

# After Putin, the deluge?

Foresight on the possible futures  
of the Russian Federation

Bob Deen  
Niels Drost  
Milou Carsten

**Clingendael Report**



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# Executive summary

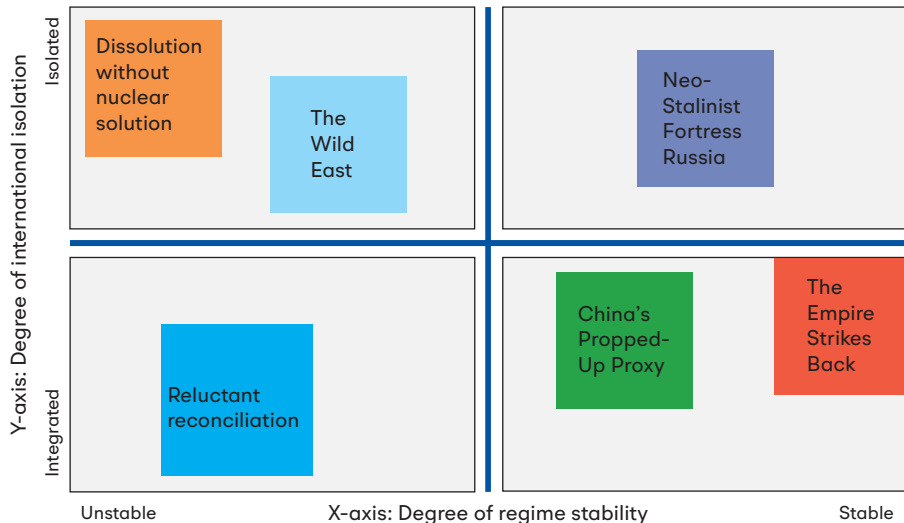
Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine is by now not only existential for Ukraine. It also seems to have become existential for Vladimir Putin's regime itself, which equates its own security and continuity with Russia's national security. How the war ends will be an important factor that shapes the future of the Russian Federation. The inverse is also true: whether or not the Russian regime remains stable is also a key factor that determines when and how the war ends. Russia's future will furthermore shape the broader European security architecture – and vice versa.

To help policymakers prepare for what might lie ahead, this report draws up a model consisting of 35 variables that will together shape Russia's future – based on an extensive literature review and scenario workshop with Dutch and international experts. It then builds on this model to construct a scenario framework for the next five years. These scenarios take into account (1) to what extent the Russian regime could change or persist, (2) to what extent this would be accompanied by large-scale instability and violence, and (3) to what extent a future Russian government would pursue confrontation or rapprochement with the West. The report then puts forward six scenarios based on these variables and presuppositions:

1. **Reluctant reconciliation.** After Russia has lost the war in Ukraine, various groups in the Russian elite join forces to oust Putin in a 'palace coup'. The new president strikes a deal with the West, makes Putin and his loyalists a scapegoat, and enacts limited democratic and economic reforms.
2. **China's propped-up proxy.** The war grinds on for years and no end is in sight. Putin is forced to step down due to mismanagement, but the regime itself prevails and a successor eventually secures political and financial backing from Beijing. Russia becomes fully dependent on China.
3. **The Empire strikes back.** After Western support for Ukraine dwindles, Russia decisively wins the war. Putin's popularity surges and he is stronger in power than ever before. Russia has international partners that help it keep its economy going, while the West loses its unity.
4. **Neo-Stalinist fortress Russia.** Putin has made Russia a global pariah state. China, India and others abandon their tacit support and Russia is forced to become almost entirely self-sufficient. The regime continues its reign through brutal repression and propaganda.

5. **The Wild East.** After continued humiliation and a defeat on the battlefield, Putin’s regime loses legitimacy, withdraws from the south and east of Ukraine, and Russia begins to implode. Russia descends into organised chaos with high levels of criminality reminiscent of the early 1990s.
6. **Dissolution without a nuclear solution.** A catastrophic military defeat leads to the implosion of the Russian Federation, after which regional warlords seize nuclear assets to deter the rump state Muscovy. While some entities are recognised by China or other powers, Muscovy remains revisionist and deeply hostile towards the West.

Figure 1 A scenario framework for the futures of Russia



Although all scenarios in this report are *plausible*, they are not equally *probable*. More worryingly, there is also disagreement within the EU and NATO about which of these scenarios are *preferable*. While most Americans and Western Europeans tend to perceive an instable or collapsing Russia primarily as a security threat, Eastern Europeans tend to be much less risk-averse towards such a scenario – since they perceive this as a reduction of the security threat that Russia poses to them.

Regardless of the diverging views, policymakers in the EU and NATO need to consider options and steps that they can now already prepare for. Hope cannot be a policy regarding Russia’s future, so the West needs to prepare for the best, the worst, and the status quo outcomes. This means developing “no regret

options”, which would be useful in any of the six scenarios even if they may primarily be based on the assumption of regime continuity. This report puts forward a set of recommendations to that effect.

### **To prepare for scenarios of regime continuity:**

- There is a continued need for a credible deterrence, but also for containment and efforts to reduce Russia’s malign influence in the broader region.
- There would also be a clear need to monitor closely any possible emerging divisions within the foreign and security policy elite in Moscow and/or between Russia and China.
- As a long-term option, the EU could be more welcoming to Russian opposition abroad and stimulate them to present a more unified platform with an agenda for a more democratic and less revisionist Russia.
- In its strategic communication the EU could signal that there could again be a place for Russia in a renewed European security architecture – but *only* if and when Russia decides to again respect the multilateral rules-based order.

### **To prepare for scenarios of regime change:**

- There should already be debates within NATO and the EU on *the conditions under which* the West could re-engage with a new Russian leadership.
- This discussion should include prioritizing *within* this list of conditions, as well as to what extent these could be linked to a potential and gradual lifting of sanctions.
- If a new regime would again respect the full range of obligations under international law and in the context of OSCE, the West should be ready to re-engage and even support reforms inside Russia – but it should not repeat the mistake of the 1990s by doing so unconditionally.

### **To prepare for scenarios of large-scale instability:**

- The West should begin to draw up contingency plans to prevent a spill-over of instability in Russia – including a surge in cross-border flows of organized crime, refugees and weapons.
- In terms of nuclear non-proliferation, Western countries led by the United States should already now develop or update their plans on how to manage Russia’s nuclear arsenal.
- The West should also consider in advance how it would approach the possible recognition of new entities that might declare independence from the Russian Federation.



# Introduction

When Yevgeny Prigozhin and his Wagner contractors launched their fateful but failed mutiny on 24 June 2023, the shockwaves reverberated not only in Russia but also throughout Europe. The brief period of uncertainty concerning a potential regime change in the Kremlin kickstarted discussions in Western capitals about Russia's various potential futures – and the impact they might have on European security. These discussions were not new: there is a vast body of foresight studies that attempt to map out Russia's potential pathways, including different scenarios for transitions of power or domestic instability.

However, before Prigozhin's mutiny these discussions had taken place predominantly behind the scenes or within the expert community. There has generally been a cautious attitude among Western politicians when discussing Russia's future, in order not to further fan already deeply held suspicions within the Kremlin that the West is pursuing a regime change. Apart from a short and quickly downplayed remark by President Biden in March 2022 that "Putin cannot remain in power", Western officials routinely state that Russia's political future "is a domestic affair that is up to the Russian people".<sup>1</sup> Ukrainians, on the other hand, are much more up-front about their preferred future: one in which Russia is weakened through internal strife and in which Russia no longer poses a threat to its neighbours.<sup>2</sup>

Despite this Western aversity to express any preference about Russia's future, it is by now obvious that the fate of Putin's regime has become inextricably linked with the war of aggression that it launched against Ukraine. As the equation of regime security with national security is one of the cornerstones of Putin's regime narrative, a threat to one is perceived as a threat to the other as well. Russia's future will therefore shape the outcome of the war – and vice versa. But it will also shape the broader European and global security architecture for

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1 Kevin Liptak and Maegan Vazquez, "[Biden says Putin 'cannot remain in power'](#)" CNN, March 26, 2022. For later iterations of the line that 'this is up to the Russian people', see for example John Kirby, "[Press Briefing by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre and NSC Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby](#)," The White House, Jun 26, 2023.

2 "[Ukraine must systematically weaken Russia, for this goal it is essential to join EU and NATO – Ukraine's secret service chief](#)," *Ukrainska Pravda*, January 30, 2023.

the years to come. Will Europe face an isolated and vengeful Russian Federation that continues to undermine the international rules-based order? Might a change of leadership take place, after which a more constructive Russian government could try to improve its ties with the West? Or could Russia become unstable, face civil unrest and violence and perhaps even disintegrate?

In order to enable Western policymakers to prepare for and cope with the potential consequences, this paper constructs a scenario framework that aims to offer insight into the potential future pathways that Russia might take in the next five years, until roughly the year 2028. It will investigate three key uncertainties that are of particular importance for European security:

- the extent to which there will be **continuity within or a change** of the regime in the future;
- the extent to which this future will be shaped by **large-scale instability and violence**; and
- the extent to which a future Russia will pursue **confrontation or rapprochement** with the West.

To map out Russia's potential futures, this paper uses a mixed methodology based on the scenario method of the Clingendael Institute.<sup>3</sup> Based on an extensive literature review of studies on Russia's futures, the research team has identified a range of factors of influence that are grouped in five clusters and submitted to a multidisciplinary panel of Dutch and international experts from Western, Central and Eastern Europe. The experts then scored each of the factors according to their relevance through a survey method and subsequently discussed them at a scenario workshop in April 2023. During this workshop a scenario matrix with two axes was constructed and a number of potential scenarios were identified, which have been refined by the research team into five distinct scenarios that will each be discussed in turn. The paper concludes with a set of policy recommendations for the different sets of scenarios.<sup>4</sup>

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3 For an example of the Clingendael scenario methodology, see Minke Meijnders, Jaïr van der Lijn and Bas van Mierlo, '[Syria in 2019: four scenarios – Implications for policy planning](#)', *The Clingendael Institute*, November 2017.

4 The authors would like to thank Koen Aartsma, Tony van der Togt, Kaspar Pucek and Mik Dijkman for their contributions to the research project.

# Factors influencing the future of Russia

There are an unfathomable and indefinite number of factors that will influence the future of the world's largest country, the stability of its regime and the course of its foreign policy. Any exercise in foresight about Russia's future is therefore bound to fall short of being comprehensive, and this paper is no exception. In order to nonetheless identify which factors are most influential, this paper identifies 35 factors that frequently recur in a broad range of studies on Russia's potential futures. These factors can be divided into five categories: political, economic, societal, geopolitical, and war-related, although it is important to note that these categories and all factors are of course strongly interdependent.

Figure 2 An overview of the factors of influence that altogether impact what Russia might look like in the future



To get a better idea of what factors are deemed more relevant than others for the future of Russia, the research team presented these factors to a group of sixteen Dutch and international experts. These experts engaged in both a quantitative assessment and a qualitative discussion on the different factors. In doing so, many insights could be drawn from factors on which there was a high degree of consensus about their importance or irrelevance, but also when there was significant disagreement. Based on the expert consultations and additional research, the following section outlines the factors that are deemed relevant in terms of their impact on Russia's future and that serve as building blocks for the scenario framework.

