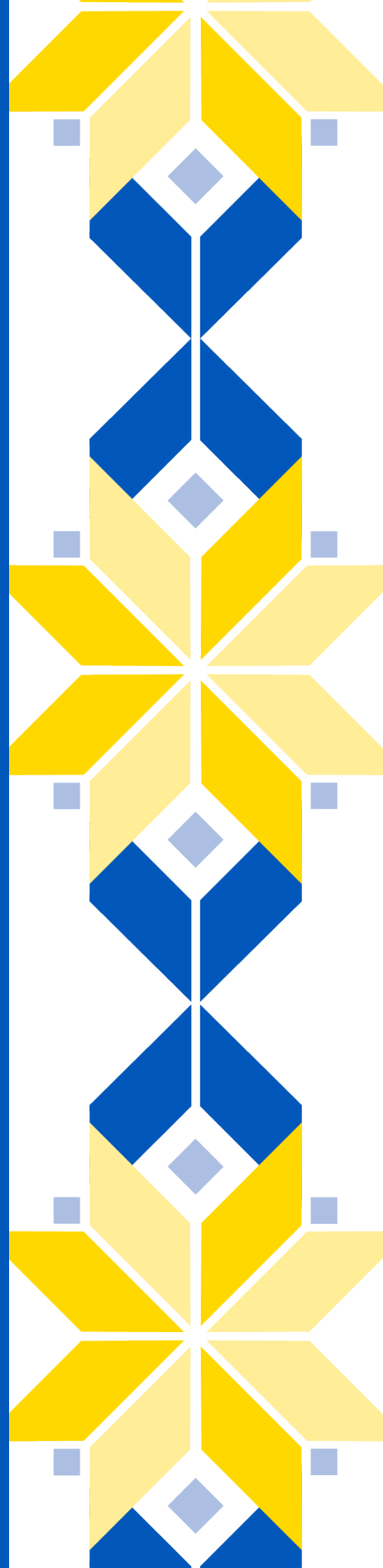


REPORT – FEBRUARY 2024

Revenge, implosion or reform - three scenarios for Russia after a defeat in Ukraine



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Final paper of Friends of Europe's working group on the post-war future of Russia

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Introduction

Human actions and decisions are guided by two primary motivations: the pursuit of desirable outcomes and the avoidance of undesirable ones. Faced with a choice between perceived stability and risk-taking, individuals often take the conservative option, prioritizing the preservation of what they have and are familiar with, rather than pursuing new and uncertain possibilities.

This inclination toward certainty over uncertainty is evident in political decisions, where leaders frequently opt for familiar and known situations. This is also mirrored in the context of the war in Ukraine. Despite the tragedy and devastation of the conflict over the past 22 months, the reality of the war has become familiar to Western decision-makers. Thinking in terms of a choice between Ukraine's victory and Russia's defeat represents uncharted territory, carrying unpredictable short-term and long-term consequences for Russia, Ukraine, and the West. Consequently, the primary focus of international military assistance has been to avert Ukraine's defeat rather than actively to bring about victory.

Western allies on both sides of the Atlantic were initially cautious about arming Ukraine because of expectations of a rapid Russian victory. When Ukrainian resistance proved far more robust than anticipated, the US and European governments, especially in Central Europe, began to empty their stockpiles to give arms to Kyiv. However, West European allies have been slow to deliver game-changing offensive weapons systems. Leaders in Washington, Paris and Berlin, concerned to avoid being drawn into direct confrontation with Moscow, are still reluctant to supply long-range capabilities that could strike sovereign Russian territory. This remains an obstacle to President Volodymyr Zelensky's efforts to strike a decisive blow against Russian occupation forces.

A defeat of the Russian army on the battlefield would have significant implications for the country's political structure, characterized by a power hierarchy led by an autocrat. A decisive loss could imperil Russia's imperial status, signaling weakness not only on a national scale but also internationally. Historical instances of palace coups and revolts, such as the brief, ill-fated revolt led by Yevgeny Prigozhin in June 2023 or the attempted Soviet coup d'état in August 1991, underscore the existential risks faced by the Moscow centre if perceived as weak in the eyes of Russia's governmental, economic, and security elites.

In the light of Russian history, a decisive victory by the Ukrainian army would introduce more uncertainty than a frozen conflict or prolonged confrontation confined to the territory of Ukraine. The current battlefield situation, marked by a static front line and the potential diminution of Western military support due to unfavorable political dynamics in the United States and in certain EU member states, reinforces the prospect of a frozen conflict, which some Western policymakers may consider a lesser evil. This approach would effectively halt or contain the fighting to current positions and defer crucial political decisions, such as on Ukraine's accession to the EU and NATO.

This paper rejects the frozen conflict narrative, which posits that the Ukraine-Russia



conflict has reached a stalemate and that Ukraine's only realistic recourse is to cede part of its territory de facto to Russia or maintain the current defensive position. Implicit in this narrative is the notion that international support for Ukraine would be curtailed, with allies pressing Kyiv to negotiate with Moscow, citing "war fatigue" among Western publics and Ukraine's failure to make significant territorial gains in its recent counteroffensive.

Contrary to this perspective, we argue that sustaining and amplifying military and financial assistance for Ukraine constitutes a vital strategic interest for the democratic world, since if international support for Ukraine fades Vladimir Putin will not stop in Kyiv but will turn towards the rest of Europe. From this viewpoint, the war in Ukraine is not merely a territorial dispute over provinces of Eastern Ukraine or Crimea but an armed struggle by the Kremlin to reclaim control over Ukraine and reverse the trajectory initiated with the Revolution of Dignity in 2014.

Put differently, Putin's war on Ukraine should be understood as a struggle against European integration and the West as a whole. This war unravels the founding principles of the rules-based international order and erodes key elements of Europe's post-Cold War security architecture. Thus, maintaining peace and security on the old continent requires concerted efforts to counter Russia's war in Ukraine and beyond. A frozen conflict and compelled concessions by Ukraine to Russia would only fuel Moscow's revisionist ambitions.

While a return to the agreements and confidence-building tools that institutionalized relations between Russia and the West, such as the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe or the NATO-Russia Council, is highly desirable, it appears increasingly improbable. The only pragmatic option to secure Europe's peace and stability lies in sustained, robust, long-term military support for Ukraine, coupled with strengthening credible deterrence and defense capabilities of the EU and NATO.

Underpinning this argument, section I takes a critical look at the viability of the frozen conflict scenario by delving into the imperialistic characteristics of Russia's overall foreign policy and its war objectives in Ukraine.

Section II outlines the historical layers of Russia's autocratic and imperialist political system and identifies its key actors. These include members of the military and security services (referred to as siloviki), oligarchs, the Russian Orthodox Church, Russia's population, and regional elites. This section explores their motivations and incentives in supporting or opposing Moscow's war in Ukraine. Emphasizing the importance of establishing channels between the EU, NATO, and their member states and the regional elites of the Russian Federation, it argues that such engagement could build on a shared interest in countering Russia's imperialism. Other actors in this landscape demonstrate high loyalties to the Moscow centre and have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

Putting Russia's foreign policy into a global security context, Section III provides a comprehensive analysis of the behaviour of Turkey, China, and Belarus towards Russia's war in Ukraine. Ankara and Beijing have taken an opportunistic and ambiguous stance vis-à-vis Moscow. As a consequence, the section calls for increased Western engagement, where feasible, with China and Turkey to collectively counter Russia's revisionist actions in Europe and beyond. This section also argues that the EU and



NATO should pay greater attention to Belarus, as the country's armed forces under Russian command pose significant threat to NATO.

Considering the potential ramifications of a Russian defeat in Ukraine for the regime in Moscow, Section IV introduces three distinct scenarios: the consolidation of power in the Kremlin, the dissolution of power leading to turmoil, and a genuine re-federalization of Russia. Given the autocratic nature of Russia's political system, enforced through violence and the steadfast loyalty of power elites to the Moscow centre, the consolidation of power in the Kremlin appears the most plausible, albeit the least desirable, outcome of a military defeat in Ukraine.

Consequently, the section emphasizes the imperative for the EU, NATO, and their member states to intensify their mutual security commitments and bolster defense and deterrence capabilities. Anticipating an even greater militarization of Russia's economy and the potential for military escalation against NATO, this proactive stance is deemed essential to safeguard regional and global security.

Sections V and VI set out the conclusion and a set of policy recommendations for the EU, NATO and their members.



1. Illusions and risks of the frozen conflict scenario

In the context of Russia's war against Ukraine, the implication of choosing certainty over risk is a preference for a stalemate, a frozen conflict with Russia occupying Crimea and the Eastern parts of Ukraine.

