

BRIEFING
PAPER

406

March 2025



Russia's war dilemma

Can the Kremlin seek peace without losing face?

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INTERNATIONAL
AFFAIRS

BRIEFING PAPER 406 / March 2025

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Can the Kremlin seek peace without losing face?

Summary

- The Kremlin appears to be cautiously testing public sentiment on potential peace negotiations, using state-controlled media and elite statements to gauge reactions.
- Support for peace talks is growing, particularly among regime supporters, reflecting increasing war fatigue. This shift is largely shaped by Putin's narrative that the war is nearing its objectives, reinforcing the perception of a strategic victory.
- Most Russians remain insulated from the direct consequences of the war, but exposure is gradually increasing through family connections. As a result, concerns about the country's stability and the long-term costs of the war are rising.
- Even if peace negotiations take place, Vladimir Putin – not the military – will claim the political benefits by framing the outcome as a victory. Despite the war, Russia's military elite has not significantly increased its political influence, and public trust in the armed forces has declined.

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Introduction

As another tragic anniversary of the Russo-Ukrainian war passes, it stands as a stark reminder of the devastating consequences. Hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian civilians have been killed or injured, and countless families have been torn apart by the war. According to UN OHCHR reports, at least 139 civilians were killed and 738 injured in January 2024 alone,¹ suggesting a consistently high rate of casualties.

Russia continues to demand recognition of its territorial claims, whereas Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has suggested a potential land exchange, offering Ukraine-held parts of Russia's Kursk region in exchange for Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories, provided that US President Donald Trump facilitates negotiations.² Trump, the Kremlin, and Ukraine appear to be exploring options for a pause in the war, but in the meantime, military actions continue on the ground.

Against this sombre backdrop, Russian opinion polls suggest a growing inclination towards peace negotiations, with 53% supporting a transition to diplomatic talks (see Figure 1). Even among those who generally support the Russian regime and remain unwavering in their confidence in Putin as a leader, recent polls indicate a preference for diplomatic negotiations.

This Briefing Paper argues that while the Kremlin maintains firm control over the narrative surrounding

the war, the Russian leadership may be strategically adjusting its rhetoric and policies in response to shifting public sentiment over the war. The exclusion of European and Ukrainian leaders from ongoing US-Russia negotiations further reinforces Putin's image within Russia, facilitated by the fact that the majority of Russian households have not been affected by the war. Moreover, if a peace deal is reached, Russia's regime will face the challenge of integrating war veterans into society and the workforce.

This paper analyses shifts in Russian public opinion on the war in Ukraine and how the Kremlin is adjusting to these changes in public sentiment. The argument unfolds as follows: First, the paper examines the connection between elite signalling and public opinion. Second, it explores changes in public support for the war and peace talks, as well as actual exposure to the conflict. Finally, it addresses the challenge posed by war veterans, including the Kremlin's suggestion that they could assume positions of power, and examines whether Russians would support such leadership.

Signs of war fatigue: The Kremlin's calculated shift on peace talks

There are indications that the Russian leadership is cautiously testing public sentiment regarding potential peace talks. State-controlled media have subtly introduced discussions about negotiations, and some elite figures have hinted at the possibility of a settlement. For instance, on February 9, 2025, Vasily Nebenzya, Russia's Representative to the United Nations, stated that Russia is awaiting "appropriate signals" from Washington to establish contacts. He affirmed Russia's willingness to discuss Ukraine "on equal terms" and, while considering Russian interests, indicated a readiness for dialogue under

1 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN OHCHR). (2025) *Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: January 2025*. UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, February 2025. United Nations. <https://ukraine.ohchr.org/en/Protection-of-Civilians-in-Armed-Conflict-January-2025>.

2 Melkozerova, Veronika. (2025) "Zelenskyy Proposes to Trade Land with Putin, Offers to Return Kursk", *POLITICO*, 11 February 2025. <https://www.politico.eu/article/volodymyr-zelenskyy-russia-donald-trump-trade-kursk-progress-war-drones/>.

