



Congress of People's Deputies
(shadow Parliament of Free Russia)



Kurasa Institute of Political
and Ethnic Studies of the National Academy
of Sciences of Ukraine

REGIME STABILITY IN RUSSIA

ASSESSMENT REPORT

JANUARY 2024

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This report is produced as the answer of Ukraine and Free Russia state analytical groups to the request made by U.S. Congress' House of Representatives within the National Security Supplemental Act draft. The House bill contains a provision (sec. 1828) that would require the Secretary of Defense and Secretary of State to submit a report including the manner and extent to which regime instability in Russia would affect United States national security, the security of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies, and the geopolitical aftershocks throughout Eurasia, an assessment of the stability of the Putin regime, and clarity on the command and control structure of Russia's nuclear arsenal in different contexts.

The conferees noted that an unstable Russia presented varied, serious, and complex security challenges and threats to the United States and its allies, partners, and interests. It was also noted that the challenge to the Russian state by personnel of the Wagner private military company in June 2023 suggested that Russian command-and-control of state- and state-directed forces may had serious deficiencies with important ramifications for United States and allied assessments of Russian policy, doctrine, strategy, tactics, and intentions.

Therefore, the conferees directed U.S. government to conduct an assessment of the stability of Russian defense forces and state institutions, including:

- (1) An overview of Russian command-and-control of its national defense forces, the Wagner Group, and other private military companies under the direction of or aligned with the Russian state;
- (2) The manner and extent to which any deficiencies in Russian command-and-control affect United States national security or the security of NATO allies and partners, including assumptions about Russian intent, indications and warning of threats to the United States, its allies, partners, or interests, and Russian defense forces ability or willingness to obey orders from political leadership;
- (3) A description of Russian nuclear forces, including their command-and-control structure, an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of that structure, and the relationship between Russian nuclear forces and Russian-controlled or directed private military companies; and
- (4) Any other matters deemed relevant.

This assessment is prepared by a leading Ukrainian state analytical center - Kuras Institute of Political and Ethnic Studies of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, and the dedicated task force of leading Russian opposition political analysts, brought together by the Congress of People's Deputies of Russian Republic.

About the authors of the report:

Kuras Institute of Political and Ethnic Studies of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine (until 1997 – the Institute of National Relations and Political Science of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine) (<https://ipiend.gov.ua/en/>) was established by decision of the Presidium of the Academy of Sciences of Ukraine dated 11th December 1991.

The Institute was formed for the purpose of profound and comprehensive research of problems which acquired special importance after proclamation of independence of Ukraine. Those include modern dynamics of political institutes and processes, correlation between politics and ethno-national relations, necessity to develop new paradigms of ethno-national development, prevention of ethno-national conflicts, modeling of optimal ethno-politic options, management technologies in political and inter-ethnic relations, examination of draft laws, state and non-government development programs in various spheres of public life.

The Institute trains specialists of highest qualification, it provides post-graduate and post-doctorate courses.

The Institute maintains broad international relations, takes part in implementation of joint research projects with Ukrainian and international scientific and educational institutions, think tanks, and public organizations, and holds active dialog with representatives of various political parties, movements, confessions on optimal ways of the further development of Ukraine.

The Congress of People's Deputies (<https://rosdep.online/en/main/>) was established in November 2022 on the initiative of several former and current Russian deputies at various levels. Congress is a shadow Russian parliament, to become the transitional legislature in the future Russia (Russian Republic). At the first session of the Congress on November 4-7, 2022, the Fundamental Declaration and the Act on the Resistance Movement were adopted, establishing the legal principles for combating Putinism. The Executive Council, Secretariat, and working groups of the Congress were also formed, which continued to prepare draft laws, and interact with all international and Russian participants of the anti-Putin coalition.

The Congress adopted the Transitional Constitution of the Russian Republic, and also approved the Bill of Rights, the Act on Lustration, the Act on Freedom of Speech, proclaiming the principles of media independence in post-Putin Russia and dismantling the system of state-oligarchic propaganda, the Act on Economic Freedom, the Act on Self-Government, establishing the first steps towards grassroots democracy in the country after the change of regime, and a number of other basic legislative acts.

About hundred deputies of various levels, residing both in Russia and abroad, who gathered over eight million votes in various level elections and representing all political parties that have ever been part of the national parliament, currently participate in the work of the Congress.

To coordinate organizational and political activities in Europe, the Congress has opened offices in Warsaw and Kiev, and the established of another one in the United States is planned for 2024.

Executive Summary

Almost two years of Russia's large-scale invasion into Ukraine, which has become the largest military conflict in Europe since World War II, has already claimed over 500,000 lives of soldiers and officers on both sides of the conflict, as well as tens of thousands of civilians, turning 16 million people into refugees and causing over \$700 billion in material damage to Ukraine. However, there are still no answers to the questions of when and how this war will end, and what strategic goals the countries in the Rammstein coalition should set for themselves.

In essence, there is still no assessment of the risks that Kremlin's policies pose to the United States, NATO countries, other key allies of America, and the entire free world. A correct understanding of these risks and the formation of a strategy by the United States in this conflict are inseparably linked to:

- 1) understanding the Kremlin's goals;
- 2) assessing Russia's military (including nuclear) potential and the state of its military;
- 3) sober analysis of the sustainability of Russia's economy under sanctions;
- 4) understanding the internal political balance of power, the mood of Russian society and elites, and assessing the stability of the political regime.

