



WINNING THE WAR WITH RUSSIA THE WEST'S COUNTER-STRATEGY TOWARDS MOSCOW

Marek Menkiszak

NUMBER 89
WARSAW
APRIL 2023

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CONTENT EDITOR

Wojciech Konończuk

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Szymon Sztyk

CO-OPERATION

Katarzyna Kazimierska, Matylda Skibińska

TRANSLATION

Radosław Alf

CO-OPERATION

Nicholas Furnival

GRAPHIC DESIGN

OSW

DTP

IMAGINI

PHOTOGRAPH ON COVER

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Centre for Eastern Studies

ul. Koszykowa 6a, 00-564 Warsaw, Poland

tel.: (+48) 22 525 80 00, info@osw.waw.pl

  www.osw.waw.pl

ISBN 978-83-67159-44-9

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MAIN POINTS

- Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine that began in February 2022 is not an escalation of a local conflict over a limited territory that will soon be permanently frozen. In fact, it is an armed aggression carried out with the aim of subjugating or destroying a major European state, and is designed to be an important stage in Russia's protracted war against the community of countries that the Kremlin propaganda describes as the 'collective West'. In fact, its aim is to entirely annihilate the current political and security order in Europe and to force a major revision of the existing global order by replacing the leadership of US-led democratic Western countries with a coalition of dictatorships which would include Russia. This is a systemic conflict and there is no chance of reducing its intensity, at least as long as Putin's dictatorial regime remains in power in Moscow.
- Russia is failing in Ukraine. It has so far failed to achieve the strategic objectives of its war, nor has it managed even the minimal ones. However, there is no sign that Russia could abandon its maximalist goals, which are hostile to the West, especially as Putin has made both himself and the entire Russian state and society hostages to the conflict. The Kremlin is hoping that the protracted confrontation and its mounting human, economic and political costs, as well as Russian threats of escalation, will undermine the resolve of the countries that support Ukraine. As a result, Ukraine, if it does not suffer total defeat and cease to exist as a state, would at least be forced to accept Russian conditions for a temporary reduction in the intensity of the conflict. This, in turn, would allow Russia to regather its strength and prepare for a new phase of the confrontation.
- It is therefore crucial for the future to make it as difficult as possible for Russia to maintain its ability to wage this war and preserve its existing dictatorial regime, while it is in the West's strategic interest for that regime to change. There are no easy or cost-free measures

in this regard. These should be undertaken with two time frames in mind. The first one would involve a short-term surge of pressure (primarily through support for Ukraine to help it achieve decisive success on the battlefield), and the second would be a long-term strategy of confrontation with Putin's Russia.

- To maximise the chances of success, Western tactics should rest on several pillars of political, economic and security action, which can be summarised as the five D's: (1) denying Russia the chance to win the war (that is, ensuring that Ukraine prevails), (2) delegitimising the Putin regime, (3) decoupling Russia economically from the West and applying economic pressure, (4) deterring Russia, and (5) defending the Western states and their partners (i.e. those countries that aspire to become part of the West).
- For this strategy to succeed, it is particularly important to further consolidate the Western community in the political, security and economic areas, to ensure that the public consciously accepts the strategy's goals, and to build the broadest possible global coalition of countries to defend the basic principles of the international order against the enemies of freedom, such as Russia. After all, the ability to deliver a strategic defeat to the current Russian regime will not only determine the fate of Ukraine and Europe, but also, to a large extent, the future of the West as a community and the continued survival of the existing global order.

INTRODUCTION

On 24 February 2022, the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation launched an invasion into Ukraine on the orders of their commander-in-chief, President Vladimir Putin. Thus, Russia's war against a major democratic European country, which had begun in 2014, turned into a full-scale armed aggression conducted by Moscow.

Russia has faced fierce resistance from the Armed Forces of Ukraine as well as Ukraine's society and government, which rallied together in the face of a threat to the existence of the nation and the state, while other, mainly Western, countries have been increasing their political, economic and military support (supplies of weapons and equipment, intelligence assistance) to Ukraine. As a result, Russia has failed to execute its plan, which included the subjugation of Ukraine.

Russia has pressed on with its devastating aggression against the Ukrainian state, even though it has suffered successive defeats (the Ukrainian forces have recaptured two-thirds of the territory that the Russian forces initially occupied),¹ mounting casualties (tens of thousands killed), as well as economic costs (the crisis caused by Western sanctions) and political costs (partial international isolation). The war's effects in Ukraine so far include tens of thousands of dead soldiers and civilians, nearly 15 million refugees and internally displaced people, damage to more than 50% of the country's energy infrastructure, and a severe economic crisis.

Russia's brutal violations of international law include not only the aggression itself, but also the countless crimes the Russians have committed

¹ As a result of the aggression carried out in 2014–2015, Russia began to occupy some 44,000 km², or about 7.3% of Ukraine's territory. In February/March 2022, after the start of the full-scale invasion, the extent of the occupied areas increased to some 161,000 km², or about 26.7% of the country's total area, before decreasing to some 86,500 km², or about 14.3% of Ukraine's territory, as a result of successful Ukrainian counter-offensives and the partial withdrawal of Russian forces in the autumn and winter of 2022/2023.

in Ukraine, such as mass murders (including against unarmed civilians), torture, rape, robberies, as well as the large-scale deportation of Ukrainian children and other civilians from the occupied territories to areas deep into the Russian Federation.

The savage war waged by Russia has not only united the Ukrainian people, but also triggered an international wave of solidarity with Ukraine involving many countries and societies. It has also led to an unprecedented consolidation of the Western countries and some of their partners, which have been coordinating actions aimed at intensifying pressure on Russia (mainly in the form of economic and political sanctions) as well as boosting all-round support for Ukraine.

The question that arises, however, is whether what has been done so far is enough to prevent Russia from carrying out its hostile intentions. This means not only defending Ukraine, but also preventing Russia from destroying the existing European and global order in the future. To do so, Russia's strategy needs to be countered by a specific counter-strategy, which should first of all include a carefully considered set of objectives and the tools required to achieve them. This should be based on an in-depth diagnosis of the situation.

This text is a contribution to the discussion on how to shape such a strategy. The starting point is to raise the question about what is at stake in this war. Indeed, realising the magnitude of the threat is a prerequisite for the proper formulation of strategic objectives. Therefore, the first chapter reconstructs Russia's intentions and aspirations and outlines a picture of the possible consequences of its success.

However, Moscow's failures must not lull us into a false sense of security. After all, there are no signs that the Kremlin has abandoned its maximalist goals. Therefore, the next chapter looks at the calculations of the regime in Moscow, which is seeking to turn its current tactical failures into a strategic success over time. To what extent it succeeds depends

largely on its ability to continue the war. This, in turn, to a large extent hinges on domestic factors: the country's military capabilities along with its socio-political and economic stability. These are analysed in the third chapter.

However, it is the external factors, primarily the attitude of the international community and especially of the Western countries, that will determine the course and outcome of Russia's confrontation with Ukraine and the West. Therefore, chapter four outlines the most important objectives and directions of the West's policy towards Russia, those which are designed to weaken its ability to maintain its current belligerent course and, further ahead, perhaps even help to eliminate the root cause of this course – the Putin regime.

Due to the complexity and multifaceted nature of these issues, this text has no ambition to answer all the questions, resolve each dilemma and offer detailed prescriptions. Its aim is to stimulate the debate on this topic, which should involve specialists from various fields, politicians, diplomats, the military, economists, political scientists, sociologists, etc.

However, other fundamentally important questions that such a debate raises remain outside the scope of this text: What mechanisms can bring about systemic change in Russia and what will its consequences be? How can political institutions and mechanisms be transformed on a global scale? How can the Western community and the global coalition for freedom be rebuilt? How can the global economic model to enhance security and prosperity be reformed? How can societies be mobilised to defend freedom and their willingness to bear its costs be spurred while simultaneously reducing those costs and fostering solidarity?

The text features a number of concepts whose definitions arouse debate and controversy. One of these is the **concept of war** as a keyword that characterises the conflict between Russia and the West, rather than only between Russia and Ukraine. The use of this term is sometimes

dismissed in the debate as inadequate for formal reasons: because war in its strict sense is a clash of military forces (in this case controlled by sovereign states), not political forces. The stated objective of the current policy of many Western countries and structures (including NATO) is precisely to avoid such a direct military clash, which could lead to an uncontrolled escalation and even World War III.

In the author's view, this approach is wrong. This is because, on the one hand, it overlooks the different understanding of war in Russian strategic culture, which blurs the distinction between a state of peace and war and also provides for the use of many non-military instruments in the conduct of war. On the other hand, it fails to take into account the previous instances of similar clashes, such as the direct fighting between the Russian and Turkish armed forces in Syria, and also between US troops and soldiers of the so-called Wagner Group private military company (actually a Kremlin-controlled tool) which both took place between 2018 and 2020, as well as the destruction of a US military drone by the Russian air force in March 2023. Other indisputable acts of aggression include attacks with weapons of mass destruction against the territory and citizens of another state or its critical infrastructure – such instances include Russia's chemical attack that took place on UK territory in 2018 and Russian cyberattacks against the US in 2020 and 2021. Likewise, the supply of significant amounts of Western weapons, ammunition, military equipment and intelligence support to Ukraine, as well as the participation of Western volunteers in the conflict, represent indirect participation in the war. Therefore, the state of war between Russia and the West is not a formal status but a reality. It results from the Kremlin's perception and Russia's policy based on this perception (irrespective of the political will of Western countries and structures). It is also gradable – the war can escalate in terms of its intensity and the type of instruments used.

Another controversial concept that appears in the text is the collective **category of the West** as a strategic adversary in the eyes of the Kremlin. But does the West even exist and can it be an adequate subject of analysis

and strategy? In the author's view, the West as a category that was historically shaped primarily by the experience of the Cold War against the totalitarian Soviet Union (whose present-day successor is the Russian Federation) remains a real, albeit diverse, community. It is underpinned by its participants' values (the commitment to the ideas of democracy, the rule of law, human rights, freedom) and interests (ensuring security, prosperity, the observance of basic norms in interpersonal and international relations), as well as by common institutions: both those that bring together Western countries (such as NATO, the EU and the G7) and those that are global but were established at the West's initiative (the UN, the WTO, the IMF, the World Bank and others).

Western countries face a range of problems both domestically and in their relations with each other and with other countries. Therefore, they sometimes engage in fierce disputes, especially over specific national interests. They are not always and not entirely guided by the values they proclaim, but these values still remain something of a beacon and determine whether a country is part of the Western community. The attitude to Putin's Russia is also increasingly becoming one of these determinants. The West, in its broadest sense, therefore includes the member states of NATO, the European Union, the European Economic Area, the United Kingdom and Switzerland, as well as Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. However, there are some question marks over Turkey and Hungary, which have been accused of violating democratic standards and cooperating with the Russian Federation, thus partly undermining the community's cohesion and solidarity. On the other hand, there are countries close to the West that share the interests and values of this group and seek membership in Western structures – they are referred to in this text as partner states. These include countries in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, especially Ukraine and Moldova in the latter area.