Russian public support for peace negotiations regarding Ukraine over time



Figure 1. Russian public support for peace negotiations regarding Ukraine over time

Source: Russian Field. (2024) "Military Operation in Ukraine: 16th Wave (November 7–12, 2024)." *Russian Field*, 18 November 2024. <https://russianfield.com/svo16>.

specific conditions. Additionally, in August 2024, billionaire industrialist Oleg Deripaska called for an unconditional ceasefire.³ His statement drew harsh criticism from pro-war figures, including Alexander Dugin, who accused him of betrayal, while the Kremlin and state media largely ignored his remarks. These declarations may serve strategic purposes, such as buying time to strengthen military capabilities, rather than signalling a genuine commitment to peace. While these signals remain ambiguous, they reflect an awareness within the Kremlin that war fatigue may be taking hold, even among regime loyalists like Nebenzya and Deripaska. Economic strains, the protracted nature of the war, and concerns about further military escalation likely contribute to this shifting landscape.

This shift towards peace may indicate increasing discontent with the ongoing war and suggests that

segments of the public – despite their alignment with the Kremlin – are open to the prospect of ending hostilities through dialogue. As a result, Vladimir Putin has framed the war's objectives in a way that suggests that they are close to being achieved. The Kremlin's narrative has evolved slightly, increasingly implying that Russia has successfully defended its national interests and solidified control over occupied territories.

For example, in a speech at the Russian Foreign Ministry on June 14, 2024, Putin outlined conditions for ending hostilities in Ukraine, stating that Ukraine must begin the actual withdrawal of troops from the territories of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia oblasts within the administrative borders. He emphasized that these conditions were essential for Russia to cease fire and begin negotiations, framing them as necessary for the 'final resolution' of the

3 Bryanski, Gleb. (2024) "Russia's Deripaska under fire for rare anti-war comments", *Reuters*, 9 August 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-deripaska-under-fire-rare-anti-war-comments-2024-08-09/>.

conflict.⁴ While these demands reflect an aggressive stance and high expectations for the negotiations, they also suggest that the Kremlin is positioning itself for a shift towards diplomatic negotiations (or at least a pause), likely in response to increasing public discontent with the war. Furthermore, in early December 2024, Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) Director Sergey Naryshkin stated that Russia was close to achieving the goals of ‘the special military operation’.⁵ This positioning may contribute to a growing perception that the time is right to transition from military operations to diplomatic negotiations.

Growing support for peace talks

Within the Russian population, recent survey data suggest a growing inclination towards peace negotiations, even among those who generally support the regime. While overall support for the war remains high, approximately half of the respondents in recent polls expressed a preference for diplomatic negotiations.

Figure 1 illustrates how Russian public opinion on the war in Ukraine has shifted over time. Initially, in April 2022, 54% of respondents supported continuing the war, while 35% favoured peace talks. By late 2022, support for both positions had reached parity at around 44–45%, signalling a turning point in public opinion. Throughout 2023 and 2024, support for peace negotiations steadily grew, reaching 53% by late 2024, while backing for military operations declined to 36%. This trend highlights a growing openness to diplomatic resolutions over time. Predictably, younger respondents and women are more likely to support negotiations.

What, then, is driving these shifts in public opinion? In authoritarian regimes, opinion polls should be taken with a grain of salt. When it comes to sensitive issues, many respondents – if they agree to answer at all – tend to rely on the prevailing moods around them, including those in their immediate circles and the official discourse conveyed by the

mainstream media. Public fatigue with the war is also growing, even among Kremlin supporters, leading to increased openness to negotiations. More likely, however, is that Putin’s narrative – framing the war’s goals as almost achieved – has shaped this shift. The Kremlin presents Russia as having secured its national interests, fostering a perception that now is the right time for diplomacy. This approach helps maintain Putin’s image of victory while creating a semblance of national consensus.

“The Russian leaders are seeking peace talks on their own terms, which will be domestically portrayed as a victory.”

