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Issue Article

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THE POSSIBILITIES OF SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS – FORECASTING THE DEGREE OF CONFRONTATION OF FORCE MAJEURE RISKS TO ENSURE SOCIAL PROTECTION OF THE POPULATION OF RUSSIA

Abstract*: The article analyzes the effectiveness of the situational analysis of the forecast of the degree of confrontation, the risks of force majeure, economic gaps, the importance of domestic policy for preventing state bankruptcy, impoverishment of the population, the risks of further spread of economic conflicts in Russia and other world regions - Yemen, Iran, Turkey, Libya, Palestine, Egypt.*
Key words*: expert community, degree of confrontation, concept, force majeure, risks of economic conflicts, situational analysis.*
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Introduction

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The past period has maintained a high degree of tension in international relations, a new peak of which was reached in the Middle East. There, against the backdrop of military activity by Yemeni Houthis, who are impeding international shipping in the Red Sea, the first (and probably not the last) phase of the international operation in northern Yemen, which is under the control of the Houthis, was carried out. These events have increased the potential for confrontation in the Middle East, including along the line of conflict between Iran and a number of Arab states of the Persian Gulf. Meanwhile, the leadership of Ukraine used all this to search for and strengthen ties in international circles, seeking to reboot the process of international support for Kyiv. At the same time, the situation in the SVO zone was characterized by intense military actions, which differed from what it was a year ago, when a Christmas truce was declared (although not fully implemented). The expert community believes that the Russian side is trying to purposefully increase pressure on Ukraine and the Ukrainian Armed Forces in order to use its tactical advantages and turn them into a strategic advantage. During the period under review, the Russian Armed Forces carried out new drone and missile attacks, but on a smaller scale than before. Expectations have grown that, against the backdrop of the Russian presidential campaign, attempts will be made to take control of Avdiivka and attack the previously abandoned Kupyansk.

At the same time, these expectations were not justified today, without bringing significant territorial shifts. Ukraine sought to strengthen its line of defense, as evidenced by V. Zaluzhny's visit to Kupyansk. Along with this, the Ukrainian Armed Forces continued the tactics of attacking Russian facilities in Crimea (Saki airfield), Belgorod Region, Orel (Orelnefteprodukt oil depot), etc.

However, Ukraine has focused its main efforts on the diplomatic front, which was the result of its awareness of the growing problems with the level and prospects of international support. Last week, the Ukrainian leadership held an unprecedented number of international negotiations with representatives from various countries around the world. Among other things, they were timed to coincide with a new meeting on the Ukrainian "peace formula" that started in mid-year in Switzerland in conjunction with the Davos International Forum. At the same time, information appeared about a secret meeting on the Ukrainian "peace formula" in December in Saudi Arabia, which was attended by representatives of a number of Western countries, Turkey and India (but no representatives from China). However, this meeting was assessed as ineffective, although it did allow the parties to clarify their positions ahead of the event in Switzerland. The fact is that international players are increasingly losing their understanding of whether the Ukrainian formula can be implemented in principle. They are more inclined to the idea of bringing Russia and Ukraine together at the negotiating table, but both sides are not yet ready for this. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the Swiss Foreign Ministry considered it right to include Russia in the discussion of the “peace formula”, but Russia did not express such a desire.

Among the most reliable partners, Ukraine still strongly relies on the Baltic countries. Having chosen the "easy way" of building international contacts, V. Zelensky visited Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia last week. All three countries announced not very large, "feasible" amounts of military aid. Thus, Estonia promises Ukraine aid of 1.2 billion euros until 2027. Lithuania allocates military aid of 200 million euros, which it provided in January-February 2024, and also plans to organize joint production of drones with Ukraine. The main point of the visit, however, was that the Baltic countries are inclined to support the most radical ideas and initiatives of Ukraine, and in this the Ukrainian authorities want to count on them in the context of increasing internal disagreements in the EU and taking into account the new elections to the European Parliament upcoming in the summer. At the same time, at the level of less obvious partners, Ukraine is improving ties with Japan – the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of this country, Yo. Kamikawa, visited Kyiv. In fact, Japan is acting proactively and taking on a noticeable burden – it was there that a conference on economic development and restoration of Ukraine was held in February. In the meantime, Japan has decided to contribute 37 million dollars to the NATO fund for the purchase of drone detection systems in the interests of Ukraine.

It is also worth noting the diplomatic activity of Ukraine in relations with the Vatican and Brazil, which periodically demonstrate interest in the role of international mediators. Thus, the head of the office of the President of Ukraine A. Yermak held telephone talks with the Secretary of State of the Vatican P. Parolin and the special envoy of the Pope M. Zuppi (known for his peacekeeping mission and visits to Russia and Ukraine). Let us recall that P. Parolin and M. Zuppi were awarded the Order of Merit of the 2nd degree by Ukraine at the end of December, which emphasizes the desire to attract them to its side. Finally, A. Yermak discussed the preparation of a meeting on the "peace formula" with the main adviser to the President of Brazil S. Amorim (considering the absence of Brazil at the December secret meeting in Saudi Arabia). However, a particularly important intrigue is spinning in the relations of Russia and Ukraine with the countries of the Middle East, from which one can expect a more active participation in the issues of conflict resolution. Thus, Turkish President R. Erdogan has once again confirmed his readiness to become a mediator – this was done during a telephone conversation with V. Zelensky. As is known, Turkey refused to hold a conference on the Ukrainian “peace formula” on its territory last year, but intends to participate in the Swiss event. Moreover, Turkey, like Japan, is going to host a forum on the restoration of Ukraine, which indicates an important shift in international support for Ukraine – from burdensome and ineffective military aid to targeted solutions to socio-economic problems and the possible attraction of investments using the potential and interests of various international businesses.