A wider group that represents a set of the West's potential natural allies in resisting aggressive autocracies (primarily Russia, North Korea and

Iran, but also China to some extent) includes other democratic countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia, particularly India. Although Russia does not see them as adversaries and is not at war with them in any sense, they have also suffered some negative effects of its aggressive policies and would not benefit from any political success for Moscow (and Beijing) in their confrontation with the West.

I. THE DESTRUCTION OF THE EXISTING ORDER: WHAT IS AT STAKE IN RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE AND THE WEST

24 February 2022 is one of the milestones in recent history, although it was not the day when the Russian-Ukrainian war began. In fact, Russia's low-intensity armed aggression against Ukraine, a strategically located democratic European state, had been ongoing since March 2014, when the Russian Federation began occupying two Ukrainian territories, namely Crimea and a part of the Donbas. However, the current clash is not a local conflict, but an important element of a much broader confrontation between Russia and the West, which also did not begin in 2022, but has been ongoing since at least early 2007, and which has been growing gradually more intense (except for a brief interlude of more cooperative relations in 2009–2011). The return of Vladimir Putin to the office of President of the Russian Federation in the spring of 2012, followed by a series of aggressive Russian actions from around 2013, marks an important turning point. Since then, Putin's Russia has effectively been waging a war against the West, which includes measures such as hostile propaganda campaigns, cyberattacks, sabotage operations, including against critical infrastructure, attempts at political subversion, corrupt practices, energy blackmail and, indeed, armed demonstrations and provocations.²

² Whereas between 1992 and 2006, Russia's policy towards the West could generally be described as a mixture of cooperation and competition (with shifting proportions and temporary crises), since 2007 it has been appropriate to speak of confrontation on the part of Russia. This symbolically began with Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007 (although he had already announced his political decision on an anti-Western policy reversal six months earlier, at a meeting of Russian ambassadors). The practical signs of this change included cyberattacks on Estonia, Russia's *de facto* withdrawal from the CFE regime and the start of work on medium-range missiles, followed by the war against Georgia. A period of more cooperative relations in 2009–2011 and Putin's return to the Kremlin in May 2012 were followed by a further intensification of the confrontation, the signs of which included anti-US sanctions, the launch of combat duty patrols by Russian strategic air forces and unannounced large-scale military exercises from 2013 onwards, and finally the invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and the military intervention in Syria in 2015. For more on the evolution of Russian policy towards the West, see M. Menkiszak, *A strategic continuation, a tactical change. Russia's European security policy*, OSW, Warsaw 2019; *idem*, *Russia's best enemy. Russian policy towards the United States in Putin's era*, OSW, Warsaw 2017, osw.waw.pl.

Table 1. Examples of Russia’s hostile actions against Western countries and their partners

Type of action	Examples of countries targeted by Russian actions	Description of actions
cyberattacks against critical infrastructure	Estonia (2007)	cyberattacks against the banking system and government institutions
	Georgia (2008)	cyberattacks against the banking system and government institutions
	Ukraine (2015, 2016)	cyberattacks against power plants and energy networks
	France / Italy / outer space (2017)	attempted interception of satellite communications
	United States (2020, 2021)	cyberattacks against government systems, pipelines and food distribution networks
	Ukraine (2022)	cyberattacks against government institutions, communications and energy systems
other major cyberattacks	Germany (2015, 2021)	cyberattacks against the parliament and political parties
	Netherlands (2017)	cyberattack against the institutions conducting legal proceedings related to the downing of a passenger plane (flight MH17)
	Netherlands (2018)	attempted cyberattack against the headquarters of the international Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons
	Switzerland (2018)	attempted cyberattack against the headquarters of the World Anti-Doping Agency
political subversion	Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova (since 2003)	secret service operations targeting pro-Western political forces / governments and supporting pro-Russian forces; supporting separatism; organising demonstrations, riots, etc.

Type of action	Examples of countries targeted by Russian actions	Description of actions
political subversion (cont.)	Norway (2015), Finland (2015–2016)	provoking an artificial migration crisis on the borders with Norway and Finland
	Germany (2016)	attempts to provoke ethnic-based political tensions and riots
	Montenegro (2016)	alleged coup attempt with the use of secret services and armed militias
	United States (2016)	the use of cyberattacks to influence the presidential election
	United Kingdom (2016)	organisation of the campaign in support of Brexit
	Spain (2017)	organisation of the campaign in support of the independence/ separatist movement in Catalonia
	France (2017)	the use of cyberattacks to influence the presidential election
	Greece / North Macedonia (2018)	organisation of campaigns and demonstrations against the agreement between Greece and North Macedonia
	Poland, Lithuania (2021)	support for the regime in Belarus, which manufactured an artificial migration crisis on the borders with Poland and Lithuania
sabotage	Poland (since 2021)	attempts to use cyberattacks against politicians and officials to influence the political situation
	Czech Republic (2014)	organisation of explosions at two arms depots
	Bulgaria (2011, 2015, 2020)	organisation of explosions at four arms depots

Type of action	Examples of countries targeted by Russian actions	Description of actions
attacks with chemical weapons	United Kingdom (2006)	assassination of Russian former agent and opposition activist Alexander Litvinenko with the use of radioactive polonium
	Bulgaria (2015)	attempted murder of businessman Emilian Gebrev with the use of a Novichok-type nerve agent
	United Kingdom (2018)	attempted murder of former Russian agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter with the use of a military-grade Novichok-type nerve agent; one person (a British citizen) died and several people were severely poisoned
political assassinations/ attempted assassinations	Turkey (2008–2021)	assassinations of ten Chechen opposition leaders and activists and the attempted assassinations of two others
	United Kingdom (2012–2017)	alleged assassinations of 14 Russian businessmen, former diplomats and activists (including former oligarch Boris Berezovsky in 2013)
	Germany (2019)	assassination of the Chechen opposition leader Zelimkhan Khangoshvili
	France (2022)	attempted assassination of a Russian activist
military clashes	United States (2018)	clashes between so-called private military companies from Russia and US forces in eastern Syria
	Turkey (2020)	clashes between Russian and Turkish forces in Syria's Idlib province
	United States (2023)	attack on a US unmanned reconnaissance drone over the Black Sea

Type of action	Examples of countries targeted by Russian actions	Description of actions
armed aggression against another country	Georgia (2008)	armed aggression, temporary occupation of a part of its territory, illegal recognition of the independence of two local para-states (Abkhazia and South Ossetia)
	Ukraine (since 2014)	armed aggression, occupation of a part of its territory, illegal annexation of several regions (Crimea; Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson oblasts)

Source: the author's own compilation based on open source data.³

The Kremlin has long believed that it is in a state of war with the West. It has openly declared this and taken what it considers commensurate measures.⁴ Irrespective of the diagnosis of this situation, the political will and the public narrative on this issue, it is therefore logical that the US, other NATO member states and the EU are now *de facto* in a state of war with the Russian Federation, even though they are not directly engaged in hostilities against its forces (see Introduction).

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 represented a radical form of escalation of this war in all its dimensions (local: against Ukraine, regional: against Europe, and global: against the entire Western

³ This list is far from exhaustive and could also include violations of the airspace/territorial waters of Estonia, Lithuania, Finland, Sweden and Turkey, interference with GPS signals in Norway and multiple incidents of economic and energy blackmail against countries such as Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Bulgaria, Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Germany, as well as the downing of a Malaysian passenger plane (flight MH17) over Ukraine.

⁴ Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov went as far as to say that Russia and the US are in a state of 'hot war' in his remarks on 5 April 2023. See ['Рябков заявил, что Россия и США находятся в фазе горячего конфликта'](#), ТАСС, 5 April 2023, tass.ru.

world) and was intended to be only a very important stage in the implementation of Moscow's broader plan. Its aim was not only to destroy the existing post-Cold War political and security order in Europe, but also to deal a possibly decisive blow to the current global international order, in which the US-led Western countries play a vital role.

Both the statements and actions of the most senior Russian government and military officials make it possible to try and reconstruct the original assumptions of Moscow's plan. All indications suggest that the Kremlin planned a swift military operation to seize Kyiv as well as all of the Donbas and to establish a land connection to Crimea in a short amount of time (between a few days and a few weeks); in the maximalist variant, the operation's goal was to capture the whole of eastern Ukraine situated on the left bank of the Dnieper. The democratic Ukrainian government headed by President Volodymyr Zelensky would have been overthrown and the key government figures would have been taken out or forced to flee the country. The government in Kyiv would have been replaced by a puppet cabinet made up of pro-Russian collaborators. These actions were designed to paralyse any possible resistance by the Ukrainian armed forces and other security agencies and to intimidate the Ukrainian population. Russia would thus have taken political control over the whole of Ukraine (the possible extent of the military occupation of the country is unclear, it could have excluded the westernmost oblasts) while suppressing any signs of local resistance with terror. Moscow probably anticipated limited Western sanctions, but assumed that the shock resulting from the speed and effectiveness of its actions and the collapse of Ukrainian resistance would have deterred the West from attempting any interference, which would have eventually led to the West's *de facto* acceptance of the new status quo.

The effective liquidation of Ukraine as an independent state would only have been the starting point for Russia's talks with the US and NATO countries, which would now be from a position of strength. The demands Moscow presented in December 2021 as draft security agreements would

have formed the basis for these negotiations.⁵ The Kremlin would have likely escalated its claims along the way, which would have served the traditional strategic objectives of Putinist Russia's policy in Europe. These include: (1) the West's recognition of the so-called post-Soviet area (with the temporary exclusion of the Baltic states) as the Russian sphere of influence, thus blocking the possibility of the future integration of Eastern European and South Caucasus countries into the European and Euro-Atlantic structures; (2) the establishment of a kind of security buffer zone in Central Europe (and possibly also in Northern Europe) through the imposition of far-reaching limitations on the level of armaments and military activity in the countries of this region as well as the institution of a ban on the deployment of allied forces there (from other NATO countries); (3) the reduction of the US presence in Europe to a minimum, including in particular the withdrawal of US forces (primarily their nuclear capabilities) from the region and the dismantling of the emerging integrated (US-NATO) missile defence system in Europe.⁶

To reinforce its case, Russia would have probably carried out several displays of force (such as large-scale military exercises to practise 'aggressive' scenarios on its western borders) and provocations (such as incidents involving warplanes, warships and possibly missile forces) in an attempt to create a credible perception of its readiness for a military confrontation with NATO. In doing so, Moscow would have hoped this attitude would intimidate some EU/NATO member states and cause deeper political divisions over how to properly respond to these moves. If these divisions were to actually emerge, Russia would have likely tested the response of the allies by engaging in so-called hybrid warfare (subversion operations, cyberattacks, economic pressure, armed provocations), which would have primarily targeted the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) and possibly Poland. The weaker the response of the allies, the more aggressive Russian actions would have become.

⁵ For more detail, see M. Menkiszak, 'Russia's blackmail of the West', OSW, 20 December 2021, osw.waw.pl.