## Domestic political factors

It goes without saying that **domestic political factors** will play a decisive role in determining the future of Russia. While foresight should not overly focus on Vladimir Putin as an individual, the Russian regime has become highly personalized in comparison to the post-World War II Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup> As became evident from both the literature and the expert consultations, there is a broad agreement that what Putin will decide – or will be forced to accept – with regard to his position in the Kremlin will be of the utmost importance to the overall stability of the Russian regime. In April 2021, the Duma passed a law that allows Putin to run for two more terms, allowing him in theory to stay in office until 2036.<sup>6</sup>

However, so far it is unclear whether Putin will want or will be able to sit out those new terms, and not just because of his health.<sup>7</sup> Our survey results suggest that experts believe that the degree of consensus or disagreement within Russia's ruling elite is almost as decisive for the political fate of Russia. Putin has followed

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5 Alexander Baturo and Johan A. Elkind, [The New Kremlinology: Understanding Regime Personalization in Russia](#) (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2021), pp. 1-20; Maria Domanska, ["Reinventing Russia: How the West Should Prepare for the Post-Putin Period,"](#) *Zentrum Liberale Moderne*, January 26, 2023.

6 Reuters Staff, ["Putin signs law that could keep him in Kremlin until 2036,"](#) *Reuters*, April 5, 2021.

7 Which, in the end, is also a relevant factor, simply because Putin has no designated successor and his sudden death could thus create an acute succession crisis in Russia. Examples from Russia's history might teach us something about how the Russian elites would deal with such a problem, see: Vladislav Zubok, ["After Putin – what?,"](#) *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, November 9, 2022.

an approach of 'divide and rule', ensuring that no single security actor has the monopoly on the use of force, that all these actors deeply distrust one another, and are accountable only to Putin personally. This has made the Russian regime vulnerable to internal disputes that could well turn violent.<sup>8</sup>

This particularly concerns the traditional 'siloviki' security actors, but also newly emerging players such as the Wagner Group and other private military companies.<sup>9</sup> Although many experts have downplayed the importance of these newly emerging security actors, as well as the possibility of a military coup, the Wagner mutiny has certainly shed a different light on this. Some argue that the actions of the Wagner leader Prigozhin – who has presumably died<sup>10</sup> – have not only revealed significant frictions among the Russian elites, but also a considerable weakening of Vladimir Putin's personal authority and his carefully created power vertical.<sup>11</sup> Others instead consider that Wagner's mutiny and the fatal consequences for its leadership was another opportunity for Putin to position himself as a strongman and further consolidate his power.<sup>12</sup>

After the mutiny by Prigozhin, Putin has decided to also have regional security forces to support governors in keeping the situation under control. However, it remains to be seen whether such forces could also turn into more independent actors. They do seem to be a centrifugal force in Russian politics, with the potential to further contribute to the decentralisation of the levers of power in

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8 Bruno Tertrais, ["After the Fall. Must We Prepare for the Breakup of Russia?"](#) *Institut Montaigne*, March 20, 2023.

9 Zoe Strozewski, ["Putin Will Come to Unpleasant End' in One of Two Ways: Former MI6 Head,"](#) *Newsweek*, August 11, 2022; Douglas Bushvine, ["After Putin, Who Will Ruin Russia Next?"](#) *Politico*, September 29, 2022; Cyrus Newlin and Andrew Lohsen, ["Russia Futures: Three Trajectories"](#), *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, May 4, 2022, pp. 9-12.

10 Vladimir Soldatkin, ["Russia says genetic tests confirm Prigozhin died in plane crash"](#), *Reuters*, 27 August 2023.

11 See for instance: Kathryn Stoner, ["This Is Not the End of Putin's Troubles,"](#) *Journal of Democracy*, June 2023; John Lough, ["Putin has limited options after the Prigozhin mutiny,"](#) *Chatham House*, June 26, 2023; Sam Greene, ["Evgeny Prigozhin and Other Things Going Bump in the Night,"](#) *CEPA*, June 25, 2023; Susan Milligan, ["Putin Loses Stature as Threats Draw Near,"](#) *US News*, June 30, 2023; Peter Rutland, ["Wagner's mutiny punctured Putin's 'strongman' image and exposed cracks in his rule,"](#) *The Conversation*, 25 June 2023; Catherine Belton, Shane Harris and Greg Miller, ["Putin appeared paralyzed and unable to act in first hours of rebellion,"](#) *Washington Post*, July 25, 2023.

12 Naman Karl-Thomas Habtom, ["When Failed Coups Strengthen Leaders,"](#) *War on the Rocks*, July 21, 2023; Derk Sauer, ["De sleutel tot de val van Poetin ligt niet in Moskou of Minsk, maar in Kyiv,"](#) *Het Parool*, June 28, 2023.

Russia. Because of Putin's strong personal role in these matters, it could easily contribute to fragmentation, once the current president leaves office.<sup>13</sup>

In any case, there seems to be a general agreement that *if* change does come to Russia, it is more likely to come from 'above' (or in response to internal infighting) than from 'below'. After all, another crucial factor in the political fate of Putin and his regime is the repressive capacity of the state, which relies on both military and political instruments. As a result of ongoing repression, workshop participants considered a 'colour revolution' or any serious challenge to Putin's regime coming from society as being highly unlikely. This notion is further strengthened by the work of Henry Hale, who argues that mass social unrest, as well as its political success, rather tends to be the result of splits within the ruling elite and succession struggles.<sup>14</sup> The lack of political engagement among the population will be explored further under the 'social factors' category, where it becomes evident that these factors scored notably low.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, the surveyed experts pointed out the possibility that the elite may exploit social discontent as a pretext to carry out and legitimize a power grab.<sup>16</sup>

More depressingly with regard to Russia's democratic future, our experts scored the importance of Russia's domestic opposition by far the lowest, reflecting the fragmented and weak character of the political opposition.<sup>17</sup> There was even less optimism concerning the potential for change lying in the field of civil society,

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13 Tatiana Stanovaya, "[Beneath the Surface, Prigozhin's Mutiny Has Changed Everything in Russia](#)," *Carnegie Politika*, July 27, 2023.

14 Henry Hale, "[Democracy or autocracy on the march? The colored revolutions as normal dynamics of patronal presidentialism](#)", in *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, vol. 39, no. 3 (september 2006).

15 Fabian Burkhardt, "[The 2024 Putin Transit and Russia's political future](#)", *Atlantic Council*, August 2, 2019; Andrei Goryanov, "Ukraine war: Why so many Russians turn a blind eye to the conflict," *BBC*, February 22, 2023; Sviatoslav Hnizdovskyi, "How strong is Russian public support for the invasion of Ukraine?," *Atlantic Council*, May 2, 2023.

16 As Madi Kapparov suggested, "[There will be, however, a coup toppling the current regime](#)" which "[will be done under the smoke screen of a "revolution" following a "popular uprising," aka mass protests. The show would be put on for both domestic and foreign audiences to create a false sense of change in Russia](#)," *Twitter*, June 11, 2023.

17 According to Dr. Jeremy Ladd, the remains of Russia's opposition space have virtually been destroyed during the war, which would be very difficult to recreate in the near future. Dr. Jeremy Ladd, "[Lecture: A Rock and a Hard Place: The Russian Opposition in a Time of War](#)," *Elliott School of International Affairs – PONARS/George Washington University*, April 11, 2023; Max Seddon, *Financial Times*, June 10, 2023.

which can be attributed in part, but not solely, to the current repressive climate. Even abroad, the Russian opposition and civil society appear to be relatively disorganized compared to the opposition of Belarus, for instance. However, experts and policymakers seem to disagree on the question whether it would make sense for Western governments to invest more actively in the numerous Russian émigrés in the West. Many of these émigrés come from the business elite and intelligentsia and could, according to optimists, form the organisational basis for a more democratic Russia in the long term.<sup>18</sup> However, there is consensus that, at least in the short term, the chances of Russia becoming a fully-fledged democracy are very low, and that, due to the heavy impact of years of authoritarian rule, Russia will most likely remain an authoritarian state for the foreseeable future – although it is important to note here that there are still many varieties within the category of authoritarian states.<sup>19</sup>

Either way, virtually all experts in our workshop agreed that Putin's successor is most likely to emerge from within the circles of the ruling (security) elite. The degree of elite consensus is crucial here, as there is no guarantee of unanimity regarding Putin's successor, nor that the process of power transition may proceed in an orderly fashion. Current infighting within and between individual security services and the armed forces, including on the conduct of the war, could contribute to further instability once Putin is gone. Some experts caution that the emergence of a power vacuum would be accompanied by significant instability and a further escalation of inter-elite conflicts. Others emphasized the elites' preference for stability and the preservation of the status quo, which will make them join forces and ensure a relatively smooth power transition to a new ruler who can continue authoritarian rule over Russia.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, the majority of our experts believe that any significant opposition to Putin's regime would likely arise from within the Moscow elites rather than the regional elites. Partly because of Putin's carefully created power system, it

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18 Maria Domanska, "[Reinventing Russia: How the West Should Prepare for the Post-Putin Period](#)," *Zentrum Liberale Moderne*, January 26, 2023.

19 Duncan Allen, "[Imagining Russia's future after Putin Possible outcomes of a defeat in Ukraine](#)," Chatham House, pp. 14; Mark N. Katz, "[Post-Putin Russia: Five Potential Pathways](#)," *E-International Relations*, July 4, 2023.

20 Duncan Allen, "[Imagining Russia's future after Putin Possible outcomes of a defeat in Ukraine](#)," Chatham House, pp. 4-5; Vladislav Zubok, "[After Putin – what?](#)", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, November 9, 2022.



seems to be more advantageous for regional leaders to remain loyal to Putin. In addition, regional leaders lack both a substantial power base and the military means that would be needed to seriously challenge Putin's power.<sup>21</sup> However, regional elites, especially if backed up by their own (para)military forces, could become an important constituency for which elites in Moscow would compete for, in case splits occur in the capital.

The same applies to the mobilisation of Russia's ethnic minorities, which neither the expert survey nor the literature sees as a fundamental challenge to the stability of the Russian Federation. Despite the existence and increase in inter-ethnic tensions and social discontent in some regions like Ingushetia, Chechnya, Dagestan, Yakutia, Tatarstan, and Bashkortostan during the war, researchers have relativized the existence of serious secessionist movements, let alone the potential for secession within these regions.<sup>22</sup> In fact, support for the central authorities and Putin in particular is generally stronger in rural provinces or regions with large ethnic minorities.<sup>23</sup>

However, participants in our workshop did point out that, given the fact that Russia's current centralized regime relies heavily on Putin's persona and his power vertical, any potential successor would likely struggle to firmly consolidate power, at least in the short term. This could provide scope for small-scale reforms or a natural development towards a slightly more decentralized, federal Russia, which could perhaps form the starting point for the introduction of more political pluralism.<sup>24</sup> Yet, others stressed that the collapse of Putin's power vertical could shake up the overall composition of the federation and the relationship between

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21 Mikhail Vinogradov, "[How 2022 Changed Regional Politics in Russia](#)," *Carnegie Politika*, January 16, 2023.

