

RUSSIA AT A GLANCE

August 2024: a test of loyalty

This edition is devoted to August's main event: the unexpected incursion by the Ukrainian Armed Forces into Kursk Region and the reaction to this of both the Russian authorities and Russian society. These events have cast doubt over the efficiency of the Kremlin; the capacity of Russian citizens to act; and the attitude of the authorities to the population.

This edition was prepared with contributions by
Kirill Kharatyan, John Lough, Vladimir Pastukhov and Nikolai Petrov.

9 September 2024

CONTENTS

3 The Events

The successful incursion into Kursk Region by Ukrainian forces and the surprisingly weak response from the Russian Federation.

5 The Reaction of the Federal Authorities

A lack of preparedness; irritation; a refusal to acknowledge reality; cynicism; and indifference towards people's fate. Attempts to keep the incursion out of the news, and a miserly attitude to giving compensation to citizens.

8 The Authorities at the Regional and Local Level

A lack of leadership, practical skills and the capacity to act in a crisis; and a vacuum when it came to legal issues or matters of regulation.

12 Evacuation

No coordinated plan for evacuating people from dangerous areas, and poor preparedness as to where to send them.

15 Volunteers and Charitable Organisations

In the areas where fighting was taking place, charitable organisations could operate only within the limits permitted by the state. Despite this, charitable organisations were able to solve many of the problems caused by the authorities' poor management of the situation.

17 Citizens and Eternal Russian Questions

Both those citizens who found themselves in areas where fighting was taking place and those who had been evacuated were disappointed and angry at how the authorities behaved, yet they did not blame Vladimir Putin. Levels of anxiety grew among Russian citizens.

20 Prospects for the Future

The Ukrainian forces' operation in Kursk Region brought Russian society together. The question of Russia–Ukraine peace talks is now off the agenda.

Events

The Reasons for the Ukrainian Army's Incursion Into Kursk Region and How It Happened

KEY POINTS

Not only did the Kremlin manage to keep in the background what was going on in Kursk Region, they also avoided raising people's hopes by not promising Russian society a swift and significant response to the invaders. Nevertheless, this 'comfortable' situation for the Russian authorities cannot last for an indefinite period.

CONTEXT

On 6 August the Ukrainian Armed Forces entered the territory of the Russian Federation. They met little resistance and in the following three weeks occupied at least 1,000 square kilometres of Kursk Region. It was a week after the start of the operation when the Ukrainian authorities cautiously acknowledged the incursion. The first authoritative voice was Mykhaylo Podolyak, adviser to the Head of the Office of the Ukrainian president. He maintained that the operation was needed to:

- Move the front line and prevent Russian artillery from striking Ukrainian territory;
- Disrupt Russia's military logistics;
- Show the failure of the Russian military leadership;
- Make the war a fact of life for Russians and cause public outrage.

Later, the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelensky, put forward a further explanation: the operation in Kursk Region was part of the plan to bring about victory over Russia. He said he was prepared to share this plan with both the US president and the candidates in November's US presidential election.

The Ukrainian forces suffered significant losses, but the Russian claim that up to 2,000 soldiers were killed is not supported by objective data (Ukraine does not release such data). Several hundred Russian conscripts were taken prisoner. A prisoner swap took place of 115 for 115. Around 150,000 people were evacuated from the areas where fighting was taking place.

The Reaction of the Federal Authorities

Denial, Cynicism, and Apathy: How Authorities Downplay the Incursion and Withhold Compensation

KEY POINTS

This gap in payments shows the cruel, cynical and rational attitude of the authorities to the situation in Kursk Region. They have no intention of being diverted from their main aim. They are ready to fill the gaps in military units with conscripts and continue putting pressure on the Donbas until a final victory has been achieved.

CONTEXT

Unsurprisingly, President Putin did not address the nation. He tends to do so only after the denouement, when he can say something positive. Nor did Putin visit the areas under attack.

Two meetings took place on 12 and 22 August, attended by Putin and the governors of Kursk, Belgorod and Bryansk Regions, along with officials of the federal government. Putin put the first deputy prime minister, Denis Manturov, in charge of coordinating the actions of the federal bodies.

