



Brief

Russian Elections Primer

B-2024-03-15a

Classification: TLP:CLEAR

Criticality: HIGH

Intelligence Requirements: Government, Social Unrest

March 15, 2024

Scope Note

ZeroFox Intelligence is derived from a variety of sources, including—but not limited to—curated open-source accesses, vetted social media, proprietary data sources, and direct access to threat actors and groups through covert communication channels. Information relied upon to complete any report cannot always be independently verified. As such, ZeroFox applies rigorous analytic standards and tradecraft in accordance with best practices and includes caveat language and source citations to clearly identify the veracity of our Intelligence reporting and substantiate our assessments and recommendations. All sources used in this particular Intelligence product were **identified prior to 10:00 AM (EDT) on March 15, 2024**; per cyber hygiene best practices, caution is advised when clicking on any third-party links.

Brief |

| Executive Summary

Russian President Vladimir Putin will almost certainly secure a historic, constitutional fifth term in office when presidential elections are held from March 15–17, 2024. For the first time in his rule, Putin heads into these elections with no viable opposition candidate or political alternative to himself or the dominant United Russia party. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Putin initiated a reinvigorated campaign to crack down on opposition voices within all spheres of civil society and media, which sidelined what remained of the Russian political opposition. The recent death of imprisoned political oppositionist Alexey Navalny only further solidified Putin's dominance over Russia's political landscape. With his most firm grip on power yet, Putin is likely to double down on his policies of suppressing the opposition at home and antagonizing the West abroad—policies that he probably views as paramount to remaining the ultimate arbiter within Russia's political and business elite and preserving Russia's prestige on the world stage.

| Details

Suppression of Russian Dissent

President Putin has steadily restricted political freedoms throughout his 20-plus years in power but has accelerated this suppression following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.¹ Following the elections, Putin will further limit press freedoms and eliminate opposition groups. These restrictions will likely apply to both physical and online spaces.

¹ [hXXps://freedomhouse\[.\]org/country/russia](https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia)

- Immediately following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia introduced a series of war censorship laws that significantly restricted free speech. The laws established criminal and administrative punishments for "discrediting" or disseminating "unreliable information" about the Russian military.² Russian authorities have enforced these laws in broad terms to punish any criticism of the Putin government.³
- Russia has also steadily increased the punishments associated with these laws as the war progresses. In January 2024, Putin approved a bill that allows authorities to confiscate the property of any individual convicted under these laws.⁴
- In a key step to diminishing the Russian opposition, Russian authorities designated Navalny's Anti-Corruption Fund and several other opposition groups as "extremist organizations" in June 2021.⁵ The designation effectively criminalized participation in, or monetary donations to, these groups. As a result, the leading Russian opposition groups can no longer overtly organize within Russia.

The Russian government also increased the pace of politically motivated arrests and killings over the past year. The death of Navalny is the most publicized example, but a number of pro-democracy activists have recently been arrested, including Vladimir Kara Muza, Oleg Orlov, Ilya Yashin, Liliya Chanysheva, Vadim Ostanin, and Ksenia Fadeyeva.⁶

- Three of Navalny's former lawyers (Igor Sergunin, Alexei Lipster, and Vadim Kobzev) were also arrested in October 2023, while another was briefly detained in February 2024.⁷
- As a result of these incidents, most leaders of the Russian opposition are either dead, in prison, or in de facto exile abroad.

²

[hXXps://digitalpolicyalert\[.\]org/event/12819-adopted-amendment-to-code-of-administrative-offenses-expanding-liability-for-descriting-content-on-russian-state-bodies-operating-abroad-federal-law-no-62-fz](https://digitalpolicyalert[.]org/event/12819-adopted-amendment-to-code-of-administrative-offenses-expanding-liability-for-descriting-content-on-russian-state-bodies-operating-abroad-federal-law-no-62-fz)

³

[hXXps://meduza\[.\]io/news/2023/10/23/kommersant-v-2023-godu-v-rossii-stali-chasche-sudit-za-feyki-o-rossiysk-oy-armii-i-davat-realnye-sroki-za-povtornuyu-diskreditatsiyu-voennyh](https://meduza[.]io/news/2023/10/23/kommersant-v-2023-godu-v-rossii-stali-chasche-sudit-za-feyki-o-rossiysk-oy-armii-i-davat-realnye-sroki-za-povtornuyu-diskreditatsiyu-voennyh)

⁴ [hXXps://www.ekhokavkaz\[.\]com/a/32800033.html](https://www.ekhokavkaz[.]com/a/32800033.html)