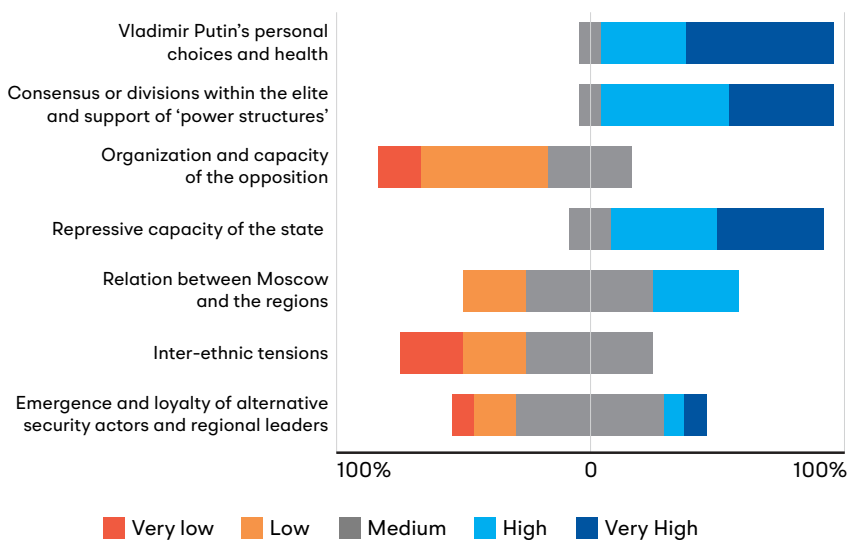
22 Max Pyziur and Alexander J. Motyl, "[If Russia collapse - which states will break away?](#)," *EU Observer*, June 30, 2022; Bruno Tertrais, "[The Fall of Russia](#)," *Institut Montaigne*, December 14, 2022; Bruno Tertrais, "[After the Fall. Must We Prepare for the Breakup of Russia?](#)" *Institut Montaigne*, March 20, 2023.

23 Maria Domanska, "[Reinventing Russia: How the West Should Prepare for the Post-Putin Period](#)," *Zentrum Liberale Moderne*, January 26, 2023; Anchal Vohra, "[The West Is Preparing for Russia's Disintegration](#)," *Foreign policy*, April 17, 2023; Alexey Gusev, "[Why Support for Putin's War Is Rife in Russia's Worst-Hit Regions](#)," *Carnegie Politika*, June 6, 2023; Marlene Laruelle, "[Putin's War and the Dangers of Russian Disintegration](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, 9 December 2022.

24 Mikhail Vinogradov, "[How 2022 Changed Regional Politics in Russia](#)," *Carnegie Politika*; Mark N. Katz, "[Post-Putin Russia: Five Potential Pathways](#)," *E-International Relations*, July 4, 2023. Arkady Ostrovsky, "Next Year in Moscow 3: Baggage", *The Economist*, March 11, 2023.

different power centres to such an extent that it risks triggering a large-scale violent conflict between different military groups, including militias from regional leaders like Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov.<sup>25</sup>

Figure 3 Expert survey results on the impact of domestic political factors



### Economic factors

Another important aspect to consider is the way in which the economic conditions in Russia will develop in the coming five years. After significant growth in the 2000s, Russia's economy has stagnated and even begun to decay and has shown limited capabilities for recovery. This has been aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the consequences of waging war in Ukraine, including newly imposed Western sanctions. Experts agree that macroeconomic stability in Russia is a key factor to monitor, which will be decisive for other economic factors, such as inflation rates, especially concerning food prices, employment

25 Bruno Tertrais, "After the Fall. Must We Prepare for the Breakup of Russia?" *Institut Montaigne*, March 20, 2023; Marlene Laruelle, "Putin's War and the Dangers of Russian Disintegration," *Foreign Affairs*. 9 December 2022.

opportunities for Russians, and the stability of the banking system. The exchange rate of the rouble to major international currencies such as the dollar, euro and renminbi, which has recently been dropping sharply, is also an important indicator in this regard.

However, the impact of the war and Western sanctions on Russia's macro-economic stability is so far still relatively limited and allows the regime to continue its war efforts.<sup>26</sup> Even though Russian macroeconomic figures cannot be fully relied upon and estimates from Western sources vary, so far the Russian economy is nonetheless more resilient than most expected. According to the IMF's forecasts, Russia's economic growth in 2023 is greater than that of the eurozone,<sup>27</sup> and it has grown by 4.9% in the second quarter of 2023 due to oil income and government spending on war production.<sup>28</sup> This explains why, up until now, economic factors have posed little challenge to President Putin's regime.

Nonetheless, it should be noted that the Russian economy is still in a precarious state, especially considering the downslide of the rouble by 30% since the beginning of the 2022 invasion,<sup>29</sup> and economic factors may potentially come into play in the long term.<sup>30</sup> Even if Russia is able to broadly maintain its macroeconomic stability, dynamic economic growth is not possible without access to Western capital markets and technology transfers, as well as domestic reforms. Hence, stagnation is arguably here to stay. Another factor that that will play a role in the even longer term, in a matter of decades, is the potential energy transition away from fossil fuels, which could potentially decimate Russian government revenues.

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26 András Rácz, Ole Spillner and Guntram Wolff, "[Russia's War Economy: How Sanctions Reduce Military Capacity](#)," DGAP Policy Brief No.3, February 2023, pp. 1-11; "[Russia's economy can withstand a long war, but not a more intense one](#)," *The Economist*, April 23, 2023; Alexander Gabuev, "[Putin is looking for a bigger war, not an off-ramp, in Ukraine](#)," *Financial Times*, July 30, 2023.

27 Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas, "[Global Economy on Track but Not Yet Out of the Woods](#)," *IMF Blog*, July 25, 2023.

28 Alexandra Sharp, "[Russia's Ruble Hits 16-Month Low](#)," *The Economist*, 14 August, 2023.

29 Ibid.

30 Vladislav Zubok, "[After Putin – what?](#)", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, November 9, 2022.

Although Western economic sanctions are not aimed at regime change, this does call into question to what extent sanctions could potentially result in regime change in Russia – especially if they are not adhered to by a sizable share of the world economy.<sup>31</sup> Russia’s international position appears to be crucial in determining whether the Russian economy can stay afloat: Russia needs international trading partners not only to circumvent sanctions, but especially to sell its oil, gas and other natural resources. This is closely linked to the further development of Russia’s relationship with, or dependence on, China, but also on the degree to which Russia manages to find a foothold in other Asian, South American, and African countries. This issue will be discussed further in the ‘international factors’ section.

As becomes clear from the results of our survey, experts unanimously consider oil and gas prices, which are in turn closely related to the rouble exchange rate, as the most crucial economic factor that will be pivotal to the stability and sustainability of the regime. It is responsible for a major part of the state budget and therefore crucial for the state to maintain its repressive machinery and to ‘buy off’ social discontent.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, there seems to be little indication that commodity prices are set to return to their high levels of the 2000s, when they played an important role in Russia’s economic boom during Putin’s first two terms in office.

However, several workshop participants did stress that this list of variables focused perhaps too much on macroeconomics, while the main economic factors might be more at the level of the microeconomics of individual households and companies. They emphasized that there is no clear-cut causal link in Russia between economic hardship, social unrest, and political mobilisation.

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31 Some analyses on the effectiveness of sanctions: Cinzia Alcidi, Farzaneh Shamsfakhr and Doina Postica, [“How successful have Western sanctions against Russia actually been?”](#) CEPS, February 23, 2023; Jeffrey J. Schott, [“Economic sanctions against Russia: How effective? How durable?”](#) PIIE, April 2023; Maria Demertzis, [“Are sanctions against Russia working?”](#) Bruegel, February 16, 2023; Alexandra Prokopenko, [“How Sanctions Have Changed Russian Economic Policy,”](#) Carnegie Politika, May 9, 2023.

32 Bryce Elder, [“Some Notes on the Russian Coup That Wasn’t,”](#) *Financial Times*, June 26, 2023; [“Russia’s economy can withstand a long war, but not a more intense one,”](#) *The Economist*, April 23, 2023; Joe Wallace, Ian Talley and Anna Hirtenstein, [“Russia Defies Sanctions by Selling Oil Above Price Cap,”](#) *The Wall Street Journal*, July 23, 2023.

The impact of economic factors also depends on the Kremlin's dominance over the information space. This allows it to manipulate the public perception of the economic conditions by presenting a distorted, rosy picture of the state of the Russian economy.<sup>33</sup> This also explains the fact that support for the regime seems stronger in industrially depressed regions and rural provinces, although economic disparities between urban and poor, distant regions have further increased during the war.<sup>34</sup>

While economic factors alone may not be the decisive factor for political change, they may come into play when combined with broader political developments. Within the current political environment the Russian business elite is likely to remain silent, due to fears of losing their assets, freedom, or even their lives.<sup>35</sup> But in case Putin's regime and its power structures collapse, it may create space for the business elite to push for economic sanctions downscaling and perhaps some reforms towards a liberal market economy, which could influence Russia's future geopolitical direction and its stance towards the West.<sup>36</sup> At the same time past experience shows that economic liberalization does not necessarily guarantee a corresponding liberalization in politics.<sup>37</sup>

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33 Vladimir Milov, "[Potemkin GDP. Vladimir Milov on why Russia's "soothing" economic indicators are not to be trusted](#)," *The Insider*, December 26, 2022.

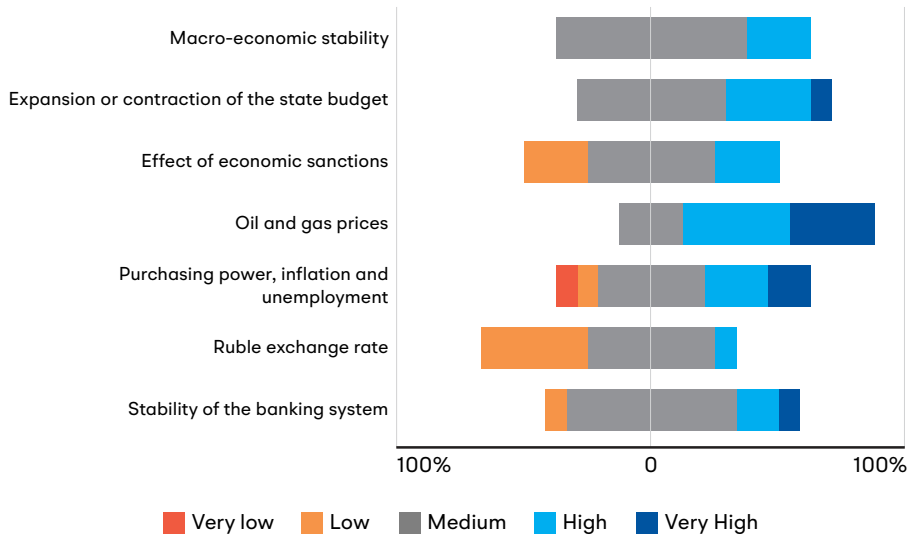
34 Alexey Gusev, "[Why Support for Putin's War Is Rife in Russia's Worst-Hit Regions](#)," *Carnegie Politika*, June 6, 2023.