It is important, however, to analyse what Russian respondents understand by the term “negotiations” and what conditions they believe should be included. For instance, a peace deal on Putin’s terms – reportedly requiring Ukraine to recognize Russian control over occupied territories, abandon its NATO aspirations, demilitarize, lift sanctions against Russia, and ensure protection for Russian-speaking citizens – has been rejected by Ukraine and its allies but is unequivocally supported by 51% of Russian respondents, with an additional 28% expressing partial support, totalling 79% in favour. In contrast, 60% of respondents would support a ceasefire agreement without preconditions. Nearly one-third oppose such a move, and 9% remain undecided.⁶ The Russian leadership is seeking peace talks on its own terms, which will be domestically portrayed as a victory. In other words, while 19% of Russians are willing to support peace only on Putin’s terms, around 60% likely exhibit signs of war fatigue. However, it remains unclear how many believe that any potential agreement would ultimately favour Putin.

Many citizens may support the regime’s broader objectives while also favouring a resolution that spares them from prolonged sacrifices. This dynamic suggests that the Kremlin may be strategically adjusting its rhetoric and policies in response to shifting public sentiment, despite retaining control over the war narrative.

4 Putin, Vladimir. (2024) “Speech at the Meeting with the Leadership of the Russian Foreign Ministry”. Speech delivered 14 June 2024, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Moscow. https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1957107/.

5 Naryshkin, Sergey. (2024) “Russia comes close to achieving special military operation’s goals — intel chief”, *TASS*, 10 December 2024. <https://tass.com/politics/1884915>.

6 Russian Field. (2024) “Military Operation in Ukraine: 16th Wave (November 7–12, 2024)”, *Russian Field Blog*, 18 November 2024. <https://russianfield.com/svo16>.