At the same time, Turkey has already become accustomed to playing on two boards, trying to resolve the issue of V. Putin's visit. At present, this visit is being agreed upon, which the Kremlin could present as another foreign policy breakthrough. However, Turkey, traditionally, sets conditions. One of them is the resumption of full-fledged work of the Black Sea grain corridor, which Russia is not yet ready to agree to. Also noteworthy is the increased activity of Ukraine in the Persian Gulf countries, with which it has had very few ties so far. Ukraine's desire is fueled by Russia's recent efforts in the same field, including V. Putin's visit to the UAE and Saudi Arabia. As a result, V. Zelensky held a series of telephone conversations - with the Emir of Qatar, the King of Bahrain, the new Emir of Kuwait. It is worth noting that Qatar, for example, is one of the mediators on the issue of the return of Ukrainian children.

As for Ukraine's relations with the West, in the context of the well-known difficulties in the United States, the initiative was once again taken by Great Britain, which finds it much easier to make its own decisions (however, in the United States, the solution to the budget issue related to aid to Ukraine is also gradually maturing). This was confirmed by the visit to Kyiv of Prime Minister R. Sunak, with whom a bilateral agreement on security guarantees was signed. The agreement, which will be in force until Ukraine joins NATO, provides for the obligation of Great Britain to provide Ukraine with intelligence, ensure cyber security, medical and military training, and cooperate in the defense industry. Also during the visit, a new aid package was announced (for 2024-2025 for 2.5 billion pounds sterling), which includes air defense systems, anti-tank weapons, shells, long-range missiles, etc.

Main part

At this stage, it would be premature to talk about the immediate results of Ukraine's foreign policy activity. The conference in Switzerland will be a new important reference point here. It is noticeable, however, that the authorities in Kyiv rely less on the United States and Western European countries and pay more attention to Asian countries. At the same time, there is a shift towards international diplomatic mediation and economic issues, which also makes it possible for the conflict to move to a new stage. Russia is quite satisfied with the reduction of military aid to Ukraine, but it is likely that bargaining will occur on economic issues, which Turkey can impose. In the meantime, the conflict in the Middle East has attracted much more attention in international circles. Attempts by pro-Iranian groups to exert asymmetric pressure on Israel, as well as on the United States, by intensifying military operations from Yemen, Lebanon and Iraq have not been successful. Israel continued its operation in the Gaza Strip, which has assumed a systematic nature. It was announced that Hamas structures were being dismantled in the northern part of the strip, where the main population lives. The operation in the central and southern parts of the Gaza Strip continues. A noticeable shift has been the apparent weakening of Hamas, which is losing its ability to resist. In general, the world is increasingly recognizing the success of Israel's operation in the Gaza Strip, indirect evidence of which is the upcoming resumption of Air France flights to Tel Aviv.

The United States continues to strive to play a key role in resolving this conflict, and Secretary of State E. Blinken visits the region time and again in its interests. Against this background, a completely expected scenario for resolving the Palestinian issue, proposed by E. Blinken, is gradually emerging: the unification of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip under the control of the Palestinian Authority, the cessation of hostilities, and the resumption of negotiations to normalize relations between Israel and the Arab countries (for which, for example, Saudi Arabia will be ready after the end of hostilities). It is also known that planning for the post-war development of the Gaza Strip is included in the calculations of the same Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Jordan, and Turkey, which promises to create a whole pool of international sponsors for the sector. E. Blinken visited all of these countries this week: Turkey, Jordan, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel. The issue of creating and fully recognizing a Palestinian state with its capital in East Jerusalem, which Russia also insists on, remains out of the picture. But this issue requires detailed coordination with Israel and remains beyond the planning horizon for now. Rather, the task is to restore the status quo that existed in Palestine before the radical Hamas movement came to power in the Gaza Strip and the hybrid involvement of Arab countries and Iran in the Palestinian conflict and support for this movement. So far, the prerequisites are being formed for this status quo to be restored. In these conditions, the main point of tension and the uncertainty associated with it has shifted to Yemen and the Red Sea. The pro-Iranian Shiite Houthis, who previously seized power in northern Yemen and the capital of the state, Sana'a, continue to pose threats to international shipping, disrupting the work of the sea corridor through the Suez Canal (transit through the canal has fallen by 30% this year, significantly reducing Egypt's income). This led to the decision to form an international coalition and military pressure on the Houthis, somewhat repeating the scenario of the previous war in Iraq. Interestingly, Bahrain, which is closely associated with Saudi Arabia, joined the coalition from the Arab states. In fact, this highlighted the long-standing conflict between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis, who have repeatedly shelled Saudi Arabian territory (but officially Saudi Arabia, like Turkey, Qatar, and others, condemned the American strikes on the Houthis). The coalition led by the United States also included Great Britain, Australia, Canada, and the Netherlands. A large and first-ever series of strikes was carried out on targets in various major cities in Northern Yemen. It is worth noting the limited effect of the Houthis' actions, which did not lead to a complete halt in shipping traffic in the Red