35 Alexandra Prokopenko, "[A Year of War Has Left Russia's Elites Anchorless and Atomized](#)," *Carnegie Politika*, March 15, 2023.

36 Cyrus Newlin and Andrew Lohsen, "[Russia Futures: Three Trajectories](#)," *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, May 4, 2022, pp. 6; Allen, "[Imagining Russia's future after Putin Possible outcomes of a defeat in Ukraine](#)," *Chatham House*, pp. 13-14.

37 Mark N. Katz, "[Post-Putin Russia: Five Potential Pathways](#)," *E-International Relations*, July 4, 2023.

Figure 4 Factors related to the Russian economy, scored according to their impact



### Societal factors

The third category pertains to social factors. Russia is grappling with various social issues that are pivotal in shaping its future. These include high mortality rates and low birth rates, as well as a substantial decline in the ethnic Russian population and a growing non-Russian population. The longer-term demographic pressure has intensified since the onset of the war, owing to a massive brain drain from critical sectors such as IT and a significant number of male casualties resulting from the Russian invasion of Ukraine.<sup>38</sup>

Most social factors were nonetheless rated low or very low in the expert survey. It is essential to consider the dimension of time here: many experts noted that these factors will certainly transform Russian society in the long run. However, in the timeframe of the next five years most experts do not expect significant changes in Russian society. As mentioned earlier in the section on political factors, this is closely tied to the repressive capacity of the state: as long as it remains intact, few people will be willing to protest or openly criticize the regime.

38 Janusz Bugajski, [Failed State: A Guide to Russia's Rupture](#), The Jamestown Foundation, pp. 19-41.

Among all social factors, there was one that clearly stood out above all others: the degree to which the Kremlin is able to retain control over the information space and push its narratives. This factor has a dual effect: it stifles criticism and genuinely influences the population's mindset.<sup>39</sup> The extent of success in this endeavour will also determine the willingness of Russians to protest and their perception of a 'social contract,' which experts generally deem relevant but only of moderate importance.

Continuity in Putin's relatively high approval ratings and the substantial support for the war in Ukraine among the Russian population can be seen as evidence of the effectiveness and persuasiveness of the Kremlin's media narratives.<sup>40</sup> It should nonetheless be noted that conducting reliable survey research in the increasingly repressive Russian context is a challenge in itself. The results might not always reflect what Russians genuinely believe. Several experts also stressed the importance of ideology in this regard: since the regime may no longer be able to legitimize its rule by providing material benefits to the population, it will instead try to legitimize its rule by defending Russia against imagined external threats and providing stability.

Despite the limitations of opinion polling in Russia, it is nevertheless interesting to observe how surveys in Russia indicate that a significant portion of the Russian population places trust in this narrative and, therefore, the so-called 'social contract'.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, the absence of public support for Putin during the recent Wagner mutiny could suggest that support for Putin among the population may not be as robust as previously assumed. Prigozhin's actions have potentially also had repercussions for Putin's image among the Russian people, though opinions differ on whether these consequences were positive or negative for Putin.<sup>42</sup>

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39 Paul Mozur, Adam Satariano and Aaron Krolik, "[Russia's Online Censorship Has Soared 30-Fold During Ukraine War](#)," *New York Times*, July 26, 2023.

40 "КОНФЛИКТ С УКРАИНОЙ: ОЦЕНКИ КОНЦА ИЮЛЯ 2023 ГОДА," *Levada Center*, July 28, 2023; "ОДОБРЕНИЕ ИНСТИТУТОВ И РЕЙТИНГИ ПОЛИТИКОВ В КОНЦЕ ИЮЛЯ 2023 ГОДА," *Levada Center*, July 26, 2023; Fabian Burkhardt, "[The 2024 Putin Transit and Russia's political future](#)," *Atlantic Council*, August 2, 2019.

41 Kirill Rogov, "[Having It Both Ways: Russians Both Support and Oppose War](#)," *Wilson Center*, March 17, 2023.

42 Michael Kofman, "[A Hot Take on Drivers and Consequences of Prigozhin's Mutiny](#)," *Russia Matters*, 25 June 2023; Cyrus Newlin and Andrew Lohsen, "[Russia Futures: Three Trajectories](#)," *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, May 4, 2022, pp. 3-11.

Another factor that relates to the importance of providing stability is the extent to which the Kremlin adapts to and (mis)manages environmental hazards such as the Covid-19 pandemic, earthquakes, forest fires, and climate-related disruptions.<sup>43</sup> However, this factor did not receive a high score in our survey. For most social factors, experts anticipate their increasing importance on the mid to long-term scale. This is not just because social and demographic developments tend to unfold slowly, but also because some experts believe that political conditions will rather be decisive. After the potential breakdown of Putin's regime, the instability accompanying a power vacuum may bring underlying social issues to the surface all at once.<sup>44</sup>

Even then, the question remains whether such a situation will lead to considerably more opposition from society. This is not only because the new regime will likely suppress it, but also because, as emphasized by many experts, the politically passive attitude of the Russian population is deeply ingrained.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, the regions experiencing the most socio-economic consequences of the war often demonstrate the most loyalty to the current regime.<sup>46</sup>

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43 [‘Russia: War’s Supersized Repression,’](#) *Human Rights Watch*, January 12, 2023; I.V. Canosa, R. Biesbroek, J.Ford et al., [“Wildfire adaptation in the Russian Arctic : A systematic policy review,”](#) *Climate Risk Management* 39 (2023).

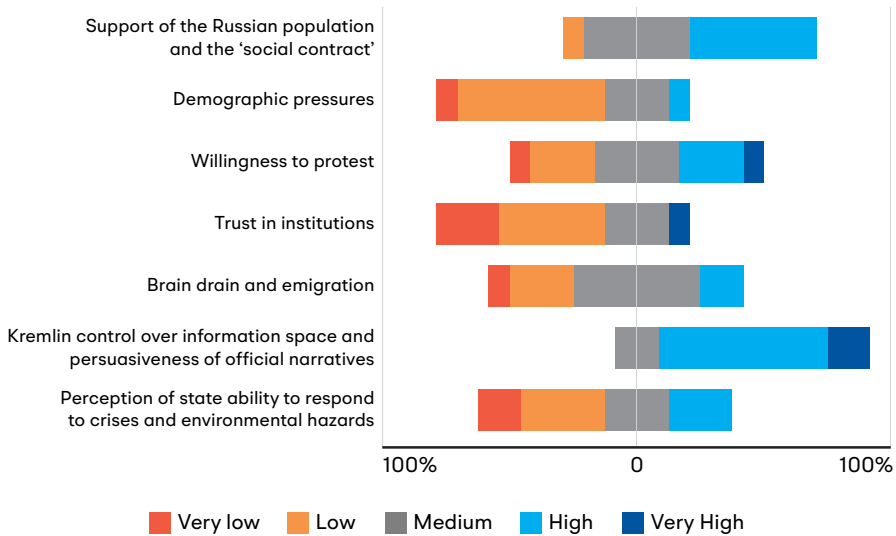
44 Bruno Tertrais, [“The Fall of Russia,”](#) *Institut Montaigne*, December 14, 2022; Bruno Tertrais, [“After the Fall. Must We Prepare for the Breakup of Russia?”](#) *Institut Montaigne*, March 20, 2023.

45 Fabian Burkhardt, [“The 2024 Putin Transit and Russia’s political future”](#), *Atlantic Council*, August 2, 2019.

46 Marlene Laruelle, [“Putin’s War and the Dangers of Russian Disintegration,”](#) *Foreign Affairs*, 9 December 2022.



Figure 5 Social factors, scored according to their impact



### International factors

Most experts agree that the influence of international and geopolitical factors will be nearly as relevant as domestic political developments for Russia’s future in the next few years. Of particular significance is Russia’s ‘pivot’ towards the East and South, above all towards China.<sup>47</sup> Among participating experts in this study there was near-consensus on the crucial role played by China, with regard to its relationship with Russia in general and its stance on the war in Ukraine in particular. If the Chinese regime decides to prop up Putin and his regime by providing economic or even military support, then the regime has a much greater chance of retaining power. However, the ‘friendship without limits’ with China certainly poses limitations for Putin’s regime, risking further reliance on China in terms of its economy, its international position, and perhaps within other domains as well.<sup>48</sup>

47 Sergei Karaganov, “[Russian Foreign Policy: Three Historical Stages and Two Future Scenarios,](#)” *Russian Politics* 6, no. 4 (2021), pp. 433.

48 Mikhail Troitskiy, “[A Final Reckoning? Sino-Russian Relations Amid Russia’s War on Ukraine,](#)” *PONARS Eurasia*, June 9, 2023.

It matters most what *China* wants to gain from this relationship, given its dominant role in the increasingly asymmetric Sino-Russian alliance. Despite Xi Jinping's relatively distant approach towards Russia's war in Ukraine, preventing a decisive Russian defeat seems to be in China's strategic interest of countering Western dominance on the global stage.<sup>49</sup> China is also carefully observing how the West responds to armed aggression, which in turn influences Beijing's decision-making regarding the future of Taiwan.<sup>50</sup> In turn, some experts believe that, as Russia's economy and regime steadily weaken due to Russia's failing war efforts, Russia will almost unavoidably become more reliant on China, potentially at the cost of a gradual loss of sovereignty and influence.<sup>51</sup> However, others have pointed out that, as the most important supplier of natural resources to China, Russia still has some leverage in this relationship. The Kremlin will still attempt to limit its reliance on China, as it recognizes the dangers this dependence pose to the strength of the Russian regime.<sup>52</sup> However, as a commodity supplier, Moscow's hand is much weaker than China's, since China can more easily diversify away from Russia than the other way around.

Almost as important as the relationship between Russia and China will be the unity within the Western camp and the willingness of Western states to support Ukraine, both politically and militarily. This will have a crucial impact on the course of the war. The level of Western support greatly depends on the political situation in Washington, which is why this is considered as a separate factor

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49 Clint Reach, "[The Rise of the Rest: How Russia Views the Future World Order](#)," *National Interest*, September 22, 2022.

50 Hal Brands, "[The Battle for Eurasia](#)," *Foreign Policy*, June 4, 2023; "[Chinese arms could revive Russia's failing war](#)," *The Economist*, March 2, 2023.

51 Bruno Tertrais, "[After the Fall. Must We Prepare for the Breakup of Russia?](#)" *Institut Montaigne*, March 20, 2023; Erin Hale, "[China unlikely to be worried by 'weaker Putin' post Wagner revolt](#)," *Al Jazeera*, 29 June 2023; "[Russia's reliance on China will outlast Vladimir Putin, says Alexander Gabuev](#)," *The Economist*, March 18, 2023; Alexandra Prokopenko, "[The Risks of Russia's Growing Dependence on the Yuan](#)," *Carnegie Politika*, February 2, 2023.