However, such a scenario offers only an illusion of certainty, as it ignores military and political motivations of both sides, the geographical scope of the war, as well as the global implications of the conflict and its unpredictable character. As to the underlying motivations, it is clear that even after more than 500 days of fighting the will of Ukraine to push Russia out of its territory has not evaporated. On the Kremlin's side, Putin knows that his political standing and personal safety depend on the outcome of his war in Ukraine. Stopping the war or being pushed to a compromise by Ukraine or another state could lead to his losing the "emperor status", making him vulnerable to pressure from Russian economic and security elites. Hence, in the current situation, there is no space for a negotiated ceasefire that could "freeze" the status quo, as both Ukraine and Russia are pursuing their war objectives.

In terms of geography, while there is no or very limited movement of the frontline, both parties are conducting active military operations. Russia's attacks are not limited to the areas it occupies in Eastern Ukraine, as its cruise missiles and drones continuously target Kyiv and other Ukrainian cities well beyond the area occupied by Russia. Ukraine is also striking targets deep inside Russian territory, notably key infrastructure and industrial targets exemplified by the drone attack against Russia's gas export terminal in Saint Petersburg in January 2024.

Hence, the vision of a frozen conflict or stalemate scenario as a solution to the war offers only an illusion of certainty. The longer the war in Ukraine lasts, the more uncertainty it will extend to the world across multiple domains. Russia's repeated attacks on Black Sea shipping that is crucial for Ukraine's grain exports, has already led to global food price inflation and potential food crises in Africa. The war has also sharpened geopolitical fights for resources and over the potential Northern Sea Route.

Stalemate is also an objective of the Russian Federation, as it would perpetuate the feeling of war fatigue in Western capitals. We see that the Western support of Ukraine is increasingly contingent upon the military advances on the battlefield. The longer the war goes on, the easier it is for opponents of military and financial support for Ukraine to frame the conflict as a "forever war". This narrative has been resurgent since the Ukrainian counteroffensive in summer 2023 failed to yield the territorial advances seen in autumn 2022.

A battlefield stalemate with decreased support from the West could also propel



a “stab in the back” narrative in Ukrainian politics. In such a case, there would be a risk of the political discourse becoming more nationalistic, making Ukrainian policymakers more reluctant to adopt and implement necessary political and economic reforms.

Moreover, a frozen conflict situation would not allow Ukraine to launch its economic and material reconstruction and grow its economy, as that requires a significant volume of foreign direct investment. While fighting continues, the government is unable to attract foreign investments in the required volume, as investors are reluctant to put their money into a country at war. This attitude would hardly change if the war turned into a frozen conflict, as the situation would be too unstable, unpredictable and open to exploitation by different actors. Although investment insurance schemes may incentivize foreign investors and creditors to bet on Ukraine, such measures cannot offer adequate reassurance for investors that seek certainty for business.

It is also important to bear in mind that so far there has been no successful peace mediation in the former post-Soviet space by third parties. Therefore, the military option remains the only viable solution to restore Ukraine's internationally recognized borders.

Empire's endgame: defining russia's defeat

Acknowledging that defeating Russia can be achieved only by the military power of the Ukrainian army, it is important to define what Russia's defeat means and what short and long-term implications it might have for Russia's economy, political system and external relations. Shedding more light on these consequences is essential to address the uncertainty faced by decision makers with regard to Russia's post-war future.

Contrary to a widespread belief, defeating Russia does not necessarily or exclusively mean the expulsion of Russian forces from the entire territory of Ukraine, as the roots of the conflict are not in a dispute over the territories Russia currently occupies but in the Kremlin's revisionism. Putin has displayed this imperialist thinking on multiple occasions. His speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, in which he described the collapse of the Soviet Union as “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century”, was the most notable example. A year later, Putin put his ideology into practice by invading Georgia, backing the self-proclaimed republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and facing no resistance from the West.

However, Putin's imperialism is more nuanced than a territorial expansion of Russia's “sphere of influence” and has complex ideological underpinnings. Although views on his main philosophical inspiration differ, we can identify two main streams of thinking in Putin's numerous articles and speeches.

First is the notion of Western decadence and Russian moral superiority conceptualized most famously in the writings of the early 20th century thinker, Ivan Ilyin. Ilyin believed in Russia's divine messianic mission to save the world, as an innocent land

not marked by the sins of the morally, politically and religiously corrupt West. These views form an important part of the contemporary Russian political discourse on the West and the EU in particular. The latter is often described as a decadent entity harboring dysfunctional societies perverted by homosexuality, immigration and other “sins”. To confront these “perversions”, Ilyin saw war as a legitimate instrument to restore the divine order on earth. The imprints of this messianic philosophy can be found in an address that Putin delivered after he launched his full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, stating that one of the aims was “denazification of Ukraine” and to “protect people who, for eight years now, have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kiev regime.”

The second philosophical concept that underpins Putin’s approach to foreign policy and is a natural corollary of Russian superiority conceptualized by Ilyin is Eurasianism — a cultural and geopolitical stream of thought claiming that there is a distinctive geographical space between Europe and Asia that should be governed by Russia. According to this doctrine, propounded currently by far-right political thinker Aleksandr Dugin, other nations in this space do not have a right to self-determination, as they are part of the Russian world or “*Ruskiy mir*” governed by Moscow. In Putin’s view, Ukraine and Belarus are integral parts of the Russian world. He has made this clear on multiple occasions. For instance, in his 2021 article *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*, Putin described the Russian nation as a “*triune*” composed of Russians, Ukrainians, or Belarusians. He asserted that Russia and Ukraine are part of “the same historical and spiritual space”, underlining that the word *Ukrainian* has been historically used mostly to describe “the frontier guards who protected the external borders” of this space.

From the above, it is clear that the journey Ukraine embarked upon in 2014 with its Revolution of Dignity in the Maidan Square is a double challenge to Moscow. First, Ukraine’s embrace of democratic and liberalizing reforms, as part of Kyiv’s path towards EU membership, presents a viable alternative to Putin’s autocratic regime, and thus directly threatens his staying in power. Furthermore, the EU, as a community of values based on human rights and the rule of law, represents the decadent West that Ilyin was so obsessed about. As a consequence, a successful Ukraine in the EU would be a mortal threat for “the purity and innocence” of the Russian world.

In addition to challenging Russia’s self-image of innocence and purity, the prospect of Kyiv’s European and Euro-Atlantic integration is a direct challenge to Putin’s worldview, as it threatens the integrity of “the same historical and spiritual space” shared by Russians, Ukrainians and Belarussians. The EU-Ukraine Association Agreement of 2014 was perceived by Putin as Ukraine’s explicit departure from this shared space or, in other words, Russia’s “sphere of influence”. By signing the Association Agreement (geared towards gradual integration in the EU’s customs union and single market), Ukraine expressed a clear preference for economic and political integration with the West, pouring cold water on Putin’s rival community embodied in the Eurasian Economic Union. To prevent Ukraine from becoming an integral part of the West, Putin first annexed Crimea and then unleashed the separatist war in Donbas. When this did not make Ukraine change geopolitical course, Putin launched his full-scale invasion in February 2022 that lasts until today.

The war in Ukraine is rooted in the Kremlin’s revisionist and anti-western foreign



policy, and thus cannot be seen as a territorial conflict, like those in Nagorno-Karabakh between Azerbaijan and Armenia or in Kashmir between India, Pakistan and China. For this reason, it would be reductive to think of an eventual Russian defeat in Ukraine only in terms of a complete recapture by the Ukrainian military of the currently occupied territories. While this would be highly desirable, a military defeat must also lead to the collapse or long-term constraining of Russian imperialism as the main cause of the war.

It should be noted that Russia's revisionism is not limited to Ukraine, as during the negotiations with the United States that preceded the full-scale invasion of February 2022, Moscow demanded a withdrawal of Allied troops from all countries that joined NATO after 1997 and a binding commitment that Ukraine and Georgia would never join NATO. Such demands run counter to the basic tenets of the European security architecture, namely the freedom of every country to choose its own security alliances.

Supporting Ukraine with military and financial aid is essential for the credibility of the EU and NATO, since both organizations have declared that Kyiv's future lies in their ranks. From this perspective, the Euro-Atlantic community would lose credibility in the eyes of Ukrainian political leaders and public opinion if a decrease in political and military support caused the conflict to turn into a stalemate. In such a case, Ukrainian political elites might resort to nationalistic rhetoric and become more reluctant to adopt and implement political and economic reforms needed for accession to both the EU and NATO. Such a scenario would make all previous economic and military aid packages for Ukraine's defence basically meaningless and damage the global strategic standing of the EU and NATO.

