

# RUSSIAN PERSPECTIVE

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## Executive Summary

- The Russian opposition, led by Alexei Navalny, is finding it difficult to get the public onto the streets, despite the many economic problems, a faltering vaccination campaign, the prolonged Covid-19 epidemic, and exposure of endemic corruption. The authorities' use of violence against the demonstrators has both prevented the spread of the protest and deterred the opposition.
- Putin's government is taking aggressive action to narrow the limits of political freedom in Russia ahead of the Duma elections scheduled for September 2021. These elections were designed to enable President Vladimir Putin to maintain his constitutional majority, and his actions leave no doubt that he will succeed in this mission. At the same time, the opposition is accumulating power for the purpose of detracting from the legitimacy of the elections in September.
- The Biden-Putin summit in Geneva (scheduled for June 16) is likely to restrain American-Russian competition to some extent, and to establish a dialogue, primarily on nuclear weapons control issues. At the same time, neither Moscow nor Washington has any illusions about the restoration of basic trust between the two countries in the foreseeable future.
- Biden's assertive, but businesslike, attitude towards Russia, combined with the low-key backing that he is giving Israel (as reflected during Operation Guardian of the Walls) will help preserve Israel's military freedom of action in Syria and in the dialogue with Moscow about the Iranian presence in that country.
- Behind the severe crisis between Ukraine and Russia, in which large-scale Russian forces have been concentrated near the Ukrainian border, lies an effort by each of these two countries to attract the Biden administration's attention. The Ukrainians are seeking support against Moscow, while Putin tried to emphasize Russia's power to damage Europe.
- The kidnapping of an opposition figure by the Belorussian authorities, after his plane was forced to land in Minsk on specious grounds, indicates that Lukashenko's government is prepared to take more drastic steps to suppress the protest movement and the oppositionist mood among the public. These actions have led Western countries to adopt severe political measures against Belarus. The situation in Belarus will influence the efforts by Moscow and Washington to resolve the conflict.

## Russia – The Domestic Affairs

The unrest in Russia's domestic affairs continued in the past three months in both the political and public spheres. The effects of foreign policy and the apparently deteriorating state of relations between Moscow and the Western capitals are also clear. At the same time, as has already been demonstrated more than once in the past, Russia is able to make a clear distinction between the domestic and foreign affairs. In its foreign relations, as will be shown below, Moscow is trying to achieve a balance between its aggressive tone and a constructive approach. On its home court, however, the government's attitude is less tolerant; it aims first and foremost to thwart groups liable to weaken the Kremlin's status as both a legal central ruler and as an independent player of whom notice must be taken in the global theater.

As we predicted in [Issue No. 3](#) of "Russian Perspective," the non-systemic (non-establishment) opposition, headed by Alexei Navalny, has tried to maintain its relevance, and has devised media crises in order to attract the West's attention. At the same time, it is clear that getting masses of people onto the streets proved to be a rather difficult task. Most of the public continued to be indifferent to this political activism, despite the many cases of government corruption exposed. Furthermore, the escalating violence practiced by the authorities was a deterring factor, and reduced participation in the demonstrations.

Another prominent phenomenon was the open rivalry between different factions in the Russian leadership, indicating a renewal of the power struggles that came to a halt in 2020, following a series of constitutional changes that strengthened Putin's status.

Furthermore, the continuing instability was also influenced by the faltering effort to combat the Covid-19 epidemic. The unwillingness of people in Russia to be vaccinated is especially stark, in view of the worsening medical situation. This situation was not exposed for almost a year, and is becoming clear only now, in indirect ways. Russia has also been unable to emerge from the economic crisis, which is causing a continual rise in prices of basic food items. This is aggravating the public's dissatisfaction, and is damaging the weak standing of the governing leadership still further. Not only is the leadership in the midst of a campaign for its political survival, but it is also having to take action to neutralize groups who are liable to upset the balance of contending forces within the leadership.

### The Non-Systemic Opposition and the Struggle against Western Influence

The public protests were renewed in Russia in late January and early February 2021, following the arrest and trial of Alexei Navalny. These demonstrations gave the impression that public protest was becoming stronger, and that it would only increase with the approach of the parliamentary elections scheduled for September 19, 2021. In reality, however, the protest was unsuccessful, and illustrated several trends typical of the relations between the non-systemic opposition and the authorities in Russia:

- A. Alexei Navalny has been unable to gain widespread support among the general public. [A large proportion](#) of the Russian population still believes that his arrest and imprisonment is justified. A series of actions aimed at reinvigorating the wave of protest and keeping Navalny relevant in public consciousness, such as his [hunger strike](#) and reports of his allegedly [deteriorating](#) medical condition did not have the desired effect. While Western governments strongly declared their clear support for Navalny, the situation within Russia is completely different.

- B. Although a majority of the public in Russia expresses no strong opinion about Navalny, support for his activity among young people (age 18-24) [has gradually increased](#).
- C. The government is continuing its responses to the activity of Navalny and his supporters. The [violent suppression](#) of the protests, particularly the arrest of over 1,500 people during the April 21, 2021, demonstrations, illustrates the concern about uncontrolled internal instability that the opposition's actions are liable to cause.
- D. A change in the rules of the game by means of [legislation to prevent](#) the inclusion of Navalny's supporters in the upcoming parliamentary election campaign is also indicative of the authorities' counter actions, and their anxiety about groups criticizing them from outside the system.
- E. Nevertheless, the government is also starting to realize the change taking place among the younger generation, and is trying to attract them by adapting the pro-government ideological discourse to a language more understandable to the "Z generation." For this purpose, the leadership of the Russian Federal Agency for Youth Affairs was replaced, and 30 year-old Ksenia Razuvaeva [was appointed](#) to head it. Despite her young age, Razuvaeva has already served in several key positions pertaining to young people and teenagers and the promotion of ideological projects.