52 Mikhail Korostikov, "[Xi in Moscow: Russia Offers China a Glimpse of Its Own Future](#)," *Carnegie Politika*, March 24, 2023; Mark N. Katz, "[Post-Putin Russia: Five Potential Pathways](#)," *E-International Relations*, July 4, 2023; Sergey Vakulenko, "[Can China Compensate Russia's Losses on the European Gas Market?](#)" *Carnegie Politika*, January 6, 2023; John Raine, "[The Legacy of the War in Ukraine: Will a 'Silk Curtain' Fall?](#)" *IISS*, May 31, 2023; Mikhail Troitskiy, "[A Final Reckoning? Sino-Russian Relations Amid Russia's War on Ukraine](#)," *PONARS Eurasia*, June 9, 2023; Mikhail Korostikov, "[Is Russia Really Becoming China's Vassal?](#)" *Carnegie Politika*, 6 July, 2023.

in the survey.<sup>53</sup> Depending on how much longer the war will drag on, the 2024 U.S. elections, as well as the situation in Taiwan, will be critical in this regard.<sup>54</sup>

Moreover, this Western unity will remain important after the war, as Western countries will likely be involved during potential peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine. An agreement and the eventual concessions made, as well as the penalties, reparations and demands for justice imposed on Russia during this negotiation process, will influence the future development of Russia's politics and its attitude towards the West. The key challenge for Western governments will be how to hold a defeated Russia accountable for its war crimes and accommodate Ukraine's demands for justice and reparations – without inadvertently creating a dangerous breeding ground for instability and revanchism in Russia. The example of Weimar Germany is often used to illustrate this dilemma<sup>55</sup>, as French President Emmanuel Macron did in his much-maligned call not to 'humiliate' Russia.<sup>56</sup>

That said, the future relationship between Russia and the West primarily depends on Russia's willingness to stabilize relations and make amends. Q a fair number of authors have claimed that, even under a completely new leadership, a fundamental change in Russia's foreign policy and its threat perception towards the West seems highly unlikely, as this hostility towards the West seems to be deeply ingrained among the elites and some parts of Russia's population.<sup>57</sup> However, limited attempts towards reconciliation might be possible in a post-

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53 NB: not all Republican candidates oppose support for Ukraine, but if Donald Trump were to return to the White House, then Europe will practically stand alone in its support for Ukraine. See: RM Staff, "[Territorial Dispute' or 'Vital National Interest'? GOP Presidential Hopefuls Split on Ukraine Conflict](#)," *Russia Matters*, June 09, 2023.

54 Daniel Michaels, "[Ukraine's Lack of Weaponry and Training Risks Stalemate in Fight With Russia](#)," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 23, 2023; "[The geopolitical stakes of Ukraine's counter-offensive](#)," *The Economist*, June 6, 2023.

55 Margaret MacMillan, "[How Wars Don't End: Ukraine, Russia and the Lessons of World War I](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, June 12, 2023; Duncan Allen, "[Imagining Russia's future after Putin Possible outcomes of a defeat in Ukraine](#)," Chatham House, pp. 3, 14.

56 See for example "[Macron draws new wave of criticism over call not to 'humiliate' Russia](#)", *France24*, 6 June 2022.

57 Eugene Rumer, "[How Putin's War Became Russia's War. The Country Will Struggle to Reckon With Its Crimes in Ukraine](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, June 9, 2023; Anders Fogh Rasmussen, Dmytro Kuleba, Kristi Raik et al., "[NATO's Next Decade: Nine thinkers assess the alliance's future ahead of a historic summit](#)," *Foreign Policy*, July 6, 2023.

Putin and post-war Russia, driven by pragmatic considerations to mitigate China's dominance and reduce Western sanctions.<sup>58</sup>

Russia's interference in what it perceives to be its post-Soviet sphere of influence, as well as relations with countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, is also significant in this regard. Strengthening ties with these countries seems to be vital to the regime in order to prevent isolation, counter ongoing sanctions, and reduce dependency on China.<sup>59</sup> In fact, there is disagreement on the extent to which Russia is isolated today.<sup>60</sup> There does seem to be a consensus, however, that Russia has lost considerable influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus. This is not just significant due to the strategic importance of these countries for Russia, but also because of the symbolic importance of these countries, which Moscow sees as belonging to its natural sphere of influence. As pointed out earlier, experts expect little change in Russia's foreign policy orientation, hence Russia's attempts to project its soft power and intervene in the post-Soviet states are likely to continue in the coming years, regardless of the strength of the regime.<sup>61</sup> In a clear but nonetheless worrying acknowledgment of the erosion of the multilateral rules-based order, one of the few factors that virtually all experts in this study agreed upon is the relative irrelevance of multilateral actors such as the UN in determining Russia's future.<sup>62</sup>

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58 Duncan Allen, "[Imagining Russia's future after Putin Possible outcomes of a defeat in Ukraine](#)," Chatham House, pp. 14; Cyrus Newlin and Andrew Lohsen, "[Russia Futures: Three Trajectories](#)," Centre for Strategic and International Studies, May 4, 2022, pp. 6.

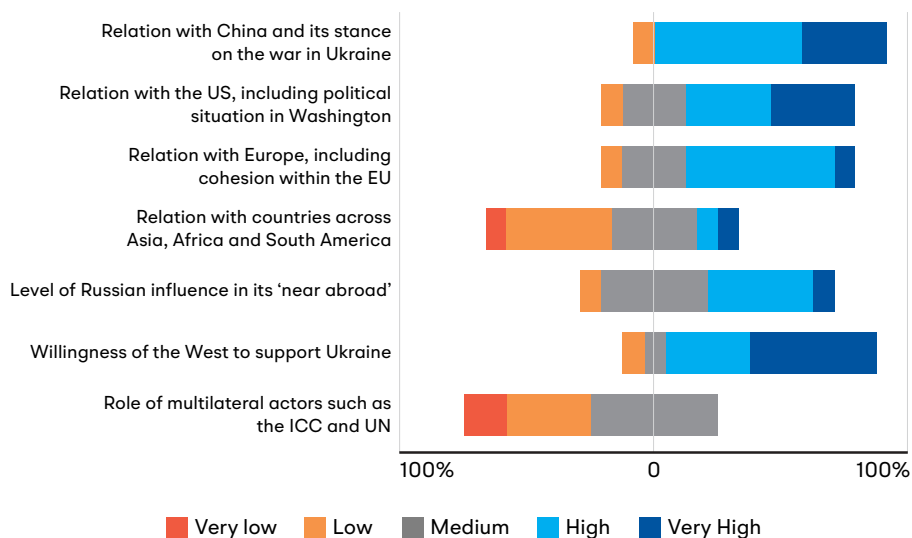
59 Simon Saradzhyan, "[Uptick in Russian-African Diplomacy Moscow's Evolving Geopolitical Plans](#)," Russia Matters, June 2, 2023; Sergey Vakulenko, "[Can China Compensate Russia's Losses on the European Gas Market?](#)" Carnegie Politika, January 6, 2023.

60 "[Russia's friends are a motley—and shrinking—crew](#)," *The Economist*, March 14, 2023.

61 Duncan Allen, "[Imagining Russia's future after Putin Possible outcomes of a defeat in Ukraine](#)," Chatham House, pp. 11-16.

62 The recent expansion of BRICS has not been taken into account in this survey, as it has been conducted in April 2023.

Figure 6 International and geopolitical factors, scored according to their impact



## Factors related to the war in Ukraine

Although the war in Ukraine is technically part of international factors, and virtually connected to every other factor discussed in this paper, we have methodologically chosen to survey a separate cluster of factors related to Russia’s war against Ukraine. The developments in – and the outcome of – this war will have a tremendous impact on the sustainability of the Russian government and Russia’s position on the international stage.

Both our expert panel as well as recent literature stress that the most influential factor in this regard is the degree of success or failure on the battlefield, which indeed correlates with the Kremlin’s choice of strategy and tactics. The longer the war will rage on, the more impact an eventual loss or win will have on the credibility of Putin and his regime associates, whose legitimacy has become increasingly dependent on military action over the years.<sup>63</sup> While criticism of

63 H.E. Hale, “[Russian Regime Dynamics through 2025: Comparative Thinking About the Future](#),” in Lipman, M. and Petrov, N. (eds), *Russia 2025: Scenarios for the Russian Future* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 125; Nikolay Petrov, “[Putin’s Downfall: The Coming Crisis of the Russian Regime](#)”, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, April 2016, pp. 1-2.

military setbacks so far has not targeted Putin personally, there is continued disagreement between hardliners and those who advocate a more cautious approach. The struggle for supremacy between these pragmatist and hawkish groups will be one of the key political altercations in Russia, and is dependent on what happens on the battlefield.<sup>64</sup>

Not only would a total defeat in Ukraine pose a threat to Putin's regime, but continued humiliation on the battlefield, infighting among military leaders, and drone attacks on Moscow and Crimea may escalate infighting among elite factions or prompt a mass defection of officials who lose faith in Putin's ability to control the situation.<sup>65</sup> On the other hand, a string of military victories or an outcome of the war that would cement Russian gains would bolster the credibility of the regime. Many experts have pointed out that growing tensions within the Russian political and military elite, as evidenced by Prigozhin's mutiny, have made the possibility of another mutiny or intra-elite conflicts taking on a military dimension more likely.<sup>66</sup> The lack of explicit support for Putin from both military officers and officials during Prigozhin's march on Moscow is indicative of this.<sup>67</sup> Their wait-and-see attitude did not turn into action this time around, but if the perception arises among elites that Putin will fall, this could turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy. And then, a system built on personal relations, distrust, and repression could suddenly collapse like a house of cards.

Interestingly, most experts who participated in this study agreed that the number of casualties in the war is actually not as important. It should be noted that this, again, depends on the time span: in the long term, the high number of casualties will certainly have an impact on the demographic composition of Russia.<sup>68</sup> However, in the short term, the high numbers of casualties do not seem

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64 Tatiana Stanovaya, "[Russia Faces Three Pivotal Moments in 2023](#)", *Carnegie Endowment For International Peace*, January 9, 2023; Max Boot, "[Putin Finally Learns the Lesson All Tyrants Learn](#)," *The Washington Post*, June 24, 2023; Keir Giles, "[Prigozhin and Wagner could not challenge Putin's power directly, but they exposed his weakening grip](#)," *The Guardian*, 24 June 2023.

65 Catherine Belton and Francesca Ebel, "[Political risks rise for Putin as Ukraine's counteroffensive begins](#)," *The Washington Post*, June 10, 2023.

66 Tatiana Stanovaya, "[Beneath the Surface, Prigozhin's Mutiny Has Changed Everything in Russia](#)," *Carnegie Politika*, July 27, 2023.

67 "[Dozens of Senior Russian Officers Detained, Fired After Wagner Mutiny – WSJ](#)," *The Moscow Times*, July 13, 2023; Pjotr Sauer and Helen Sullivan, "[Russian general says he has been fired for telling truth about Ukraine problems](#)," *The Guardian*, July 13, 2023.