⁶ For more detail, see *idem*, *A strategic continuation...*, *op. cit.*

In an extreme scenario, if the Kremlin became convinced that there was paralysis in decision-making within NATO and perhaps even in the United States on the issue of responding decisively to Russia's aggressive policies, Moscow could have taken the risk of launching a limited war to quickly seize parts of the territories of one or more of the aforementioned countries, treating this as a bargaining chip to extract political concessions (so-called 'Finlandisation' and, subsequently, acceptance of Russia's growing presence and rising influence). If this also failed to draw an immediate military response from the US and NATO either, the alliance could have effectively (if not formally) broken up and the European Union could have been severely weakened. At the same time, Russia would have pushed for the creation of a new European security architecture through the establishment of political institutions with Russia's participation, which would have given it real veto power over key security decisions. Then it would have taken advantage of this development to gradually limit the sovereignty of the Central and Eastern European countries and to exert increasing influence on them. In fact, all of Europe would have become a target of heightened Russian penetration – first economically and then politically. As a consequence, forces willing to cooperate with Russia would have been likely to take power in some countries. This would have resulted in the destruction of the post-Cold War order in Europe.

Russia's success in Ukraine would have also seriously affected other regions. In the so-called post-Soviet area,⁷ it would have heightened fears that the Russian Federation could move on to carry out Ukraine-like scenarios with respect to other countries, particularly Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. It is highly likely that Moscow would have first attempted to take political control of Moldova through

⁷ In the author's opinion, the term 'post-Soviet area / former Soviet states' has lost its defining and explanatory value. These states have almost nothing in common anymore, they do not form any common region or geopolitical area. The only justification for considering them collectively is their place on the Russian mental map, their treatment by the Kremlin and Russian elites as an object of Russian strategy.

a combination of political subversion, energy pressure and military blackmail. Most of the other post-Soviet states, in view of their limited ability to secure external security guarantees, would have certainly complied with at least some of the Kremlin's demands so as not to irritate it. This would have resulted in their closer cooperation with Russia while ties with the US and the EU would have been curtailed (relations with China and Turkey could have intensified).

More than anything, however, the materialisation of this scenario would have shattered the image of the US as a power capable of and willing to defend its allies and partners. This would have resulted in serious adverse consequences for the global network of US alliances and partnerships and prompted many countries to distance themselves from Washington and seek alternative ways of ensuring their security. This would have also applied to countries outside the Western alliance system. The entire process would have probably escalated into a new regional arms race and could have resulted in the unchecked proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear weapons. This is because the weaker countries would have looked to this type of arsenal as the most effective means of defence.

In another consequence, the security situation in many regions, including the Middle East, East Asia and South Asia, would have been destabilised. Russia's example would have demonstrated to authoritarian countries with growing ambitions, such as China, that radically violent methods are effective and that the US and the Western structures had been weakened. This would have created a very strong incentive to emulate Russian policy and to coercive measures, including military force, in the pursuit of their objectives. In practical terms, an escalation of the conflict in the South China Sea would have become highly likely under such circumstances, which could include a Chinese military assault on Taiwan in the extreme scenario. Other dictatorships that pursue aggressive policies, such as North Korea and Iran, would have probably stepped up destabilising actions in their regions as well. Furthermore, there

could have been an escalation of the Pakistan-India conflict and several other regional and local disputes.

After a Russian success in the war against Ukraine (and, *de facto*, against the West), the whole world would have been much less secure while the system of international law would have been severely eroded. The fact that Russia has failed to execute this scenario so far does not mean, however, that the threat has passed.

II. TURNING DEFEAT INTO SUCCESS: RUSSIA'S CALCULATIONS AND TACTICS AFTER MORE THAN A YEAR OF WAR

The supposed original objectives of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, which were outlined at the beginning, have not yet been achieved. In this sense, the Russian operation has failed. Not only has Moscow failed to occupy Kyiv, but it has not even fully 'liberated' the Donbas, which was one of the main official priorities of the so-called 'special military operation'. The Kremlin underestimated the Ukrainian people's will and ability to resist, which stemmed from the Russian elite's ignorance and arrogance in its approach to the so-called post-Soviet states, resulting in wrong diagnoses. The Kremlin was also wrong about potential Western support for Ukraine and the West's determination to push back against Russia's policies, especially in the context of the relatively high degree of political consolidation of Western countries. This, in turn, reflects the Russian ruling group's distorted perception of the West and wishful thinking. The 'second strongest army in the world' has been waging this bloody war for more than a year, but Russia has still failed to achieve its objectives, despite resorting to extraordinary measures (the so-called 'partial mobilisation', the use of prisoners and immigrants) and suffering losses estimated at tens of thousands of deaths (several times greater than those suffered by the Soviet Union and Russia combined in all post-World War II armed conflicts). This illustrates the scale of Russia's failure.

The toughest sanctions in the history of relations between the Russian Federation and the West are another serious cost of Russia's war. While the Russian economy has avoided collapse, the sanctions have caused an economic crisis. Many cooperative ties with the West have been severed – it has cut Russia off from the most advanced technologies and financial markets and also severely curtailed access to the key market for Russia's energy resources, the backbone of its economy. Contrary to Russian interests, Ukraine and Moldova have strengthened their ties

with the West (for example, both countries have been formally recognised as candidates for EU membership), while the defence capabilities of European countries have been gradually increasing. Moreover, the US has significantly expanded its military presence in Europe (including on NATO's eastern flank) and transatlantic cooperation has deepened. Finland has joined NATO while Sweden is nearing accession, which changes the geostrategic situation in Europe to Moscow's disadvantage. Furthermore, global alliances and agreements which involve the US and other Western countries (AUKUS, cooperation with Japan and South Korea) are becoming stronger. All of this means that the decisions of Putin and his closest associates have undone decades of efforts by Russia's diplomacy, secret services and companies.

Despite this, there is no indication that the Kremlin has abandoned its maximalist goals with regard to Ukraine and the West. It merely appears to have come to the conclusion that achieving these goals will take longer, come at a much higher cost and necessitate the use of more brutal tools.⁸ The specific nature of the Russian system of power, with its centralisation and personalisation, coupled with the traditional Russian political and strategic culture, which values strong and determined leadership, have made Putin hostage to the war in Ukraine and the Russian people have in turn become his hostages. Indeed, a decisive defeat of the Russian Federation in this conflict will be a powerful blow to the image of the Putin regime, which will foster its internal destabilisation and could ultimately even lead to its downfall.

The scenario of Russia's defeat can be considered in several variants. In the most basic one, Russian forces would be unable to capture (or maintain their occupation of) the entire Donbas within the administrative boundaries of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and the other formally

⁸ A number of remarks made by Putin and other Russian government officials attest to this, including the Russian President's address from February 2023. See M. Domańska, I. Wiśniewska, W. Rodkiewicz, 'Putin's address: an attempt to unite Russians and blackmail the West', OSW, 21 February 2023, osw.waw.pl.

(illegally) annexed oblasts of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson. The medium scenario would see the Ukrainian forces liberate the areas occupied by Russian forces after 24 February 2022. Finally, the maximum scenario envisages the full restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity, which would also include the liberation of parts of the Donbas and Crimea that were seized in 2014.

However, Russian declarations and actions suggest that the Kremlin still hopes for a favourable shift in the conflict. This is based on the deeply ingrained beliefs shared by members of the Russian elite about the nature of Western countries as well as on the narrow ruling group's perception of the current situation and the short- and medium-term forecast of its evolution. As for the former premise, Moscow continues to perceive the West (which is internally heterogeneous) as relatively weak and plagued by internal crises and divisions (political, economic, social and ideological), with low public resilience especially in view of long-term sacrifices (the need to save or temporarily reduce living standards), as risk-averse and fearful of conflict escalation, vulnerable to intimidation and corruption, and as seeking stability at the cost of compromises and concessions. These Russian stereotypes apply in particular to most Western European countries, least of all to the US, the UK, the Baltic states and Poland.

The Kremlin seems to believe that the level (more qualitative than quantitative) of Western, especially American, military support to Ukraine will determine the outcome of the war. The next major factor, in the political and economic spheres, will be the political will in Washington (and to a lesser extent in the EU and its key member states) to provide systematic and sustained assistance to Ukraine. Therefore, **Moscow's immediate (short-term) objective** is to deter and discourage the West from providing support to Ukraine sufficient to allow the Ukrainian counter-offensive to succeed, resulting in the materialisation of any of the aforementioned scenarios of Russian defeat.

The Kremlin's **medium-term objective** is to get the European Union and then also the US to revise their existing policies towards Ukraine so that they put pressure on Kyiv to accept Russian conditions for a ceasefire, and ideally to agree to a partial settlement of the conflict. According to information and leaks about Russian demands, these conditions would primarily include Kyiv's and the West's at least *de facto*, but ideally formal, acceptance of the new territorial status quo: the annexation of not only Crimea, but also of the four Ukrainian oblasts of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson. Russia would also like to see a halt to the flow of weapons to Ukraine and, preferably, Ukraine's official renunciation of its NATO membership aspirations, the West's commitment to curtail military cooperation with Ukraine as well as the partial demilitarisation of Ukraine: limits on the size of its armed forces and stocks of individual categories of weapons as well as a ban on the possession of certain types of weapons. In turn, Russia would demand that the West lift or at least significantly reduce the sanctions it has imposed, primarily sectoral ones.⁹ The weaker the determination to resist on the part of the West and Ukraine, the further the Russian claims would reach. At the same time, it would be a mistake to think that Moscow would treat its demands as final. In fact, the Kremlin would probably regard such a ceasefire or political settlement as a pause that would allow it to restore its capabilities, which have been depleted by the war and the sanctions, and also to prepare for a new phase of confrontation with Ukraine and the West under conditions more favourable for Russia. In the longer term, this would lead to the materialisation of the above-described scenario of the Western community's strategic failure and collapse.

Russia is trying to achieve these objectives in several ways. **Firstly**, it has deployed the tools of psychological warfare that include several types of narratives and actions. In particular, it has repeatedly resorted to threats

⁹ See RTVI's interview with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Galuzin – «Мы не потерпим существования на своих рубежах откровенно антироссийского государства». Замглавы МИД Галужин — об условиях мира на Украине и отношениях с Грузией, RTVI, 29 March 2023, rtvi.com.

of a possible far-reaching escalation of its aggression against Ukraine. Statements by senior government officials and propaganda messages have spread fear that Ukraine could use a dirty bomb (fissile material that causes radioactive contamination) and even threatened that Russia could resort to the use of tactical nuclear weapons.¹⁰ Demonstrative steps such as Putin's order to the Russian Ministry of Defence to prepare for a possible nuclear test (February 2023) and the announcement of the deployment of tactical nuclear arms in Belarus (March 2023) were intended to make these threats appear more credible.¹¹ The Kremlin is aware of the high sensitivity of Western public opinion to threats of nuclear escalation and therefore treats psychological warfare in this field as an important tool of its policy; Russia is unlikely to use these means on the battlefield and probably could only do so in the most extreme of all scenarios. Moscow is fanning fears of such radical consequences, which it threatens in response to the West increasing its military support for Ukraine, with the intention of prompting Washington and other capitals to defer political decisions on this issue.