Sea, or a sharp rise in oil prices, or an end to the Israeli operation in the Gaza Strip (but did raise freight and insurance rates for ships). In other words, the Houthis not only failed to make anyone take them into account with their activity, but, on the contrary, created risks to their existence, in fact, similar to the Hamas movement in the Gaza Strip. For now, the US and its Arab allies are aiming to suppress the international military activity of the Houthis. It is difficult to say whether there is a possibility of an operation to remove them from power, but such a scenario is beginning to be discussed. The problem is that it is impossible without the active involvement of Saudi Arabia, which must still carefully weigh the pros and cons. For now, it is more likely that the situation will return to its original position, that is, the Houthis will retain power in Northern Yemen and cease hostilities. And the issue of power in Yemen will eventually be resolved within the framework of domestic political processes (but with decisive international influence), taking into account both the presence of the Yemeni government in exile and autonomous governing bodies in Southern Yemen (where there are no Shiites and there are traditional contradictions with Northern Yemen). However, at this stage, the world is not yet ready to deal with issues of Yemeni settlement, since they are not a priority. The US is currently denying plans to overthrow the Houthis. In addition to Yemen, other pro-Iranian groups are also trying to put pressure on the US and its allies. The Islamic Resistance of Iraq, representing Iraqi Shiites sponsored by Iran, is constantly attacking US positions in Syria and Iraq. Hezbollah leader in Lebanon, H. Nasrallah, periodically makes threatening speeches.

At the same time, attention is drawn to the growing discontent of the Iraqi government, which, according to the formula for distributing power in this state, is led by the Shiite M. Sh. Al-Sudani. Recently, after the death in Iraq as a result of an American strike of the field commander of the pro-Iranian Shiite movement Hezbollah An-Nujaba, the head of the Iraqi government spoke about the need to withdraw the forces of the international coalition led by the United States from his country. The argument is that Iraq is turning into a field for settling scores between the United States and Iran, which its authorities and population do not need at all. Whether the United States is ready for such a step is still unknown. Finally, in the current situation, one can expect an escalation of the situation directly around Iran, although its authorities have tried to avoid this since the beginning of the current conflict in the Gaza Strip. But the open involvement of groups directly associated with Iran in the conflict, on the one hand, plays into the hands of radical factions in the Iranian government, but on the other hand, increases the likelihood of pressure on Iran. This complicates the process of partially lifting sanctions on Iran, which was discussed last year. Do not underestimate the internal political contradictions in Iran, which may spill out if the country's development prospects become too uncertain. In addition, one can note the increased activity of the DPRK, which carried out a series of artillery shelling on the border with South Korea (the shells fell in the maritime buffer zone between the two states). In response, the South Korean authorities conducted military exercises in the Yellow Sea. So far, the situation is far from an international crisis, but it is becoming an argument for coordinating the efforts of the United States, Japan and South Korea, which has noticeably increased its activity last year. It is noteworthy that it was against this background that the United States imposed sanctions against three Russian legal entities and one individual allegedly for transferring ballistic missiles from the DPRK to Russia. However, in another potentially dangerous area of international tension - between the United States and China - the situation remained fairly calm, despite the elections held in Taiwan in January. So far, events are developing in the direction of the bipolar world order scenario desired by both countries, in which Washington and Beijing take responsibility for solving global problems and coordinate their actions. Among the important events in this logic, the negotiations between representatives of the Pentagon and the People's Liberation Army of China attracted attention, the first since January 2021. The participants in the negotiations were Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Pentagon for China Mike Chase and Deputy Director of the Office of the Central Military Commission of China for International Military Cooperation Song Yanchao. However, China is looking for ways to "warn" the United States in connection with its support for Taiwan, where Washington-oriented supporters of independence remain in power. To emphasize its position, China imposed sanctions on five American companies for supplying weapons to Taiwan (BAE Systems Land and Armament, Alliant Techsystems Operation, AeroVironment, ViaSat and Data Link Solutions). And to tighten control over their elites, China is launching massive anti-corruption purges designed to strengthen Xi Jinping's position.

Meanwhile, there are no significant changes in relations between Russia and the EU countries. Thus, the closure of the border checkpoints was extended by Finland until February 11. Bargaining continues within the EU with Hungary, which is ready to lift its veto on providing financial aid to Ukraine if this aid is reviewed every year. It is still unclear whether the EU is ready for such annual bargaining. Much will also depend on the elections to the European Parliament, which are scheduled for June. For now, there is a high chance that opponents of aid to Ukraine will strengthen their positions, which, of course, will also benefit Russia.

The situation in the global economy last week was not significantly affected by the Middle East crisis, despite its new aggravation. In particular, the level of oil prices remained relatively low, which also held back oil and gas revenues of the Russian budget. The world's leading economies recorded mixed trends in inflation and economic growth. The summing up of the results of 2023 in Russia demonstrated the presence of budget constraints, although the key indicators remained within the plan. The question of how to maintain the growth rate of the Russian economy in 2024 remains relevant, and therefore experts are not particularly optimistic.