As we saw with Prigozhin's ill-fated revolt, Putin's political standing has become increasingly dependent on the outcome of his aggression against Ukraine. Although Putin and the leadership of Russia's armed forces withstood the mutiny, this unprecedented development was a reminder that Russia is not a homogenous black box but a complex structure of competing interests and fracture points. Therefore, we can assume that a military action that has robust and seriously delegitimizing consequences for the Russian political leadership or armed forces may generate shifts within the Kremlin's power structures even without a complete recapture by the Ukrainian military of the territories occupied by Russia. For instance, it is quite possible that a recapture or blockade of Crimea by cutting the supply lines between Russia and the peninsula, or a massive drone attack against a strategically important target inside Russia, might cause the current power structures to crumble.

In an ideal scenario, military defeat in Ukraine and subsequent power shifts within the Kremlin would unleash such a transformation that would align the political system with the Constitution of the Russian Federation that defines Russia as a "democratic federal law-bound State with a republican form of government". It is clear that the authoritarian and kleptocratic nature of the "power vertical" created by Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s and perfected by Vladimir Putin is far from any form of democratic governance.

Russia's constitution also says that the basis of the Russian Federation is "the equality and self-determination of peoples in the Russian Federation". Although the country counts more than 100 nations and ethnic groups organized within



republics, territories, regions and other entities, it remains a highly centralized state governed directly from Moscow with only limited self-government granted to its federative nations and ethnic groups. At least 7 of these nations, among them Buryats, Tatars, Bashkirs, Chuvash and Chechens, have a population of more than 1 million. However, given the absence of real self-government, they are *de facto* subjects of Moscow.

There is a direct link between imperialism and Russia's autocratic character. A functional federation can hardly exist in an autocratic state, as autocracies are by nature hierarchical and highly centralized. As a consequence, re-federalization of the Russian Federation is not possible while the autocrat remains in power.

Failure in Ukraine (whatever form it takes) would be a serious blow to Putin's power. If this is not the case and Russia remains autocratic and revisionist in nature, nothing would prevent the country's leadership from unleashing a war of continuation a few years later or turning the conflict into a war of attrition to wear down Ukraine and its allies politically, economically and morally.



2. Internal actors of Russia's imperialism

STRUCTURE OF RUSSIAN SOCIETY

Russia is not a monolith but a complex structure encompassing different actors and interest groups with overlapping but also competing interests. Therefore, when conceptualizing the effects of a potential shift within the political system, it is important to understand the motivations and positions of different actors within the Russian state.

In his lecture on Russia's strategic culture, Martti J. Kari, former Finnish intelligence officer and current professor at University of Jyväskylä, distinguishes 6 layers of Russian history that have shaped society and its relations with the outside world.

The first layer can be seen as *Slavic*, determining not only Russia's language and ethnicity, but also underpinning the pan-Slavic tendencies present in political thought — a belief that Russians, as the largest Slavic nation, are responsible for the unity and protection of other Slavic nations, notably Ukrainians and Belarusians.

The second layer is *Byzantine*, relating to the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Empire in 1453 and the emergence of Moscow's claim to be the successor of the Byzantine Empire, also known as “the third Rome”, the centre of the Eastern Orthodox Church. This had two main implications for the Russian political system. First, the ruler of Russia has a divine right and duty to rule over the Eastern Orthodox nations to defend the Eastern Orthodox Church. Hence the Church is obliged to support and assist Russia's ruler. Second, by proclaiming itself the successor of the Byzantine Empire, Russia has also embraced a rigid and conservative vision of society and politics, that gives primacy to the collective entity, such as the nation or the Church, over the individual. The belief that the supreme guiding principle of the ruler's actions is the will of God also means that the ruler cannot be held accountable.

The third layer is *authoritarian*. We can trace its origins to the era of Mongol rule between the 13th and 15th century. The main imprint that this period left in Russian politics was the totalitarian and often violent style of government that was typical of the Mongols, as well as the widespread use of corruption to gain influence and power. Interestingly, it was in this period when the seeds of disinformation were planted as a tool of Russia's foreign policy, with the emergence of “strategic lies” aimed at deceiving one's political adversaries, a tactic perfected over the ensuing centuries by Russian political, security and military elites.

The fourth layer that characterizes Russian political thinking is *fear of unrest* that relates to the period between the late 16th and early 17th centuries known as the Time of Troubles or “Smuta”. This was an era of lawlessness, chaos, famine and

foreign incursions that followed the Mongol withdrawal. The weak leadership of Russian ruler Feodor I and subsequent power struggle among different dynasties are seen as the main cause of Russia's problems during this period. As a consequence, Russians have preference for strong and authoritarian leaders over democracy which they see as weak, leading to internal chaos and making Russia vulnerable to external pressures. This is also why a large number of Russians hold negative views not only of the chaotic era of Yeltsin's presidency in the 1990s but also of democracy as a whole.

The fifth layer in Russian political thinking can be described as *European* and is linked to the reign of Peter the Great and his successor Catherine the Great in the 18th century. In this age of enlightened despotism, Russia underwent significant modernization, absorbing and implementing Western knowledge and science across the state and economy. Importantly, this period marked the beginning of Russia's imperialism and territorial expansion, notably westwards, which made Russia a key European power.

The sixth layer that shapes and largely determines Russia's foreign policy is the era of a *superpower* that the Soviet Union occupied during the Cold War. While in 18th century Russia entered the club of the European powers, after World War II, Moscow assumed the role of a global superpower with its own "sphere of influence" and nuclear arsenal matched only by the United States, the other Cold War superpower. Therefore, unlike in the former Soviet satellites in Central and Eastern Europe, the fall of communism and subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union are not perceived by Russian political elites and citizens as a triumph of liberal democracy but as a defeat and loss of Moscow's global standing.

These six layers determine the motivations and behavior of key actors of Russia's society and political establishment. Given the authoritarian nature of the political system, the agency of different actors has always been limited by Russia's supreme ruler- the Tsar, Secretary General of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union or President of the Russian Federation. Around the supreme ruler, a group of "boyars", economic, governmental and security elites, are vested by the ruler with temporary powers to govern a particular region, lead a state institution and/or make money. The concentration of power in the hands of a few individuals means that there has only ever been a very limited space for independent institutions, civil society, the private sector and free media.

SILOVIKI

Currently, power is primarily in the hands of siloviki, a group of security elites composed of Russia's armed forces and intelligence services, the National Guard of Russia, and Federal Security Service (FSB). Despite significant losses in Ukraine and severe intelligence failures, with a few exceptions, a small group of military and intelligence leaders have remained immensely powerful and close to the centre of power, Putin himself. Among the underlying factors that drive the behavior of members of the security apparatus are a common identity and ideology aligned with Russia's current foreign policy and a shared career journey often rooted in the



Soviet Union. Since the power structure has not crumbled despite relative failure in Ukraine, the *siloviki* still perceive Putin as a guarantee of stability and a bulwark against potential social unrest. History has shown that severe punishment awaits members of the security and defense circles for defection, dissent or disobedience. The latter is almost impossible given Putin's coup-proofing of the security services by fragmenting them into the Federal Guard Service, National Guard and Federal Security Service, each spying on the other.

OLIGARCHS

The second group that is key in Russia's political system is *oligarchs*, a group of billionaires who accumulated wealth through political connections and corruption. Their ability to impact the political regime is highly limited due to several factors. First, Russia's economy is based on quasi feudal foundations, as influential business figures and CEOs of large state-owned companies, such as Rosneft, Gazprom or Russian Railways, are expected to maintain loyalty to the Kremlin in exchange for lucrative government contracts and ownership of key assets. In other words, as the Kremlin grants oligarchs the right to make money and control large swaths of the economy, they have no option but to support the Kremlin's geostrategic interests and policies, including the aggression against Ukraine. Otherwise, they risk being dispossessed of their property, sentenced to long prison terms or even physically eliminated.

The main factors influencing the behavior of oligarchs are thus the redistribution of money, fear of punishment and tendency to support order and stability. Hence, even though a number of oligarchs suffer from the sanctions adopted by the West in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, we have not seen an open display of dissent or criticism of Putin from their ranks. This is also partly due to the fact that it was Putin who significantly limited the power and influence of oligarchs from the Yeltsin era, appointing mostly *siloviki* to key economic positions.

RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

Although Putin has highlighted on multiple occasions that Russia is not only a multiethnic but also multi-religious state, no other religion has such a unique standing in the political system as the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). This is mainly due to Moscow's self-proclaimed role as the successor to the Byzantine Empire with the right to rule over the other Eastern Orthodox nations. According to the canon law and irrespective of national borders, Orthodox churches in other countries of the so-called "post-Soviet space", such as the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Latvian Orthodox Church or Belarusian Orthodox Church, are considered to belong to the "canonical territory" of the Moscow Patriarchate led by Patriarch Kirill.

As a reaction to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church has declared full independence from the Moscow Patriarchate. This decision was



followed by a law adopted by the Latvian parliament granting independence from Moscow to the Latvian Orthodox Church. Neither of these decisions has been approved by the Moscow Patriarchate as it would fragment the canonical territory of the ROC, and thus erode the powers of the Moscow Patriarchate beyond Russia's borders. In this regard, there is an overlap between the "canonical territory" claimed by the ROC and "the same historical and spiritual space [shared by Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians]" referred to by Putin in his essay *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*. Given the complementarity between the imperialism of the ROC and that of the Russian state, Patriarch Kirill openly supports the war in Ukraine.

Besides their mutually supportive goals, the symbiotic relationship of the two entities is based on their common disdain for Western liberalism. The main drivers of the ROC's behavior are thus protecting the integrity of its "canonical territory" against fragmentation and preserving conservative values within Russian society which the ROC deems threatened by the penetration of Western values.

RUSSIA'S POPULATION

Due to restrictions on free speech and a series of draconian laws criminalizing even the smallest displays of criticism of Moscow's "special military operation" in Ukraine, it is difficult to map the views of ordinary Russians not only on the war but on the situation in Russia in general. Recent polls by the Levada Centre show that around 70% of the population supports the Kremlin's aggression, seeing the United States and NATO as responsible¹. This polling reflects the tide of pro-war content shared by Russian social media users on Telegram and other platforms.

Public displays of discontent are rare and almost absent. Unlike in the early days of Putin's tenure, the Kremlin nowadays expects citizens to openly adhere to the official line of the country's leadership with the focus on the younger generations of Russians. To this end, the Kremlin has militarized school curricula and rewritten history textbooks, presenting Joseph Stalin as Russia's defender, Hungarian revolutionaries of 1956 as fascists and the 1968 occupation of Czechoslovakia as international assistance. Unlike during Soviet times, most Russians are not restricted by their government from travelling abroad. Hence many intellectuals, independent journalists and Putin critics have left the country, which has significantly weakened the domestic opposition. The war in Ukraine and the associated rise of political oppression has accelerated this trend.

The increasing authoritarianism of Putin's Russia is a modern example of the political tradition of autocracy, orthodoxy and nationality (*narodnost*) conceptualized by Sergey Uvarov, a scholar and minister of education during the 19th century reign of Nicholas I. According to Uvarov, Russian people must unconditionally support the country's ruler and embrace the autocratic style of government as the sole guarantee of Russia's independence and orthodox values that are threatened by the Western culture.

Furthermore, we saw on multiple occasions in history that Russian people are

¹ <https://www.levada.ru/en/2024/01/26/conflict-with-ukraine-assessments-for-november-2023/>

willing to endure harsh socio-economic conditions. This is a natural corollary of the nationality concept, as bringing sacrifice for the greater good of Russia and its ruler has a high value in political culture. Moreover, except for large cities like Moscow or St. Petersburg, the standards of living are very low in Russia. This enables the regime to recruit a disproportionately higher number of recruits from the poorest and most remote regions than from urban centers. In many of these regions, the military is often the only employer, and many young people thus see it as a reliable source of income and an enabler of social mobility.

In sum, Russia's people are in a double trap. On the one hand, they have no functional democratic mechanisms to channel discontent in a peaceful and orderly way. On the other, they are highly distrustful of democracy, as they associate it with weakness, chaos and mismanagement that marked Yeltsin's rule in the 1990s. It is against this historical background and their national autocratic tradition that Russians have an inclination to support strong rulers, seeing them as guarantors of order and identity embodied by the principles of autocracy, orthodoxy and nationality.

LOCAL ELITES

The fifth group that comes into consideration when analyzing Russia's political structure is *local elites*.

These are mostly regional governors and powerful local political and economic players. Unlike some of the siloviki or oligarchs, local elites are often overlooked by the expert community. This stems from their relatively low profile in the Russian media ecosystem and a Western approach that has always been Moscow-centric. As a result, most discussion in European and North American expert circles of relations with the Russian Federation has been focused on Kremlin strongmen, largely ignoring developments beyond the so-called "MKAD" circular highway around the Russian capital.

However, it should be noted that the one of the most powerful people inside the Kremlin is the first deputy head of the President's Administration, Sergey Kiriyenko, who is personally responsible for elections both on the federal and local level. As Kiriyenko's main activity is to control local leaders and governors, he and his close collaborators will play a major role in "securing" Putin's re-election as president in March 2024.

The role of the local leaders in the imperialist power structure and the loyalty that Moscow expects from them was displayed during the failed coup attempt by Prigozhin, the leader of the "Wagner group" private military company, against Russian Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu and chief of staff Valery Gerasimov. Immediately after the coup attempt failed, one of the top Kremlin-linked telegram-channels, Nezygar, published a special post to deny a number of statements made in Russian media by local governors who, according to the channel, failed to express their unconditional support for Putin. The post emphasized that the Presidential Administration had been in contact with the governors around the clock during the coup attempt. This shows that the Moscow centre is aware that support for Putin



among governors and local elites is not always iron-clad, but it is rather formal and opportunistic, and theoretically could be extended (or not) to another person gaining power in the Kremlin.

As the risk of changing loyalties on the local level is a weakness of Russia's autocratic system, Moscow runs affairs in the republics in a manner that is closer to a feudal than a genuine federal system. The Kremlin requires local elites to provide the necessary human and natural resources to support its military conquests. In return, local elites receive money from the federal budget and are formally allowed to govern in their regions. Although the tight control that Moscow exercises over the regions, mainly through channeling federal subventions and controlling local elections, leaves an impression that the regions have no power over the Kremlin, the 2023 regional elections showed that Moscow (internally weakened by its war in Ukraine) had to "negotiate" the outcome of the elections with the local elites.

Putin abolished direct elections of heads of Russian Federation entities in 2004, citing the tragic hostage-taking incident at the Beslan middle school as justification. Direct elections were briefly restored in April 2012 under the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev. However, this democratic practice was swiftly curtailed by significant constraints.

By April 2013, with Vladimir Putin back in the presidential role, legislative amendments were introduced to impose further guardrails on regional elections. According to these revisions, regional heads could only be elected by regional parliaments upon the recommendation of the President of Russian Federation. Even in regions where direct elections were not abolished, a filter was imposed, requiring candidates to secure signatures from deputies of regional legislative assemblies—a process practically reliant on the endorsement of Putin's United Russia party.

During the 2018 elections, escalating tensions between regional entities and the central government were exposed in Ingushetia where the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) decided not to nominate a candidate in Primorye Krai, despite Andrey Ishchenko, the CPRF candidate, consistently outpolling acting governor Oleg Kozhemiako. The CPRF justified this decision by asserting that their candidate would inevitably have failed to pass the filter—a rather weak rationale for a parliamentary party. This situation led to a scandal, with mutual accusations of bribery. Consequently, the Kremlin was forced to hold a supplementary round of elections.

In the same election, Kremlin-backed candidates faced setbacks in the initial round of gubernatorial ballots in four regions—Primorsky Krai, Khabarovsk Krai, Khakassia, and the Vladimir Region. The federal and local authorities were completely unprepared for such an unexpected result. Despite customary attempts by loyal Kremlin supporters to manipulate the results, Kiriyenko was forced to annul the fraudulent election outcomes in Primorye and rerun the election.

In 2018, Khabarovsk Krai witnessed highly contentious situations when the opposition candidate, Sergey Furgal of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), emerged victorious in the gubernatorial elections. The region displayed the lowest support for the Kremlin in a 2020 referendum on constitutional amendments, that granted Putin an indefinite presidential tenure, with 77.92% against and 21.27% in favour.



Following the referendum, federal law enforcement initiated criminal proceedings against Furgal, accusing him of involvement in homicides. His subsequent arrest prompted weeks-long protests in Khabarovsk, as residents rallied in support of their elected governor. In 2023, Furgal was sentenced to 22 years for a double murder. It is noteworthy that a significant portion of the Khabarovsk population traces its roots to Ukrainians who were forcefully relocated by Stalin to distant regions of the Soviet Union.