Russia has complemented this narrative with parallel signals, especially in the autumn of 2022, that it was ready for dialogue with the US (to a lesser extent with Ukraine) on a ceasefire or peace settlement.¹² In this way, the Kremlin hoped to activate those circles in the West which wish to freeze the conflict and gradually normalise relations with Russia, for example because of their previous economic interests with the Russian Federation or various forms of dialogue with Moscow. When this failed to produce any visible effect, the Kremlin began to change

¹⁰ See A. Wilk, P. Żochowski, 'Russia threatens with a dirty bomb. 242nd day of the war', OSW, 24 October 2022; M. Menkiszak, 'Russia: the decision to escalate the war with Ukraine', OSW, 21 September 2022; K. Nieczypor, J. Rogoża, 'No concessions. Ukraine's response to Russia's annexation and nuclear blackmail', OSW, 6 October 2022, osw.waw.pl.

¹¹ M. Domańska, I. Wiśniewska, W. Rodkiewicz, 'Putin's address: an attempt to unite Russians and blackmail the West', *op. cit.*; A. Wilk, J. Ber, 'Putin threatens to deploy nuclear weapons in Belarus. Day 396 of the war', OSW, 27 March 2023, osw.waw.pl.

¹² See W. Rodkiewicz, K. Nieczypor, 'Russia and Ukraine on the prospects for peace talks', OSW, 16 November 2022, osw.waw.pl.

the narrative, declaring once again that it would conduct high-intensity military operations until its vague political goals of ‘demilitarisation’ and ‘denazification’ of Ukraine were achieved.

Moscow has also announced further decisions to bolster its military effort, including its personnel and matériel capabilities (gradually shifting the economy to a war footing and boosting arms production, increasing short- and medium-term funding for the armed forces, suggestions of tapping into further mobilisation resources, including immigrants, and formally raising the overall number of military personnel).¹³ The Kremlin wants the West (rather than Ukraine) to read this as a signal that Russia is determined and ready to wage a protracted war of attrition against the Ukrainian state. This psychological operation is designed to discourage Western countries from systematically supporting Ukraine in military and financial terms by suggesting that this attitude will fail to change Moscow’s plans and will ultimately be neutralised by the Russian war effort.

Secondly, Russia has been ramping up the brutality of its military operations in Ukraine. Attacks have not only targeted the civilian population (to exert a kind of moral pressure on the Ukrainian government), but above all Ukraine’s critical infrastructure, especially its electricity grids. In winter conditions, this was meant to gradually paralyse both the companies that are still operating (especially those that provide for the armed forces) and providers of utilities to the civilian population, including operators of district heating networks in major cities. From Moscow’s point of view, the optimal scenario (which did not occur) was

¹³ For example, in December 2022, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu announced plans to increase the size of the armed forces by around 150,000 to 1.15 million in 2023 and then to 1.5 million in the following years. An estimated 50,000 prisoners have been persuaded (or forced) to fight on the Ukrainian front, a process that has been mainly handled by the Wagner Group. Official expenditure on domestic security and national defence increased in Russia’s 2023 federal budget to around one-third of total spending, compared to around one-quarter in 2022. For more detail, see I. Wiśniewska, ‘Russia’s ‘war’ budget for 2023–2025’, OSW, 12 December 2022, osw.waw.pl.

to provoke a humanitarian crisis and trigger massive waves of refugees heading mostly to the neighbouring countries (NATO and EU members), which in turn would destabilise the internal situation in those countries and create pressure to change their governments and/or their policies so that support for Ukraine would be abandoned. An additional objective is to significantly increase the cost of the immediate reconstruction of Ukraine with foreign funds (mainly from the US and the EU) and ultimately to discourage the West from continuing its efforts in this direction, viewing them as ineffective and/or increasing the resources allocated to such efforts.

Thirdly, Russia is continuing to use economic (especially energy) weapons against the West. In particular, it is maintaining a very low level of gas supply for the key European consumers (80% below the pre-invasion average daily volume) as it seeks to aggravate the energy crisis in Europe and indirectly drives up inflation in European countries. It expects this to have a negative impact on public sentiment, generate war fatigue and ultimately put political pressure on European governments to reduce their support for Ukraine and, ideally, push the government in Kyiv to end the war as soon as possible. With regard to the US, Russia is striving to achieve this effect, though on a smaller scale, by threatening to reduce oil supplies to countries that participate in the sanctions against the Russian oil sector and creating general uncertainty about the size and direction of these supplies, with the aim of driving up crude prices on world markets. Although this stance has so far failed to produce the desired results, Russia hopes that this will change over time. It initially expected that the energy crisis would cause political upheaval in Europe during the winter of 2022/2023, but it now appears that it increasingly has the next heating season in its sights.

Another tool at Russia's disposal is its potential to provoke a food crisis. Moscow has chosen not to formally tear up the so-called 'grain deal' (whose provisions include the operation of safe corridors for Ukraine's grain exports by sea) due to political calculations (the need to preserve

cooperation with Turkey and maintain a positive image among the countries of the Global South) and economic benefits (the facilitation of its own food and agricultural exports and some easing of the effects of Western sanctions on maritime transport). However, Russian military operations have still caused a decline in Ukraine's grain exports, which are globally significant.¹⁴ This has driven up global food prices and worsened instability in many poorer countries, potentially exacerbating migration pressures on EU countries from Africa and the broader Middle East, which could destabilise the internal situation in some of these countries and distract them from the war that is raging in the east of Europe. Russia hopes that these factors will further its political objectives in the medium term.

The US presidential election in November 2024 is the most important single political event that Russia has set its sights on. The Kremlin is keeping a very close eye on the mood of the US establishment and society as well as how the campaign is playing out in its preliminary stage. It hopes that the protracted war in Ukraine, the negative economic developments that are partly related to this war (rising fuel and food prices) and the mounting costs of supporting Ukraine will gradually put political pressure on the Joe Biden administration to scale back US involvement in the conflict and seek to freeze it. The best-case scenario for Russia would be the electoral victory of a proponent of these moves and major de-escalation. The US leadership role in the Western coalition that supports Ukraine and targets Russia with sanctions, a role which the Kremlin sees as crucial, would then be clearly weakened, prompting other countries to also reduce their involvement. In the most optimistic scenario for Moscow, this would create strong pressure on the government in Kyiv to accept Russian conditions for a freeze (or even formal settlement) of the conflict.

¹⁴ On the grain deal, see A. Michalski, K. Nieczytor, I. Wiśniewska, 'Grain under fire: agreement to unblock Black Sea ports', OSW, 26 July 2022, osw.waw.pl. Overall, the value of Ukrainian agricultural and food exports fell by 15.5%, but, in the case of wheat, by as much as approx. 50%. For more detail, see S. Matuszak, 'A year of war in Ukraine's foreign trade', OSW Commentary, no. 487, 8 February 2023, osw.waw.pl.

In conclusion, Russia's main objective is to convince the West that its resources, determination and resilience, and its willingness to bear the costs of the war are greater than on the Western side. It would therefore be in the West's interest to move quickly towards freezing the conflict by making concessions to Moscow, which would come at Ukraine's expense. In the minimum variant, this would involve a temporary halt to hostilities or at least a significant reduction in their intensity, giving Russia time to restore its depleted military capabilities and prepare for the next phase of the confrontation: not only against Ukraine, but also against other neighbouring countries. In the maximum variant, this would entail the legitimisation of territorial annexations (the expansion of the Russian Federation's territory), the imposition of fundamental limits on Ukraine's sovereignty and, possibly, the easing or lifting of at least some of the Western sanctions against Russia (Moscow will try to make this concession one of the key parts of a 'peace agreement'). Should this happen, at least some of the original objectives of the Russian plan would be achieved, the Putin regime would be significantly strengthened and its temptation to continue Russia's aggressive policies against the West would greatly increase. Consequently, there would be an elevated risk of the materialisation of the 'worst-case scenario' that was described in the first chapter.

To prevent this, it is necessary to formulate an adequate Western counter-strategy. The starting point, however, should be to predict those factors that will determine Moscow's ability to press on with its war against Ukraine and the Western countries.

III. STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES: THE FACTORS THAT AFFECT RUSSIA'S ABILITY TO CONTINUE THE WAR

In principle, Russia is able to continue its war effort based on its military capabilities and the capacity to replenish and restore them, but their real extent is closely related to other factors: economic, political and social stability, which are linked to economic costs, the cohesion of the ruling elite and public sentiment, respectively.

1. Military capabilities

Analysing Russia's current military capabilities and the production capacity of its defence-industrial complex is a very difficult task, which goes beyond the scope of this text that focuses on general political analysis. This challenge primarily stems from the fact that this sphere is subject to particularly high levels of confidentiality, especially in war-time conditions. The figures, whether on casualties or arms production, which appear in public in the form of assessments, are therefore highly unreliable and should be approached with caution.¹⁵ They are also part of the information war that the parties to the conflict have been waging. Several factors point to certain problems that Russia faces with regard to maintaining a satisfactory level of the restoration of its military capabilities, which have been severely depleted during its military aggression in Ukraine. These include tightened criminal liability for obstructing the implementation of defence procurement, criticism of the conduct of this process by some senior government officials, as well as isolated examples of resorting to imported weapons or technologies used for non-military purposes.

¹⁵ One example is the data reported by the International Institute for Strategic Studies and Russian independent analyst Pavel Luzin, quoted by *Financial Times*. See M. Seddon, P. Ivanova, C. Campbell, D. Clark, S. Joiner, C. Nevitt, '[How long can Russia keep fighting the war in Ukraine?](#)', *Financial Times*, 21 February 2023, ft.com.

Nevertheless, there are reports that clearly suggest a gradual switch of the Russian economy to a war footing, including through continuous (round-the-clock) production at arms factories and the prioritisation of the military and security budget. Moreover, some creative solutions in the use of weapons in the conflict,¹⁶ as well as the continuing fairly high level of the use of some advanced systems, indicate that the West has probably underestimated Russian resources and production capacity. Despite the fact that Russia's military has likely suffered steep casualties and its effectiveness is debatable, the Kremlin has so far shown no inclination to reduce the intensity of the conflict.

2. Economic stability

Despite the unprecedented scale of Western sanctions and the visible signs of crisis in some areas, the Russian economy performed significantly better than forecast in 2022.¹⁷ Several factors contributed to this.

¹⁶ There have been reports about Russia's imports of (relatively simple and cheap) combat drones from Iran, which have been used to carry out high-intensity air-strikes in Ukraine since the summer of 2022, the purchase of ammunition from North Korea, announcements of possible deliveries of some pieces of equipment from China, as well as the fitting of Western components, including those used in domestic appliances, in Russian drones and missiles. Russia has also used S-300 air defence systems in a non-standard way, as ground-to-ground missiles.

¹⁷ For more detail, see I. Wiśniewska, '[Russian economy in 2022. Adaptation and a growing budget gap](#)', OSW, 16 February 2023; *idem*, '[The economic consequences of the war: a profound crisis looming for Russia](#)', OSW, 23 March 2022, [osw.waw.pl](#).