The authorities carefully control and embellish any information which emerges about the Ukrainian incursion into Kursk Region. They use euphemisms such as ‘provocation’, ‘terrorist attack’ or simply ‘the situation’. At a press conference held by the Russian Orthodox Church that was dedicated to offering help to those affected, such people were referred to as ‘refugees from areas of Kursk Region which were being shelled’.

ANALYSIS

It is not in the Kremlin's interest to draw 'unnecessary' attention to the incursion. This is a very awkward situation for the authorities. Putin based his 'special military operation' on the premise that he was concerned about the safety of Russia's borders, but the low-key response to the Ukrainian incursion completely undermines this position. Reporting on events in the region is strictly limited. Concentrating on the low number of casualties among the civilian population, the authorities remain silent about military losses, which are twice the number. As for reports from the Ministry of Defence, they are based on a simple formula: there are lies; there are outrageous lies; and then there are communiques from the Russian military about losses of personnel and equipment suffered by the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

Information about the Ukrainian attack is presented as if it were either a natural disaster or a terrorist act. The capture of new settlements by Ukraine is presented as if it were a normal turn of events; and the evacuation of tens of thousands of people as a reason to praise the careful organisation of the procedure.

The fact that there was a detailed discussion of the new school curriculum at the meeting Putin attended on 22 August was a clear indication that the Kremlin is prepared to tolerate Ukrainian forces on its territory for at least the next few months.

The authorities have clearly laid out their priorities: they propose giving 10,000 roubles (\$110) to every inhabitant of Kursk Region affected by the war, to compensate for their suffering, with the hope that a further 15,000 roubles (\$160) might come from the Ministry for Emergency Situations. This amounts to a fraction of a one-off payment that the authorities are offering Russian citizens to fight in the war. And in some regions a 'volunteer' to fight receives two million roubles (\$22,000) or even more.

COMMENT

These miserly payouts are presented in the media as examples of personal care from the president. At the 22 August meeting, it was stated that one-off payments had been made to 41,000 people, from the previously mentioned figure of 133,000 evacuees. Furthermore, it took the personal intervention of Putin two weeks after the evacuation began before the Ministry for Emergency Situations agreed to make the 15,000 rouble payments.

The Ministry's report for August on payments made to displaced persons in Kursk Region showed that 70,000 people had received help totalling one billion roubles (\$11,000,000), which works out at roughly 15,000 (\$160) roubles each.

The Authorities at the Regional and Local Level

Leadership Gaps, Lack of Crisis Management, and Legal Uncertainty

KEY POINTS

Martial law has not been declared in Kursk Region, even after the Ukrainian incursion. The local authorities were unprepared for the attack due to a lack of necessary resources and support from the Kremlin. The regional governors' initial response was weak and uncoordinated.

CONTEXT

Martial law has not been declared in Kursk Region. In October 2022 Vladimir Putin introduced martial law only in the Ukrainian territories 'newly' occupied by Russia: parts of the Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia Regions. From the same date, only partial martial law has been in operation in Kursk and other regions. Referred to as an 'average response level', this is in effect in the 'old' occupied territories of Crimea and Sevastopol, as well as other regions bordering Ukraine: Bryansk, Belgorod, Voronezh and Rostov Regions and the Krasnodar Territory. The 'average response level' includes six of the 19 points of martial law, including the guarding of key installations, moving civilians to safer areas and the creation of territorial defence (these last two are at the discretion of the local headquarters).

Even now, after the incursion by Ukrainian forces, full martial law has not been declared in Kursk Region. Instead, an 'emergency situation regime' and a 'counter-terrorist regime' have been instigated in Kursk and two neighbouring regions, Bryansk and Belgorod.

These represent a step up from the 'average response level'. In the first instance only regional resources are deployed, and the situation is monitored by regional legal measures. In the second instance, the federal authorities participate in the management of the situation, using federal resources.

ANALYSIS

The authorities in Kursk Region were unprepared to react quickly and efficiently to Ukraine's incursion. This was partly because the former governor of the region, Roman Starovoit, had become a federal minister three months previously, and was replaced on an acting basis by Alexey Smirnov, who until then had been deputy governor. Although the regime of partial martial law in which Kursk had been operating gave heads of regions greater independence, the Kremlin had not supported them by providing the essential financial or legal resources.



Alexei Smirnov, Acting Governor of Kursk Region since May 2024, TASS

In particular, partial martial law did not allow for the organisation of territorial defence in Kursk Region, which is not the case in the 'newly' seized territories where full martial law prevails.