Suppressing the non-systemic opposition, even if it is actually not as pro-Western as some are trying to portray it, was accompanied by additional measures to reduce the general Western influence in the country. [Harsh regulation means](#) were employed to restrict the social networks and free media, and lawsuits were threatened against anyone refusing to obey the new rules. In addition, the circle of entities and private people classified as "foreign agents" was widened, and [punitive measures were stepped up](#) against anyone opposing being labeled in this manner. Furthermore, more severe ideological steps were taken in order to maintain a uniform pro-government outlook among the public in general, and among the young generation in particular. The most prominent and surprising measure was [changes in the state education law](#) requiring a license for any public opinion-forming activity, including lectures and informal educational activity.

It is important to note that the restrictions, in particular in education, are arousing widespread opposition by specialists, because they believe that the development of science and research in the country will be harmed, and that in the long term, a brain drain is liable to ensue. As recently described by senior members of the Russian Academy of Sciences, since Vladimir Putin again assumed the presidency in 2012, the rate of intellectuals leaving Russia [has quintupled](#).

### **Power Struggles in the Government Leadership**

A series of political measures and rapid changes in legislation in 2020 brought the power struggle in the Russian government to a halt, restrained the open rivalry between interest groups competing for control, and supposedly put an end to the struggle for the future succession. The continued decline in the government's popularity, however; the public's growing lack of confidence in the ruling elite; and the inability to advance long-term solutions to the social crises pervading Russia have reignited the substantial disagreements among the government leadership. Most of the struggles concern relations between Russia and the West, and focus on the question of whether to take a tough line against the West or take constructive action through negotiations. For example, the Minister of Foreign Affairs [Sergey Lavrov](#) has spoken about a new Cold War between Russia and the United States, and Security Council of Russia Secretary [Nikolai Patrushev](#) has accused the West of hundreds of years of subversion against Russia.

Power struggles in the government leadership:

- A. Utilization of Russian ultranationalism – on February 17, 2021, President Putin [decried](#) the extensive use of the old nationalistic call "Rossia dlia russkikh" (Russia for the Russians), calling it "peshchernyi natsionalizm" (cave nationalism). This expression can be interpreted as an effort to put a stop to the uncontrolled close association of circles in the government elite with ultranationalist groups.
- B. On March 24, 2021, President Putin [signed](#) an order eliminating age restrictions on senior government officials appointed to their position by the country's leader. It appears that the government is trying to retain its veteran team because of its familiarity with the rules of the game. This order, however, can also be interpreted in two other ways: as a measure designed to strengthen the president's supporters in the country's senior management backbone and also as a way of relieving the pressure from groups in the current government that are competing for control at the top, and whose representatives hold senior state positions, and are liable to interpret their removal, however, legal, as an attempt to undermine their status and influence.

Some believe that the current power struggles in the government leadership result from the weakening of Putin's status. This weakness results from his inability to advance practical solutions to the crises afflicting Russia and his alleged lack of toughness in the developing confrontation with the West. Putin's weakness is augmenting the ambition of his rivals to improve their political positions of influence in preparation for the battles to succeed him when these battles are renewed. No conventional succession or survival contest is involved, however – most of Russia's government leadership belongs to the generation that first became active towards the end of the Soviet era, and is naturally nearing the end of its time at the top. In contrast to prevailing practice in the Western world, however, this leadership is taking steps to leave the status and rule that it has won to those in the new generation who share similar attitudes, thereby quietly [creating a kind of "new ruling nobility,"](#) accompanied by as few shocks as possible.

### **Social Stability**

In order to maintain social stability, Russia has recently taken action in two main spheres: the struggle against the coronavirus and the economic situation.

Russia has been hit very hard by the Covid-19 epidemic. Although it was one of the first countries to grant regulatory approval for a vaccine against the virus (Sputnik V), it ultimately suffered from an ambivalent attitude towards the virus from the very beginning of the epidemic. On the one hand, it disregarded the real state of infection, while on the other , it fostered conspiracy theories and denigrated the medical struggle against the virus in the Western countries in order to prevent the use of competing vaccines. To this should be added the deepening lack of confidence in the authorities among the general public in Russia. The result is that a low proportion of people in Russia have been vaccinated, and many people are opposed to vaccination.

In a [survey](#) conducted on May 10, 2021 by the Levada Center (an independent polling institute that is the most esteemed and credible of Russian pollsters), 62% of the respondents did not wish to be vaccinated with the Sputnik V Russian vaccine. This proportion has remained constant since February 2021. The proportion of those expressing willingness to be vaccinated fell from 30% to 26%, probably because some of these people have already been vaccinated. A similar trend was [also reported in a survey](#) by the WCIOM Center (regarded as associated with the government). The