Table 2. Russia's selected key economic indicators in 2021 and 2022¹⁸

Type of indicator	2022	2021
GDP growth (y/y)	-2.1%	4.7%
Industrial production value growth (y/y)	-0.5%	5.3%
Export value growth (y/y)	14.7%	48.2%
Import value growth (y/y)	-9%	26.8%
Oil and gas export budget revenues and their percentage increase	\$172bn (40%)	\$123bn (69%)
Inflation (December to December)	11.9%	8.5%
Budget surplus/deficit (in % of GDP)	-2.3%	0.4%

Source: Rosstat.

Firstly, Russia had a sizeable financial cushion as a result of the continuously high revenues from its raw material exports, the cornerstone of the Russian economy, in 2022 (especially in H1). This was related to the energy crisis in Europe, which Moscow actively stoked, and psychological factors. Moreover, although Russia has also been waging war against the entire Western community, its countries (especially those in the EU) have long been the leading recipients of these exports and the most important source of revenue for the Russian Federation.¹⁹ Therefore, Western countries (especially EU members) have for decades financed Russia's ability to also pursue its aggressive anti-Western policy, for example by expanding infrastructure and trade links. In this situation,

¹⁸ For more detail, see I. Wiśniewska, '[Russian economy...](#)', *op. cit.*; There are growing doubts about the reliability of a range of official Russian economic data. However, there is no possibility to verify this.

¹⁹ For example, between 2013 and 2020, twelve EU member states imported oil and petroleum products from Russia worth a total of more than €800bn. Data from: Ru-Stat, ru-stat.com. Russia's revenue from exports of energy resources to the EU decreased gradually during 2022: from an estimated peak of around €1bn per day to around €640m per day. Data from: Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA), [energyandcleanair.org](#).

it has proven very difficult to rapidly break with this model, for both objective and subjective reasons.

Secondly, the very late entry into force of major EU sanctions against Russia, notably a partial embargo on imports of Russian oil and petroleum products (5 December 2022 and 5 February 2023, respectively), was closely related to these circumstances. Moreover, due to a lack of consensus, it came with significant exemptions that resulted from the attitude of some countries (primarily Hungary), which argued that the potential damage to their economies was too high. Western oil sanctions were also accompanied by concerns about their negative impact on the global supply-and-demand balance and consequently on crude prices, which have important economic and political implications. A similar motivation was behind the late introduction of the so-called price cap on Russian oil and the *de facto* easing of some EU sanctions on its exports to third countries.²⁰

The dependence which parts of Europe have on imports of Russian natural gas meant that sanctions did not extend to this area of trade with Russia. Paradoxically, it was Moscow's 'counter-sanctions' that resulted in a gradual significant reduction in Russian gas imports and necessitated an accelerated diversification of supply sources by some EU countries. Moreover, EU's financial restrictions (including Russia's exclusion from the SWIFT interbank settlement system) did not extend to some key Russian banks, which was justified by the need to maintain a settlement mechanism with Russia to pay for the fuels it continued to supply Europe. In particular, the sanctions did not cover Gazprombank; this gave Russia the opportunity to create mechanisms to partially circumvent them. Six months passed from the start of the invasion before the embargo on Russian coal imports to the EU came into force. In turn, the lack of consensus prevented the inclusion of the Russian nuclear sector in European restrictions. Despite the gradual widening of the commercial and

²⁰ See I. Wiśniewska, 'Further restrictions on Russian oil exports', OSW, 7 February 2023, osw.waw.pl.

technological sanctions, which have reduced the trade turnover between Russia and the West, mutual trade has not been completely halted and not all Western companies have left the Russian market.²¹

Thirdly, Russia has gradually been learning to operate in the new conditions by creating mechanisms to circumvent the restrictions. A key element of this process was the official introduction of the so-called parallel imports (authorised imports of goods without the consent of the brand owners) in May 2022, and the scope of this has been systematically broadened. As a result, the value of goods supplied to the Russian Federation in this way has been increasing.²² Various channels of ‘grey’ imports have been created for this process, involving Russian companies and numerous intermediaries from countries that do not participate in Western sanctions, mainly from the post-Soviet area, East Asia and the Gulf region.

Fourthly, Russia has been diversifying its trade and economic ties, mainly towards Asia. The impressive growth of Russia’s trade turnover with individual, mainly non-Western countries (especially India, China, Turkey and Kazakhstan) has partly resulted from re-exports of goods through these countries to Russia, a process whose scale is difficult to estimate.

²¹ According to European Commission estimates, at the end of February 2023, EU sanctions against Russia covered 49% of the value of EU exports and 58% of the value of its imports from 2021. See ‘[EU sanctions against Russia explained](#)’, European Council, [consilium.europa.eu](#). In 2022, while exports from the 27 EU member states to the Russian Federation fell by 44.45% from the previous year (from €105.4bn to €58.5bn), imports (due to high raw material prices) rose by 12.15% (from €192.8bn to €216.2bn). Eurostat data per: Z. Darvas, C. Martins, C. McCaffrey, ‘[Russian foreign trade tracker](#)’, Bruegel, [bruegel.org](#). According to estimates by the US-based Yale University, Western businesses operating in the Russian market fall into three main groups: companies that have completely withdrawn from the country (about 25%), those that have reduced their operations (about 50%), and those that have not changed the nature of their presence (about 25%). See ‘[Yale CELI List of Companies Leaving and Staying in Russia](#)’, Yale School of Management, Chief Executive Leadership Institute, [yalerussianbusinessretreat.com](#).

²² According to estimates from the Russian government, goods with a total weight of 2.4 million tonnes and a value of more than \$20bn were imported in this way by the end of 2022. See [Платежный баланс Российской Федерации, по. 4 \(13\), Q4 2022, Банк России](#), 26 January 2023, [cbr.ru](#).

Some Western countries (especially the US) have held one-on-one political talks with the countries that participate in these mechanisms and have applied economic pressure, but these discussions are yet to produce tangible, significant consequences.²³

Fifthly, some of the Russian government and central bank's emergency measures, especially those that were taken during the initial phase of the invasion of Ukraine, have helped to maintain the stability of the Russian banking system and mitigate the severity of Western sanctions for Russian citizens. In particular, these include drastic restrictions on foreign exchange trading and the temporary suspension of stock exchange listings, as well as a rather restrained attitude towards Western companies which have a presence on the Russian market (incentives to stay there or to return in the future).

3. Political and social stability

Although the radical decision to launch the full-scale military invasion of Ukraine must have been prepared and taken months in advance, there are many indications that only a narrow circle of members of Russia's top political and military leadership were privy to this process. For the vast majority of members of the wider elite (not to mention the Russian public), it seems that what happened came as an unpleasant surprise. In retrospect, it is clear that the Kremlin had taken a number of preparatory measures: first of all, it had tightened the already draconian repressive legislation and broken up or neutralised the remaining structures of civil society and political opposition in Russia, including the last independent media organisations.²⁴

²³ For example, Russian exports to India increased by 400% in 2022, to Turkey by 120% and to China by 49%. In turn, Russian imports from Turkey increased by 80%, from China by 17%. Apparently, under US pressure, a number of banks from Turkey and Kazakhstan have stopped processing Russian MIR payment cards and, as a consequence of an EU decision in March 2023, Turkey has largely ceased re-exporting Western goods that are subject to sanctions.

²⁴ For more detail, see M. Domańska, 'Russia 2021: Consolidation of a dictatorship', OSW Commentary, no. 419, 8 December 2021; M. Domańska, K. Chawryło, 'War dictatorship: power and society in Russia', OSW Commentary, no. 433, 22 March 2022, osw.waw.pl.

Interestingly, the borders remained essentially open while this crack-down was underway. Independent Russian activists were generally not prevented from leaving Russia, even when the invasion had already begun, and when the so-called partial mobilisation was announced in late September 2022, the government in fact allowed tens of thousands of (mostly young) men to flee the country. It is estimated that a total of around 500,000 citizens left Russia permanently or for a longer time due to broadly defined political reasons in 2022. Although this had some negative socio-economic consequences, it was a stabilising factor from the point of view of the Kremlin's interests. This was because the ranks of people leaving the country included large numbers of those who were 'politically unreliable', which objectively reduced the potential for any protest movements. Moreover, the few demonstrations that accompanied the mobilisation made it clear to the Kremlin that it did not have to fear public resistance to its aggressive external policy.²⁵

Opinion polls in countries with totalitarian features, such as present-day Russia, cannot be a tool for analysing public sentiment. Therefore, the fact of continued, and even slightly growing, support for the government and its 'special military operation' in Ukraine (on average, about three-quarters of Russians support it in polls) does not mean that the Russian public actually holds these views.²⁶ At the same time, there is no doubt that even the claimed annexation of four Ukrainian oblasts that was announced in late September 2022 (intended as a substitute

In addition to Putin, it appears that those involved in the preparation of the invasion included Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, Secretary of Russia's Security Council Nikolai Patrushev and FSB head Aleksandr Bortnikov. By contrast, the earlier attitude and subsequent reactions of the heads of the foreign ministry and the economic ministries suggested that they had not been told about the preparations for this operation. For more detail, see M. Domańska, 'Putin's neo-totalitarian project: the current political situation in Russia', *OSW Commentary*, no. 489, 17 February 2023, osw.waw.pl.

²⁵ For more detail, see K. Chawryło, I. Wiśniewska, 'Mobilisation in Russia: society's reactions and the economic consequences', *OSW Commentary*, no. 486, 20 January 2023, osw.waw.pl.

²⁶ For more detail, see M. Domańska, 'Putin's neo-totalitarian project: the current political situation in Russia', *op. cit.*

for the non-success of the Russian military operation) did not generate any public euphoria. In contrast, the annexation of Crimea in the spring of 2014 was accompanied by this sentiment, although its positive political effect for the Kremlin lasted only a few years.

Some problems with the management of public sentiment can also be seen in the inconsistencies of the Kremlin's official propaganda narrative. On the one hand, it is trying to reassure the public that despite the 'operation', Russia is functioning in a fairly normal way, and even getting better. On the other hand, it is seeking to mobilise society to defend the country against alleged Western aggression, which is compared to the USSR's fight against Nazi Germany during the Second World War (or Great Patriotic War as it is called in Russia) of 1941–1945.

However, the key condition for political stability in Russia is not the mood of the popular masses, but the views and attitudes of the political and business elite. In this respect, too, the Kremlin has little cause for concern as yet. Neither the shock of the invasion nor the subsequent defeats on the Ukrainian front in 2022 (in spring and autumn) opened up any apparent major rifts within the Russian establishment. While only a minority of officials, big businessmen and artists have demonstrated political loyalty and made pro-war gestures, voices of doubt (not to mention active opposition to the war) are even more scarce in these circles.²⁷ There has been public tension and disputes between members of the broadly defined security apparatus over responsibility for the military defeats and limited successes (the most high-profile example is the open criticism of the military leadership by Yevgeny Prigozhin, the head of Wagner Group, a so-called private military company), while the military leadership has been reshuffled on several occasions. However, these frictions do not relate to strategic policy goals, but only tactics and how to implement the policy effectively.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

It appears that this state of affairs has two main sources. The first one is the persistent (and actually heightened in wartime circumstances) fear of the consequences for personal security in the event that an opposition stance towards the Kremlin is revealed. Ordinary citizens face a whole array of repressions resulting from draconian legislation and its instrumentalisation (deprivation of work, expulsions from university, fines, arrests and even long-term imprisonments). However, disloyal members of the political and business elite can expect not only to be deprived of their jobs, positions, financial benefits and a large part of their property and assets – in extreme cases, they or their loved ones may be killed. Nonetheless, a change in the current situation is unlikely as long as this fear is greater than the frustration at the losses they have suffered personally and collectively, and as long as the risk of taking active steps against Putin and his acolytes is subjectively assessed as too high. Indeed, the latter are obsessed with their security, avoid potentially risky activities (including by limiting direct contacts) and likely try to monitor any horizontal contacts of elite members.