The most important manipulations on the global oil market were associated with Saudi Arabia, which is waging a persistent struggle to form a more favorable balance for itself. Already realizing that it will not be possible to play for the increase in world prices (they were not affected by the blockade of the Ash-Sharara field in Libya), and some competitors are playing for a decrease, Saudi Arabia itself began to engage in moderate dumping in order not to lose market share. To do this, since February it has reduced the selling prices for its Arab Light grade for all regions of the world. This decision contributed to the consolidation of world prices for the Brent grade below $ 80 per barrel (at the end of the period under review - more than $ 78 per barrel). Thus, Saudi Arabia made a choice in favor of maintaining positions in key markets for it instead of trying to provoke price growth. And this is not the best signal for Russia, given the shortfall in oil and gas revenues and competition with the same Saudi Arabia in the markets of China and India. In addition, the United States is pursuing a consistent policy to reduce energy prices. In particular, there is currently an accelerated growth of domestic oil production, designed to prevent an increase in gasoline prices on the domestic market. The US Department of Energy predicted that a record level of oil production is expected in 2024 (13.21 million bpd), and even more in 2025 - 13.44 million bpd. In 2023, production in the United States has already increased to 12.92 million bpd, which is 1.01 million bpd more than in 2022. It is not surprising that against this background, the world is revising oil price forecasts downwards. Thus, the World Bank lowered its forecast for this year from $ 83.1 to $ 81 per barrel, and the US Department of Energy - to $ 82.49 (Bank of America - to $ 80). No one is predicting price growth in 2025. According to the World Bank, they will fall to $78 per barrel, and the US Department of Energy has lowered its bar to $79.48. In fact, these are not such bad figures for exporters, they are even slightly higher than current prices. However, it is important to understand that forecasts are revised slowly and as new data appears. It is very likely that these forecasts will be revised downwards. At the same time, some experts believe that additional supplies from Iran and Venezuela will be allowed in 2024, which depends on the position of the United States. However, the current actions of both countries do not encourage the lifting of sanctions. Moreover, Iran has just spoiled relations with China by deciding to raise prices for its oil. Therefore, approximately the same countries will play on the market, and one of the uncertainties is whether supplies from Russia will be further restricted. Data on Russia confirms the low price level associated with the price ceiling and forced discounts. As the Ministry of Finance testified, the average price of the Russian Urals grade in 2023 fell by 1.2 times and amounted to $62.99 per barrel - slightly higher than the established ceiling (which Russia itself officially rejects, but is forced to take into account). The current trends are the most alarming: in December, the price of Urals fell to $64.23 per barrel after $72.84 in November. In these conditions, problems with oil and gas revenues of the Russian budget are growing again. In December, they were lower than expected by 199.9 billion rubles due to lower prices and payments to oil companies under the damper. However, in January, a positive balance was formed - an inflow of an additional 130.8 billion rubles. This also means good news for the Russian currency. The total amount of funds allocated for the sale of foreign currency and gold from January 15 to February 6 will amount to 69.1 billion rubles (daily sales volume - 4.1 billion rubles). And taking into account the previously announced sales by the Central Bank of the Russian Federation, the daily volume of currency sales will amount to 16.7 billion rubles from January 15 to 31 and 15.9 billion rubles from February 1 to 6. Returning to oil and gas revenues, we note that in December they fell to 650.5 billion rubles after 951.7 billion in November. In 2023, they were lower only in January-February, April-June and August (the maximum was reached in October-November). The main negative trend was a significant decrease in oil revenues. The prospects for 2024 for Russian energy resources look difficult. In particular, the pressure on the shadow fleet, which Russia managed to create last year, is growing. Despite good contacts between Russia and the UAE, this country has banned ships flying the Cameroon flag from entering its waters, which are used to transport oil from Russia and Iran. After the introduction of US sanctions against the Arctic LNG 2 project, the prospects for growth in liquefied natural gas exports are lost. Pipeline gas exports to China will grow, but they will not compensate for the loss of the European market. Therefore, the year promises to be difficult and nerve-wracking for Russian exporters, who are forced to constantly adapt to unfavourable conditions. As for Western economies, the beginning of the year is taking place there in a situation of exhaustion of positive trends. For example, inflation in the eurozone in December accelerated to 2.9% year-on-year compared to 2.4% in November. April-June and August (the maximum was reached in October-November). The main negative trend was a significant decrease in oil revenues. The prospects for 2024 for

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Although inflation figures in Europe do not look ideal, business and consumer confidence is gradually growing, which provides perspective. According to the European Commission, the indicator rose to 96.4 points in December after 94 points in November. At the same time, optimistic sentiment is observed in the services sector (8.4 points after 5.5 points in November), while the situation remains negative in industry ((-)9.2 points after (-)9.5 points in November). Meanwhile, the investor confidence index (Sentix) in the eurozone rose to (-)15.8 points in January after (-)16.8 points in December (however, it was slightly worse than expected at (-)15.5 points and remains in the negative overall). Outside Europe, Australia has shown success in the fight against inflation. There, in November, it fell to 4.3%, becoming the lowest value since January 2022. In the US, the Department of Labor published a strong report on the labor market for December. The market remains stable, as a result of which the risks of a possible recession are reduced, but these trends may hinder the fight against inflation (the stability of the labor market may delay the start of the key rate cut). However, there are also signs of its slow cooling. Thus, in December, the increase in jobs in the non-agricultural sector amounted to 216 thousand (expectations - 170 thousand). However, the data for previous months were revised downwards (November - 173 thousand instead of 199 thousand, October - 105 thousand instead of 150 thousand). In December, the largest increase in the number of jobs, as in November, was recorded in the health care and social security sector (+58.9 thousand) and the public sector (+52 thousand). At the same time, compared to 2022, job growth slowed significantly: in 2023 it amounted to 2.7 million, while in 2022 it was 4.2 million. In addition, the unemployment rate in the US in December was 3.7% (expectations - 3.8%), the same as in November. Monthly wage growth was 0.4% m/m (expectations - 0.3% m/m) after a similar 0.4% m/m in November. In annual terms, wage growth accelerated to 4.1% y/y (expectations - 3.9% y/y) after 4.0% y/y in November.

Then, data on inflation in the US appeared, which indicated that the problem persisted, although it was not critical. In December, inflation in the US accelerated to 3.4% after 3.1% in November (these data were worse than in June-July and October-November), and monthly price growth was 0.3% after 0.1% in November. However, this increase in inflation was largely due to the peculiarities of demand during the holidays. Thus, core inflation in the US continued to decline, and in December 2023 it fell to 3.9% y/y (expectations - 3.8% y/y) after 4.0% y/y in November. In monthly terms, price growth was 0.3% m/m after the same 0.3% m/m in November. We add that the US made an expected decision, which is important for the cryptocurrency market. The US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) has approved the launch of 11 exchange-traded funds (ETFs) investing in Bitcoin. This has led to an increase in the value of this cryptocurrency (at the level of 46-49 thousand dollars per unit).