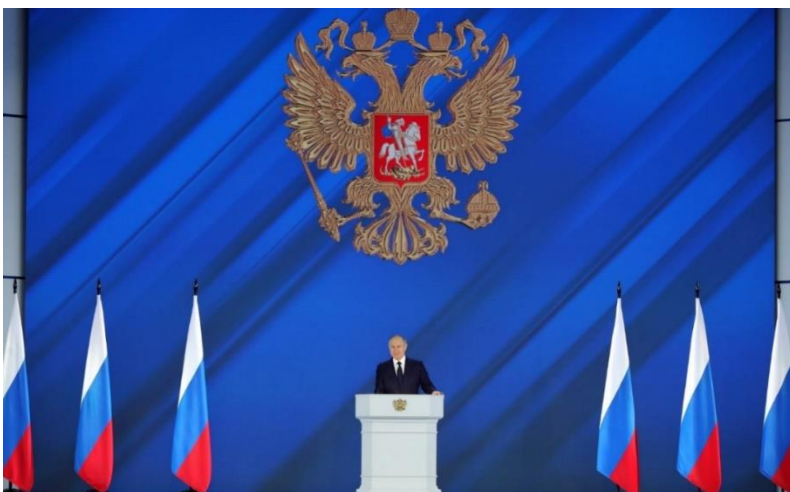
information provided by the authorities about the proportion of those vaccinated is also faulty. In April 2021, Russian Deputy Prime Minister for Social Policy, Labor, Health and Pension Provision Tatyana Golikova [reported](#) that just over seven million people in Russia had been vaccinated – 4.8% of the population. On May 10, however, President Putin [stated](#) that the proportion of people vaccinated had doubled to 21% in two weeks. These two statements do not logically contradict each other, but they are inconsistent with the slow pace of vaccination described by professional parties.

The level of infection in Russia is not improving. The number of daily infections has been stable at a high level of approximately 9,000 for many months. A general 10-day vacation was declared in early 2021 in order to reduce the extent of infection; furthermore, senior government officials have also begun to warn against the spread of the virus. Statistical data highlight the gravity of the spread of Covid-19 and its effect on society – [according to recently published reports](#), the death rate in Russia in the early months of 2021 was 26% higher than in the corresponding period in 2020. Some believe that this rise reflects an unreported increase in death from Covid-19; the officially reported number of fatalities from the virus is fairly low. After reported life expectancy reached 71.1 years, following an increase over several years, this increase has now come to an end.

In addition to causing a decline in the medical situation in Russia, the Covid-19 epidemic has also had a negative impact on the economic situation in the country. During the past year, prices of basic foodstuffs have been spiraling out of control. The authorities have even been forced several times to [ban exports of buckwheat](#), a measure that usually indicates problems in the food industry. Already in March, 58% of the population [reported](#) that the rise in food prices was the problem that worried them the most. In addition, Dr. Yaroslav Kuzminov, rector of HSE University, Moscow's leading school of economics, [warned](#) on May 10 that the economic situation was posing a genuine threat of general impoverishment to the middle class in Russia.

The authorities' response to the economic problems, particularly the statements of Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin, [in which he blamed](#) "greedy business owners" for the rise in prices, indicate as of now, the government is striving to minimize the political damage, without offering any practical professional solutions.

### Summary and Evaluation



The speech by President Putin to both houses of parliament, April 21.

Source: [Kremlin website](#).

In his speech to both houses of the Russian parliament (The Federal Assembly) on April 21, 2021, [President Vladimir Putin listed](#) the main problems facing Russia in the internal sphere: the Covid-19 epidemic, socioeconomic stability, and public protest. While expectations were high for the speech to be focused on the political realm, eventually most of it was devoted to internal issues, and expressed the government's position in advance of the

parliamentary elections – an announcement of election economics and distribution of grants to

several population segments. It seems that Putin administration believes that these measures will help ensure its victory and maintain its legitimacy. As of now, the handling of these three problems is aimed at preventing threats to political and governmental stability and further fanning the power struggles among the governing elite.

The government's harsh response to the social protests, and its efforts to control damage in the economic sphere, including blaming a third party, were designed to ensure its victory in the Duma elections in September. Winning the elections will give the government continued legitimacy in terms of its legal status, and enable it to devote all of its strength to the continuation of the struggle over the succession. At the same time, the objective of minimizing the other "background noises," such as the social protests, the economic problems, and the effects of Covid-19, are giving rise to genuine concern about the government's ability to contend with the main current domestic challenges.

## Russian Foreign Policy (vis-à-vis the Major Powers and in the Middle East)

### United States and Russia – Rollercoaster Relations

Relations between Russia and the United States in the spring of 2021 resembled a rollercoaster. It sometimes appeared that relations had gone completely off the rails and were in freefall, especially after President Biden [agreed](#) in a March 17 television interview with the interviewer's statement: "Putin is a murderer." Moscow took this as a national insult, and [recalled](#) its ambassador in Washington for consultations (he has not yet returned to the United States).

On March 15, the Biden administration [announced](#) that it had finished its policy assessment towards Russia following the Russian intervention in the 2020 elections in the United States, the cyberattack against the Solar Winds company, and the violation of human rights in Russia. It was decided to enforce sanctions on several Russian government agencies, and to expel 10 Russian intelligence operatives present in the United States under diplomatic cover. Although the administration's sanctions and explanations prepared the ground for more painful measures against Moscow in the future, [no heavy price was actually exacted](#) immediately. Furthermore, while the restrictions on investments in Russian bonds set a precedent, they were [limited](#), and their implementation was delayed until June in order to give Russia time to organize and minimize the consequences.

Russia quickly responded on April 16 by applying [severe counter-sanctions](#): American diplomats were expelled, a list of sanctions against senior Biden administration officials was published, it was "recommended" to Washington to recall its ambassador for consultations (there has been no ambassador in either capital in the past two months), and more severe restrictions were imposed on the number of American diplomats in Moscow. These sanctions led in late April to an almost complete halt in American consular activity in Russia. The severe restrictions imposed by presidential order on the activity of foreign diplomatic missions led the United States to [close](#), on May 17 its consulate in Yekaterinburg, its last remaining mission outside Moscow.