The other important source of this status quo is the persistent belief (which is difficult to assess and quantify) which at least a part of the elite has in the prospects of Russia's future 'victory' in the confrontation with Ukraine and the West, as projected by official propaganda. The Kremlin may succeed in sustaining this belief as long as the following factors remain in place: the perception that Ukraine's capacity to resist and especially the West's willingness to support Ukraine over the long term are diminishing; the conviction that the crisis of the Western community and its individual member states is deepening; the prevalence of Russian stereotypes about these countries remains (especially in relation to Western Europe), i.e. that they are not very resilient, are risk-averse and prone to intimidation and corruption. The perpetuation of this belief in a future victory will favour the survival of the regime.

IV. THE WEST'S OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGY: THE FIVE D's

The aggressive policies of Putin's Russia pose a direct and serious threat to the security of the Euro-Atlantic area, as well as a challenge to global security. For Ukraine, most countries of Central, Eastern and Northern Europe, especially those that border the Russian Federation (but also those in the South Caucasus and Central Asia), this challenge is existential as it affects their independence and territorial integrity, and even their very existence. For the other Western countries, in turn, the danger comes from the negative consequences of Russia's ongoing aggressive policies. This includes the potential weakening or disintegration of the key political, economic and security structures (especially NATO and the EU) and efforts to destabilise their internal situation, including through political and economic subversion, acts of sabotage, cyber-attacks and other hostile actions. In the global dimension, Russia's policy means an increased risk of regional crises and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the continued threat of energy and food crises and serious disruptions to international trade, as well as a further erosion of international law and the basic principles of coexistence between states. A world where countries that consider themselves great powers and claim spheres of influence to limit the sovereignty of others use military force to redraw borders and overthrow democratic governments will be less secure for the vast majority of countries.

The source of the aforementioned threats is the current Russian regime itself – its dictatorial, neo-totalitarian nature, the composition of its narrow ruling group and the perception of reality by its members, the political goals they define and the methods they choose to achieve these goals. These threats will remain as long as this regime exists and power is held by Vladimir Putin, the main instigator of the war against Ukraine and the West, and by his closest associates who share his views, who have been actively involved in the planning and management of

the war, and who are jointly responsible for large-scale war crimes and acts of state terrorism.

The Western community is, on the one hand, the main object of Russia's aggressive policies and, on the other, the organiser of resistance against it. For this reason, the main objective of the policy of the West and other countries that share its values and desire to defend freedom should not only be to stop the ongoing Russian aggression and minimise the resulting damage. It is no less important to create the conditions for ousting the members of Putin's regime from power and for ushering in a profound systemic change in the Russian Federation, which would provide hope for a reversal in its external policy (see below). Of course, such a process will not directly result from efforts by Western countries, since they do not have the instruments to carry it out. We can only consider a range of political, economic and information measures that will shape favourable circumstances for domestic Russian actors (opposition activists, but above all members of the wider elite) to institute a change of this kind themselves. Achieving this goal will be very difficult, involve a number of serious risks and incur significant costs. However, the alternative to this scenario – the survival of the regime, the continuation and likely escalation of its aggressive policies – will be even worse for the security of the West and, more broadly, of the international community.

In order to maximise the chances of achieving these goals, the West's strategy should be pursued with two time frames in mind: the short term (up to a year or more) and the long term (from several years to as much as a few decades).

In the short term, the main thrust of Western policy should be to concentrate and maximise political, economic and military efforts, which can be called **a surge of pressure**, with the aim of increasing the likelihood of a Ukrainian military and political success in the ongoing defensive war. This is because only a decisive Ukrainian victory, meaning

the liberation of the vast majority – and ultimately all – of the currently occupied territories of Ukraine (first of all those that Russian forces seized after 24 February 2022), can have a profound political and psychological effect in Russia itself.

In the long term, the West, recognising the systemic nature of its conflict with Russia, should be prepared for a **gruelling and protracted confrontation**, especially if the above-mentioned strategy of a surge of pressure does not lead to a breakthrough. In that case, it will be increasingly important to use instruments of economic pressure, first of all sanctions and measures aimed at gradually increasing the international isolation of the Putin regime. However, it will be necessary to deepen consolidation and boost the capabilities and resilience of the West itself. The scale and horizon of this policy should be reminiscent of the Cold War era (especially its initial period that involved the doctrine of containment), while keeping in mind that the current conflict is unfolding under different conditions.

1. Denying Russia the chance of victory

In addition to the fear of repression, a key factor in legitimising the Putin regime and ensuring that the wider elite maintains its political loyalty to the Kremlin is the creation of hope that a future victory is attainable, even if distant and earned at the cost of many casualties and sacrifices. The members of this elite can be deprived of any hope of Russia's success in the conflict if Ukraine inflicts a resounding defeat on the Russian forces, humiliates Putin and his associates, and demonstrates their ineffectiveness and impotence. Only then, in addition to the mounting costs of isolation and sanctions, can strong incentives be created to trigger conflicts within the Russian elite. Even if this does not immediately lead to a political upheaval because of the Kremlin's response with domestic terror, it will weaken a regime which is gripped by growing paranoia and focused on real and alleged internal threats, fostering its gradual erosion and loss of control over time.

On the risks of regime change in Russia

Some arguments in the public debate suggest that such a collapse or change of the regime in Russia as a desired situation is too risky, because it raises the prospect of either the emergence of an even more aggressive nationalist dictatorship or the collapse of state structures, chaos and even the disintegration of the Russian state. This is based on partly erroneous premises. Firstly, these arguments underestimate the specific features of the Putin regime, which has developed a power vertical subordinated to its charismatic leader. Therefore, any personnel change at the top will undermine the regime's cohesion and effectiveness. None of the figures with leadership aspirations will be able to secure the same level of effective control as Putin. Each of them will also face resistance from internal rivals, who will balance and diminish their influence. Russia's ability to effectively pursue its aggressive policies will therefore decline in the event of such reshuffles in the top ranks. Secondly, the clear bankruptcy of the current policy course, its ineffectiveness and rising costs increase the likelihood that a personnel and institutional change will result in the rise of proponents of an alternative approach, one that is more pragmatic and seeks a de-escalation of the conflict with the West. Thirdly, there are some underestimated factors that impede Russia's break-up, including the regions' economic dependence on support from the centre and horizontal ties, the weakness of local elites and the absence of strong separatist movements, even if Moscow's 'neo-colonial' policies are resented. These and many other aspects make Russia's break-up much less likely than its de-imperialisation, decentralisation and the restoration of its federal character, which will depend on the extent to which the federal centre is weakened and the scale of change within it. Fourthly, the main problem for the West is not Russia's potential instability, but its excessive current stability. Indeed, the government's suppression of the extra-systemic domestic opposition and

the destruction of the last independent institutions (from the Kremlin's point of view, this destruction increased political stability), made it possible for Putin to take the decision to invade Ukraine and escalate the conflict with the West. Therefore, only the absence of such stability can change this situation.²⁸

To ensure a convincing victory for Ukraine, the Western community should significantly increase its already serious military, financial-economic and political efforts. Priority should be given to **removing the existing restrictions on the types of weapons that are being transferred to Ukraine** and to providing it with more and better quality weaponry, especially air defence systems, artillery, armoured weapons and air power. This would enable it to improve the effectiveness of its defence, especially against air attacks, and also to carry out effective counter-offensive operations; optimally, the war's effects would shift deep into Russian territory. This requires a significant increase in the production capacity of the Western defence-industrial sector and/or the procurement of weapons and munitions. These efforts should be supported by national and collective funding schemes.

One way to facilitate the creation or reconstitution of units of the Armed Forces of Ukraine that participate in combat operations, as well as to accelerate their adaptation to the use of advanced military equipment, would be to develop **legal and organisational mechanisms at the level of individual NATO and EU countries to facilitate the enlistment in Ukrainian military service** of veterans and trained specialists who remain in reserve. This mainly involves support (through NGOs) for the recruitment of Ukrainian citizens. As for citizens of other (mainly Western) countries who decide to join international volunteer formations in Ukraine, this would be facilitated by the decriminalisation of such activities where they are currently treated as illegal.

²⁸ For more on this subject, see M. Domańska, 'The fetish of Russia's stability: an intelligent weapon against the West', New Eastern Europe, 24 March 2023, [neweurope.eu](https://www.neweurope.eu).

Efforts should be made to remove the stark asymmetry of fighting taking place only on the (internationally recognised) Ukrainian territory, so that the horrors of war affect Russian society more directly and tangibly (not just through mobilisation and sanctions-induced market shortages), dampen the public mood and depress the morale of the Russian Armed Forces and other security structures. However, this runs the risk that such an expansion of the battleground will help Russian state propaganda to mobilise society in support of the war. Therefore, it is advisable to apply pressure selectively and launch **pinpoint strikes on Russian territory** (for example, retaliatory attacks on military facilities and critical infrastructure), but avoiding crossing the internationally recognised borders of the Russian Federation and occupying parts of its territory (of course, this does not apply to the liberation of the illegally annexed Ukrainian territories, which action should be supported).

The issue of Crimea

Concerns are sometimes raised about the consequences of increased Western military support for Ukraine, which relate primarily to the scenario that sees the Ukrainian forces recapture the Crimean Peninsula. Although such a Ukrainian success, even with greater Western assistance, remains unlikely, it is worth considering its positive and negative implications. The former include a much higher threat to the survival of the Putin regime due to the significant political and symbolic dimension of such a reverse. On the other hand, we need to be aware of the possibility of a serious escalation of the conflict. There is some risk that the Kremlin could resort to the use of tactical nuclear weapons. However, this is most likely to happen only if it determines that there is an imminent threat of regime collapse. Nevertheless, even the materialisation of this extreme scenario will not cause the Ukrainian side to abandon its resistance, while the political and economic damage to Russia resulting from the use of such weapons will be very high.

Therefore, a question to consider is whether Ukraine could exercise self-restraint by temporarily deciding against the liberation of the whole of Crimea by military means (except for some part that would serve as a political symbol).

Other components of support should include: **increasing immediate technical assistance** to repair the damage to Ukraine's critical infrastructure, **expanding the existing channels for the regular supply of fuel and energy carriers, and providing guarantees of financial assistance over a longer time period (of at least several years)**. This will convince Russia that its terrorist methods will fail to cause the Ukrainian state to collapse and that Western support will continue, meaning that its war of attrition has no chance of success. In practice, it would be very important to create legal and economic mechanisms to allocate frozen Russian assets (both state-owned and those that belong to big business which supports the Kremlin) to these purposes.