⁵ [hXXps://www.rbc\[.\]ru/politics/09/06/2021/608670e09a7947709c4de06c](https://www.rbc[.]ru/politics/09/06/2021/608670e09a7947709c4de06c)

⁶ [hXXps://www.reuters\[.\]com/world/europe/who-are-other-opposition-activists-jailed-russia-2024-02-16/](https://www.reuters[.]com/world/europe/who-are-other-opposition-activists-jailed-russia-2024-02-16/)

⁷ *Ibid.*

These arrests and killings have targeted not only pro-democracy activists but also Russian nationalists critical of Putin's handling of the war in Ukraine. Two of Putin's most outspoken critics recently died under suspicious circumstances.

- Wagner leader Yevgeny Prigozhin died in a high-profile plane crash in August 2023.⁸
- Former Russian military commander Igor Girkin, who was highly influential in Russia's invasion of Crimea and the Donbas, was found hanged in his prison cell in February 2024.⁹
- These deaths eliminated criticism from within the elite, serving as a signal for other members to stay in line.

After the elections, Putin will likely pursue stronger government restrictions on the Russian internet widely known as the "RuNet." Russia had been slow to introduce state controls on the internet but has increased those controls in recent years as Putin has pursued greater command of the domestic information space. In 2019, Russia began publicly stating its intent to technically isolate RuNet from the global internet.¹⁰ Further consolidation of state control over the internet can be expected in the months and years after the elections.

- Russia recently suffered two mass internet outages in January and February 2024, which suggests it may be testing aspects of its sovereign RuNet.¹¹
- On March 1, Russia banned the advertisement of virtual private network (VPN) services to further isolate the Russian public from the global internet.¹² Using VPNs is one of the only ways for Russians to access many foreign websites, services, and information. While the use of VPNs currently remains legal, officials have indicated they will soon ban popular VPN providers.¹³

⁸ [hXXps://www.bbc\[.\]com/russian/articles/cgezg5908pko](https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/cgezg5908pko)

⁹ [hXXps://www.nytimes\[.\]com/2024/02/21/world/europe/russia-blogger-morozov-ukraine-avdiivka.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/21/world/europe/russia-blogger-morozov-ukraine-avdiivka.html)

¹⁰

[hXXps://www.atlanticcouncil\[.\]org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/reassessing-runet-russian-internet-isolation-and-implications-for-russian-cyber-behavior/](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/reassessing-runet-russian-internet-isolation-and-implications-for-russian-cyber-behavior/)

¹¹ [hXXps://t\[.\]me/bbcruussian/61310](https://t.me/bbcruussian/61310)

¹² [hXXps://tass\[.\]ru/obschestvo/20124281](https://tass.ru/obschestvo/20124281)

¹³ [hXXps://t\[.\]me/SvetEKB/56829](https://t.me/SvetEKB/56829)

Cyber Campaigns

Distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks have proven a key feature of Russian cyber campaigns since Russia invaded Ukraine. Pro-Russian hacktivist groups such as NoName057(16) and Killnet frequently carry out such attacks against Ukrainian and Western institutions.¹⁴

- These attacks are relatively unsophisticated; however, when instituted effectively, they can impact operations—particularly at financial services institutions, which are among the most frequently targeted sectors.
- Expect the proliferation of DDoS attacks to continue after the Russian elections, perhaps with more novel and difficult-to-stop methods being used to launch more powerful DDoS attacks.¹⁵

Russia also frequently engages in disinformation campaigns to advance its geopolitical agenda; it is possible these campaigns will see the biggest amount of growth after the Russian elections. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, these campaigns have supported Russia's war aims by targeting Ukraine and Western countries. In the West, Russian disinformation efforts aim to lessen societal support for Ukraine, with the ultimate goal of reducing aid to Ukraine. Upcoming 2024 elections across the European Union (EU), the United Kingdom, and the United States will likely be prime targets for Russian-backed disinformation campaigns, with Russia hoping to defeat candidates that back Ukraine.

Meanwhile, disinformation campaigns in Ukraine aim to divide the Ukrainian military and public to weaken resolve. Ukraine and Moldova are particularly likely to face severe Russian disinformation campaigns over the next several months.