These instances show that legitimization of elections and referendums in the Russian Federation depends on the backing of local authorities that use these polls to demonstrate their loyalty (or lack thereof) to the centre. In this regard, Kiriienko's role in maintaining public allegiance to Putin is pivotal. To achieve this, over recent years, he has strategically appointed numerous individuals to political roles across regions, while requiring public displays of loyalty. This was underlined when he criticised the lack of support from certain governors during the attempted coup by Prigozhin.

Thus, unlike *siloviki* or oligarchs, local elites are the only force in the Russian Federation that has the ability to trade with and make deals with Putin instead of blind obedience. Their role in the state structure is not static but can be adapted according to their needs and interests. It is also to be noted that local elites in remote regions are often not ethnic Russians but belong to other national and ethnic groups. These are often underrepresented in Moscow elite circles and have been among the first to be drafted to serve in Russia's war against Ukraine.

It is also important to note the worsening of economic situation in regions that contribute a substantial portion of their revenues to the federal budget to support the war. These are mostly in the Southern Federal District, encompassing Rostov and Krasnodar. The regions of the North-Western Federal District have lost an important part of their budget due to Western sanctions, as a substantial portion of their economy was based on import-export operations and maritime logistics.

There is also an important environmental and ethnic dimension in the clashes between Moscow and the regions. For instance, recent protests in Bashkortostan were centred on defending local environmental and indigenous rights activist Fail Alsynov. The protests were triggered by the initiation of a criminal case against Alsynov, a leader of the Bashkir national liberation movement, who opposed plans to open a new gold mine in the region. This clash holds distinct ethnic features, as both Bashkortostan and Tatarstan are regions where the local ethnic population surpasses that of Russians. The republics of Tuva, Buryatia, Kalmykia, and Dagestan face significant hardship, particularly due to the loss of conscripts in the war in Ukraine.

Recognizing the peculiar position of some local elites and challenges faced by the regions is pivotal in formulating effective strategies to counter Moscow. Acknowledging overlapping interest in limiting the regime's capacity to pursue its revisionist objectives, the EU, NATO and their member states should seek to develop a more pragmatic and cooperative approach towards those local elites and regions that show interest in weakening the Moscow centre.



3. External actors and Russia's imperialism

Russia's foreign policy is not determined exclusively by its internal political and societal structures but also by the capacity of external powers to enable, acquiesce in or counter the Kremlin's expansionist tendencies. This is especially the case in the so-called "post-Soviet space" that Moscow sees as its legitimate "sphere of influence". This section takes examines the behavior of China, Turkey and Belarus in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine, identifying key factors that motivate them to act as enablers or spoilers of Russian's actions.

1. CHINA

Despite symbolic meetings and statements proclaiming "partnership without limits" between Beijing and Moscow, Putin's aggression against Ukraine has been rather unsettling for China. First and foremost, China has always promoted the fundamental principles of international law, such as non-use of force, respect for the territorial integrity of all states and non-intervention in domestic affairs. Therefore, although Beijing has not explicitly condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it has refrained from declaring open support for Moscow and opted for neutral messaging with regard to Russia's actions in Ukraine and even issued its own peace plan.

Besides reputational and diplomatic costs, China has also sought to avoid economic damage from possible Western sanctions in retaliation for any military support for Moscow. Senior Western policymakers, notably and most explicitly US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, have addressed warnings on this front to Beijing. Although several instances have been reported of Chinese-made dual use items and even some Chinese military equipment being used by Russia on in Ukraine, such cases remain marginal. China's caution towards Russia, and especially reluctance to support Moscow militarily, is driven by a high dependence on trade with the United States and other Western countries. Maintaining these trade relations is even more important in the context of relative economic stagnation resulting from its zero Covid policy and over-zealous regulation of the private sector.

Despite the authoritarian character of both countries and their symbolic rapprochement in recent years, a high level of mutual distrust remains between Moscow and Beijing. On the Chinese side, distrust of Russia is rooted in negative experiences with Russian imperialism. In the late 19th century, Moscow forced China to enter into a number of unequal border treaties, annexing large areas of Chinese territory. From this perspective, China's experience with Russia does not differ greatly from the humiliating treaties that Western powers imposed on Beijing in the same period.

Beyond historical distrust, Moscow is suspicious of Beijing's recent attempts to



project greater influence in Russia's neighborhood, notably the Arctic and Central Asia. Put differently, Russia sees a risk of China's abusing its current distraction with Ukraine to pursue its own geopolitical and geoeconomic goals.

Having labeled itself a "near Arctic State" and outlined plans for a "Polar Silk Road", China aims to exploit the potential Northern Sea Route (NSR) to cut shipping time between Asia and Europe by one third. Although Moscow and Beijing have pledged to cooperate closely in building NSR infrastructure, a Chinese presence in the Arctic has always been sensitive for Moscow. Russia only reluctantly agreed with granting China an observer status in the Arctic Council, an intergovernmental forum promoting cooperation in the region. Russia is also re-opening and modernizing its Soviet-era military bases in the region to reassert itself as an Arctic power.

Central Asia is another region where China seeks to expand its influence by taking advantage of Russia's relative weakening due to its aggression against Ukraine. In recent years, China has displaced Russia as the main trading partner of all Central Asian republics. Access to energy is one of the greatest drivers of increasing Chinese presence in the region. Beijing imports 30 to 40 percent of its natural gas consumption from Turkmenistan. As part of its Belt and Road Initiative, it has pledged to build railroads, pipelines and transport routes. In May 2023, the first China-Central Asia Summit took place in Xi'an, China. Interestingly, Russia was not invited despite being a key power in the region and close geopolitical partner of Beijing. China seeks to protect its security interests in the region, notably to protect its Western border and prevent any incursion of Islamist militants from Afghanistan to its Xinjiang province, having established a police outpost in Tajikistan, a CSTO member.

China and Russia also differ in their views on the state of international order. During a meeting in March 2023, Chinese President Xi Jinping told Putin: "Right now there are changes – the likes of which we haven't seen for 100 years – and we are the ones driving these changes together." Behind this facade of unity between Moscow and Beijing, different underlying patterns are at work in Russian and Chinese foreign policy. While Putin has described the collapse of the Soviet Union as "the greatest geopolitical disaster of the twentieth century", lamenting the loss of Russia's (Soviet) superpower status and concentrating his efforts on regaining this rank, Xi sees the international order created after World War Two as illegitimate and wants to replace it. This is reflected in a number of Chinese strategic documents, such as the recently outlined proposal for "A Global Community of Shared Future" that describes the current international order as "increasingly out of step with the changing times" and proposes a new order that would be free of "bloc politics" and "universal values defined by a handful of Western countries."

In a nutshell, China is both an enabler and spoiler of Russia's foreign policy. On the one hand, it provides Moscow with a symbolic partnership and international backing for its geopolitical struggle against the West. On the other, Chinese economic interests in the Arctic and Central Asia present a direct challenge to Moscow's influence. While offering token political assistance, notably in the UN Security Council, China has been able to take advantage of the lower cost of Russian fossil fuels due to Moscow's loss of Western markets, making Russia even more dependent on trade with Beijing. The asymmetry between the two countries in terms of size of their economies, level of technological development and different perceptions



of international order make their cooperation problematic and difficult to sustain in the long run.

While it is not in China's interest to see Russia defeated in Ukraine, since that would deprive it of a useful international ally, Beijing's transactional relationship with Moscow suggests it would seek to exploit either a possible Russian defeat or a potential victory in Ukraine to pursue its own geopolitical objectives.

2. TURKEY

Turkey has historically acted as a spoiler of Russia's imperialism, notably when it comes to countering Moscow's power in the Black Sea region, Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Middle East. In the context of Russia's war against Ukraine, Turkey has played an ambiguous role. Turkey, a NATO ally, has condemned Russia's invasion but not adopted any economic or diplomatic sanctions against Moscow, partly due to its fragile economy's dependence on Russian gas, trade and tourism. However, Turkish defence company Bayraktar has provided Ukraine with its renowned TB2 drones and pledged to open a drone factory in Ukraine by 2025. Moreover, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has publicly supported Ukraine's NATO membership and welcomed Zelensky to Istanbul. Turkey also played a crucial role (together with the United Nations) in mediating the Black Sea Grain Deal between Russia and Ukraine, that secured supplies of Ukrainian grain to the countries of the so-called Global South until Russia withdrew from the agreement in July 2023.