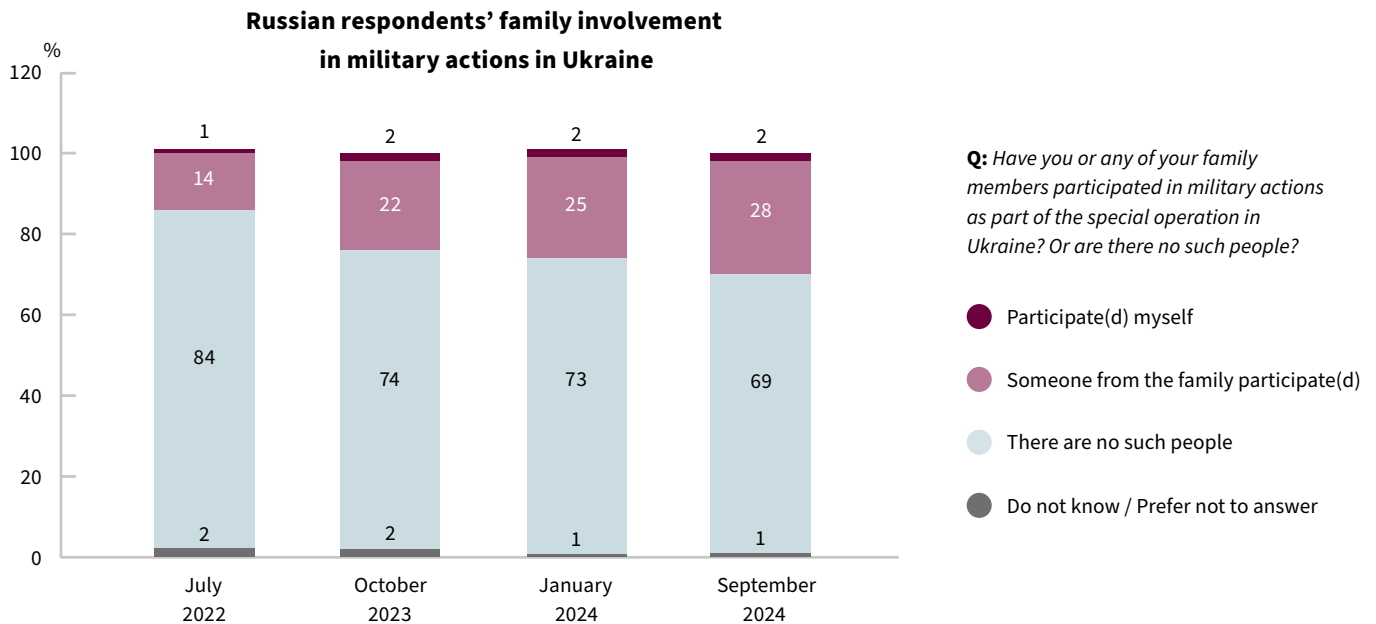


Figure 2. Russian respondents' family involvement in military actions in Ukraine

Source: Chronicles. (2024) "Dynamics." *Chronicles Blog*, 23 December 2024. <https://www.chronicles.report/dynamics>.

The war most Russians have not felt... yet

The Ukrainian population is experiencing the tragic consequences of the war on a daily basis, with almost no household left unaffected, whereas Russians have been far less exposed to its impact. By June 2023, 78% of Ukrainians reported having close friends or relatives who had been killed or injured.⁷ In contrast, only 27% of Russians admitted that the war had directly affected their lives, highlighting its uneven impact (see Figure 2).

The survey results in Figure 2 illustrate how Russian respondents' exposure to the war has changed over time. In July 2022, only 1% reported personally participating in the war, a figure that remained steady at 2% in both October 2023 and January 2024. Meanwhile, the proportion of those reporting a family member's participation increased from 14% in July 2022 to 22% in October 2023 and 25% in January 2024. The proportion of respondents stating that neither they nor their family members had participated decreased from 84% in July 2022 to 74% in October 2023 and 73% in January 2024

7 Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS). (2023) "How Many Ukrainians Have Close Relatives and Friends Who Were Injured/Killed by the Russian Invasion: Results of a Telephone Survey Conducted on May 26 – June 5, 2023", *KIIS Report*, June 2023. <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?cat=reports&id=1254&lang=eng>.

(see Figure 2). Overall, the data indicate the growing exposure of Russian households to the war, primarily through family members' involvement.

Support among those whose family members are or have been on the battlefield can be explained by an unwillingness to change their stance after costs have already been incurred. At the same time, the limited personal impact on many Russians could also explain why support remains relatively high, as the costs of the war are not felt uniformly across society. On the other hand, the Kremlin is clearly not interested in making these costs highly visible, as doing so could increase incentives to end the war – or at least pause it – before Russia has a chance to secure a more favourable deal.

It is often – albeit mistakenly – assumed that those who support Putin and his regime are the same as those who push for the war effort. While these allegiances tend to correlate, they are not precisely the same. Those who support the regime form a highly heterogeneous group, including both core loyalists with a strong political stance and more apolitical, demobilized groups.

Support for Putin still largely relies on individual satisfaction with the economy. Levada and other pollsters report moderately optimistic figures from Russia, although concerns about looming inflation are beginning to take hold. TV consumption remains one