- On February 27, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) warned a Russian disinformation campaign, dubbed Maidan-3, will likely reach its peak between March and May 2024. According to the SBU, Russia budgeted about USD 1.5 billion on Maidan-3 to demoralize Ukrainians ahead of a rumored Russian offensive set

¹⁴ ZeroFox Intelligence

¹⁵ [https://www.cybersecuritydive\[.\]com/news/cisa-researchers-warn-ddos-attacks/685990/](https://www.cybersecuritydive[.]com/news/cisa-researchers-warn-ddos-attacks/685990/)

to begin sometime this spring.¹⁶ Russia will likely try to sow discord among Ukrainians ahead of its offensive in an attempt to extract maximum gains.

- Ukraine was due to hold elections at the end of March, however, the constitution bars elections from being held during martial law. President Zelensky himself confirmed Ukraine will not hold elections for the foreseeable future. Russian disinformation efforts will likely take advantage of this decision to cast doubt upon Zelensky's political legitimacy.¹⁷
- On March 5, the Director of the Moldovan Intelligence and Security Service (SIS), Alexandru Musteata, announced Russia plans to interfere in Moldovan elections in 2024 and 2025.¹⁸ This interference primarily aims to destabilize the ruling pro-Western Moldovan government and derail Moldova's EU accession process.
- Musteata said Russia plans to use disinformation and Moldovan politicians under Russian control to create "economic and social crises" and foment public unrest.¹⁹

Putin can also be expected to parlay Russia's recent modest battlefield gains in Ukraine to amplify disinformation campaigns aimed at undermining Western unity. These gains have largely allowed the Russian military to set the tempo of fighting and decide where and when battles will occur.²⁰ Ukraine remains on the defensive, reacting to Russian attacks. Ukrainian military and political leaders maintain that they lack the equipment and momentum needed to launch meaningful offensive efforts on the ground; however, Ukraine continues to launch successful, asymmetric attacks against Russian naval and air force assets.²¹

- Russia will use its successes to insist it is winning the war, thereby firming up resolve at home and degrading Ukrainian morale.

¹⁶ [hXXps://ssu.gov.ua/novyny/zaiava-komitetu-z-pytan-rozvidky-pry-prezydentovi-ukrainy](https://ssu.gov.ua/novyny/zaiava-komitetu-z-pytan-rozvidky-pry-prezydentovi-ukrainy)

¹⁷

[hXXps://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-03-03/ukraine-braced-for-russian-disinformation-attacks-on-zelenskiy](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-03-03/ukraine-braced-for-russian-disinformation-attacks-on-zelenskiy)

¹⁸

[hXXps://balkaninsight.com/2024/03/05/russia-plans-election-meddling-to-obstruct-moldovas-eu-path-spy-chief/](https://balkaninsight.com/2024/03/05/russia-plans-election-meddling-to-obstruct-moldovas-eu-path-spy-chief/)

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ [hXXps://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/ukraine-conflict-updates](https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/ukraine-conflict-updates)

²¹ *Ibid.*

- Putin will use any military gains to insist he is righting historical wrongs by returning “Russian lands” to Russia. This narrative aligns with Putin’s ideology that Ukraine is not an independent state and ultimately is a part of Russia.
- To that end, Putin will continue to pursue maximalist goals of capturing eastern Ukraine and Kyiv. Any reported Russian overtures towards Ukraine to negotiate peace are only designed to force preemptive concessions from the West—or halt the fighting while Russia rebuilds its military capacity to once again invade Ukraine at a later date.

When faced with military threats from the West, Russian officials will likely engage in nuclear saber rattling. In particular, both Putin and former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev can be expected to use rhetoric threatening the West with nuclear weapons.²² While this rhetoric can be alarming, the threat of Russia employing nuclear weapons is low.

Russia’s Economic Shift and Foreign Policy

In 2022, Russia began shifting its longstanding trade relationships after Western countries imposed sweeping sanctions in response to its invasion of Ukraine. Prior to the war, Russia’s economy relied heavily on the European market, especially the oil and gas sector. Russia has now shifted the bulk of its energy exports from Europe to India and China. Russia has also developed closer economic ties with countries frequently locked out of the global economy, including North Korea, Iran, and Venezuela.