Turkish behavior with regards to Russia is driven primarily by Ankara's aim to play a more important and active role in its neighborhood in its quest for "strategic autonomy", the overarching concept of its foreign policy. In practice, this involves balancing the interests of major powers, such as the US, Russia and China, and projecting its soft and hard power in the Middle East, North Africa, Balkans, Caucasus and Central Asia.

In Syria, Turkey has been a staunch opponent of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, a Russian client. Ankara has not only provided training and weapons to elements of the Syrian opposition but has also occupied border areas of northern Syria, preventing their recapture by Assad's Russian-backed forces. The occupation helps Turkey to conduct military operations against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and is an important bargaining tool in Ankara's relations with Russia, Iran and other powers. Although Erdoğan has dropped his long-sought objective of ousting Assad, a normalization of relations between Turkey and Syria is not in sight despite Russian mediation.

Refugees are another major factor in Turkey's conduct in Syria and the broader Middle East. The country hosts more than 4 million primarily Syrian refugees, and another influx from Syria or elsewhere could harm the standing of Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party in the eyes of Turkish voters. However, Erdoğan often uses the refugee issue to pressure the West, threatening to let Syrian refugees flood into



the EU. Furthermore, Turkish NATO membership gives Erdoğan a possibility to block or severely hinder any action by the Alliance, such as Sweden's membership bid. All these factors enable Turkey to balance between Russia and the West to project power in its neighborhood.

The recent recapture of Nagorno-Karabakh in a swift military action by Azerbaijan's Turkish-backed armed forces is a good example of how the conflicting but sometimes overlapping interests of Turkey and Russia interact. Despite international recognition of the region as part of Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh had functioned as the self-governing Republic of Artsakh, with Armenia's illegal backing, since the 1990s. While Russia predominantly supported Armenia (although it cultivated good relations with Azerbaijan as well), Turkey has historically backed Azerbaijan. However, instead of defending its Orthodox ally, Armenia, and condemning the Azeri takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia tacitly approved the action. The dissolution of the enclave could allow Baku and Ankara to pursue long-sought plans for a so-called "Zangezur corridor" that would connect the Azeri mainland with the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan without Armenian checkpoints, threatening the territorial integrity of Armenia. Ankara sees the proposed corridor as a gateway for Turkey to reach the Turkic peoples of Central Asia. In this context, Moscow's quiet acquiescence in the Azeri military offensive may be interpreted as both a reaction to Armenia's geopolitical shift towards the West and a consequence of Russia's dependence on Azeri supplies of natural gas which it uses for domestic consumption.

To sum up, the main driver of Turkish behavior towards Russia, which determines whether Ankara acts as a spoiler or enabler of Moscow's regional objectives, is Turkey's capacity and willingness to project power in its neighborhood. As a self-proclaimed "middle power" determined to pursue an independent foreign policy, Turkey seeks to balance the interests of major powers to achieve its geopolitical objectives. Unlike China, Turkey has condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine and used its role as custodian of the Bosphorus to bar Russian naval vessels from entering the Black Sea since the start of the war. However, it has stopped short of adopting sanctions against Moscow despite being a NATO ally. Turkey also took the advantage of weakened Russia to support Azerbaijan in its dissolution of Nagorno-Karabakh. From the geostrategic perspective, further Russia's weakening would embolden Turkey to exert even greater influence over the territories inhabited by Turkic peoples in Central Asia and some areas within the Russian Federation.

3. BELARUS

Belarus has been a significant material ally of Russia, supporting Russia in its invasion of Ukraine.

Russia used the territory of its eastern neighbour as a springboard to send its troops into Ukraine on February 24, 2022. By leveraging Belarus as a staging ground, Russia found the most convenient and direct route to target the Ukrainian capital.

Despite dictator Alyksandr Lukashenka's longstanding assurances that Ukraine would not be attacked from Belarusian territory - once even humorously suggesting



his assistance on a tractor with a plough - reality took a different turn. While Belarus officially refrained from entering the war, the Belarusian government played a crucial role by opening its training grounds and civil and military infrastructure to the Russian army. Belarusian airfields became departure points for Russian planes launching strikes in Ukraine, with hundreds of missiles fired during the initial six months of the invasion.

While Lukashenka retains authority over domestic affairs in Belarus, questions arise regarding the extent of independence in decision-making, particularly in geopolitics. For instance, Lukashenka could theoretically have refused Putin's request to use Belarus as a springboard for the attack. However, in practical terms, with Russian troops stationed throughout Belarus, the Minsk regime demonstrated an unwillingness or inability to compel their departure, despite opposition within Belarusian society.

An example illustrating the dynamics of Belarus's relationship with Russia was the brief yet shocking mutiny led by Yevgeny Prigozhin, to which Lukashenka boasted he had mediated a peaceful end. The reality looked different when Putin - not Lukashenka - declared that thousands of Wagner troops involved in the rebellion had the option to relocate to Belarus. This incident solidified the perception of Belarus as a useful vassal, reinforcing the perception that key decisions and outcomes are directed by Moscow.

Arguably the most significant development in this series of events was Putin's announcement of an agreement with Minsk to station Russian tactical nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory. This move was widely interpreted as a further escalation in Putin's nuclear intimidation tactics, aimed at dissuading the West from continuing to support Ukraine militarily.

Belarus is unlikely to be given any say over the use of those weapons. Yet the country could face severe consequences if Moscow were to escalate. By agreeing to host nuclear weapons, the regime has made Belarus a direct threat to European security and a potential target for retaliatory strikes if the conflict in Ukraine expanded to neighboring NATO member states.

The deployment of the missiles underscores the strategic importance of Belarus in Putin's regional agenda. Lukashenka's continued rule provides Moscow with strategic options in its confrontation with the West and allows the Kremlin to bolster its influence across the broader region. For Lukashenka, remaining indispensable to Moscow is a strategic imperative. As long as he continues to play a role in advancing Moscow's regional objectives, Putin is unlikely to abandon him. In reality, the establishment of a Russian military base with nuclear weapons significantly heightens Moscow's leverage over Belarus and solidifies Putin's hold on the country.

Much of Belarusian society opposes both the involvement of Belarus in the war and the presence of Russian nuclear arms. Independent surveys conducted from abroad reveal a stable pattern over time. An overwhelming majority of up to 79% (Chatham House survey) oppose the deployment of Belarusian troops to Ukraine, which has not occurred so far². More than half of the population disapprove of attacks or shelling from the territory of Belarus into Ukraine. Importantly, a majority of Belarusians are against the deployment of Russian nuclear weapons on their soil.

² <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1lojZvBq6Ah4tjDkkLwLIRZx6xqeyCuTW/view>

The regime hardly cares. Following the contested elections in 2020, Lukashenka initiated a fierce crackdown on protesters voicing widespread opposition to his leadership. The number of political prisoners has continued to grow. Shortly after the invasion, Belarusians took to the streets in protest, leading to widespread arrests. Partisans engaged in massive sabotage actions on the railway to impede Russian attacks on Ukraine. In response to these actions, the regime amended legislation, introducing the death penalty for “attempted terrorism.”

Fearing mobilisation among Belarusians, the regime expelled most independent media outlets and shut down civil society organisations. Many of them were dedicated to fostering cultural initiatives, promoting the Belarusian language, and disseminating knowledge about the history of Belarus. Even speaking the Belarusian language can serve as grounds for arrest. The process of Russification in schools has accelerated, leaving little room for alternative perspectives. State-owned media channels are dominated by Russian propaganda and narratives, shaping the information landscape.

Over the past three decades, Belarus has experienced a significant escalation in its reliance on political, economic, and military support from the Kremlin. Initially buying 40% of Belarusian exports, Russia now accounts for approximately two-thirds. In international institutions, the Belarusian regime consistently aligns its votes with those of Russia. If Putin were to decide to redeploy Russian troops to Belarus, Lukashenka might find himself with limited power to resist such a move.

The potential loss of Belarus might be more challenging for Putin than losing Ukraine. Lukashenka, having limited room for manoeuvre, has jeopardized the country's sovereignty. It is crucial to recognise the threat to Belarusian independence and prevent Putin from seizing Belarus as a consolation prize or trophy following the invasion. With Lukashenka under Russian control, Belarus poses a continuous threat to Europe's security. The EU and NATO should pay greater attention to the potential hybrid and kinetic threats emanating from the instrumentalised regime in Minsk.

