 1,340 km border with Russia to create instability. Russia denies Finland's claim. To stem the flow, Finland closed its eastern border in December 2023 after a surge of crossings.²³ In May 2024 Finland proposed emergency legislation blocking alleged "asylum seekers" from crossing the border. This law is in violation of EU human rights standards, but Finland is seeking an exception for situations when any EU member is being overwhelmed with migrants, ostensibly to destabilize the country.²⁴

Germany

In 2023, German federal police arrested more than 1,000 illegal migrants who had entered the EU across the Polish border from Belarus or Russia. After a lull during the early 2024 winter months, federal police have registered an uptick in illegal entries into Germany via the Belarus route. Many of the migrants were from the Horn of Africa.²⁵ Overall, illegal entries into Germany were down 6.6% in the first six months of 2024 (nearly 42,000) compared to the same time period in 2023 (nearly 45,000). The number of smugglers arrested also declined, from 1,000 during the first half of 2023 to 770 in January-June 2024. Federal police credit the decline to new German border controls put into place with Poland, Chechia, and Switzerland in October 2023.²⁶

Norway

Norway restricted Russian tourist visas shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in March 2022 to protest Russia's actions. On 29 May 2024, Norway blocked all Russians travelling to Norway for tourism or other "non-essential" travel and imposed controls on all other Russians entering the country "in line with the Norwegian approach of standing by allies and partners in reaction to Russia's illegal war of aggression against Ukraine."²⁷

Poland

The Polish government claims that nearly 90% of migrants trying to cross its eastern border hold Russian visas, indicating complicity by Moscow.²⁸ In addition to an influx of migrants, Poland claims that Russian and Belarusian agents are conducting hostile actions within

Poland, including cyberattacks, sabotage, and arson.²⁹

Poland declared investments of \$2.55B to secure its eastern border against illegal immigration through Russia and Belarus and infiltration of Belarusian and Russian agents intended to cause instability. This is in addition to the \$400M spent in 2021 to emplace a 180km-long fence, cameras, and sensors to stem dramatically increased illegal migration.³⁰

According to the Polish defense minister, Polish security forces have used their weapons in emergency situations at the boarder nearly 700 times since 2022. In March 2024, Polish soldiers fired warning shots to stop a group of migrants from forcing their way across the Poland-Belarus border. In May, a Polish soldier was stabbed through the border fence by a migrant and later died, while multiple other Polish security forces have been wounded by migrants at the border.³¹ Recently, the Polish parliament has taken up a new bill allowing security forces to use their firearms in self-defense or defense of their comrades. The bill has been condemned by human rights organizations, but a recent poll showed 86% public support for the measure.³²

In addition to the physical and technical measures being implemented, Poland has engaged in an information campaign across North Africa, the Middle East, and Turkey to dissuade migrants from trying to cross its border, with moderate success. However, migrants from less tech-saturated regions continue to attempt to cross from Russia and Belarus.³³

Poland threatened to close its border with Belarus over a surge in illegal immigration suspected of being engineered by Moscow. This prompted an exiled Belarusian opposition leader to urge Warsaw to not put Belarusians "behind a new iron curtain."³⁴

Romania

Russian spies posing as Ukrainian refugees infiltrated Romania in 2023 to gain information on military exercises and support for Ukraine, according to the Romanian Supreme Council of National Defense.³⁵

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ENDNOTES

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