ANNEX TO THE REPORT ON RUSSIAN PUBLIC OPINION REGARDING THE WAR IN UKRAINE -
PUBLIC REACTION TOWARD FUTURE SCENARIOS

(Updated May 30, 2022)

The leadership of the Russian Federation has driven itself into a situation from which there is no good way out. Facing the inability of their armed forces to carry out their tasks and the very real prospect of a military defeat, the political and military leadership of the country finds itself in the position of a classic zugzwang. The most likely next steps along the path of war will require from the majority of Russian citizens a significantly greater degree of involvement in events and greater personal sacrifices. People are beginning to feel this. Our research allows us to assume Russian society's likely reaction to various future scenarios.

1 Willingness to accept various options for a peace agreement

"It is not just the tap, the whole system needs to be changed."

The public wants peace - but not defeat. Russian society wants peace, an end to this war / "special operation". The current situation burdens people, the war goals are not clear, and the validity of Russian actions is questionable. Propaganda efforts are capable, at this stage, of ensuring that a passive majority of the population accepts the government actions, but they are not capable of generating real enthusiasm and sincere support for the war among the majority of the population.

At the same time, society is not yet ready to accept military defeat. Peace is perceived as a consequence of “victory”. Since the goals of the war are incomprehensible, the very concept of “victory” is vague. Some kind of political compromise, close to what was discussed in the March Istanbul talks, may well be perceived with relief. The authorities of the Russian Federation, therefore, retain a certain freedom of maneuver to achieve a peace agreement. Being largely victims of their own propaganda, they are unlikely to be aware of this.

However, the signing of such an agreement would be perceived with expectations of a quick return to the political and economic situation of February 23, 2022, which, of course, is impossible. So even under such a development, Russia is in for a serious increase of internal tensions. This could call into question the continued existence of the current political regime, although such events would occur with a certain time lag in relation to the actual cessation of military hostilities.

2. Mass mobilization and reformatting of "special operation" into an open war

"War - can be declared - impossible to implement."
Mass mobilization. Faced with the prospect of imminent military defeat, the leadership of the Russian Federation is certainly considering the option of openly declaring a state of war and conducting mass mobilization. At the same time, it fears the social consequences of such a step, for which society is clearly not ready.

Such a step by the leadership of the Russian Federation is unlikely to immediately lead to major social unrest, but it will be fraught with consequences of a different kind.

In the short term, such a decision can be "sold" to the most deprived categories of the population, which happen to be the main reserve of "cannon fodder" of the armed forces and a number of other power structures, as a kind of "fair" decision, forcing everyone to participate in military hardships. However, practical implementation of mass mobilization will prove to be practically impossible due to mass sabotage and, at first, passive, but as things develop, increasingly active resistance. This, in turn, will lead to a new aggravation of tensions between various social groups, and in some cases, between ethnic communities. Over time, there may well be a demand in society for an armed force capable of fighting against the current authorities. In this case, the option of building up the potential of an alternative Russian armed structure to the level where it can challenge the Kremlin authorities is not ruled out.

3. Escalation of the conflict

"Phony War"

Opening a war front with a NATO country. Despite the seeming absurdity of further geographical expansion of the conflict where the Russian army has already practically exhausted its reserves and faces the prospect of military defeat, there are a number of reasons why Russian leadership may consider escalation. Direct military intervention by other countries, in particular members of the NATO bloc, can be viewed by the Kremlin as a way out of the military-political impasse. Firstly, it offers a "legitimate" reason for reframing the "special operation" into an open war and make (at least in the opinion of the Kremlin) a successful mass mobilization in the Russian Federation more likely. Secondly, it may provide an opportunity to "save face" to some extent when signing a peace agreement that will be an actual defeat of Russia. Losing to NATO is very different than losing to Ukraine.

It is important to take into account that Russia does not have the resources for even a minor war with the NATO bloc. Russian leadership, however, may consider some kind of "fake war" with a NATO member country, for example, with Romania on the territory of Moldova, to cover up its defeat in the Russian-Ukrainian war.

The reaction of the population to such a turn of events will depend on the specific circumstances of the case. Implementing a "small lost war" with a quick exit into a peace agreement, would lead to a new wave of tensions in society, and a quick resolution of the conflict will create a wave of relief, somewhat delaying the moment when the population
starts to understand what happened and begins opening it eyes to the long-term consequences of military events. If the main task of implementing such a scenario is to reformat the “special operation” into an open war, conduct a general mobilization and restructure life to meet the demands of wartime, then, in contrast to the calculations of those who start such a thing, these actions will lead to the opposite effect, since the futility of a war with NATO will be completely obvious to the public.

"Put the whole world in ruins"

The second option for escalating the war could be the use of weapons of mass destruction, including tactical nuclear weapons. This decision could be based on two considerations. First, to thwart the possibility of effective offensive actions on the part of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, since the offensive operations require a concentration of military forces, creating potential targets for nuclear weapons. Second, to demonstrate the complete "insanity" of the military-political leadership of the Russian Federation, intimidating the West with the prospect of a global nuclear conflict.

The reaction of the population to such events will probably be determined not so much by the fact of such an action on the part of Russia, but by the reaction of Ukraine, of the West and the entire world to such actions. At present there is no reason to expect a sharp intensification of anti-war actions (not sentiments) on the part of the population. If anyone starts taking real action against the country's leadership, it would be certain elite groups. As for the population, most likely, the use of nuclear weapons will lead to mass panic. People will begin leaving cities, and trying to flee from the country. There could be a mass relocation of Russians to the territory of Belarus, and the economy in Russia itself will collapse. Ultimately, in case of such a scenario, further events will be determined not so much by internal processes in Russia (unless there is a coup d'état), but by the reaction of the world to the actions of the Russian leadership.

The newly unemployed are a possible, though expensive, military recruitment target. As for the conclusions regarding the reaction of the population to various possible scenarios for the development of events, there has been one big change since April. While the prospects of an open mass mobilization remain doubtful, it should be recognized that the Russian authorities still have a significant reserve for covert mobilization, in particular, at the expense of people who have lost their jobs as a result of the economic consequences of the policy pursued. We are not talking about the poorest categories of the population, but about those who are accustomed to a fairly high level of income, for example, shift workers. Accordingly, the financial burden on the authorities if they decide to involve these people in military service will be significantly higher, and this, in turn, will require higher payments to other categories of military personnel. Moreover, as real information about the state of affairs in Ukraine penetrates into society, the price of attracting new manpower to participate in the war will increase even more.