68 "[Russia's population nightmare is going to get even worse](#)", *The Economist*, March 4th, 2023.

to make a large difference to the stability of the regime, which can be explained by the importance of the factor of ‘perception’, which was emphasized by various experts and again closely linked to the narrative and ideology that would explain why Russia went to war in the first place.

A feeling of an existential threat could also reinforce the ‘besieged fortress’ mentality of the Russian population and strengthen support for the regime, at least in the short to medium term.<sup>69</sup> However, it remains uncertain how long the Kremlin’s narrative will dominate, especially since important figures like the late Prigozhin have recently publicly challenged this narrative.<sup>70</sup> If alternative narratives gain traction among the broader public, it could lead to a decline in military morale or increased resistance to further conscription and mobilization efforts, which will certainly have an impact on Russia’s efforts on the battlefield.<sup>71</sup>

Figure 7 Factors related to the war in Ukraine, scored according to their impact



69 Agnieszka Legucka, “Putin’s Address - a Year of War in a Besieged Fortress,” PISM, February 22, 2023.

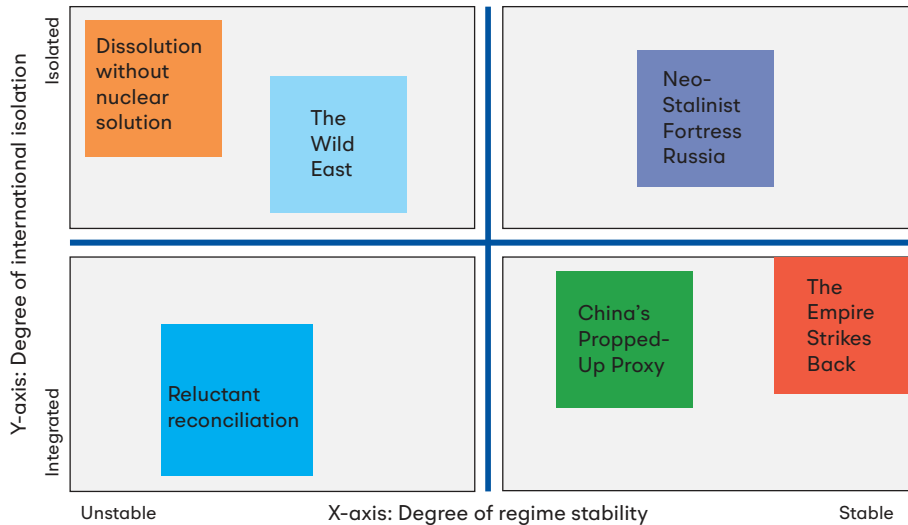
70 Alain Frachon, “« Le profil de Poutine en patron infallible d’un Etat omnipuissant ressort fissuré de l’épisode Prigojine »,” Le Monde, Jun 29, 2023.

71 Kevin Liffey, “Complaints about Russia’s mobilization grow”, Reuters, September 25, 2022; Bruno Tertrais, “After the Fall. Must We Prepare for the Breakup of Russia?” Institut Montaigne, March 20, 2023.

# Scenarios

Based on our expert survey and workshop discussions, we have combined the various factors of influence that determine the future of Russia into two aggregate variables. These **internal** and **external** factors have a relatively high impact, come with a rather great deal of uncertainty, and together form the foundation of a scenario matrix for the purpose of Western policymakers.

Figure 8 Scenario matrix



On the internal (x) axis, the key uncertainty is formulated as the **degree of regime stability**: the extent to which the regime currently headed by Putin can continue to govern Russia in its current form, either with or without him as president. This axis can range from complete regime continuity and regime stability, on the one hand, to regime discontinuity and regime instability, on the other.

On the external (y) axis, the key uncertainty is **the degree of international isolation of the Russian Federation**, in particular its relations with China and the West. This axis is complex, as Russia can either be completely internationally isolated as a pariah state, or fully reintegrated with the West – or it could be something in between, having a confrontational relationship with the West but



building relatively good relations with China and other countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. This is why workshop participants identified more than only one scenario in each of the quadrants. For the sake of brevity and readability the research team has refined these into six distinct scenarios that will be each discussed in turn.

### Scenario 1: Reluctant reconciliation<sup>72</sup>



In this scenario, Russia has largely but not decisively lost the war in Ukraine. Faced with a series of increasingly humiliating battlefield defeats, a sharp economic downturn and an increase in domestic discontent, various factions in the Russian elite have temporarily joined forces to engineer a transition of power through a ‘palace coup’. Putin has disappeared and is presumed to be

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72 The fictional visuals that offer an expression of the various future scenarios in this report have been generated by Clingendael, using the generative AI software by the Midjourney research lab. See: [Midjourney](#). They are included as provocative, fictional imagery to stimulate discussion and do not reflect the position of the Clingendael Institute on the desirability of these outcomes.

dead, as are some of his closest allies. The new Russian president makes Putin a scapegoat for all of Russia's ills and embarks on a policy of 'de-Putinization', focusing predominantly on economic reforms and on consolidating power by purging Putin's loyalists. It also launches limited reforms towards more democratisation and less repression to reduce domestic discontent.

Russia has signed a temporary, Chinese- and Turkish-brokered armistice with Ukraine under which it has agreed to cease active hostilities, to withdraw its troops from the Ukrainian mainland and to hand over certain commanders and cronies of Putin – but not Putin himself – to the ICC. China positions itself as the main architect and guarantor of the peace agreement and actively rejects Western sanctions against Russia. Instead, China proactively supports the new Russian leadership in rebuilding its economy. Economic relations between Russia and the West do not return to the level of before 24 February 2022, as some economic sanctions remain in place and the West will continue its search for alternative energy sources. Russia therefore continues its search for alternative outlets for its gas supplies, notably China, but also in other countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Although the new leadership nominally distances itself from the excesses of Putinism, it does not entirely reject Russia's imperial past or authoritarian style of governance – nor its strategic interests in retaining influence in its 'near abroad'. It agrees with the West to withdraw Russian troops from Transnistria, and nuclear weapons and intermediary-range missiles from Belarus and Kaliningrad, in exchange for a relaxation of the sanctions regime. It nonetheless retains its military presence on the heavily fortified Crimean peninsula, and offers to hold a UN- and OSCE-monitored 'referendum', with the intention to use the principle of self-determination to justify its continued occupation.

Ukraine vehemently rejects this. Together with the lack of substantial reparation payments, the 'Crimean question' obstructs a comprehensive peace agreement and full normalization of Ukrainian-Russian and West-Russian relations. Russia actively tries to drive wedges between Ukraine and the West. Both Russia and Ukraine keep building up their military and the risk of a new resumption of hostilities over Crimea remains substantial, but both parties feel it is in their interest to avoid a new war for now.

## Policy implications

This scenario is particularly probable if the Russian invasion of Ukraine is unsuccessful, as a new Russian leadership will have a strong interest to triage the conflict and secure better relations with the West – which it will try to do so for the least concessions possible. In this case, domestic pressure in the West mounts to embark on some form of *détente* and *rapprochement* with Russia, including the lifting of some of the harshest economic sanctions in exchange for compliance with the ceasefire and a withdrawal from mainland Ukraine.

The cohesion and unity of NATO is strained as there is a profound lack of consensus on which criteria should be met before sanctions can be lifted and Russia can be reintegrated into the European security architecture. Eastern European allies, together with Ukraine, continue to push for a hard line against Russia and firmly object to any easing of sanctions until Crimea is liberated, all war criminals are brought to justice and reparation payments are paid in full. Several Western governments, most notably including the U.S., prefer to normalize relations with Russia in order to extricate themselves from the Ukrainian-Russian conflict – and to free their hands for a possible future confrontation with China and to avoid the emergence of a full-fledged Sino-Russian alliance.

The central policy dilemma in this scenario is to *which extent* and *under which conditions* any form of reconciliation and normalization of relations can be achieved with a new Russian leadership. A second dilemma is whether or not Ukraine could and should be admitted into NATO. Not just in case it does not have full control over all of its constitutional territory, but also considering whether a post-Putin Russia would be antagonized by the NATO admission of Ukraine, as this is widely seen as a security threat within Russian elite circles. A third dilemma relates to Russia's broader geopolitical role vis-à-vis China and in particular whether or not the West would be willing to compromise towards its support for Ukraine in pursuit of other geopolitical aims, such as avoiding Russia becoming *de facto* vassalized by China (Scenario 2).

## Scenario 2: China's Propped-up Proxy



The war in Ukraine grinds on year after year. This happens at a lower level of intensity than it did in 2022-2023, but without a stable ceasefire. Neither side has the capacity to impose its will on the other and both feel that they can eventually win this war of attrition. There is no clear end to the protracted conflict in sight. Putin is eventually forced to step down due to his personal mismanagement of the war effort and in order to have 'someone to blame', but the regime itself prevails and a hardline successor is hand-picked by the security services. There is a brief period of political instability and uncertainty until the new leader consolidates control and secures political and financial backing from Beijing, in exchange for far-reaching economic concessions.

Russia *de facto* becomes a Chinese proxy and supplier of raw materials. Stabilizing Russia is in China's interest, as it wants to prevent chaos at its borders and needs Russia for the supply of cheap natural resources to fuel its global competition against the West. China also finds Russia a convenient tool to distract and weaken the West while it pursues its other ambitions. Russia eventually becomes fully dependent on Chinese support, both to finance its war

against Ukraine, to stave off default and to prop up its unpopular regime through increased repression. China effectively becomes to Russia what Russia at the moment has become to the Lukashenka regime in Belarus: an external guarantor of regime stability, despite profound domestic despondency.

Russian foreign trade becomes nearly entirely 'yuanized' as China offers Russia a conduit to both evade and mitigate the effect of Western sanctions. Both countries embark on far-reaching military co-operation. Beijing, among others, provides Russia with cheap credits, economic support and assistance in increasing its military-industrial production, in order to balance Western economic and military support to Ukraine.

Emboldened by Chinese support, Russia remains confrontational towards and isolated from the West and the risk of a new flare-up of the unresolved war with Ukraine remains imminent. The sanctions remain in force and are even tightened further, as it quickly becomes apparent that the new leadership does not intend to change course. Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic aspirations are frustrated by the war, something that Russia and China do not fail to utilize in their strategic communications. As economic weakness limits Russia's ability to rebuild conventional military power, the country becomes more reliant on its nuclear arsenal as a deterrent and an emblem of its pretensions to great power status.

### **Policy implications**

This scenario seems to be one of the more probable scenarios that have been identified; it represents a continuation of the current trend, in which Russia keeps fighting and steadily becomes more dependent on China. The primary dilemma in this scenario for the West is how to cope with Russia as a Chinese proxy, whereby the Kremlin and its long war in Ukraine both become tools that serve Chinese interests. A dependent Russia that provides China with a sheer limitless supply of heavily discounted natural gas, oil and other mineral and natural resources, as well as military technology and expertise, will strongly strengthen Beijing's position in its global economic and military competition with the United States.

However, a problem with this scenario could be resistance at lower levels in Russia to becoming China's junior partner and gradually running the risk of being turned into a Chinese vassal state. The key question here is what alternatives there are, which trade-offs the Russian elites would be willing to make for alternative scenarios, and to what extent the West would use this situation at some point as well.