Unlike Belarus, neither China nor Turkey has directly supported Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In contrast to Beijing, Ankara has condemned the invasion and allowed its defence industry to supply weapons to Kyiv. Both China and Turkey seek to exploit Russia's current “preoccupation” with Ukraine to increase their own power and influence in Russia's neighborhood. Such an opportunistic stance presents the West with an opportunity to engage Ankara and Beijing, where possible, to undermine Russia's war machine, as both powers have an interest in acting as counterweights against Moscow.



4. Three scenarios for Russia's defeat and post-war development

A frozen conflict in Ukraine will not make Russia's revisionist appetite disappear, as proved by the Second Chechen War, 2008 war against Georgia and the initial phase of Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014. The current empire will likely retain its army and security services, nuclear weaponry, and powerful propaganda system. It will use the time gained by the stalemate to regroup and better prepare its forces for further escalation of the conflict. Therefore, it is absolutely indispensable that Ukraine continues receiving necessary military, financial, political and humanitarian assistance to prevail on the battlefield.

The political contours of a Ukrainian victory are relatively clear, as the war is also a struggle to protect the process of European integration and rules-based international order. Therefore, it is highly probable that a victorious Ukraine would continue adopting and implementing necessary reforms to pursue closer integration with the EU and NATO and eventually becoming a member of both organizations.

However, the future is much more blurred when it comes to the impact of a defeat on Russia. As the war in Ukraine is a direct consequence of the imperialist nature of Russia's internal power structures, a defeat could well unleash serious political upheaval within Russia. To shed more light on these possible transformations and their different actors, three groups of scenarios come into consideration, each with a different level of probability and desirability, seen from the Western perspective. These are 1) consolidation of power in the Kremlin, 2) dissolution of power, and 3) genuine federalization of the Russian Federation.

1. CONSOLIDATION OF POWER IN THE KREMLIN: UNDESIRABLE BUT LIKELY

The consolidation of power within the Kremlin may take place with or without a power transfer.

Consolidation of the imperial system without a transfer of power

Responding to the immediate shockwaves of a military defeat in Ukraine, Putin might resort to tightening internal repression akin to Stalin's methods, such as mass suppression of the remaining opposition and civil society, an increased military buildup and even greater militarization of Russian society to prepare for another conquest. Another option could involve an even greater turn towards isolationism,



doubling down on Russia's principles of orthodoxy, autocracy and *narodnost* and closer rapprochement between the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church, creating a regime similar to the current political system in Iran.

Both paths would consolidate Russia's revisionism, opening doors to another round of aggression in the future. This would also involve brief periods of relative peace used to regroup and rebuild military capabilities. A weakened and more isolated Russia might be even more dependent on China, and thus become a de facto satellite of Beijing.

Transfer of power to “new faces”

The sheer magnitude of a Russian defeat and/or Putin's incapacity to protect the integrity of Russia's current power structure may prompt members of the *siloviki* to depose him, transferring power to one or a group of the emerging figures within the security apparatus. This could involve either the installation of a high-ranking member of the military or intelligence services, sympathetic to extreme militarist ideologies, as head of the Russian Federation or a managed transition to a more liberal regime, allowing the facade of power to shift while *siloviki* retain substantial influence on Russia's internal and foreign policy behind the scenes. Although the latter more than the former could pave the way for some negotiations with Ukraine and the West, any such replacement is unlikely to signal a genuine departure from Russia's current trajectory.

Regardless of whether Putin is replaced, or power is transferred to another individual, pursuing the war in Ukraine would likely remain the paramount concern for the “new faces” in the Kremlin. Although a new face in the Kremlin might seem an opportunity for another “reset” between the West and the Russian Federation, a *siloviki*-orchestrated transfer of power would not lead to a sustainable and just peace. Given their shared ideology and adherence to current Moscow's foreign policy goals, *siloviki* are unlikely to exhibit enthusiasm for withdrawing troops from Ukraine without damaging concessions from Kyiv and the West as a whole.

2. DISSOLUTION OF POWER IN THE KREMLIN: UNDESIRABLE AND UNLIKELY

While the consolidation of power scenario presupposes Putin's staying in office or his peaceful ousting by members of the *siloviki*, a dissolution of power unleashed by a crumbling of Putin's famous “power vertical” as a consequence of defeat in Ukraine would be much less orderly and more violent for two main reasons. First, unlike the Soviet Union, present-day Russia has no mechanism for peaceful transfer of power. Second, as most of Moscow's current elite are from the ranks of armed forces and security services, the ensuing power struggles would involve high levels of violence.

In this scenario, a power vacuum left by Putin's demise is exploited by different members of the *siloviki* fighting for the throne he once occupied. It is important



to note that the meticulously cultivated autocratic system of governance created by Putin has largely pacified relations between different interest groups within the *siloviki*. Putin has encouraged his closest allies to compete with and spy on each other, while he plays the role of ultimate arbiter, resolving conflicts that occasionally arise among his allies.

However, with the arbiter's disappearance, the rules he once upheld—whether deemed good or bad—would perish with him. Therefore, the dissolution of power scenario sets the stage for protracted internal conflict, as various individuals would claim to represent Putin's will after his demise.

In addition to power struggles among the central elites, tensions might also emerge between the local and central elites. With the Moscow centre weakened by internal power struggles, some republics of the Russian Federation may try to exploit this situation to demand more autonomy, self-governance or even self-determination. In case these demands are not fulfilled, strife between the republics and the central power may escalate into armed conflict. Although considered less probable due to lack of data on regional dynamics within the Russian Federation, the likelihood of this scenario may increase with the weakening of the Moscow centre caused by Ukrainian military advances on the battlefield. A weakened central power might be unable to restore the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation and therefore a likely outcome of such internal conflict could be a reduced Russian territory after a civil war.

Besides weakening of the Russian military on the battlefield, an armed struggle against the central power may be also sparked by a rebellion of army units hailing from ethnic republics, as the death toll of soldiers mobilized to the Russian army from Dagestan and other ethnic republics is often proportionately much higher than among mobilized soldiers from the central parts of the country. Such imbalances illustrate the highly undemocratic character of the Russian Federation.

A dissolution of power leading to violent turmoil within the Russian Federation may not be an immediate consequence of Russia's defeat in Ukraine. The manner and magnitude of a defeat would define the scope and intensity of changes inside the Russian Federation. We may also see a brief period of consolidation of power (with or without a new head of the Russian Federation) followed by a long period of turmoil caused by Putin's or his successor's inability to truly consolidate power. Russia experienced similar scenario in the late 16th and early 17th century during the period known as "Smuta" or the Time of Troubles.

The dissolution of power in the Kremlin followed by a violent struggle among the central elites or between the central and local elites would be a highly undesirable scenario for Ukraine and the West due to the inherent unpredictability and instability of such a process. Furthermore, it would likely embolden China to seek more robust presence in the Central Asia, Far East and Arctic and to take greater advantage of Russia's natural resources. Turkey would be emboldened to exploit Russia's weakening in the South Caucasus and Central Asia.



3. RE-FEDERALIZATION OF RUSSIA: DESIRABLE BUT UNLIKELY

Both consolidation and dissolution of power within the Kremlin pose significant challenges both for the West and Ukraine. A third scenario, although the least probable, envisions the rise of new power centers in the federative republics and a transformation of Russia from an empire into a genuine federation, as provided by the Constitution of the Russian Federation.

True federalization of the Russian Federation would create a system of checks and balances that would serve as a foundation for sustainable peace between Russia and the countries Moscow deems its “sphere of influence”.

As the Russian Federation lacks true federal characteristics, such a transformation would require a more balanced distribution of power among constituent regions. In this endeavor, conscious and directed efforts by local elites would be crucial for obtaining independence or broader autonomy from the Moscow centre. Historical precedents, such as the ill-fated New Union Treaty of 1991 proposed by Mikhail Gorbachev to save the Soviet Union, provide a foundation, but the main challenge lies in implementing the principles of true federalism in an autocratic system. As long as the political system of the Russian Federation is autocratic both at the federal and local level, the prospect of a bottom-up democratization emerging from the regions seems unlikely.

A more radical scenario would involve granting full independence to Russia's republics, while strategically preserving the remainder of the Russian Federation. The Belovezha Accords of 1991 signed by the representatives of the Russian Federation, Ukraine and Belarus that officially dissolved the Soviet Union, can serve an example. However, such process would face significant resistance from Russia's elites, notably the siloviki and the Russian Orthodox Church, unwilling to accept such a radical loss of their power.

The most desirable scenario would involve a controlled reconstruction of the Russian Federation, challenging the highly centralized power structure, and promoting collaboration between regions and the center on a more equal footing. However, this scenario is highly unlikely, given the lack of democratic mechanisms on both the local and federal level, as well as the chaos and turmoil Russia's defeat in Ukraine might produce.