- Russia will continue to pursue partnerships with countries that are in ideological opposition to the West. Russia seeks a bloc of countries to create an alternative to the U.S.-led global economic system.
- Russia has relied on entities located primarily in the Middle East and Asia to import sanctioned Western goods. These entities have helped Russia evade sanctions to keep sourcing advanced Western electronics and dual-use military equipment.
- The United States recently imposed further restrictions to crack down on foreign institutions that help Russia evade sanctions, which led several banks in China,

²² <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-nuclear-war-vladimir-putin/>

Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates to suspend financial transactions with Russian entities.²³²⁴

- However, these networks are essential to Russia's economy and military efforts and are only likely to expand. Russian elites and intelligence officials are likely engaged in operations to establish new procurement channels for finances, weapons, and sanctioned technology. For example, on February 27, the Russian Duma approved legislation that would allow the use of digital financial assets in international settlements, which may allow Russia to shield some international transactions from Western sanctions.²⁵

Recent Russian policies in Africa have also shown that Russia will continue its focus on gaining influence on the continent. Since the death of former Wagner leader Yevgeny Prigozhin, which was likely in response to a failed mutiny he launched inside Russia in early 2023, the Russian government has largely subsumed Wagner fighters under a new entity dubbed the "Africa Corps," which is poised to continue Russian influence operations in Africa.

- After Prigozhin's death, it appeared that Russia would limit its Wagner operations in Africa to consolidate resources in Russia.
- However, with Putin's battle victories this winter in Ukraine and his political dominance domestically now assured, the Africa Corps will likely continue its operations inside of Africa. The Africa Corps remains engaged in several armed conflicts throughout the continent, primarily to ensure continued Russian access to mines and other valuable natural resources in exchange for security protection for the leaders of those countries.²⁶
- This exchange provides the Russian government with valuable revenue streams it can use to fund its war effort.

Russia has become the dominant foreign power in the former French colonies of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger since 2020 and will likely continue pushing for similar

²³ [hXXps://ofac.treasury\[.\]gov/media/932441/download?inline](https://ofac.treasury.gov/media/932441/download?inline)

²⁴

[hXXps://meduza\[.\]io/news/2024/02/07/glavnyy-dlya-rossiyskih-importerov-kitayskiy-bank-ostanovil-vse-raschety-s-rf](https://meduza[.]io/news/2024/02/07/glavnyy-dlya-rossiyskih-importerov-kitayskiy-bank-ostanovil-vse-raschety-s-rf)

²⁵ [hXXps://www.interfax\[.\]ru/business/947904](https://www.interfax[.]ru/business/947904)

²⁶ [hXXps://www.bbc\[.\]com/russian/articles/c131ym25y2ko](https://www.bbc[.]com/russian/articles/c131ym25y2ko)

arrangements across the continent. Russia's engagement and investments in Africa Corps since the death of Prigozhin suggest it will continue looking for other expansion areas in Africa, which could conflict with European and U.S. interests on the continent.

Conclusion

With perhaps his firmest grip on power yet after sidelining the Russian opposition, President Putin is likely to intensify his strategies of solidifying his control over Russian society and antagonizing the West after the March presidential elections. Many of Putin's familiar tactics—suppressing domestic dissent, disinformation and cyber campaigns, disrupting the global economy, and aggressive rhetoric towards the West—will continue and are highly likely to increase in severity. Putin's fifth term will likely be characterized as his most repressive and anti-Western term yet.

| Appendix A: Traffic Light Protocol for Information Dissemination

	Red	Amber
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:RED when information cannot be effectively acted upon by additional parties and could lead to impacts on a party's privacy, reputation, or operations if misused.	Sources may use TLP:AMBER when information requires support to be effectively acted upon but carries risks to privacy, reputation, or operations if shared outside of the organizations involved.
HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?	Recipients may NOT share TLP:RED with any parties outside of the specific exchange, meeting, or conversation in which it is originally disclosed.	Recipients may ONLY share TLP:AMBER information with members of their own organization and its clients, but only on a need-to-know basis to protect their organization and its clients and prevent further harm. Note that TLP:AMBER+STRICT restricts sharing to the organization only.
	Green	Clear
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:GREEN when information is useful for the awareness of all participating organizations, as well as with peers within the broader community or sector.	Sources may use TLP:CLEAR when information carries minimal or no risk of misuse in accordance with applicable rules and procedures for public release.
HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?	Recipients may share TLP:GREEN information with peers and partner organizations within their sector or community but not via publicly accessible channels.	Recipients may share TLP:CLEAR information without restriction, subject to copyright controls.

| Appendix B: ZeroFox Intelligence Probability Scale

All ZeroFox intelligence products leverage probabilistic assessment language in analytic judgments. Qualitative statements used in these judgments refer to associated probability ranges, which state the likelihood of occurrence of an event or development. Ranges are used to avoid a false impression of accuracy. This scale is a standard that aligns with how readers should interpret such terms.

Almost No Chance	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Roughly Even Chance	Likely	Very Likely	Almost Certain
1-5%	5-20%	20-45%	45-55%	55-80%	80-95%	95-99%