The governor of the neighbouring Belgorod Region, Vyacheslav Gladkov, tried arbitrarily to create territorial defence units after Russian volunteers entered the region in May and June 2023, but after an angry reaction from the centre had to rename them 'self-defence units', which have no legal standing.

COMMENT

The reaction of the regional authorities to the Ukrainian attack on Kursk Region shows that the political elite in Russia cannot act independently. Those who answer to the boss are unable to act or speak independently. Without orders from above, the authorities appeared half-paralysed. They were unable to make a decision, assume responsibility, or react swiftly and effectively.

This problem was evident at the first meeting on 12 August between the governors of the three border regions and Putin. The acting governor of Kursk Region, Alexey Smirnov, came across slightly better than his two colleagues, not because he differed from them in principle, but because elections which were due to take place in early September made him into a public political figure.

However, his attempt to report the situation to Putin was met with a sharp rebuke:

‘At the present time the situation in the region is difficult. 28 settlements are under enemy control. The enemy has penetrated 12 kilometres into the territory of Kursk Region. The front is 40 kilometres wide’, Smirnov reported.

‘Listen, Alexey Borisovich,’ Putin interrupted, ‘it’s the task of the military to report to us the width and the depth of the penetration. Your job is to report on the socio-economic situation and on the assistance being given to the civilian population.’

At the second meeting attended by the governors and Putin, on 22 August, the picture had changed, and all three governors appeared to be better prepared. Now, in the operational headquarters, there were also representatives of the Ministry of Defence and the leaders of the territorial bodies of the Interior Ministry, the Emergency Situations Ministry, the FSB and Rosgvardia (the National Guard; together, these are known as ‘the power ministries’).

These headquarters were a variation on Stalin's headquarters, the difference being the governor is now in a weaker position than the regional representatives of the power ministries. At best the governor has merely a coordinating role.

Significantly, the Governor of Belgorod Region, Vyacheslav Gladkov, reported that cooperation with the power structures was now established:

‘Recently, thanks to the personal decisions of the Minister of Defence relations with the Defence Ministry have improved. I am convinced that these relations will now lead to a change in the situation allowing for better protection of the population’.

Translating this from bureaucratic language, this means that relations between the regional authorities and the military were appalling, and that it had taken the personal intervention of the Minister of Defence to improve them.



Vladimir Putin and Vyacheslav Gladkov, getty images

Evacuation

Poor Evacuation Planning and Inadequate Relocation Preparedness

KEY POINTS

The authorities are mentally preparing people for the idea that not only will it take months, not weeks, to expel the Ukrainian Armed Forces from Kursk Region, but also that they do not have the will to solve the problems of the evacuees.

CONTEXT

According to figures provided on 29 August by the acting governor of Kursk Region, Alexey Smirnov, about 135,000 people had been evacuated from nine administrative districts of the region. This rose to 150,000 with the inclusion of evacuations from the Krasnoyarskiy region of neighbouring Belgorod Region. The majority of those evacuated had either made their own arrangements or were living with relatives.

The Emergency Situations Ministry announced on 28 August that some 7,000 people were housed in 58 temporary shelters on the territory of Kursk Region. One of the largest of these was in the Kursk Circus. Local authorities say that in all, 84 temporary shelters are in use.

Overall, 11,500 people – including 3,500 children – are living in temporary shelters in 29 areas of the country. Buildings used as shelters include medical and social institutions and children's holiday camps. The rest of the evacuees from the border areas are living with their relatives.

Some of the evacuees were transported to safety by train or bus. Initially the temporary shelters were situated in neighbouring regions of central Russia, but as the flood of evacuees grew, their destinations spread across more territories. Today these include 200 temporary shelters across 30 regions of the country, reaching as far east as the Urals. They are in Moscow, St Petersburg, the regions of Moscow, Nizhny Novgorod, Orlov, Rostov, Ryazan, Samara, Saratov, Sverdlovsk and Tambov; and in Tatarstan, and elsewhere.

In all, 524 temporary accommodation camps were set up, with capacity for 64,000 people. Of these, 20,000 places were arranged by the Moscow city government, mainly outside the city.

According to some reports, organised bus transport lasted for two days, after which it was up to evacuees to make their own arrangements. Witnesses in Kursk Region said that people who did not leave on those buses had serious problems getting any help at all.