At the same time, on April 14, just before instituting sanctions, President Biden [initiated](#) a talk with President Putin, and invited him to a summit in Geneva on June 16 to discuss the state of relations between the two countries. Putin also participated in an online climate summit hosted by Biden on April 24. The Kremlin [confirmed](#) Putin's participation in the Geneva summit only a month after the



A meeting between the Russian foreign minister and the American secretary of state in Iceland on May 19.

Source: [Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website](#).

invitation (on May 25), but senior Russian and American officials have held several rounds of preparatory meetings.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and his American counterpart, Anthony Blinken, [met](#) face-to-face for the first time in Iceland on May 19-20. The mood was good, and the talks were fairly fruitful. On the eve of the meeting, the American administration exercised its special authority [and removed](#) sanctions against the Russian-German company building the controversial Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline connecting Russia and Germany. This was perceived in Russia as a positive gesture, following which a personal [meeting](#) between US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and his Russian counterpart, Nikolai Patrushev, took place in a calm atmosphere.

A ransomware attack on systems of Colonial Pipeline, a company that owns a pipeline for transporting fuel from the southeastern United States to the northeast, took place in the first half of May. The attack shut down the pipeline, resulting in a severe fuel shortage in the northeastern US. Russian hackers were behind the ransomware attack, and a [dispute](#) began in the community of experts about the Russian government's responsibility for their activity. The affair overshadowed the developing American Russian dialogue – the United States expressed doubt about the usefulness of the dialogue with Moscow on cyberspace, but the Russians are demanding that the discussion extend to [all](#) of the outstanding problems between the two countries, including this subject.

#### **China and Russia moving closer to each other**



A meeting between the Russian and Chinese foreign ministers in China on March 22.

Source: [Russian Foreign Ministry website](#)

Given the Biden administration's growing focus on strategic competition with China, Russia is choosing to present a common front with Beijing on the question of reducing American dominance in the international arena. The two countries also prefer to downplay the major conflicts of interest between them. Foreign Minister Lavrov visited China on March 22, several days before the first American-Chinese meeting in Alaska (which featured an "unpleasant mood").

The dialogue between diplomats from Russia and China has been stepped up in recent months, including on issues pertaining to the Middle East, among them the question of Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On May 25, the day following the meeting between Patrushev and Sullivan, Chinese Communist Party Central Foreign Affairs Commission director Yang Jiechi [visited](#) Moscow. Due to coronavirus restrictions, President Putin's talk with Jiechi took place through a video call. The



meetings between senior Russian and Chinese officials, immediately after one of the parties met with senior Biden administration officials, were giving the impression that Moscow and Beijing are closely coordinating their positions.

### **Growing Tension in Relations with the European Union**

While American-Russian relations are following their rollercoaster path, the tension between Russia and its European neighbors continues to mount. In addition to criticism of Moscow's measures to suppress its internal opposition, the situation in Belarus and relations between Russia and Europe have deteriorated as a result of the [discovery](#) by Czech intelligence that Russian military intelligence operatives were responsible for an explosion in a munitions warehouse in the Czech Republic in 2014 in which two people were killed. The affair resulted in a large wave of expulsions of Russian intelligence personnel residing in European countries under diplomatic cover, in response to which Russia expelled European diplomats, instituted sanctions against senior European Union officials, and [published](#) on May 17 a "list of countries hostile to Russia," containing, as of now, the Czech Republic and the United States. The affair also caused [political tension](#) within the Czech Republic between pro-Russian President Milos Zeman and the government, and the [exclusion](#) of Russian atomic corporation ROSATOM from a tender to build a nuclear reactor in the Czech Republic – an issue that has been under consideration for many years.

The developments in Ukraine and Belarus also contributed to the increased tension between Russia and Europe. [A large concentration of Russian forces](#) near the border with Ukraine has aroused concern among many in the West that Moscow is liable to increase its military intervention in the country. This resulted in intensive Russian-America-European-Ukrainian dialogue in an attempt to avoid the risk of escalation. Europe also took a dim view of [Russia's backing](#) for the arrest by the Belarussian government of an opposition blogger taken off a plane flying through Belarussian airspace.

A UK multi-year strategy document [published](#) in late April classified Russia as one of the main threats to UK security. The document mentioned no areas of possible cooperation between London and Moscow. According to the document, Britain is an extreme indicator of the attitude of European countries to Russia.

In recent months, Russian vaccine diplomacy has been the focus of a dispute pitting Moscow against the European Union leadership and many European Union capitals (although some of them were willing to approve the temporary use of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine, in contrast to the European Union's views). Russia has encountered an obstacle in recent weeks, after the regulators in the Czech Republic and Brazil [refrained](#) from approving the Russian vaccine. A former executive in the European Medical Association (EMA) predicted that Russia would find it difficult to ignore the decision by these two regulators, especially given the [doubts](#) raised on May 12 in a letter to prestigious medical journal "The Lancet" about the reliability of the experimental data from the Russian institute that developed the Gamaleya vaccine.

It will be recalled that a previous article in "The Lancet" in [February](#) found that the interim results of Sputnik V trials showed that the vaccine was 92% effective, thereby buttressing Russia's efforts to have the vaccine approved in 66 countries and to conclude many agreements to produce it outside Russia. Despite intensive Russian efforts to market the vaccine, however, including an aggressive consciousness campaign, Sputnik V exports currently total only [16.3 million doses](#), and

undertakings to buy it for foreign countries totaled 205 million doses. Beyond the regulatory problems, the low numbers are also attributable to difficulties in mass production and continued lack of confidence in the vaccine outside Russia, given the low number of people vaccinated in Russia itself (a little over 10% of the population).