The beginning of the new year was traditionally marked by the presentation of various global economic development forecasts. Thus, the World Bank updated its forecasts compared to June. According to the new forecast, global GDP growth in 2024 was maintained at 2.4% (after 2.6% in 2023), and for 2025 it was lowered from 3% to 2.7%. There was more skepticism regarding the growth of the Chinese economy - its forecast for 2024 was reduced from 4.6% to 4.5%, and for 2025 - from 2.3% to only 1.7%. Very weak data were presented for the eurozone: the growth forecast for 2024 was only 0.7% (previously 1.3% was predicted), for 2025 - 1.6% (instead of 2.3%). The forecast for 2024 in the US was improved from 0.8% to 1.6%, but for 2025 it was worsened from 2.3% to 1.7%. As a result, China still remained the main driver of global growth, but without inflated expectations. Also interesting is the contradiction between the World Bank data on Russia and the Kremlin's wishes, which are ultimately embodied in official statistics. Last year, the World Bank estimated the growth of the Russian economy at 2.6%, while President V. Putin, who has recently been announcing increasingly optimistic figures, has already begun to talk about growth of not even 3.5%, but 4%. Whether Rosstat will confirm this will soon become clear. In any case, the World Bank slightly, but only slightly, improves its forecasts for Russia. According to his data, in 2024, GDP growth in the Russian Federation will be a modest 1.3% (previously 1.2% was predicted), and in 2025 – only 0.9% (previously 0.8% was expected).

In addition, Russia has already released data, albeit preliminary, on the execution of the federal budget last year. As we expected, this data highlighted the increased budget spending in December, when the state urgently fulfilled various obligations. As a result, the budget deficit stopped at 1.9% of GDP, which was slightly below the plan (2%), but exceeded the forecasts of the authorities themselves (V. Putin predicted 1%, A. Siluanov - 1.5%). As for the growth of budget revenues, it remained significantly below inflation in 2023 and amounted to 4.7%. The problem was created by the shortfall in oil and gas revenues, which fell by 23.9% (and amounted to 1.3% less than the government's plan). The authorities were helped by the growth of non-oil and gas revenues by 25% (and 18.1% more than the plan), but it still did not help to achieve real, not "inflationary" growth of budget revenues. The government, however, specifically notes that the excess profit tax on large businesses and exchange rate duties that it introduced contributed to the growth of revenues. However, the authorities are increasingly backtracking on exchange rate duties, admitting that in reality they bring in little revenue and create conflicts with businesses. Apparently, they will be abolished for the coal industry, which is also facing not very friendly actions from China. China is introducing an import duty on Russian coal, which the Russian authorities are trying to compensate for by abolishing their exchange rate duties. It is curious that China is simultaneously abolishing duties on coal from Australia, with which it had previously clashed by closing its market (which was situationally advantageous for Russia), and ASEAN countries, where supplies from Indonesia are most important. Thus, the choice was clearly not made in favor of stimulating coal imports from Russia. The expected trend has meanwhile been the strengthening of the ruble, which experienced considerable volatility last year, largely due to the interest of the authorities, as well as exporting companies, in making the national currency cheaper. The current "calm" on the currency market is returning the ruble to values below 90 units per US dollar. The Central Bank's return to currency sales in January also plays a role here.

At the same time, the government is still tackling the problem of the “ruble cycle” that has long been raised by exporters. According to reports, amendments have been made to the presidential decree on the procedure for the mandatory sale of foreign currency proceeds. They provide for concessions for companies that, in the spirit of the Russian government’s guidelines, receive more than half of their foreign revenue in rubles (and are forced to convert them into foreign currency and then sell it to the state, which creates a cycle). Such companies will be allowed to reduce the amount of revenue sold to the state by the amount of payments on foreign currency debts. New data on inflation has also appeared, showing that the fight against it has stopped at approximately the expected level by the end of 2023. According to new data from Rosstat[3], consumer inflation amounted to 7.42% (compared to December 2022), which is slightly lower than the forecast figure of 7.5%. It can be argued that in December, the policy of containing inflation became somewhat more successful - price growth at least slowed down in monthly terms to 0.73% m/m (in November - 1.11% m/m). In the food sector, price growth in December slowed down slightly and amounted to 1.49% m/m (in November - 1.55% m/m). The largest contribution to price growth in this sector was made by the already "familiar" cucumbers - 40.4% m/m (in November - 35.1% m/m) and chicken eggs - 18.2% m/m (in November - 15.1% m/m). In the non-food sector, price growth also slowed down and amounted to 0.42% m/m (in November - 0.53% m/m). In the services sector, price growth was only 0.10% m/m (in November - 1.23% m/m). Vacations to a number of foreign countries became especially cheap. Inflation data for January - June 2024 were also released, which showed approximately the same trends. Price growth was 0.26% y/y, which corresponds to the annual inflation rate of 7.44% y/y (and, by the way, slightly worse than the data for December). The greatest contribution to the growth of inflation in the first week of the new year was made by the same fruits and vegetables, which do not even think of getting cheaper - cucumbers (+13.40%), tomatoes (+9.76%), white cabbage (+7.28%), potatoes (+6.08%), carrots (+4.63%), beetroot (+4.12%), onions (+4.06%), apples (+1.79%), bananas (+1.61%). Prices for vacations have increased seasonally. And the government can be proud of the fact that the prices for chicken eggs have increased by only 0.78% over the first half of the year. Against this background, the Russian Ministry of Agriculture has begun to demonstrate reports on its successes in the fight against "egg" inflation. Against the backdrop of weak growth in prices in retail trade, D. Patrushev's department claims a decrease in prices for eggs from producers - by 2.5% for the first category of eggs and by 4.2% for the second category. According to calculations, this will lead to a decrease in prices in retail, but not immediately. At the same time, the producers themselves do not promise a significant reduction in prices (as shown by the interview of the director of the "Rosptitsesoyuz" G. Bobyleva), and also draw attention to the small volumes of imports that have appeared (so far less than 3% of consumption), believing that they will not make a difference. The long-predicted problems with housing mortgages are also beginning, interconnected with the increase in the key rate of the Central Bank. The beginning of 2024 was marked by a wave of difficulties for potential borrowers caused by the curtailment of mortgage programs by the country's leading banks. Banks, for example, provide mortgage loans only for those developers with whom they have agreements. The preferential mortgage is actually being wound down before its official end this summer (when it was supposed to be extended in a limited version). And things are moving towards the point where the government will have to agree with business on new temporary rules of the game in order to preserve this market, especially since the pace of housing construction in the country is interconnected with it. Finally,New data indicate mixed results of import substitution policy, particularly in the automotive industry. China is actively developing the empty Russian market, which has even allowed it to overtake Japan and take first place in the world in car exports (of course, not only due to Russia). Data for 2023 also showed that with a significant recovery in sales of new passenger cars (60% growth), domestically produced cars accounted for about half - 49%. Moreover, since the summer, the number of sales of imported cars has begun to exceed the sales of domestic cars, which was not the case either in 2022 or in the first half of 2023. The market for imported electric vehicles, which also includes many Chinese products, has grown noticeably, although it remains small. Contrary to beautiful plans, the production of electric vehicles in Russia remains very small, although it has grown during the year. And to create a demonstration effect, the State Duma is implementing a decision to transfer deputies to Russian cars against this backdrop - for vice-speakers and heads of factions, bulky executive class Aurus cars are provided, and for ordinary deputies - the unpretentious Lada Vesta.