ANALYSIS

The evacuation took place hurriedly and was poorly organised. Clearly there were far more places arranged in temporary shelters than were taken up. The inefficiency of local authorities was highlighted by the fact that only one in 12 evacuees was housed in a temporary shelter, while the rest made their own arrangements.

Officials played little part in the way the evacuation was carried out, or in how people were then looked after. They left this up to government-organised non-governmental organisations.

The evacuation did not occur without some serious problems, even if some were symbolic. For example, in the village of Korenovo, 98-year-old Klavdiya Tursina-Voytova was left behind. She was the only veteran from the Great Patriotic War in the area, and the authorities used her for their own propaganda purposes. Officials came to have their photo taken with her, and then the frail elderly woman was left entirely alone. 'No one even tried to save her', local media reported.

The fate is unknown of around 2,000 mainly older people who remained in occupied villages. Contact with them has been lost, relatives have been restless, and volunteers have been trying to help those left behind, a task made harder by an information blackout ordered by the authorities.

COMMENT

Even with the dedicated assistance of government-organised non-governmental organisations, it is difficult to expect a comprehensive and effective evacuation process in Kursk Region. On the one hand, the local people themselves have not been publicising the situation as clearly as has happened in years past when there have been natural disasters. On the other hand, the evacuation involves long-term and systemic problems for which there will be no quick fix.

Foreign analysts are suggesting that the ‘situation’ in Kursk Region could drag on for a year. And for the Russian leadership the liberation of the region appears to be secondary to the plan to make further advances in the Donbas.

Volunteers and Charitable Organisations

Charities Step In: Overcoming State Limitations to Address Crisis Mismanagement

KEY POINTS

4,500 volunteers, including locals and those from other areas, are helping with evacuations, providing shelter, and distributing humanitarian aid. Most assistance comes from government-organised non-governmental organisations, with additional support from regional non-profits and businesspeople.

CONTEXT

According to Smirnov, the acting governor, there are 4,500 volunteers operating in Kursk Region, among them local people and those who have come in from other regions of the country. They have been assisting with the evacuation process, settling people into temporary shelters, searching for missing relatives, and collating and distributing humanitarian aid.

ANALYSIS

Most organisations which are assisting with the evacuation are government-organised non-governmental organisations:

- The Russia-wide self-help organisation, ‘#MYVMESTYE’ [‘We Together’] is collecting humanitarian aid;
- The Russian Red Cross (not to be confused with the International Red Cross) is searching for missing relatives; delivering humanitarian aid to refugees (15,000 helped already); and providing psychological help (to over 10,000 people so far);
- The All-Russia student lifeguard corps;

-
- The Russian Orthodox Church (effectively an organisation of the state), which is providing aid to more than 1,000 people each day in church centres across Kursk;
 - ‘Liza. Alert’; the authorities have banned this organisation from publicly advertising searches for missing people (this organisation is named after Dr Elizaveta (Liza) Glink, who gave medical assistance to homeless people and did other charitable work; Dr Liza was killed in a plane crash in 2016);
 - The volunteer corps of Russian Railways; the current transport minister, Roman Starovoit, was until three months ago the governor of Kursk Region.

Some small regional not-for-profit organisations are active in Kursk Region. They are involved both with fundraising and humanitarian aid in various parts of the country, and with directly distributing this aid on the ground, in Kursk Region and in 30 areas where evacuees are housed in temporary shelters.

Well-known business people are also involved in charitable work. For example, Oleg Deripaska sent to Kursk Region 120 tons of top products from Kuban, including meat, milk, vegetables, flour, sugar and mineral water. Deripaska’s foundation, ‘Vol’noye delo’ [‘Voluntary Deed’], has been evacuating groups of citizens from Kursk to Moscow Region, Nizhny Novgorod, Tver and Ust-Labinsk in the entrepreneur’s home territory, where the foundation has provided apartments in a new housing complex.

COMMENT

The governments of various regions set up aid programmes under similar slogans, such as ‘Moscow helps’, ‘We don’t forget our own people!’ and #MYVMESTYE. In many places, including Moscow, the impetus for collecting humanitarian aid comes from above and is passed down to the individual organisations, meaning that it is not spontaneous and does not come from the people. It is important to understand that humanitarian activity comes about thanks to the conscious efforts of the Kremlin’s political strategists. The authorities do not want mobilisation from below, but control over all political activity.