An important element in support of these efforts is proper **strategic communication from the West directed at Russia**. First of all, it is necessary to avoid statements that imply a lack of confidence in the persistence and effectiveness of Ukraine's resistance and Western support, serious concern about Russia's capabilities and its willingness to escalate, as well as the potential consequences of this escalation. The West should also avoid actions that encourage self-restraint, including in the sphere of military security. Declarations of unwillingness to cause any serious damage to Russia, attempts to draw red lines for Western (rather than Russian) policy and suggestions of timelines for ending or freezing the conflict are very harmful from the political and psychological point of view. Indeed, they reinforce the Kremlin's (and the wider Russian elite's) belief that the West is not determined enough to withstand the current confrontation, especially in the long term, so Russia should 'wait it out' in order to ultimately prevail. This perpetuates confidence in the future effectiveness of Russia's ongoing aggressive policies and

discourages the Kremlin from a re-examination. It also increases the Kremlin's temptation escalate, boosts its image in the eyes of the domestic elite and thus cements the elite's cohesion.

Table 3. Examples of how selected Western messages are interpreted in Russia

Western message	Reception in Russia
We are not at war with Russia.	We fear a military confrontation with (powerful) Russia.
We are not threatening Russia's security.	We do not have sufficient capabilities or political will to threaten Russia.
We cannot allow the conflict to escalate.	We fear escalation by Russia and are ready to make concessions.
We cannot allow World War III to break out.	We fear Russia's nuclear capability and are ready to make concessions.
There is no alternative to a diplomatic/political solution to the conflict.	We feel weak, have no capacity and/or political will for confrontation and we are ready to make far-reaching concessions.
You cannot back Russia/Putin up against the wall.	We fear escalation by Russia and are ready to make concessions.
Putin needs an off-ramp.	The West is tired of confrontation and needs an excuse to make concessions.
We want to create conditions for (peace) talks between Ukraine and Russia.	We are tired of the conflict, we do not want to extend support for Ukraine indefinitely and we are seeking to freeze the conflict at the price of Ukrainian concessions.
We have to take into account the rising costs of sanctions.	The costs of sanctions are too high for us and we are looking for an excuse to reduce them.
The unity of the West is paramount. We must take into account the positions of some of our allies/partners.	We are unable to agree on a common position. We are looking for an excuse to ease the pressure on Russia.

Source: author's own compilation.

From the point of view of Russian political culture, proper, meaning effective, Western strategic communication should consist of the reverse of these messages. It is therefore necessary to emphasise calm resolve, a lack of hesitation and concern, the inevitability of the execution of earlier announcements, negative instruments and the resulting damage to Russia, while ignoring Russian threats. Such assumptions should underpin Western communication towards Moscow.

2. Delegitimisation of the Putin regime

It is important to continue active diplomacy and efforts to maximise Russia's political isolation. We should remember that any high-level dialogue with Moscow, regardless of its declared intentions and content, is used by the Kremlin and Russian state propaganda to enhance Putin's prestige and to convince Russian elites and society that it is not possible to isolate the country, that the West still fears it and is ready to make concessions in order to de-escalate a conflict it is already tired of. Consequently, the inclination to continue Russia's aggressive policies is growing, while the belief in the effectiveness of these policies over the long run is strengthening.

It is therefore important for Western countries to set their own standards and **refrain from political dialogue with Russia at the highest level**. Vladimir Putin should become a political pariah, ideally not only for the West. It should become a permanent practice that no bilateral meetings are held with him and that Western leaders refuse to attend multilateral meetings in which he is scheduled to participate. It is also not advisable to engage in remote dialogue (including by telephone) with him or with his closest associates. Any contacts should take place at lower (sub-ministerial) levels, be primarily technical and/or serve only to convey messages, including warnings.

It is also crucial to take real steps towards the establishment of a **special international tribunal to prosecute Russian war crimes in Ukraine**

and indict senior members of the Russian civilian and military leadership. This will be facilitated by the extensive evidence that has been gathered by the investigative bodies of Ukraine, as well as those of various other countries where investigations into the matter are ongoing. At the same time, it is clear that the personal appearance of the defendants before any such tribunal will become practically possible only after Russia has lost the war and the Putin regime has collapsed. The holding of such a public trial would be fundamental to the deputinisation of the Russian Federation – the eradication of the political and psychological remnants of the ousted neo-totalitarian regime. At this stage, however, even preliminary actions (the announcement of investigations, the creation of relevant bodies and the issuance of arrest warrants by national and international prosecutorial and judicial bodies) are adding to the political and psychological pressure by publicly stigmatising the Putin regime, increasing its isolation and consequently fostering its delegitimisation. In this context, the decision of the Hague-based International Criminal Court to issue an arrest warrant for Vladimir Putin and others on charges of war crimes in Ukraine is an example of a step in the desired direction. Indeed, it represents a serious image blow to the Kremlin, significantly reduces its room for manoeuvre and discourages Western leaders from engaging with it.²⁹

Support for Russian civil society and various expressions of opposition to the Kremlin and its aggressive policies should also be part of efforts to delegitimise the Putin regime. Given that repressions have

²⁹ The International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague on 17 March announced a decision that was taken by its chamber on 22 February 2023 to issue an arrest warrant for Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova (commissioner for children's rights) on charges of overseeing directing the commission of war crimes in Ukraine involving the forced deportation of thousands of Ukrainian children to Russia. In practice, this means that Putin should be arrested and handed over to the court if he arrives on the territory of any of the 60 countries that have supported the establishment of the ICC and recognised its jurisdiction by ratifying the Rome Statute. Although this scenario seems unlikely to materialise in the near future, this step hinders Putin's freedom of external activity and makes him an even more politically 'toxic' figure.

forced Russian opposition activity to move abroad, mainly to Western countries, emphasis should be placed on helping to develop independent initiatives, including political debate and self-organisation, to support free media organisations and to circumvent blockages in the flow of information to and from Russia, especially regarding the true picture of the war and the nature of the Putin regime. It is important that the Kremlin's opponents are able to develop an alternative programme that envisages the deputinisation, de-imperialisation and decentralisation of the Russian Federation, as well as the formation of new elites which could play a role in the formulation of Russia's new policy under the favourable circumstances of a political upheaval.

In order to potentially weaken the Putin regime, the West could (more or less formally) **offer benefits to individual members of the political and business elite** (such as future exclusion from sanctions lists, the unfreezing of their assets, significant financial rewards and possible reductions in penalties) in exchange for valuable information, the commitment of significant financial resources and, in particular, active efforts to remove from power and/or bring to justice leading figures of the Putin regime, especially those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity. This specific 'crown witness' status could be used both in the lead-up to and following regime change. The awareness of the existence of this status would increase the obsessive sense of insecurity within the Russian power structures and could help to weaken them.

3. Decoupling Russia from the West and economic pressure

In the economic sphere, it is crucial to quickly and completely decouple from dependence on economic cooperation with Russia, especially in the area of imports of energy and other strategic resources (such as rare earth metals, noble gases, etc.). This process is already underway, but it must be completed quickly and made irreversible. This raises the need for serious investment in diversifying the sources and import routes

for raw materials, including energy carriers, as well as the sources of energy supplies. It will also be particularly important to further increase support for the development of energy conservation technologies, RES and nuclear power. This involves the need to change the economic model (especially in industry) in the EU and other Western countries to one that is less energy-intensive and more technologically advanced, and to create or expand competitive advantages in this area. In view of the high costs of this endeavour, measures taken by individual countries should be supported by existing and new collective funds, especially EU funds. It is therefore advisable to support both the transfer of the already established recovery funds for this purpose and the calls to set up a special facility of this type to finance innovation and diversification projects. The creation/expansion of joint procurement platforms, for example for natural gas, would be an important tool for reducing the costs of obtaining energy. This would also prevent the risk of competition for resources between individual countries.

Western policy should seek not only **to maintain but also to step up pressure on Russia, mainly through sanctions mechanisms** (when ever we mention restrictions against Russia, this should also apply to Belarus, as Alyaksandr Lukashenka's dictatorial regime is complicit in the aggression against Ukraine and demonstrates a lack of political independence). Indeed, the West must not allow the Russian elite to form the impression that the West is actually tired of the costs of sanctions and that it is ready, under some pretext, to gradually withdraw from them, even without concessions from Moscow.

Western sanctions to date have not led to the collapse of Russia's economy, but they have doomed the country to a protracted crisis, a gradual demodernisation, deteriorating living standards and a decline in its international standing. However, long-term action is required to achieve the desired effect. The restrictions that have been imposed so far will not bring about the desired turnaround in Russia in the short term. Nonetheless, there is still ample room to increase them. The Russian economic

model is based largely on the exports of raw materials, especially fuels (primarily oil and petroleum products, secondarily natural gas).³⁰ Therefore, it is of strategic importance to **close the previously crucial European market to Russia**. On the one hand, Russia itself has already attained this goal in part through its 'counter-sanctions'. However, it makes sense to speed up this process by imposing an embargo on overland imports of oil, as well as imports of natural gas (including LNG). In addition, cooperation in the nuclear field should be halted and the EU should impose sanctions on this Russian sector. The situation where Western countries, against whom Russia is waging war, at the same time provide it with the financial means to fight this war is politically unacceptable and should be ended as soon as possible.

One problem is that it is becoming increasingly difficult to reach a consensus within the EU on further steps involving sanctions. Under these circumstances, it is necessary **to reform the EU's decision-making mechanisms** by expanding an opt-out rule or developing a 'consensus minus one system', which would prevent individual member states from blocking necessary action. However, if this cannot be achieved, the lesser evil would be to violate the principle of coherence and impose sanctions by a collective decision of the broadest possible coalition of the willing.³¹ While Russia can partially redirect oil and LNG exports from the European market to Asian markets, it does not have (and will not have in

³⁰ Oil and gas revenues accounted for 42% of Russia's federal budget receipts in 2022. 55% of these revenues came from crude oil exports, 18% from petroleum products and 27% from natural gas (6.5% in the form of LNG). Data from the Federal Customs Service of the Russian Federation per: statista.ru.

³¹ Examples of the effective application of such solutions include the functioning of the contact group on defence support for Ukraine (the so-called Ramstein Group), which comprises more than 50 countries, and the decision taken by the Baltic states, Poland and Finland to severely restrict the issuance of Schengen visas and the right of entry to Russian citizens. In addition, some EU countries have adopted restrictions against the Russian Federation and Belarus on an individual basis: for example, Germany has halted pipeline oil imports from Russia, while Poland introduced an embargo on Russian coal imports before the EU did and also closed several border crossings with Belarus.

the coming years)³² such a capacity for gas transported by pipeline. This redirection is already happening – in this context it is important to incentivise the solidarity of countries from the broader West, such as Japan and South Korea.

The direct financial consequences of the established **price cap on Russian oil exports** to third-country markets are hard to assess, as it is difficult to separate them from those that stem from the EU's import embargo. However, there is no doubt that Russia's losses would increase if this cap was brought down to no more than \$30 per barrel (from the current \$60). While such a step would not reduce Russian profits to zero, the margins of Russian companies, which pay taxes to the Russian federal budget, would significantly decrease. Given the current and projected situation on commodity markets, fears that this would destabilise them and drive up prices significantly should be considered as exaggerated.