Although the reasons for the tension between Russia and countries in the European Union differ from country to country, it appears that the thread connecting all of the developments at the present time is Europe's desire to influence the Biden administration's views and strengthen their bargaining power vis-à-vis Moscow. A summit of European Union leaders decided [to leave the tough policy towards Russia unchanged](#), but demanded that the European Commission prepare a report in the coming weeks to be used as a basis for renewed discussion of Russia's relations with the European Union. French President Macron [stated](#) that a new approach was needed, because the sanctions were no longer affecting Moscow.

### "Constructive Ambiguity" in the Middle East



Ambassador Ulyanov's meeting with the American envoy for the Vienna talks, Mali.  
Source: [Ulyanov twitter](#)

Recent months have featured Russian activity in the Middle East in relative cooperation with the Western countries. Especially prominent was the change (in comparison with the Trump administration's term in office) in the dynamic between Russia and the United States in negotiations with Iran on the nuclear agreement and during Operation Guardian of the Walls and the broader Israeli-Palestinian crisis. It is clear that despite the differences in views, Russian diplomats are acting in a [businesslike](#) manner to bridge the disputes between the United States and Iran, and between other players in the Vienna talks on the nuclear agreement.

They are doing this despite the tension that has arisen between Moscow and Tehran following the [leaking](#) of recordings of Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif, in which he accused Moscow of attempting to prevent the original nuclear agreement in 2015. Russian Ambassador to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Mikhail Ulyanov, who is leading the negotiations on behalf of Russia, [stated](#) on April 27 that a return to the Iranian nuclear agreement would be the best way of safeguarding Israel's security interests.

During the recent Israeli-Palestinian crisis and Operation Guardian of the Walls, Russia strove to maintain public neutrality. Representative of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other Russian officials were careful in their many statements to avoid putting the blame on either Israel or the Palestinians, and called for a renewal of the dialogue between the two sides in the direction

of a two-state solution. Russian diplomats kept in contact with both sides, and with other international players, including [Hamas](#). Russia took part in the UN Security Council discussions and in meetings of the international Quartet and its statements. Russia's main initiative is to convene a meeting between the Quartet's foreign ministers, the "Arab Quartet," and the parties to the conflict in order to restart negotiations on a permanent settlement.

Although Moscow played no direct role in ending the hostilities, Moscow can take satisfaction from the fact that the Israeli-Palestinian issue is once again on the agenda of the institutions in which Russia is involved: the UN Security Council and the international Quartet. Furthermore, in the months since the Abraham Accords were signed, Russia has emphasized that their contribution to a solution of the Palestinian problem is limited, and that the efforts by Israel and the Trump administration to marginalize the problem had been unsuccessful. Russia takes a positive view of Washington's renewed commitment to the two-state solution, and this issue expands the limited list of international topics on which Moscow and Washington are likely to hold a constructive dialogue.

Despite the many IDF attacks against Iranian targets in Syria in March-April, when the Vienna talks between Iran and the major powers were taking place, no significant change is evident in Moscow's attitude towards the IDF's activity, which remains what it was before – 'turning a blind eye'. At the same time, when reports increased of Israel attacks against Iranian ships, Sputnik, the official Russian news agency, [reported](#) that Russia, Syria, and Iran had agreed that Russian warships would guard Iranian ships transporting oil for the Syrian regime – probably intended to deliver a warning message to Israel.

Russia helped the Assad regime succeed in the Syrian presidential elections on May 26 in an attempt to ensure maximum [legitimacy](#) for a regime that guarantees Russian interests in the country, and through it, in the entire Middle East. Russia also acted to gain the support of the Sunni countries – United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt – for the return of Damascus to the family of Arab peoples.

Russian diplomacy has awakened in recent months, and is once again active in the Middle East. The Russian foreign minister conducted a number of visits in the region (in Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Egypt, and Iran), and a series of regional leaders visited Moscow. Of particular note were the [rapprochement](#) between Russia and the Government of National Accord in Libya and Russia's [growing involvement](#) in the political order in Lebanon, which were designed to promote Russia's economic interests in these two countries. Relations between Russia and Turkey continue to be very tense: in addition to a dialogue on the senior level about the situation in Syria, Libya, and the Southern Caucasus, Moscow has expressed dismay at the warm reception given by Turkish President Erdogan to his Ukrainian counterpart, Zelensky, and [suspended](#) Russia's tourist ties with Turkey, ostensibly due to the difficult epidemiological situation in Turkey. This suspension is doing serious damage to the Turkish economy.

In April, "official Sudanese sources" [leaked](#) information that Khartoum had suspended the agreement to lease part of Port Sudan to Russia on the grounds that the agreement had been signed with the previous government of ousted President Omar al-Bashir. Commentators all over the world and in the region hinted that the United States was behind Sudan's action. It was later [reported](#) that the Sudanese were willing to restrict the agreement to anchoring rights for civilian ships, without a permanent military presence, because of concern about a conflict of interest between them and the

United States. It is important to note that in November 2020, Moscow [gave extensive media coverage](#) to the ratification of the agreement to lease part of Port Sudan for 25 years, and claimed that this had been agreed with the Sudanese government. Although what went on behind the scenes is unknown, the impression is that the Russians wanted to take advantage of a period "between administrations" in the United States to execute a quick maneuver that would consolidate a permanent Russian military presence on the continent. For now, at least, it appears that this attempt has been unsuccessful.

### Summary and Evaluation

Russia has been showing a belligerent and inflexible face to the West in recent months. President Putin's [annual speech](#) to both houses of the Russian parliament on April 21 included a short but pithy section on foreign and defense affairs. He stated his readiness for friendly relations with all of the world's countries, but promised an "asymmetrical, rapid and harsh" response, insisted that Russia had justice on its side, and warned its enemies, "We'll decide for ourselves in each case where the red line is."