Due to the many holidays in Russia, the domestic political situation in the period under review was not dynamic. The election campaign continued to unfold with V. Putin clearly playing a leading role, making periodic trips to the regions. The greatest activity was also shown by officials with a strong grip and interested in maintaining leading positions in power. However, the public background was quickly changing in a not at all festive direction due to a protracted series of utility accidents caused by the high wear and tear of housing and communal services systems against the backdrop of frosts. During the presidential trip to the Far East, observers drew attention to the participation of the head of state's assistant for economics M. Oreshkin. This became further evidence that M. Oreshkin is in favor and is a contender for larger government positions in the leadership of the Russian government or the Central Bank. As for the trips themselves, their destination was Chukotka and Khabarovsk Krai. Chukotka was chosen to create a demonstration effect, since V. Putin never visited this region during his tenure as president (while D. Medvedev, holding this post, visited Chukotka). The focus was on social topics (communication and discussion of issues with SVO participants, public figures, doctors, teachers, large families, etc.), and a greenhouse complex was chosen as an economic object, symbolizing Chukotka's desire to provide itself with vegetables (for the Far East, this is an important issue that the state controls). Khabarovsk Krai was chosen as a large and potentially problematic (in the past - very protest) region, and the theme of the events was more related to issues of local business development. It is noteworthy that the region that showed the lowest electoral ratings for V. Putin, Yakutia, was dropped from the program of the trip, although it was initially included. Officially, this was explained by difficult weather conditions for landing the plane, although regular air traffic with the region was not interrupted at that time. However, now it is said that this year V. Putin will still visit this region, but obviously after the elections.

Along with trips around the country, the campaign plan tightly integrates ongoing events on the topic of the SVO, designed to integrate its participants into the system, make them a more reliable support for the current government and, possibly, one of the foundations of the emerging political elite. Thus, on Christmas Eve, the president met with family members of servicemen who died during the SVO. The participants in the meeting - people somehow connected with the authorities, also took part in a church service held in the church in Novo-Ogaryovo (the president celebrated Christmas in this church at his residence in 2022). Among high-ranking officials, the holiday period quite noticeably drew a line between those who chose this period for rest and those who, on the contrary, demonstrated high public activity in their area. In particular, S. Kiriyenko continued and completed a tour of new regions, visiting the DPR and LPR. The trip was quite eventful, emphasizing the leading role of S. Kiriyenko in supervising new regions (presentation of awards, visiting military units, etc.). Deputy Prime Minister M. Khusnullin, who visited the DPR and, in particular, construction sites in Mariupol, also worked in the same field and with the same goals.

Following the president, other candidates have become more active in the regions, mainly those who are particularly closely connected to the Kremlin and coordinate their trips and other activities with it. In particular, the leader of the LDPR, L. Slutsky, who became the first registered candidate, made quite a long trip around the southern regions, visiting Krasnodar, Stavropol Krais and Saratov Oblast. The candidate of the "New People" V. Davankov was the second to receive registration and went to Chelyabinsk Oblast. On the contrary, the third registered candidate of the CPRF, N. Kharitonov, has not yet shown himself in the regions, showing no interest in active work in the campaign.