The relationship at the highest level between Putin and Xi is highly personalized and there is some disappointment and resistance at other levels and among other groups within the elite – as well as quite a few frictions in the ‘friendship without boundaries’. Once Putin is gone, this could lead to increased uncertainty about the future of the relationship with some in the elite possibly preferring to reach some kind of understanding with the West instead of becoming totally dependent on Beijing. Although it would also be possible that this scenario unfolds while Putin remains in power, the variant in which Putin disappears from the scene has been chosen to allow policy-makers to prepare for this.

The war in Ukraine and the need for credible deterrence in Eastern Europe will also be a continuous drain on Western political and economic resources, as Ukraine will not be able to withstand a Chinese-supported Russia in the long term without sustained and large-scale Western support. The risk with this scenario is that it could still mutate into scenario 3: a gradual Russian victory over Ukraine. But at the same time, in a post-Putin scenario this could also lead to a renewed discussion within the foreign and security elites in Russia about relations with China and a preference for balancing or hedging with a more constructive relationship with the West. This would offer opportunities for the West to move in the direction of scenario 1, depending on the concessions that a post-Putin regime would be willing to offer.



### Scenario 3: The Empire Strikes Back



After a shaky ceasefire, a decrease in economic and military Western support due to ‘Ukraine fatigue’ and shifting political landscapes and priorities, Russia rearms and resumes its full-scale attacks. NATO unity crumbles as a new isolationist U.S. president shifts the responsibility for support to Ukraine to European NATO allies – which are unable or unwilling to rise to the challenge. Russia eventually successfully leverages its demographic and economic superiority over Ukraine to gain the upper hand in a gruelling war of attrition. The West, China and Turkey eventually force Zelensky to accept what is seen in Ukrainian eyes as a humiliating and unfavourable armistice that leaves Russia in control of large parts of the south and east of Ukraine.

Despite Russia’s enormous losses for relatively limited territorial gains, Putin declares victory in the ‘fight against the collective West’ and gains a large boost in popularity – both within Russia and in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Russia has successfully shown that ‘might makes right’. The war has already brought (revisionist) autocratic Eurasian countries closer together, united by their desire to challenge the West and the influence of the U.S. dollar. Although we cannot

yet speak of a “full-blown alliance of autocracies”, a Russian victory in Ukraine might “hasten the construction of a Fortress Eurasia”.<sup>73</sup> Strategic and economic cooperation between Russia and China had already further strengthened, but the Kremlin maintains enough leverage in this relationship to ensure that it does not become too dependent on Beijing.<sup>74</sup> Therefore, Russia is also investing in further strengthening (economic) cooperation with other BRICS countries.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, Russia continues to deepen its diplomatic, economic, and also military and security ties throughout the African continent and with some European partners as well.<sup>76</sup>

Relations with the West remain tense and the Western ‘containment policy’ and sanctions remain in place, but Russia manages to establish sufficient new economic and military partnerships to reinvigorate its economy and strengthen its military. Despite Putin’s age, his personal stature as a historic figure enables the regime to continue governing. He eventually orchestrates a smooth transition of power to a hand-picked successor who continues his aggressive policies of military threats and blackmail, not only towards Ukraine but also towards Armenia, Belarus and Moldova. As Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has succeeded and the ‘Western bloc’ has weakened relative to the ‘Eurasian bloc’, China feels more confident to attack Taiwan, which means the chances of a Sino-American war in the western Pacific have significantly increased.<sup>77</sup>

## Policy implications

In this low-probability but high-impact scenario, a fragmented and weakened West faces an increasingly assertive Russia and China and significantly loses influence in the rest of the world. With an emboldened and rearmed Russia right on its doorstep, Europe will have to invest significant resources to build up its own defence capabilities to deter future Russian aggression – especially if the U.S. continues an isolationist course. Europe will also have to come to terms with a

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73 Hal Brands, “[The Battle for Eurasia](#),” *Foreign Policy*, June 4, 2023.

74 Mikhail Troitskiy, “[A Final Reckoning? Sino-Russian Relations Amid Russia’s War on Ukraine](#),” *PONARS Eurasia*, June 9, 2023.

75 The BRICS countries have already discussed the possibilities of a shared currency, suggesting the countries’ intentions to further strengthen economic ties in the coming years, and to counter the dominance of the U.S. dollar together. Joseph W. Sullivan, “[A BRICS Currency Could Shake the Dollar’s Dominance](#),” *Foreign Policy*, April 24, 2023.

76 Simon Saradzhyan, “[Uptick in Russian-African Diplomacy Moscow’s Evolving Geopolitical Plans](#),” *Russia Matters*, June 2, 2023;

77 Hal Brands, “[The Battle for Eurasia](#),” *Foreign Policy*, June 4, 2023.



destroyed, impoverished and vengeful Ukraine that will continue to try to resist Russia – and also blames the West for abandoning it. This sentiment of betrayal will also be deeply felt within the EU and NATO itself, especially in Central and Eastern European countries. This scenario particularly serves as a stark reminder of why the West is supporting Ukraine: not only to help the country defend its sovereignty against Russian aggression, but also to uphold the rules-based order, to deter future military aggression – and to preserve the unity of the Transatlantic alliance.

#### Scenario 4: Neo-Stalinist fortress Russia



In this scenario, Putin has resorted to the use of tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine in order to deter further Ukrainian attempts to liberate the Crimean Peninsula or hit targets in Russia itself. In response, China, India and Brazil abandon their tacit support for Russia and the country becomes almost entirely isolated – with the exception of other outcasts such as North Korea. It might still manage to sell some of its natural resources at bargain prices. This would depend especially on China's reaction in such a situation, which runs counter to

China's demands and threatens the role China would like to play as a benevolent Great Power in world affairs. If Beijing would not restrict itself to diplomatic condemnation but also establish other sanctions, including economic sanctions, Moscow would have to deal with almost total isolation and would have to become near-autarkic, also economically and financially.

Despite its global pariah status the Russian regime could retain its grip on power at least in the short term, as it still has enough means to continue or further increase repression, and to keep its propaganda and the 'besieged fortress' narrative effective. However, the economy would contract sharply and Russian society would enter into survival mode, as it becomes ever more totalitarian and militarized.

Russia's foreign policy continues its trends of paranoia, hostility and 'active measures' towards the West but also increasingly focuses on achieving autarky. However, it would have to abandon its rhetoric on a multipolar world order and a Russia as a proponent of Asia, Africa and South America.

### **Policy implications**

Although this low-probability but high-impact scenario would not be considered very plausible by most experts, in particular regarding the possibility of Russia resorting to the use of nuclear weapons, a much more isolated Russia remains a distinct possibility. It is also a Ukrainian policy preference to make Russia a global 'pariah state', presumably as an intermediate step before regime change. This scenario would nonetheless imply that even China would have lost its leverage over Moscow, because Russia's options have shrunk to regime survival and the prevention of a total defeat in Ukraine at all cost. Some may argue that China also depends on Russian energy resources and raw materials, although it has not become as strongly dependent on this as Europe, and does have other options available.

Most important for Beijing (and other states in the West as well) is to prevent a total collapse of Russia, which would lead to instability at its borders. In the meantime, Russia is useful for China in countering a unipolar world order and receiving energy at a discount. As long as an autarkic Russia would remain relatively stable, this would not run counter to China's fundamental interests. An isolated Russia could in principle also open up possibilities for China and the West to cooperate in attempting to solve "the Russia question".

## Scenario 5: The Wild East



As the Russian army faces significant losses of territory, personnel and equipment in the ongoing war with Ukraine, dissatisfaction spreads amongst all the ranks of the Russian army. Due to the continued humiliation on the battlefield, Putin's regime – which has increasingly relied on military action to justify its rule – loses legitimacy.<sup>78</sup> Following a particularly catastrophic defeat in Ukraine in which Russia's military is routed and makes an unorganized withdrawal from southern and eastern Ukraine, Russia's central authority weakens and a degree of 'organized chaos' ensues.

Since Putin had divided power among too many competing security actors with their private militaries, the lack of consensus among the elite means that the 'power vertical' quickly begins to crumble. Several private military companies, different branches of the security forces and regional actors such as Kadyrov

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78 Nikolay Petrov, "[Putin's Downfall: The Coming Crisis of the Russian Regime](#)", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, April 2016, pp. 1-2.

throw their support and armed forces behind different factions. In addition, Ukraine actively supports rebel groups that fight against the Kremlin. A series of low-intensity armed conflicts and clashes break out across Russia. This does not completely turn into all-out civil war or dissolution as all sides understand that this would be harmful for everyone's interests. Instead, power gravitates towards the regions as a new, weaker leader from one of the factions has to make a string of concessions to remain in power.

The brain drain has now become a more serious problem as even more people from the upper and middle class have fled the country. Longer-running socio-economic problems come to the forefront due to the destructive consequences of the war and the weakened repressive apparatus of the state. The economy crumbles in a situation reminiscent of the early '90s, and there are high levels of criminality.<sup>79</sup> Organized crime groups actively recruit traumatized war veterans with combat experience; they openly resort to force in order to seize control of economic assets. Virtually all major companies form their own PMCs to defend themselves or prey on their competitors.<sup>80</sup>

China is not actively supporting the new regime in Moscow, but instead ruthlessly exploits it by buying up key infrastructure. It also encroaches on several Russian regions in the Far East, which it sees as buffers against instability in the west of Russia. The foreign policy of Russia becomes subordinated to domestic concerns. The new leadership does not pursue reconciliation with the West nor with Ukraine, but also refrains from further aggression towards its neighbours – not due to a lack of will, but rather due to a lack of capacity.<sup>81</sup> It may make token concessions in exchange for economic bailouts in a highly transactional manner. Instead of military aggression or energy, Russia now exports organized crime to secure hard currency: it becomes a hotbed of cybercrime and trafficking in drugs, weapons and human beings.

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79 Vladislav Zubok, "[After Putin – what?](#)", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, November 9, 2022.

80 Bruno Tertrais, "[The Fall of Russia](#)," *Institut Montaigne*, December 14, 2022; Bruno Tertrais, "[After the Fall. Must We Prepare for the Breakup of Russia?](#)" *Institut Montaigne*, March 20, 2023.

81 Duncan Allen, "[Imagining Russia's future after Putin Possible outcomes of a defeat in Ukraine](#)," *Chatham House*, pp. 11-15.

### Policy implications

The probability of this scenario is relatively high and some in Ukraine or Eastern Europe may even consider this a relatively desirable scenario – but it is certainly not a stable outcome. ‘The Wild East’ is reminiscent of the Russia of the 1990s: an unpredictable, unruly place that might not directly threaten its neighbours through military aggression or energy blackmail – but that nonetheless poses significant problems due to transnational organized crime, irregular migration and other knock-on effects of regional instability.