The Biden administration has highlighted its hard line against Russia, and Biden used the early months of his presidency to state this policy change in order to differentiate his attitude from that of President Trump. At the same time, Biden wants his presidency to focus on issues that do not involve Russia, such as internal reform and competition with China, and is signaling his willingness to stabilize relations with Moscow. Biden has no illusions about the possibility of warm relations with Russia – relations will continue to be hostile. He recognizes Russia's capability to hamper US policy, however, and is willing to cooperate in specific matters on terms that are useful to Washington.

It appears that the American-Russian summit in Geneva will result in a resurrection of the political dialogue on the issue of "strategic stability," with an emphasis on nuclear arms control – an issue avoided by Trump and the only area in which the United States is willing to deal with Russia on equal terms. It is possible that the two sides will agree on a mutual removal of restrictions on their diplomatic-consular staff, after these restrictions reached an unprecedented level. They can also discuss other matters – Iran, North Korea, Syria, climate – but it appears that the substantial and explosive disputes concerning the architecture of European security, relations between Russia and the NATO alliance, the issue of Ukraine, and the ideology of Western liberalism will maintain the high level of tension at the Putin-Biden summit, even if it is successful.

The hardline attitude to Russia attributed to the Biden administration when he took office aroused concern that he would demand that Israel limit its ties with Moscow in a way that would make it difficult for Jerusalem to maintain its interests in Syria. The Biden administration's assertive but businesslike attitude towards Russia has been emerging in recent months, added to the low-key backing it has been giving Israel (as reflected in Operation Guardian of the Walls), will help Israel preserve its freedom of action in military activity in Syria and in the dialogue with Moscow about the Iranian presence there.



## The Post-Soviet Space

### Belarus – A Black Hole in the Heart of Europe



Western planes refrain entering Belarus airspace following the forced landing of Ryanair plane and opposition activist's arrest

It appears that the attempts in recent months by the opposition leaders in Belarus to renew the popular uprising in the country have failed completely. Nevertheless, the protest is continuing, and is adopting a semi-underground mode of action – in Telegram groups or short low-profile marches with few participants on the outskirts of cities and in neighborhoods of Minsk, the capital, where the support for opposition to the regime is more widespread. For its part, the Lukashenko government is employing measures to suppress public opposition, for example [arrests](#) of opposition members, journalists who are not part of the establishment media, and independent opinion-makers active mainly on social networks and Telegram channels, using various pretexts. In addition, several opposition leaders were exiled or forced to emigrate.

At the same time, during Spring 2021, Lukashenko and his associates have been careful to refrain from using real physical violence on a large scale against their opponents, because they realized that overly violent suppression was liable to bring the masses back out on the streets. In addition to suppression, the regime is also conducting intensive vitriolic propaganda that included both [open and implied anti-Semitism](#).

In the second half of May 2021, a fundamental change occurred in the patterns of the regime's actions against its opponents.

- A. On May 18, policy forces [broke](#) into the offices of tut.by, the most popular independent news portal in Belarus and shut it down.
- B. On May 21, the authorities [reported](#) the death in prison of Vitold Ashurak, an opposition activist sentenced to five years in prison.
- C. On May 23, Belarus authorities [forced](#) a civilian plane of Irish airline Ryanair to land in Minsk, alleging that Hamas operatives had planted a bomb on it. Roman Protasevich, former editor-in-chief of Nexta, the most popular opposition Telegram channel, was on board the plane.

Protasevich, who was wanted for questioning in Belarus on charges of "subversive activity," was taken off the plane and detained by the authorities.

[Responses](#) in the European Union and Western countries to the forced landing of the Ryanair plane in Minsk were extremely negative. Some of the Western media termed the act "[air piracy](#)." A number of countries and airlines [ordered](#) their planes to avoid flying through Belarus airspace, and some countries ordered Belarus national airline Belavia not to land at destinations in their countries. The Russian government, on the other hand, [backed](#) the Lukashenko government's official narrative. It is unclear, however, how far Russia will go in supporting Belarus politically and economically, especially in view of Russia's [renewed](#) dialogue with the West and the United States.

This series of events reflects an escalating trend in the Lukashenko government's willingness to employ active means, including violence, in order to crush any real oppositional activity, even at the price of a major confrontation with Western countries. These events also indicate that at this stage, Lukashenko feels safe in suppressing his opponents at home.

Several future scenarios in this area are possible:

- A. Continued persecution of opposition groups, backed by Russia, combined with highlighting and escalation of the confrontation with the European Union countries and Western countries in general. As of now, it appears that this is the most likely scenario in the immediate future.
- B. A successful renewal of mass protests against the regime by the opposition groups. Such a situation, if channeled effectively by the regime's opponents, is likely to culminate in regime change. Russian military intervention in support of Lukashenko is likely in such a scenario. As of now, this scenario appears having low probability.
- C. Parties in the regime who wish to avoid the political and economic consequences of Lukashenko's actions overthrow him in one way or another. Regime change is also possible in this situation. Russian military intervention on Lukashenko's side is also possible in this scenario. Such a scenario is not very likely, but is also not impossible.