Citizens and Eternal Russian Questions

Public Discontent with Authorities' Actions Amid Growing Anxiety, but No Blame on Putin

KEY POINTS

If citizens voice their anger towards the authorities, it is aimed at the lower levels of power. The upper reaches are seen to be behaving correctly. In Kursk Region itself, people are complaining about the local leadership and writing to Putin to ask him to be involved and to help them. Many see what is happening as proof of what Putin said about the West preparing to attack the Donbas and Russia itself.

CONTEXT

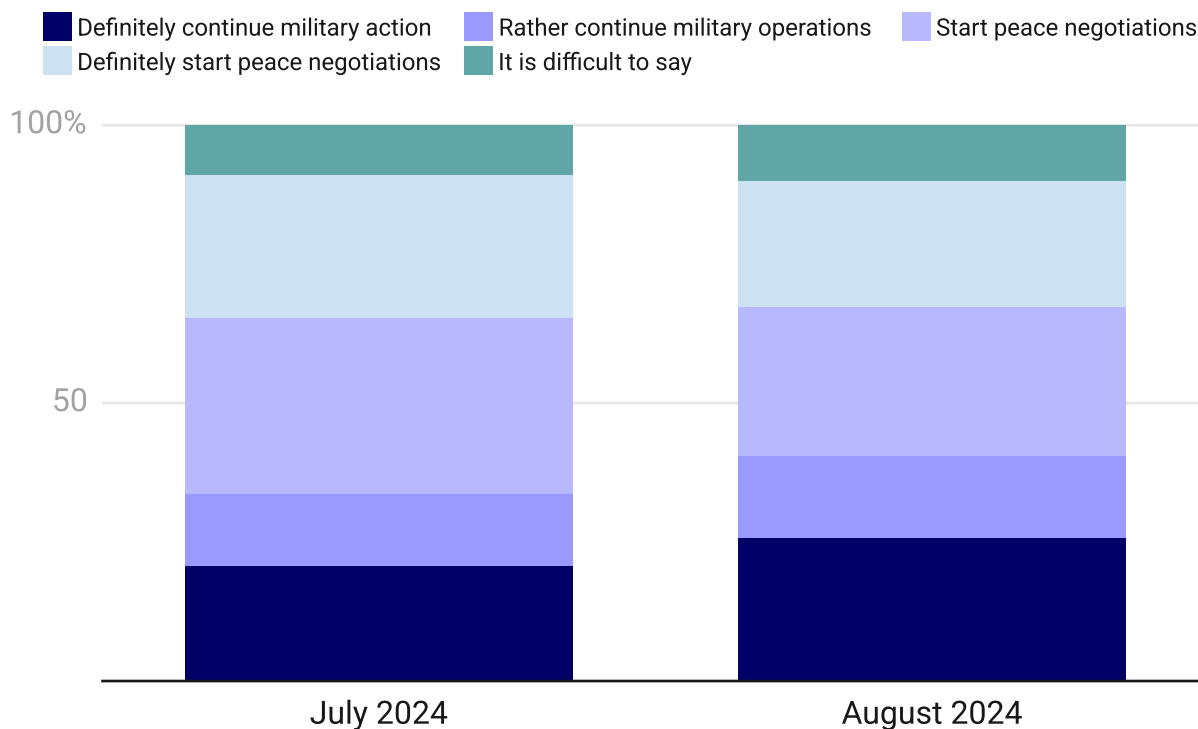
Apart from those who have a family member in compulsory military service, most people living in Russia view the Ukrainian counterattack in Kursk Region with a degree of detachment, as if it were something happening far away which does not affect them personally.

Away from the three border regions, what is happening in Kursk is seen as 'not ours', which is exactly how the authorities want to present it. Taking this into consideration, only three regions (or at most, five, if we include Rostov and Voronezh) can be considered to be 'Russia at war'.

Nevertheless, in August the weekly Omnibus survey carried out by the Public Opinion Foundation showed for the first time in a year not only a significant increase in anxiety in society, but an equal amount of feelings of calm and of alarm.

Below are the results of another survey – conducted by the Levada Centre in August. One of the questions was: 'Should military actions continue or should peace negotiations begin?' According to the survey, the number of war supporters has increased by five per cent.