At the same time, the situation around the CPRF and the left movement as a whole remains complicated, which many observers perceive as signals of dissatisfaction with this party and its actions during the campaign. The general unwillingness of the Kremlin's domestic policy bloc to cooperate with the CPRF in its current form is also well known. Earlier, the signal was the early resignation of the "red" mayor of Novosibirsk A. Lokot. This was followed by a criminal case and arrest against the well-known radical left-wing activist S. Udaltsov, coordinator of the "Left Front" and a former prisoner in the "Bolotnaya case". S. Udaltsov is accused of publicly justifying terrorism for some old posts in his personal Telegram channel. Before this, the Kremlin did not show signs of dissatisfaction with S. Udaltsov, and his wife and also quite a radical left-wing activist A. Udaltsova last year became a State Duma deputy from the CPRF, receiving the vacant mandate. All this was seen as a way to integrate left-wing radicals into the system, to work with them. The same S. Udaltsov was often quoted in pro-government Telegram channels and did not seem like an opposition marginal.

Let us also recall that the moderate left-wing activist (not associated with the Communist Party of the Russian Federation) B. Kagarlitsky was recently under investigation, but received a rather lenient sentence in the form of a fine.

However, now the situation around the left movement has changed again to its disadvantage. S. Udaltsov, who is critical of the current government, was considered too unreliable an element during the presidential campaign and was taken out of the game, much like the right-wing radical I. Strelkov was previously. For the CPRF, this can be considered a warning about the need not to cross "red lines" during the campaign, although N. Kharitonov has nothing of the sort in mind. But the issue is not with N. Kharitonov, but with the fact that the Kremlin and the security forces consider it important to warn the CPRF about the undesirability of advancing the opposition left agenda. The person of S. Udaltsov himself (as well as A. Udaltsova) is not so important here, since they do not have close ties with the CPRF leadership and are rejected by a significant part of this leadership. Against this background, reasons for discontent, capable of disrupting the course towards consolidation of society, have begun to appear in sensational quantities since the beginning of the year. First of all, we are talking about numerous utility accidents, which demonstrated the unpreparedness of the housing and utilities sector for severe (but not at all unique) frosts. The most resonant catastrophe occurred in connection with the shutdown of a boiler room in the Moscow region microdistrict and former city of Klimovsk, which is part of Podolsk. Accidents occurred in a number of other cities and towns in the Moscow region, and took place in many other regions of the country.

A series of communal accidents revealed the low real quality of work of the vertical of power in the housing and utilities sector. Of course, the culprits were quickly found and arrested in the person of local figures - Deputy Mayor of Podolsk R. Ryazantsev, as well as the general director and, according to rumors, co-owner of the Klimovsky Cartridge Plant (which includes the boiler house) I. Kushnikov - a representative of the security elite with federal connections and a former FSB officer[5]. But, in essence, the investigations did not go beyond Podolsk, where the scandal was the loudest, although there were many problems literally all over the country. And in the context of the presidential campaign, it was announced that V. Putin took the situation under his personal control, after his telephone conversations with the Moscow Region Governor A. Vorobyov, as well as with the head of the Kherson Region V. Saldo (there was an accident on the power grid there).

It was important for the Kremlin not to allow the issue of responsibility for the accidents to reach the federal level, which was done. Rumors about the alleged disgrace of A. Vorobyov (who, according to rumors, spent the holidays at a foreign resort) were not confirmed - the center does not intend to make claims against him. M. Khusnullin's team has been completely removed from the attack, although questions cannot but arise about it. Thus, it is the Territorial Development Fund supervised by this Deputy Prime Minister and the Ministry of Construction and Housing and Utilities under his control that allocates funds for the modernization of housing and utilities in the regions. The readiness of the housing and utilities sector for winter is constantly discussed and checked in the Russian government. Now it turns out that federal control in this area was weak and nominal. After the high-profile accidents, the Kremlin and regional authorities first of all tried to take control of the situation in the information field, demonstrating that the governors are actively involved in solving problems, achieving quick successes, etc. However, society has become convinced that, despite talk of modernizing the housing and utilities sector, its condition remains deplorable due to a high degree of wear and tear. And this noticeably undermines the image of the authorities, without affecting, however, their federal level. The feeling of frankly poor work by both the authorities and business was only fueled by the catastrophic fire at the largest warehouse of the Wildberries company in St. Petersburg.

Along with this, problems have also emerged in the border regions, which are also a subject of public concern. First of all, this applies to the Belgorod region, where public safety issues have become very acute not only in Shebekino, but also in Belgorod itself. The proposal of Governor V. Gladkov to evacuate Belgorod residents to the cities of Stary Oskol and Gubkin, located further from the border, was not understood by society, and was not perceived as a significant solution. Finally, the resonant issue was the problems of relations between military personnel in the SVO zone, which cast a shadow on the Kremlin's policy aimed at constantly demonstrating concern for military personnel and their family members. Here, the role of troublemaker was played by Serbian sniper D. Beric, who participated in military operations since 2014 (having the medal "For the Liberation of Crimea") and is currently recruiting Serbian volunteers, and also has a special relationship with the Kremlin (including the status of a trusted person of V. Putin). D. Beric was forced to record a video message regarding conflicts with the command of the 119th Guards Airborne Regiment, accusing it of a mocking attitude towards Serbian volunteers. At the same time, the Serbs failed to transfer to the disposal of the Akhmat battalion, as they had previously discussed. The current situation reduces the motivation of ideologically charged Serbs to participate in the SVO and raises the issue of "non-statutory" relations in active units. All this was also completely inappropriate in the context of both the SVO and the election campaign. But it is noteworthy that the Kremlin decided to respond to D. Beric's demarche in order to resolve the problem. It is also noteworthy in this regard that the government approved a plan of activities for the Year of the Family, which has little to do with real demographic problems (which, by and large, are unsolvable, given the scientifically substantiated sad prospect of a further reduction in the population of Russia). The government, as usual, reduces work in this area to various official events and competitions, such as the forum “Russia with Many Children,” the “Family of the Year” and “It’s Family-Like” competitions, promising to develop a strategy for demographic and family policy for the period up to 2030. The regions approved their action plans by February 1. Along with this, and just as usual, the government offers performance indicators for the implementation of measures that are somewhat anecdotal in nature. These include, for example, ensuring 150 million views of positive publications in the media and social networks on the topic of family and traditional family values, increasing support in society for a strong family as the most important family value to a level of at least 80% (which sociological surveys can easily show), etc.