Another important element of pressure would be to block Russian exporters and carriers that violate the price cap mechanism from **accessing Western insurance services**, including for the transport of raw materials to third-country markets. Since Russia has been trying to circumvent the cap through the use of non-Western freight brokers and the formation of a fleet of 'shadow tankers' (under unknown flags), it would be reasonable to tighten financial monitoring and introduce automatic extraterritorial sanctions against entities that support and implement this procedure, regardless of which jurisdiction they are subject to.

Other **financial sanctions** are also linked to the above-mentioned instruments. In particular, it is essential that Russian banks are completely cut off from Western financial markets and the SWIFT system.

³² In particular, this is shown by the difficulties in concluding contracts for the construction of the Power of Siberia-2 gas pipeline, which would connect the West Siberian gas fields (the main base for Russian exports to Europe) to China via Mongolian territory, a project that Moscow has been lobbying for in Beijing for years. See M. Bogusz, W. Rodkiewicz, 'Games between allies. Xi Jinping's visit to Moscow', *OSW Commentary*, no. 502, 24 March 2023, osw.waw.pl.

This move is crucial especially with regard to Gazprombank, which still handles payments for energy supplies and simultaneously creates channels for other Russian banks to circumvent the sanctions. The continuing **presence of some Western companies on the Russian market** is an unfavourable circumstance from the point of view of Western interests. This takes various forms: sometimes it is disguised by functioning as an intermediary of formally Russian entities that they control. So far, decisions to exit the Russian market have mainly been taken by companies themselves for reputational reasons, so it is worth considering the inclusion of a ban on Western companies doing business in Russia in the formal sanctioning mechanisms. Indeed, in the current situation, the varying attitudes of individual operators are becoming an element of unfair competition, which leads to an uneven distribution of the costs of sanctions.

While sanctions pressure on Russia will not cause it to stop its aggression any time soon, it will exacerbate internal tensions within the Russian state over time and force the Kremlin to choose between ramping up spending on its armed forces and security structures or pursuing an active social policy and compensating the losses of some of its big business in order to prevent domestic instability. There is no doubt that the Putin regime will focus on the former tasks rather than the latter in the near future. However, the longer the war continues, the greater the burden this will place on the state, the ruling elite and society. We should remember that similar factors (a growing crisis and exhaustion with spending on the arms race) forced the Soviet government to terminate the Cold War.

One of the biggest dilemmas in Western policy is **the attitude it should adopt towards those countries, mainly non-Western**, which have chosen not to join the sanctions coalitions and are instead continuing and even expanding their trade with the Russian Federation. They are also becoming intermediaries in formal or informal trade with this country, including through so-called parallel imports. This particularly

concerns India, Turkey and China, all of whom have significantly increased their imports from Russia, especially with regard to energy resources. In these cases, it seems useful to combine the promise of alternative benefits with elements of persuasion and targeted sanctions that are not aimed at these countries, but at individual companies that operate within their borders. Practice shows that this kind of policy yields tangible results (see above). It is advisable to draw certain 'red lines' for countries that continue their cooperation with Moscow. A firm and decisive response, including sanctions, is required when such collaboration directly enhances Russia's capacity to wage war. This refers to the supply of arms and all types of military equipment and technology with military applications, including from the IT sector. In particular, it is necessary to tighten restrictions against the dictatorial regimes in North Korea and Iran that are supplying (or are prepared to supply) weapons which are then used in attacks on Ukraine.

It is worth holding a debate about whether third countries' imports (and re-exports) of raw materials from Russia can be tolerated and to what extent. On the one hand, Western sanctions make it possible for these countries to extract ever greater discounts on oil imported from Russia, which is cutting into its revenues. This mechanism also applies to the processing of Russian oil in local refineries rather than in Russian ones. On the other hand, this situation sustains Russia's trade and keeps its economy afloat.

Some countries (including those in the post-Soviet area, Latin America, Africa and Asia) continue to cooperate with Russia either out of fear or in pursuit of short-term benefits. However, the US and the EU have the political and economic instruments to **entice them into cooperating** with the West and thus to reduce their engagement with Russia. Greater political and economic involvement from key Western countries and structures in these regions, especially in the Global South, may help to increase the effectiveness of pressure on Russia.

4. Deterrence and defence

At the political level, it is arguably a priority issue to embark on the actual (and ideally also formal) **dismantling of NATO's (self-imposed) restrictions** which prevent it from permanently deploying significant allied forces in the new member states. These political declarations made by the alliance and enshrined in the May 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act have lost their rationale in view of the fundamental change of circumstances in the political and security areas as well as Russia's repeated and flagrant violations of the document's provisions, including its principles. A permanent deployment (with the option of rotation, also as part of the regional presence) of well-equipped allied (particularly US) forces on NATO's eastern flank (especially in the Baltic states, Poland and Romania), as well as their regular exercises involving collective defence scenarios, would serve as a deterrent to Russia. Until the necessary infrastructure is in place, it is particularly urgent to boost the stockpiles of heavy weapons in the countries of this region. The inclusion of more countries, including Poland, in the US nuclear sharing arrangement would have an even better effect. This would send out a signal to Moscow that NATO is determined to defend the treaty area.

The West's second course of action should be to **abandon dialogue with Russia on nuclear and conventional disarmament**. Moscow has for years been violating the provisions of the key agreements in this area and in fact gradually withdrawing from them. It has also treated the growing lack of transparency in its military activity as an important tool of its policy towards the West. At the same time, the Kremlin hopes that the elites in Western countries (including the US), fearful of an uncontrolled escalation of the conflict, will strive particularly hard to avert the total collapse of the nuclear component of the arms control regime. However, the West's signals of concern over this scenario will be counter-productive and will encourage Moscow to play this card and escalate its demands. The West should refuse to talk on Russia's terms, instead taking up the challenge of a new arms race that Russia has been threatening.

Only then can it create a political and psychological situation over time in which Russia, mindful of the considerable US technological potential and its own economic limitations, will once again begin to seek an agreement at the price of real concessions.

It would also serve Western interests to step up pressure on Russia through a more assertive security posture. On the one hand, this would mean applying the principle of (ideally swift and adequate) **retaliation for Russia's hostile actions**, especially through cyberattacks and the sabotage of critical infrastructure. The far-reaching restraint of Western countries on this issue is interpreted in Moscow as a sign of weakness and anxiety, and reinforces unhelpful stereotypes about the West. However, demonstrative steps targeting Russian state systems, IT networks and critical infrastructure to showcase the capabilities of certain Western countries in offensive cyber operations would have a major psychological deterrent effect. Fears that Russia could trigger escalation mechanisms are exaggerated in this aspect.

Another form of pressure on Russia would be **horizontal escalation** by the West. This would involve stepping up Western offensive activity in those countries and regions where the Russian Armed Forces or Russian paramilitary formations (the so-called private military companies) are operating. These structures could be targeted with a variety of actions: information campaigns, cyber operations, as well as political, financial and military support for armed groups that are fighting against the forces of Russia and its allies, especially in countries such as Syria. This would heighten the challenge to Moscow and its aggressive policies, forcing it to partially disperse its attention and resources or to reduce its presence and activity in certain countries and regions.

Another key element of pressure is **action inside Western countries**. In this context, it is particularly important to rapidly **enhance the defence capabilities** of individual countries and NATO as a whole, which includes the elimination of diagnosed gaps in this area. At least informal

recognition of the reality of the state of war with Russia (understood broadly, as a multifaceted, systemic confrontation) would facilitate these developments. In practice, this would help to give political priority to defence and national security spending and to **significantly increase the production capacity of companies in the defence-industrial sector** (up to a level close to wartime requirements), including in terms of military equipment, weapons and ammunition, both for domestic, allied and Ukrainian needs. Raising the recommended minimum level of defence spending for NATO member states to at least 3% of GDP should be considered. On the one hand, this would generate an additional financial burden, but on the other hand it could provide a boost to economic development and technological progress, which would bring long-term benefits to the Western community. Agreements on the use of the European Peace Facility (EPF) to finance the coordinated production of munitions of specific calibres are a step in the right direction in this area. It is important here to ensure that any such measures have a sufficiently long time frame and appropriate scale, and include state defence procurement and allied funds. The idea is to guarantee security of investment to the private sector and also to send a strong political signal to Russia that it cannot hope to weaken the will of the West to resist its aggressive policies.

In view of the negative consequences of some moves (including sanctions against Russia), another important direction of efforts in this area would be to create **compensation schemes**, including for companies which are currently linked to the Russian market and have been hit hardest by rising energy costs. Schemes of this kind should also benefit citizens, especially those who are less well-off and have been affected by the destructive consequences of soaring fuel and food prices. The measures that have been taken so far at the national level in this regard are inadequate. Moreover, due to significant differences in the financial capabilities of individual countries, they generate tensions and encourage the use of social dumping and unfair competition. Therefore, it makes sense to consider the creation of new collective solidarity funds and appropriate algorithms for the distribution of funds.

Another important part of the Western strategy should be to **build public resilience to Russian propaganda and political subversion**, for example through intelligent and active moderation of social networks, campaigns to counter disinformation and to promote education in source criticism. Efforts by NGOs in this area should gain more support from national and international structures than before. Ensuring proper **strategic communication towards societies** of individual countries is an important task for political decision-makers, in particular raising their awareness of the scale of the threat from Russia, exposing and condemning its hostile actions, but also explaining the objectives and methods of Western policy, including the motivations for supporting Ukraine.

Finally, at the global level, we will inevitably see **changes in the model of globalisation**, international trade cooperation and the functioning of commodity flow, supply and distribution networks. The time when the choice of partners and routes was determined solely by their profitability should be considered a thing of the past. Ensuring the security of supply and sourcing in the broad sense should become a priority, while the selection of economic partners should be based to a greater extent on political and security criteria. Cooperation with countries that pursue hostile policies and harm the Western community's political and security interests should be terminated. Instead, it is advisable to tighten cooperation, especially in sensitive areas (arms, advanced technologies, strategic raw materials), within the broadly defined Western community and with non-Western partners whose interests converge with those of the West. The goal is not to achieve autarchy at the national level or even across the Western bloc, but to eliminate potentially dangerous dependencies. Indeed, the policies of countries such as Russia and China provide clear examples that the development of economic interdependence (especially asymmetrical) can become a dangerous weapon in the hands of the enemies and rivals of the Western world.

* * *

Today, Ukraine is where the fate of more than just this country, of Eastern Europe, the European continent, Russia and the so-called post-Soviet area is at stake. The ongoing war will also largely determine the future of the West as a political community based on identical or converging values, interests and institutions. It will determine the global balance of power and the rules of the international order. The future peace, security and prosperity of the Western countries (and most of the world) are critically dependent on whether they rise to the challenge and take action appropriate to the scale of the Russian threat, whether they succeed in helping the Ukrainians to achieve victory in their just defensive war, and whether they create conditions to facilitate the collapse of the Putin regime. There are grounds to believe that we will pass this test.

MAREK MENKISZAK