Conflict with Ukraine and the Attack on Kursk Region: Key Indicators in August 2024



Source: The Levada Centre (levada.ru)

ANALYSIS

The Russian government has worked long and diligently to eradicate any civil society structures that are independent of it. It has replaced initiatives from society with the concept of ‘paternal care’ from the state. We should not really be surprised that, given the drip-feeding of information and total control of the media by the Kremlin, Russian citizens – except for those living in Kursk Region and surrounding areas – are virtually indifferent to what is going on with respect to the Kursk ‘situation’.

Some people just try to ignore what is happening, and the authorities play on this mood. Others treat what is happening around Kursk as if it were a natural disaster, and so are prepared to help those who are suffering, with money, food and essential items. And there are those who see the events in Kursk Region as justification in retrospect for the ‘special military operation’: ‘Well, Putin warned us that the Ukrainians were preparing to attack Russia’.

As for answering the eternal Russian question, ‘Who’s to blame?’, citizens tend to accuse bosses at the municipal and regional level, and send these concerns to Putin. They have the impression that the higher authorities – the genuine ones, such as the president – are not to blame for the situation. On the contrary, the president is their only real defender, and they place all their hopes in him.

COMMENT

The mood in society over what is happening in Kursk does not currently present a major problem for the authorities. However, this could change in the near future, when the holiday period is over and it is time for thousands of children from the nine evacuated regions and even more from the neighbouring areas to return to school. This is when 150,000 people who have been evacuated will realise that their ‘temporary’ difficulties will continue for an unspecified period.

In order to avoid discontent, the Kremlin must either drive the Ukrainian forces from Russian territory (which is currently not happening) or give the people a significant victory on the Donbas front, which – in present circumstances – looks entirely possible.

Prospects for the Future

Ukraine's Operation in Kursk Unites Russian Society and Ends Peace Talk Prospects

KEY POINTS

Contrary to certain expectations, bringing the war onto the territory of Russia has not led to a split between the Russian people and the leadership, but rather has brought them together. Russian society sees what is happening in Kursk Region as making the war a 'Fatherland' war, which has helped the growth of militarism.

CONTEXT

Given how it is developing, Ukraine's attack on Kursk Region looks rather like a game of Russian roulette. Kyiv achieved the desired morale and psychological boost in the first few days; but the continuation of the attack could lead to a dangerous weakening of the Ukrainian position on other fronts. Despite the expectations of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, the Russian invasion force has not been weakened. It is putting greater pressure on the Donbas and may break through Ukraine's defences.

According to the socio-political publication 'Verstka', the number of volunteers signing up in Moscow as contract soldiers with the Ministry of Defence doubled after the Ukrainian incursion into Kursk Region. If 97 people per day were signing up on average in the week before the attack (29 July–4 August), the following week (5–11 August) the number rose to 126 per day. The increase continued over the following two weeks: from 12–18 August on average 180 people were signing up daily, and in the week of 19–25 August it was 213 people per day.

It is worth noting, too, that Putin raised the one-off payment for the military contract to 400,000 (\$4,400) roubles. In their turn, the Moscow authorities set their payment to volunteers in the region to almost two million roubles (\$22,000).

The Kremlin's position on the subject of peace talks remains the same: as previously announced, Moscow is prepared to hold talks with the United States, but not with Ukraine. Russia is not prepared to admit to any weakness, and the incursion by the Ukrainian Armed Forces into Kursk Region has pushed Moscow into a clearly more hardline position.

If we consider three weeks of occupation and evacuation in Kursk Region as a test, then neither the Russian authorities nor the Russian people have passed it. The government demonstrated that it was not prepared to repel the attack by the Ukrainian Armed Forces, nor to organise the evacuation of citizens, nor to assist those who were suffering as a result. In Russia, the people exist to support the authorities; the authorities are not there for the people. Moreover, the people continue to beg for the supreme authority to intervene, trusting that those at the top will force the regional bosses to solve their problems.

About NEST Centre

Based in London, the New Eurasian Strategies Centre brings together the best expertise on Russia and the surrounding region. Its mission is to identify the forces shaping Russia's long-term future, to analyse their impact and to develop strategies to bring about peaceful and positive development of the country.

Please share your feedback at info@nestcentre.org