Most preferred form of governance in Russia

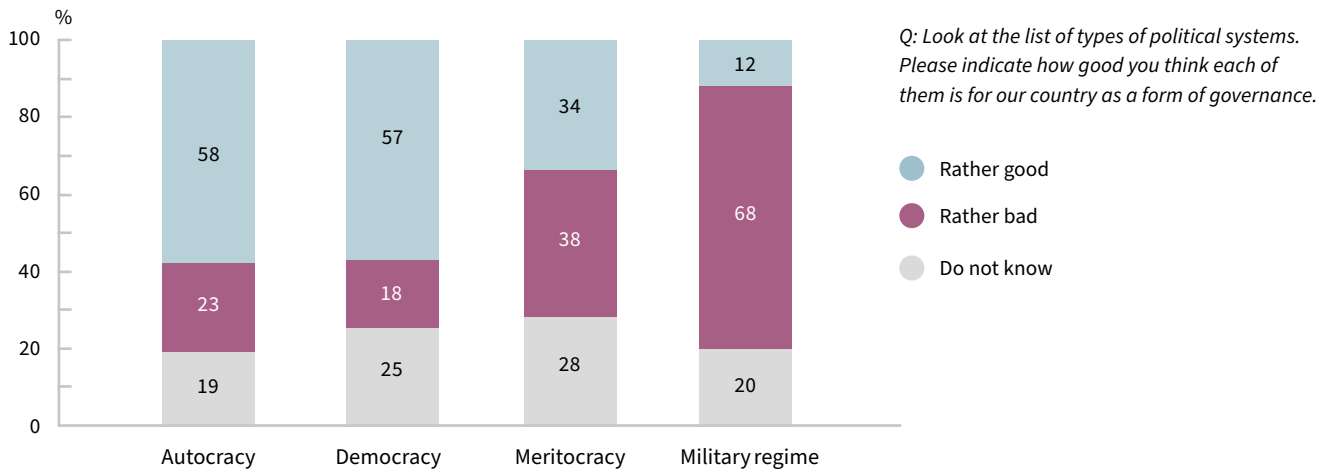


Figure 3. Most preferred form of governance in Russia

Source: Quota-based online survey conducted from June 28 to July 25, 2024, as part of the research project ‘Panel Study of Russian Public Opinion and Attitudes’ at the University of Helsinki. N=4,470. Aluykov, M., Gilev, A., Nadporozhskii, I., Vyrskaia, M., Rumiantseva, A., & Zavadskaya, M. (2024, September 17). Panel Study of Russian Public Opinion and Attitudes (PROPA) Wave 2. <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/g4an5>.

of the strongest drivers of support for Putin. Meanwhile, a smaller, more cohesive group consistently endorses the war effort – regardless of their loyalty to Putin. These individuals are more likely to be male, regular TV viewers, and have a stronger family memory of past wars, such as Afghanistan or World War II. The Kremlin also promotes these overzealous ‘Z-correspondents’ (zetkory) or ultrapatriots, like Igor Girkin (better known by his nom de guerre, Strelkov⁸), suggesting that loyalty to Putin and his cause takes precedence over proactive warmongering.

Military trust declines, but will Russia’s war veterans gain power?

Ultrapatriots and warmongers are likely to remain dissatisfied with any negotiations, but the regime will suppress them if they become too outspoken. Moreover, overall trust in the Russian military has declined since the invasion of Ukraine. As of October 2024, 69% of respondents expressed trust in the

armed forces, marking an 8–percentage–point decrease since August 2022. This decline is notable amid increasing military losses and a lack of significant victories on the front lines. The sharpest drop in trust occurred between 2022 and 2023, influenced by Prigozhin’s mutiny,⁹ corruption scandals within the defence sector, and the unpopular partial mobilization that sent over 300,000 recruits to the front, many of whom have died. These trends align with findings from a late 2023 Gallup poll, which reported a 5% decrease in trust in the military across all demographic and social groups since the start of the full–scale invasion.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the return of war veterans to Russia presents another significant challenge, as past conflicts – such as those in Afghanistan and Chechnya – have shown high rates of PTSD, unemployment, and

8 Girkin is a former Russian FSB officer, military commander, and ultranationalist. He played a key role in Russia’s 2014 intervention in Ukraine, leading pro-Russian separatists in Donbas. He was convicted in absentia by a Dutch court for his role in the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17. A vocal critic of the Kremlin’s handling of the war in Ukraine, he was arrested in 2023 for extremism after openly challenging Putin’s leadership.

9 Yevgeny Prigozhin was head of the Wagner Group until his sudden death in August 2023. On June 23–24, 2023, he led an armed rebellion in which Wagner forces seized military facilities in Rostov-on-Don and advanced towards Moscow, protesting the Russian Defence Ministry’s handling of the war in Ukraine. The rebellion ended after negotiations brokered by Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, leading to Prigozhin’s exile in Belarus. The mutiny exposed internal divisions within the Russian military and was the most serious challenge to Putin’s rule in decades.