Russia’s weakness and dependency on external financial support and exports does pose opportunities to resolve a number of long-term problems, including the protracted conflicts around Russia. The key policy dilemma here that will also divide NATO is to what extent the West wants to re-engage to actually stabilize Russia – or how much it wants to further weaken Russia in order to avoid it from becoming a threat again in the future. The risk with this scenario is that it could easily mutate into scenario 6.

### Scenario 6: Dissolution without a nuclear solution



The Russian military is not only defeated in Ukraine but also begins to collapse as mass desertions, surrenders and insurgencies spread like wildfire. Putin's political legitimacy and the entire structure of his top-down power system are severely shaken. Putin is removed and his successor quickly signs a humiliating ceasefire agreement including far-reaching concessions and reparation payments that is sharply protested by nationalist factions as a betrayal of Russia's core interests. A general sense of deep resentment against the central government spreads across the elites. The Russian economy is on the edge of meltdown. The disastrous consequences of the war, the high number of human losses and long-standing social issues give rise to social unrest.

The elite and the security forces – not only within the central Moscow Oblast, but also in the regions in the Far East and the Caucasus – begin to revolt and large-scale protests break out across Russia. Amidst such domestic turmoil, pre-existing regional and ethnic divisions intensify. Regional elites contest the way in which the Russian Federation is governed and demand decentralization and territorial autonomy.<sup>82</sup> Some first quietly and later openly conclude that the benefits of sovereignty surpass those of maintaining loyalty to Moscow.<sup>83</sup> Various subjects of the Federation declare independence and receive support from regional factions of the security forces, private military companies, and heavily armed organized crime groups.

Military attempts to quell these separatist movements result in armed conflict across Russia for a number of years. Ethnic and regional populations are mobilized to support the cause of greater autonomy, and the Kremlin's violent attempts to subdue these revolts sparks broader resistance all across the Russian Federation. Once the hierarchy of power slowly but steadily splinters, some regions' moves towards greater sovereignty sets off a chaotic chain reaction, in which their successes encourage other republics and regions to push

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82 The most cited candidates for such a secession move in the literature are the ethnic republics of Ingushetia, Chechnya, Dagestan, Yakutia, Tatarstan, and Bashkortostan. The existing discontent and resentment in these republics have intensified during the war since their populations are disproportionately represented among the casualties. However, ethnicity may only be part of the puzzle and is often overstated; wealthier regions with Russian majorities could also demand more autonomy or even mount secessionist challenges to the central Government if they feel that this serves their purpose. Max Pyziur and Alexander J. Motyl, "[If Russia collapse - which states will break away?](#)", *EU Observer*, June 30, 2022.

83 Janusz Bugajski, "[Mapping Russia's Devolution](#)", *The Arc*.



for more autonomy or secession from the Russian Federation.<sup>84</sup> Some of the new republics amalgamate into new federal or confederal arrangements.<sup>85</sup> Some of these subjects become militarily supported and recognized by Ukraine and several other countries; several far east republics become recognized and *de facto* vassalized by China.

As the Russian military fractures, regional warlords swiftly seize nuclear assets and use them to deter the Kremlin in the rump state of Muscovy, which eventually has to acquiesce to the new reality. Some of the new states offer to trade in their nuclear weapons in exchange for recognition by China and the Western powers; others want to retain them but secure recognition by blackmailing the West with the threat of otherwise selling them to other states. Each entity forms its own foreign policy. Muscovy remains revisionist and deeply hostile towards the West, which it accuses of the 'breaking up of Russia'. Several other entities opportunistically try to build new relations with Western or Asian partners.

### **Policy implications**

This scenario is a quintessential 'low probability, high-impact' scenario. Most analysts agree that while there are indeed centrifugal forces at play inside the Russian Federation, the centripetal forces that keep it together are still stronger – including the common interest of most of the elite and the population to avoid the instability and loss of power and revenue that is accompanied by this scenario.

That does not mean it is impossible. In case it does materialize, the West will only have a short window of time to react to a rapidly unfolding series of events – and limited possibilities to shape the outcome. It will face a broad range of urgent and complex questions such as how to secure Russia's nuclear arsenal; whether or not to recognize breakaway republics and whether or not to defend them from aggression by the rump state of Muscovy; and how to cope with the inevitable influx of refugees from the destructive conflicts that may well erupt across the territory of the former Russian Federation.

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84 Janusz Bugajski, "[Mapping Russia's Devolution](#)", *The Arc*; Bruno Tertrais, "[After the Fall. Must We Prepare for the Breakup of Russia?](#)" *Institut Montaigne*, March 20, 2023.

85 Janusz Bugajski, [Failed State: A Guide to Russia's Rupture](#) (Washington: The Jamestown Foundation, 2022).

Interestingly, the fact that this scenario with its far-reaching and mind-bogglingly complex consequences exists *by itself* shapes the behaviour of both Russian and Western actors, which both largely want to avoid it from materializing. The exception are those in Ukraine or the West who instead call for the 'decolonization of Russia'. Ironically, this scenario could even open up opportunities for cooperation between China and the West to stabilize the situation.



# Conclusions and recommendations

Across the literature and within the expert workshop, there is a general agreement about the *plausibility* of the abovementioned scenarios, but not on their *probability* and *preferability*. This reflects not only the difficulty of providing foresight on Russia: as often is the case with scenario studies, it is entirely possible that a combination or variation of these scenarios unfold – or that they follow each other sequentially. This debate also reflects the underlying political, cultural, historical and geographical differences across the EU and NATO.

In general, the preferred scenario in the West is no. 1, ‘reluctant reconciliation’. While most of the experts in the literature and the workshop would prefer a non-violent, orderly change of regime towards a democratic Russia, they acknowledge that such a scenario is highly unlikely and that the West has very limited options to contribute to such an outcome. Opinions then begin to vary when discussing the preferability of the scenarios in the other quadrants and, by implication, on the type of policies that should be followed towards Russia.

Most Western Europeans and Americans tend to look at an instable or even potentially fragmenting Russian Federation from the **lens of risk management**. Politicians openly state that they want to bring Putin to justice, which in reality does mean that they prefer regime change – but then stress the ‘politically correct’ principle that “this is up to the Russian people”. They are worried about an imploding Russia due to the risks of large-scale instability and the dispersion of Russia’s nuclear arsenal. This implies a preference for strategies built around containment and isolation, but not towards active involvement in domestic affairs.

In Eastern Europe (including Poland, the Baltics and Ukraine), however, instability in Russia is perceived through the lens of **reducing the security threat that Russia poses to them**. They are cautious but less risk averse than Western Europe towards the risk of a dissolving Russia. They see regime change as required to bring a definitive end to the war but also to reduce the dangers emanating from Russia in the future. As such, a situation in which Russia is forced to concentrate on internal issues first and foremost, instead of threatening its neighbours, is

considered to be desirable. Ukraine actively supports violent uprisings against the Kremlin and even the dissolution (or ‘decolonization’) of Russia, while Poland and the Baltics are less united in their assessment of the preference and probability of such scenarios. In the short term their preference would be to turn Russia into a globally isolated pariah state.

Although the views on a changing Russia differ between Western Europe and America on the one hand, and Eastern Europe on the other, in all cases the West should **prepare for the best, for the worst and for the persistence of the status quo outcomes**. This means developing “no regret options”, which would be useful in any of the six scenarios even if they may primarily be based on the assumption of regime continuity. In the case of regime change, a new range of options may emerge, depending on the kind of change taking place in Moscow. Furthermore, we should **distinguish between medium-term options** for the scenarios considered above – **and policies aimed at the long-term**, as developments may move in other directions and a more positive scenario of a more democratic and non-imperialistic Russia might eventually become an option.

The following three sets of recommendations provide such ‘no regret’ policy options that could now already be considered in case the various potential outcomes occur:

### **In case of regime stability (in the ‘China’s Propped-up Proxy’, ‘Fortress Russia’ and ‘the Empire Strikes Back’ scenarios)**

- In these scenarios there is a **continued need for credible deterrence, but also for containment and efforts to reduce Russia’s malign influence in neighbouring countries**. This particularly concerns the security of Ukraine, but also other Eastern (and Central) European countries threatened by Russian aggression and interference. NATO allies and partners should be fully supported in strengthening resilience, both in the military-security sphere and in the financial, economic, and hybrid sphere.
- There would also be a clear need to **monitor closely any possible emerging divisions within the foreign and security policy elite** in Moscow and/or between Russia and China. The West and China may also have a joint interest in preventing nuclear escalation and in preventing the spill-over of instability within the Russian Federation.

- As a long-term option, the EU could be **more welcoming to Russian opposition abroad** and stimulate them to present a more unified platform with an agenda for a more democratic and non-imperialistic Russia.
- Despite the bleak outlook of these scenarios, in its strategic communication the EU could nonetheless **signal that there could again be a place for Russia in a renewed European security architecture** – but only if and when Russia decides to return to the multilateral rules-based order, in particular with respect to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other states.

### **In case of regime change (in the ‘Reluctant Reconciliation’, ‘Wild East’ and ‘Dissolution’ scenarios)**

- There should already be **debates within NATO and the EU on under which conditions the West could re-engage with a new leadership**. Which demands should a new leader fulfil before Russia can be reintegrated into the European security architecture? Should this include withdrawal from Ukraine, arms control, accountability, reparations, ‘de-Putinization’, respecting human rights inside Russia, withdrawal from Transnistria and Abkhazia, or all of the above and more? And how far are Western politicians willing to compromise with Russia on these conditions, given that a new Russian leadership may not acquiesce to *all* of the West’s core demands?
- This discussion should include **prioritizing within this list of conditions**, as well as to what extent these are linked to a potential and gradual lifting of sanctions. Demands on accountability and reparations could for example be a priority *after* a mutually agreed ceasefire and could gain more traction in case of a regime change in Moscow. A full-scale ‘de-Putinization’ would depend on the new regime and could open up the possibility for the current opposition in exile to return and work on more fundamental change in Russia, including on a roadmap towards reconciliation with Ukraine in the longer term.
- If a new regime would again respect the full range of obligations under international law and in the context of the OSCE, the West **should be ready to re-engage** and even support reforms inside Russia – but it **should not repeat the mistake of the 1990s by doing so unconditionally**.

### **In case of large-scale instability (in the ‘Dissolution’ and ‘Wild East’ scenarios)**

- **The first priority should be to prevent or mitigate the spill-over effects of instability in Russia.** This includes a potential influx of refugees, arms and organized crime. NATO and the EU could for example already now jointly develop contingency plans with regard to border security. In some more extreme situations of civil war, peacekeeping in the context of the UN or other multilateral formats might also have to be considered.
- In terms of nuclear non-proliferation, Western countries led by the United States should already now **develop or update their plans on how to manage Russia’s nuclear arsenal** in case such scenarios unfold.
- The West should also **consider in advance how it would approach the possible recognition of new entities.** It should reflect on whether or not it would do so in cooperation with China, based on a joint interest in preventing major instability and nuclear proliferation. It should also consider options on working with whoever is in power in Moscow in order to prevent major dissolution and civil war. The recognition of new entities might only be considered as a matter of last resort, once new entities fulfil the requirements of statehood and are willing to cooperate on the basis of international law – and if they adopt the obligations which the Federation had in its relations with the outside world.