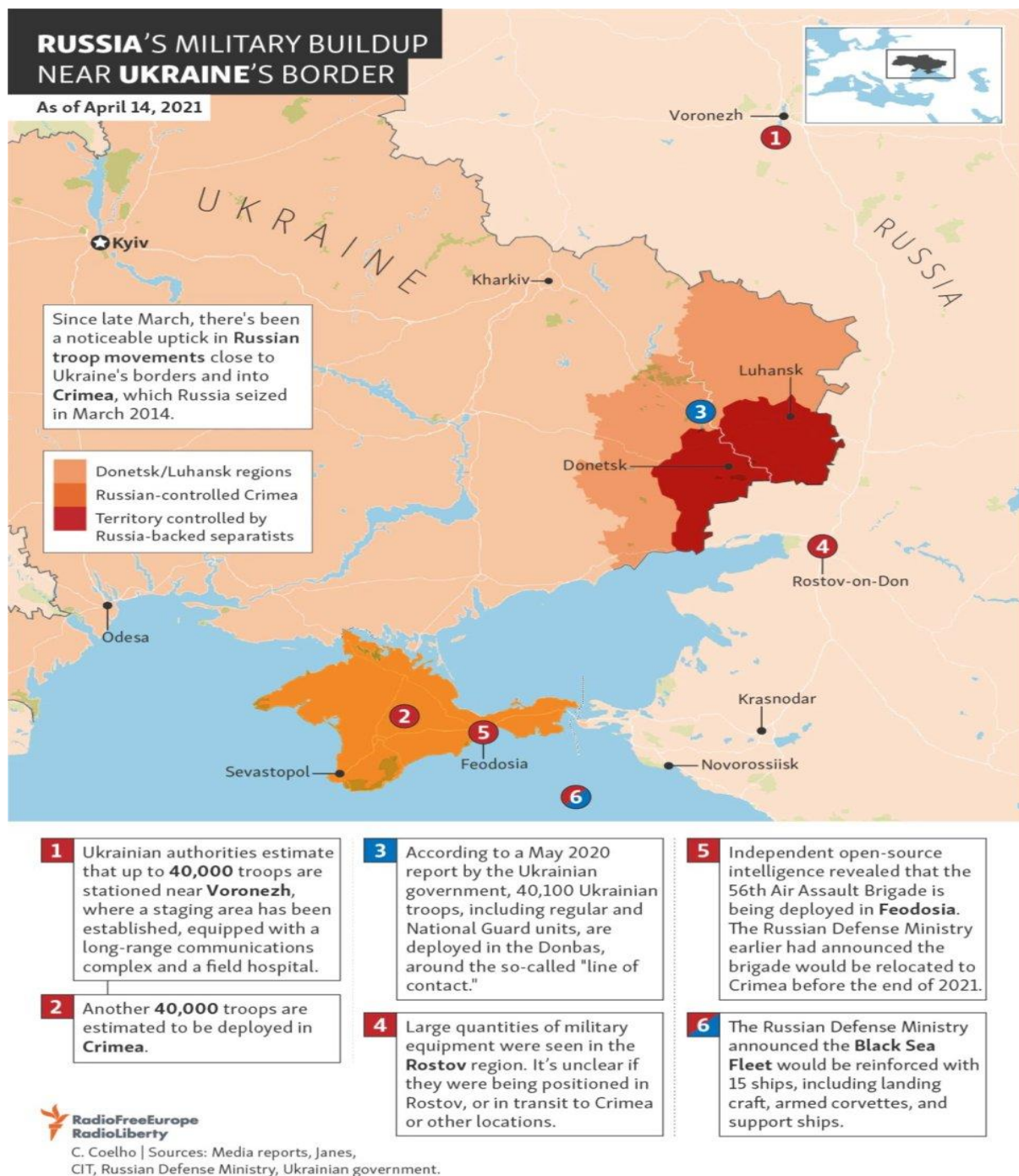
It appears that the main factors that will shape the developments in Belarus are the extent of Russian backing for Lukashenko and his actions, the West's willingness to exact a real (not a token) price from Lukashenko, and how much the Belarussian public is repelled by the regime's actions, or is willing to put up with them.

### **The Russia-Ukraine Crisis**

Since early April 2021, Russia has been unexpectedly stepping up the presence of its military forces near the international border close to the disputed areas in eastern Ukraine. Russia stated that it had moved its forces for the purpose of conducting military exercises aimed at testing the military readiness of the Russian army, following the NATO exercises conducted in Europe in March. United States and NATO sources said that this was the largest military presence in the area since the Russian occupation of the Crimean peninsula and the beginning of fighting in the Donbas region in April 2014. Ukrainian Minister of Defense Andrii Taran notified the European Parliament that the Russian forces on the Ukrainian border and in the Crimea numbered an estimated 110,000 soldiers. Russia also sent warships to reinforce its Black Sea fleet, which is based in the Crimea. Moreover, Moscow accused Kiev of planning an attack against the separatist forces in Donbas, and warned that it would intervene militarily to protect Russian citizens in the region, if necessary – referring to

residents of the Donetsk and Luhansk separatist districts who have accepted Russian passports in recent years.

At the end of the crisis, on April 22, following weeks of tension, Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu ordered several of the Russian units to return to their bases. In his speech in the Crimea, Shoigu said that the goal of "checking the readiness of the forces" has been achieved. In effect, this ended the crisis, but it is important to understand the reasons why it occurred, and the goals that each side tried to attain through it.



It appears that the leaders of Russia and Ukraine [were taking advantage of the confrontation to create a connection with the new American administration](#). Support and legitimacy from the West, led by the United States, is important for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky both domestically

and for improving Ukraine's position in the international arena. Already in February 2021, Ukraine imposed sanctions against businessman Viktor Medvedchuk, a close friend of Russian President Vladimir Putin and leader of Za Zhittia (For Life), the pro-Russian political party in Ukraine, on suspicion of funding terrorist activity against the state. The American embassy in Ukraine expressed support for this action.