10 Vladimirov, Victor. (2024) “Levada Center: Russians’ Trust in the Army Declines”, *Golos Ameriki*, 25 October 2024. <https://www.golosameriki.com/a/levada-poll-ukraine-war/7839333.html>.

difficulty reintegrating into civilian life. The Kremlin has recognized this issue and has created initiatives like the “Times of Heroes” programme, which is designed to prepare military veterans for influential roles in society. However, while the Kremlin promotes veterans as the “new elite”, this does not equate to real political power.

Figure 3 shows public evaluations of four governance systems: autocracy, democracy, meritocracy, and military regime. Autocracy is viewed positively by 58% of respondents, while 23% see it as good, and 19% are unsure. Democracy is also favoured by 57%, while 18% disapprove and 25% remain undecided. Meritocracy receives mixed opinions, with 34% seeing it as good, 38% as bad, and 28% unsure. The military regime has the lowest approval, with 68% considering it bad, only 12% seeing it as good, and 20% undecided.

While Putin has framed veterans as Russia’s “new elite”, there is no indication that Russians want to see the military control the government. The Kremlin’s strategy reflects this: instead of empowering veterans within the executive branch, it primarily co-opts them into symbolic political roles. The Times of Heroes programme, which received 44,000 applications, with 83 participants selected, is an example. Some veterans have already assumed government positions,¹¹ and in the 2024 regional and local elections, over 300 former soldiers who had fought in Ukraine secured political office as candidates from the ruling United Russia party.¹² However, the overall rate of co-optation remains low, and the roles largely ceremonial.

Ultimately, veterans are primarily co-opted into legislative and symbolic political roles rather than the executive branch, where actual decision-making power is concentrated and real policymaking occurs. Positions in ministries or senior administrative roles tend to remain under the control of established political elites and technocrats.

Conclusions

The Kremlin is carefully navigating the shifting public sentiment towards peace negotiations while maintaining control over the war narrative. This results in seemingly contradictory patterns in Russian public opinion. Although war fatigue is growing, particularly among regime supporters, it does not necessarily translate into widespread demands for peace. Instead, the Kremlin’s subtly evolving rhetoric suggests an effort to frame the conflict as nearing its objectives, reinforcing Putin’s image of victory while testing the waters for diplomacy.

At the same time, the war has not significantly increased the political influence of the military or veterans, despite efforts to integrate them into symbolic political roles. Public trust in the armed forces has declined, and Russians remain hesitant to embrace a more militarized government. These factors account for the contradictions within Russian public opinion – support for the regime coexists with war fatigue, economic concerns, and a preference for stability over continued war. While the Kremlin may be laying the groundwork for negotiations, it does so on its own terms, ensuring that any shift aligns with its broader political objectives.

Putin can enter negotiations without facing significant internal constraints. Unlike democratic leaders, who must navigate public opinion, opposition pressure, and institutional checks, Putin operates within a tightly controlled political environment where dissent is swiftly suppressed. Even hardline nationalists and pro-war factions, although vocal, lack the power to meaningfully challenge the Kremlin’s decisions. The state’s ability to manage narratives, neutralize critics, and secure elite loyalty ensures that any shift towards diplomacy will be as much a strategic choice as a response to domestic pressure. ●

11 Foy, Henry, and Polina Ivanova. (2024) “The stars of Putin’s ‘elite’ management school: soldiers accused of war crimes”, *Financial Times*, 14 December 2024. <https://www.ft.com/content/09f0a5bf-abfa-4603-94a6-3505890c1dfe>.

12 *The Moscow Times*. (2024) “Hundreds of Ukraine War Veterans Win Office in Russia’s Regional Elections”, 9 September 2024. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/09/09/hundreds-of-ukraine-war-veterans-win-office-in-russias-regional-elections-a86304>.

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PAPER

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ISBN 978-951-769-822-1

ISSN 1795-8059

Language editing: Lynn Nikkanen

Graphic design: Kaarina Tammisto

Cover photo: Stringer, AFP / Lehtikuva