Despite the low probability of peaceful federalization, a number of initiatives by ethnic groups within the Russian Federation advocate a federalization of Russia as the only solution to counter Moscow's aggression in Ukraine and other places. Russians in exile are debating the country's future and advocating for greater autonomy or sovereignty of their respective regions. While some experts dismiss the idea of widespread support for separatist movements, the lack of independent research on federal-regional interactions leaves the potential for such scenarios open, making it crucial to consider these perspectives in the broader discourse on Russia's future.

Based on the above, consolidation of power appears to be the most likely, albeit



undesirable, consequence of a Russian defeat in Ukraine. However, depending on the nature and scope of a defeat, consolidation may fail and a violent struggle for power may emerge among Russia's central elites.

Furthermore, it is likely that defeat in Ukraine would not be the result of a single military operation but rather a gradual accumulation of Ukrainian successes over a period of time. These successes would exert increasing pressure on Putin's power vertical. Hence consolidation or dissolution of power within Russia might unfold gradually.

Both the consolidation of power and dissolution of power scenarios resulting from a defeat in Ukraine would create a risk of further military aggression not only against Ukraine but also towards NATO. As a consequence, it becomes imperative for the EU and NATO to anticipate and strategize for the potential repercussions and step up measures to strengthen NATO's Eastern flank and EU's defence industrial base.

The autocratic nature of Russia's political system, characterized by a concentration of power in the Kremlin enforced through violence, coupled with the unwavering loyalty of the security circles, oligarchs, Russian Orthodox Church and the population, leaves only a small room for genuine federalization and democratization, a process that would inevitably lead to dismantling Russia's imperialism.



5. Conclusion

Russia's aggression against Ukraine constitutes a direct assault on the trajectory initiated in 2014 with the Revolution of Dignity. Viewing Ukraine as an extension of its empire, Putin aims to upend the international liberal order and European security architecture established in the post-Cold War era. The full-scale invasion not only challenges the EU but also the US, as Russia seeks to reclaim a superpower role reminiscent of the Soviet Union.

The attack on Ukraine serves a dual purpose: to reverse Kyiv's democratic and Euro-Atlantic aspirations while countering the values of liberal democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, which challenge the autocratic and revisionist regime in the Russian Federation.

Under these circumstances, considering a ceasefire or territorial concessions by Ukraine as a viable solution to the conflict is futile. The war in Ukraine is rooted not in territorial disputes over Crimea or Donbas but in its imperialist foreign policy. Any concession to Putin would only embolden further conquest and escalation.

Furthermore, the situation on the battlefield defies characterization as a stalemate or frozen conflict, since both Ukraine and Russia continue to inflict significant damage on each other and have the necessary resources to continue hostilities. Therefore, providing Ukraine with robust military and financial aid is imperative, especially considering that the EU and NATO face their most substantial threat from Moscow since the Cold War's conclusion. Ensuring that Ukraine has sufficient military capabilities aligns with the strategic interests of the EU, NATO and their member states.

While critics argue that Ukraine's 2023 counteroffensive did not yield substantial territorial gains, it's essential to recognize the strategic impact of their recent military operations. Ukraine has denied Russia air superiority, successfully reopened the Black Sea trade route despite lacking a navy, targeted key sites deep within Russian territory (such as the natural gas export terminal in St. Petersburg) despite restrictions on using Western long-range missiles, and brought down a Russian A-50 reconnaissance plane. These examples attest to the prowess and capacity of the Ukrainian military to effectively counter Russia's war machine.

In addition to providing vital military and financial aid to Ukraine, the West must anticipate potential outcomes of Russia's defeat. This could entail the consolidation of Putin's power and heightened militarization, or a prolonged internal conflict among factions vying for control over the Russian Federation. Both scenarios would likely lead to increased internal repression in Russia and unpredictable escalation towards the West. Therefore, the EU, NATO, and their member states must reaffirm their commitment to bolster their collective defense capabilities, particularly on NATO's Eastern flank. To prepare for Ukraine's eventual NATO accession, the West should also extend significant security guarantees to Kyiv in line with the commitments made at the NATO Summit in Vilnius in 2023.

Considering Russia's entrenched autocratic system, prospects for genuine



federalization and democratization as a result of a military defeat in Ukraine appear bleak. However, recognizing shared interests between the West and certain ethnic and national groups within the Russian Federation in opposing Kremlin's imperialism, it is crucial for the West to explore avenues of communication and collaboration with these communities and their formal and informal elites and representatives.

Powerful external actors, particularly Turkey and China, have taken an opportunistic stance towards Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, aiming to exploit potential weaknesses to extend their influence in regions historically dominated by Russia—such as Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and the Arctic. The West should actively engage these powers, seeking to isolate Russia and diminish its material and financial capacity for further military aggression. In this regard, the outcome of the re-launched dialogue between top US and Chinese officials and military representatives will be decisive.

Belarus is both victim and instrument of Russia's foreign policy. The Lukashenka regime, under Moscow's control, poses a substantial threat to the EU and NATO, with the capacity for hybrid and kinetic operations against Poland and other countries on NATO's eastern flank. It is likely that Russia's tightening of internal repression and increased militarization will translate also into Belarus. Therefore, the EU and NATO must be prepared for a potential military escalation from Minsk. Simultaneously, the West must increase its support for the opposition and civil society in Belarus, as they too share an interest in countering Moscow's malign influence.

In conclusion, the warnings recently voiced by key NATO officials, such as Admiral Rob Bauer, Chair of the NATO Military Committee, that the West faces a looming threat from Russia underscore the need for a long-term, sustained supply of weapons for Ukraine, as well as the urgent need to increase NATO's readiness. Disregarding these warnings may expose the Western alliance to heightened aggression, disrupting the bedrock principles of liberal international order.



6. Recommendations

1. Given the severity of Russia's aggression, the West should extend enduring and robust military support to Ukraine. This entails the provision of sophisticated weaponry, including long-range missiles and fighter jets, along with military training and intelligence collaboration. The EU must expedite the delivery of 1 million rounds of artillery ammunition, a goal it has fallen short of achieving.
2. Despite sanctions, Russia has successfully augmented its defense industrial production in quantity if not in quality, bolstering its readiness for a protracted military standoff. Consequently, the EU and its member states should facilitate collaboration and the establishment of joint ventures between EU-based and Ukrainian defense industries to enhance Ukraine's defense production capacities.
3. To facilitate Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic accession process in accordance with the commitments made at the NATO Summit in Vilnius, Kyiv should receive significant bilateral security undertakings from NATO member states. The UK-Ukraine Agreement on Security Cooperation serves as an exemplary model in this context. Germany and France also signed long-term security commitments in February 2024. Beyond providing security assistance, these agreements should prioritize aligning the Armed Forces of Ukraine with NATO standards.
4. The EU, NATO and their member states must take seriously the warnings issued by senior Western military officials that the Alliance faces a serious threat of Russian aggression in the coming years. NATO should strengthen its defense and deterrence capabilities to effectively counter potential attack from Russia. Leveraging its legislative competence over the single market and industrial policy, the European Commission should act to revitalize Europe's defense technological industrial base by addressing critical issues, such as barriers to access to finance for the defence sector and fragmented regulatory and procurement systems. It should increase incentives to member states for efficient, joint procurement of key enablers and weapons systems, and joint research, development and production.
5. The EU, NATO, and their member states should recognize that a potential Russian defeat in Ukraine, whatever form it took, could lead to either the consolidation or the dissolution of power in the Kremlin. Either outcome is likely to result in heightened internal repression and militarization of Russia's society and economy. Consequently, the EU and NATO should reaffirm their commitment to collective defense and defence cooperation, anticipating a further deterioration of peace and security in the Euro-Atlantic area.
6. The EU, NATO and their member states should seek to establish effective channels of communication and collaboration with ethnic and national groups within the Russian Federation that share a common interest in opposing Russia's autocracy and imperialism.
7. The EU, NATO and their member states should pursue active engagement with Turkey and China, which have taken an opportunistic stance towards the war

in Ukraine, as well as with countries of the so-called Global South to curtail Russia's material and financial capacity for further military aggression.

8. The threat to stability posed by Belarus requires serious attention from the EU, NATO, and their member states. To address this, they should bolster their capabilities to counter both kinetic and hybrid threats originating from Belarus. Simultaneously, supporting the Belarusian opposition, civil society, and free media is imperative in fostering resilience against external threats and promoting democratic values.





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