At the same time, relations between NATO and Ukraine were getting closer. In his meeting with Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg cited the importance of Ukraine's contribution to NATO's activity, and emphasized that Ukraine's status as an Enhanced Opportunities Partner would deepen the cooperation between the two sides. There is no doubt that the closer ties to NATO contributed to the creation of the crisis between Russia and Ukraine. During the crisis, Ukraine stressed and even exaggerated the danger from Russia in order to ensure American and Western aid. United States Secretary of State Anthony Blinken promised American economic and military support for Ukraine. In his visit to Kiev in early May, Blinken cited the support of President Biden's administration for Ukraine's territorial integrity.

Russian President Vladimir Putin took advantage of the crisis to strengthen his direct communications channels with the United States. These channels resulted in the beginning of preparations for the summit between the two presidents. Judging by how the crisis developed, it appears that Putin never intended to begin a full-scale war against Ukraine at this stage, as indicated by the fact that he did not conceal his military maneuvers.

### **The "Minsk Agreements" – Another Bone of Contention between the Parties**

"[Minsk Agreement 1](#)" was signed on September 5, 2014, when the first round of active warfare in the Donbas region in Ukraine ended. The parties signing the agreement were Ukraine, the Russian Federation, the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR), the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR), and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). "Minsk Agreement 1" was never implemented, and several months later, on February 15, 2015, Russia, Germany, France, and Ukraine signed "Minsk Agreement 2." In addition to the security arrangements, this agreement provided for the restoration of full control over Ukraine's borders throughout the disputed region to the Ukrainian government, starting on the first day after the local elections and ending on the date on which the comprehensive political settlement takes effect (local elections in certain parts of the Donetsk region and Luhansk, and the constitutional reform), to be completed by the end of 2015. This condition is extremely bad for Ukraine, because its control over its border with Russia will be restored only at the end of the process, after the local elections in the separatist regions. Many Ukrainians regard the "Minsk Agreements" as a betrayal of their national interests. In effect, many of the terms will damage Ukraine politically, and former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, who signed the agreement, therefore refrained from completing it, and the agreement has been suspended since May 2018.

Russia, on the other hand, wishes to save the agreement. Moscow is using Ukraine's fate and future as a bargaining chip with the West. In order to retain the agreement as is, it is exerting constant pressure on Kiev to implement the agreement. In order to bridge the differences between the two positions, President Zelensky proposed reversing the order of the actions in the "Minsk Agreements" by putting control of the borders at the top of the agenda. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov reject the idea out of hand.



The two sides have an interest in preserving the status quo. Russia wants it because continuation of two independent separatist entities will in effect prevent Ukraine from entering any Western political or military framework (especially the European Union and NATO). Ukraine wants it in order to avoid a frontal conflict with Russia, in which its position would be militarily hopeless. Nevertheless, the ongoing threat to Kiev is increasing the willingness of the European Union and the United States to support Ukraine both economically and militarily. It should also be taken into account that the absence of shared Western interests in Ukraine and the lack of interest on the part of Europe (particularly Germany and France) in escalating the situation and in a worsening of relations with Moscow will hamper any effort to build a broad-based anti-Russian coalition. The main current supporters of such a coalition are Poland and the Baltic states. If the Western countries fail to form a united front against Russia, we can expect a new round of tension. At the same time, it is doubtful whether Moscow wants a new confrontation before the September Russian parliamentary elections are over, unless such a confrontation will serve its immediate interest.

### The Conflict on the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan Border



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C. Coelho | Sources: RFE/RL's Tajik and Kyrgyz services

On April 28, 2021, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan accused each other of beginning a violent conflict, including the use of firearms, along their disputed border in the Batken-Golovnoi region. The incidents followed the installing of surveillance equipment in the water distribution center in Golovnoi, close to the Tajikistan border police station. According to the 1989 map dividing the territory, which both countries accept, the region belongs to Tajikistan, but Kyrgyzstan is allowed to use the water source there. The fighting finally ended on April 30. The number of people killed and the damage in the violence were unprecedented – at least 36 Kyrgyz and 18 Tajik civilians were killed, and over 200 wounded. Dozens of homes, stores, and other buildings were destroyed or damaged, and tens of thousands of people were left homeless.

When the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, there were many border incidents in Central Asia, often involving shooting. The recent deadly conflicts, however, have greatly changed the way that the two countries view each other, and this new perspective is affecting the two countries' leaders. Before the recent events, violent border incidents were always local, and hostile actions usually took place near water sources or construction sites of roads, fences, and roadblocks. Following the recent

round of fighting, the Kyrgyz believe that Tajikistan had attacked Kyrgyzstan and was responsible for Kyrgyzstan's large losses, and that Kyrgyzstan had done little to stop this aggression. This belief is having a negative impact on the standing of President-elect Sadyr Japarov.

The conflict is also having international repercussions. The role of Russia in the region is very important, primarily because Turkey was inciting a conflict, having an interest in taking over water sources in Tajikistan, while Russia wants to be the dominant power in the region, especially in view of China's economic influence. Russia was also the mediator who brought about a resolution of the crisis. Thus, Tajikistan President Emomali Rahmon was the only one invited to the victory parade in Moscow on May 9. This invitation was a clear message to the Kyrgyz president that Russia would not allow him to violate the territorial integrity of any country in the region.

Russia regards Central Asia as its backyard, and therefore does not want other players to enter the region. The hard line of the United States in its general relations with Russia led the latter to take a tough stance in its spheres of influence, especially in view of Russia's assessment that the United States would try to penetrate the region ahead of its development conflict with China. It will become clear in the near future whether Russia will change its views as a result of thaw in its relations with Washington, due to the American's wish to gain access to the region.