Meanwhile, a tense situation is also developing in the Russian Orthodox Church. Some observers believe that Patriarch Kirill is not only guided by the Kremlin in everything, but is also pursuing a policy aimed at strengthening his own vertical and taking control of more independent and well-funded church parishes (taking into account the fact that cash flows in the Russian Orthodox Church are not officially recorded). This is connected with the ban on the ministry of the well-known priest Alexei Uminsky and his removal from the post of rector of the Moscow Trinity Church in Khokhly, where he had been the rector for 30 years, enjoying considerable popularity among parishioners. But the pacifist position of A. Uminsky did not suit the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church, and analysts recognize the grounds for his removal as far-fetched from a formal point of view. But in any case, no less important is the fact that the new rector of this church is Archpriest Andrei Tkachev, who has a completely different political position. He was originally born and lived in Ukraine, was expelled from the Kyiv Theological Academy, and after 2014 moved to Russia and often made loud statements, including calls to bomb Ukraine. By promoting A. Tkachev, whose sponsor and patron is the media-famous businessman K. Malofeev, the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church demonstrates loyalty to the Kremlin and its political line. We also note that last week the policy aimed at putting the participants of the so-called "half-naked" party in the most humiliating position possible was further developed. This issue continued to be discussed in Kremlin-controlled media sources. Demonstrative punishments did not stop even against the backdrop of apologies, donations to the affected residents of Belgorod, readiness to perform in the SVO zone and other similar displays of loyalty, the sincerity of which, however, few believed. Thus, the "Mutabor" club, which found itself in a scandal, was temporarily closed, and the performer N. Vasiliev was arrested again and also received a summons to the military registration and enlistment office. As a result, representatives of the Russian pop scene, mostly either politically loyal or apolitical, felt pressure from the authorities, which obviously did not make them more loyal, and also cut them off from supporting V. Putin during the election campaign, which many of them could have easily supported.

In fact, thus, the policy was continued, which was no longer aimed at interaction with moderate opposition or wavering individuals and groups. There has been no talk of such a policy for a long time. But instead, the policy of cutting off sufficiently loyal people from relations with the authorities and positions, who, however, did not correspond to the declared course of conservatism, was increasingly developed. The developing situation caused internal polemics and splits in politically very amorphous groups, such as the artistic community or the clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church. But at the same time, the emphasized stake on those who demonstrate complete loyalty had its downsides, not only because of the emergence of the potential for the formation of protest groups sometimes "out of the blue."

The elite itself, consolidated on the principles of patriotism and conservatism, did not demonstrate effective management qualities against the backdrop of various accidents and corruption scandals and could not present any attractive image of the future, which created risks for its legitimacy in the long term. Thus, the past week clearly drew lines of possible alienation between the authorities and the "deep people", on whom the official bet is placed, as well as various socio-professional communities.

Conclusion

Thus, world politics remained quite turbulent, one way or another contributing, if not to global changes, then to the correction of the world order, in which the USA, China, Turkey and the Persian Gulf countries are trying to play an active role, increasing their geopolitical role. Russia, meanwhile, is focused on the priority solution of the task of preserving the status quo it needs within the framework of the Ukrainian crisis and securing new territories in the context of growing opportunistic sentiments in other countries on this issue. The Ukrainian leadership is trying to restart the process of its international support, but this has not yielded any obvious results.

Thus, the Russian economy is entering the new year in conditions of unclear prospects for economic growth and increased budget revenues. In fact, 2023 has exhausted the possibilities for ensuring growth in conditions of export restrictions and weak domestic demand, satisfied to a large extent by state defense procurement. Thus, the problem field is beginning to change again. If previously it consisted of problems of inflation and ruble devaluation, then for now their severity is decreasing, which also calms society. But they are being replaced by an equally serious problem of the long-term or at least medium-term perspective, the solution of which requires either a more hermetic closure of the country and its economy, or the removal of at least some of the foreign policy problems that hinder the full integration of the country into the global economy.

Thus, the first half of 2024 demonstrated a number of crisis situations indicating problems with the organization of important processes, be it housing and communal services, border security or relations in military units. All these situations required prompt solutions, but the measures taken have so far been limited to punishing the "scapegoats" and demonstrating in the information field by the authorities that the situation is under complete control. It is still unclear how far the international scandal with Serbian volunteers will go, since they, among other things, may face problems with the law in their home country.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the past week not only consolidated the confrontation in global politics, but also created risks of further spread of the Middle East conflict to Yemen and Iran. From this point of view, it was much more logical to include the writer B. Akunin (G. Chkhartishvili), who lives in Great Britain, in the list of foreign agents, previously included in the list of extremists and terrorists. However, for Russia this only increased the likelihood of consolidating the status quo in the Ukrainian conflict, with which, despite Ukraine's attempts to change the course of events, more and more international actors internally agree. At the same time, in the economic sphere, the situation does not promise any brilliant results either for Russia or for the leading economies of the world, forcing us to constantly think about the problems of ensuring economic growth and financial and budgetary stability. The domestic political situation, while generally under control, was accompanied, however, by the manifestation of force majeure circumstances capable of shaking public confidence in the authorities.

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