This report argues that:

1. The military potential of Russia has been greatly overestimated (including by the Russia's own political leadership). In fact, with less than 5% of the annual defense budget of the United States, the Ukrainians have destroyed over 50% of the offensive potential of the Russian army. The quality of command in the Russian military has sharply declined since the Soviet Union collapse; the Kremlin's bet is now on the high tolerance of the Russian population for human losses. Currently unable to conduct large-scale offensive operations, the Russian military command, having lost its most elite units and suffered several significant defeats in the first year of the war, has only been able to achieve relative parity with the Ukrainian Armed Forces on the battlefield. However, the Russian Command is learning, and the continuation of hostilities, even in a positional war, will inevitably strengthen the combat capability of the Russian Armed Forces and increase the number of experienced commanders and soldiers who will later be used by the Kremlin both within Ukraine and in other parts of the world.
2. Russian military-industrial complex, which has significantly degraded over the past 30 years, at the beginning of the war was only partially capable of maintaining even simple reproduction of conventional weapons. The mobilization potential of heavy industries has limits to its effectiveness and has already led to disproportionately high growth in the military budget; the human and scientific-technical potential of the military-industrial complex has largely been lost since the collapse of the USSR. However, some small Russian private start-up companies, receiving significant financial injections from the state and successfully bypassing international sanctions, have been able to launch new production of modern, inexpensive strike means, such as drones and others. The key problem is in the fact that the transition of the Russian economy to military rails intensifies, and the production of many military equipment and ammunition within Russia is higher than in Western countries, which allows the Kremlin to maintain and even increase the scale of military actions. As long as the West's lag in the development of the military-industrial complex continues, the Kremlin can indefinitely continue fighting and refuse to freeze the conflict without meeting its demands. Moreover, Putin will not be able in future to reduce spending on military production and security forces (5.5% of GDP, 30% of the national budget now goes to defense, plus 10% for internal

security) without serious social costs, which will push him towards further escalating military actions beyond Ukraine.

3. The Russian leadership, receiving significant financial resources from foreign economic activities, has found a way to mobilize significant human resources through the poorest marginalized segments of the population and prisoners, which do not provoke significant protests within the country. However, this mobilization resource is close to depletion, which will lead to a rapid increase in political costs and a demand for political changes.
4. Sanctions pressure on the Russian economy has not yet achieved desirable results, among others due to selectivity in their application. The mass exodus of Western companies from Russia has improved the trade balance surplus and has allowed Putin to reward loyal members of the elite with de facto confiscated assets. The country has record-low, and in many sectors even negative unemployment rates. The growth of Russia's income from natural resources trade, which occurred in the period of war-induced macroeconomic instability in 2022, has fully compensated for the loss of frozen \$300 bln. national foreign currency reserves. Without the inclusion of India and China in a unified sanction policy, its effectiveness will remain low and, in some cases, lead to political fatigue in European countries that currently bear the main economic costs. An efficient sanctions policy needs to be applied towards companies and countries that facilitate the interests of the Russian defense industries by bypassing existing limitations. Despite the inevitable technological degradation of technologically intensive sectors of the national economy in the future, bankruptcy of Russia should not be expected in the medium term, and the Russian economy in low-tech production sectors will demonstrate high adaptability to one-sided pressure from Western countries.
5. The West has not yet managed to achieve a split among the Russian elites, despite their widespread dissatisfaction with the military confrontation, common both in business and government circles. Sanction restrictions, in the absence of a clear and transparent mechanism established by the West for Russian businessmen to become compliant with international demands imposed on them, have led to their return to Russia and an increase in political control over them by the regime. However, this effect is short-living and depends entirely on the political readiness of the West to forgive past sins, create conditions for a complete break with the Kremlin in exchange for renouncing support for aggression and financing resistance. This financial resource, along with the use of seized Russian state assets, can play a significant role in countering Putin's military machine in Ukraine.
6. In the political sphere, the mass exodus of opposition-minded citizens from Russia has strengthened the Kremlin's control over domestic policy. The rotation of governors in recent years ensures effective control over regional elites, who are financially dependent on the center. Few opposition media outlets speak exclusively to the already opposition-minded population, without reaching out to the broader public. Opposition politicians are actively competing with each other, not within Russia, but for the attention of the West, attempting to build a political alternative to the Putin regime that cannot be created from within the country. However, so far, the countries most interested in emergence of such an alternative, primarily Ukraine and other neighboring countries, have not formed what could become a point of consolidation for opposition sentiments and creation of a viable political force based on the visibly growing armed resistance of Russians themselves. As a result, the regime's main commodity remains not so much a sense

of its strength, but the image of stability and the preservation of its function as the sole arbiter in internal conflicts, which can only be undermined from the outside.

7. The feasibility for Ukraine to achieve a breakthrough on the battlefield without political changes within Russia appears quite limited and depends on the scale of supply of modern weapons and financial aid. Overall, the West's military strategy will only be successful when it initiates political changes within Russia that will eliminate the source of aggression. Until then, any possible ceasefires and conflict freezes without allowing Kremlin to reach its strategic objectives, even if it would be supported by Ukrainian society, will only be temporary in nature, and confrontation will resume each time after the accumulation of new military forces for a new phase of aggression.
8. The main task of the rapidly aging Putin is the unlimited long-term preservation of his political regime, inducing the euphoria of the population from foreign policy victories. The secondary task is to ensure his political security through the restoration of the Yalta-Potsdam system of dividing the world between the Russian-Chinese and European-Atlantic blocs, with a border drawn along the former borders of the USSR. Putin's uncertainty about his personal future and the future of his regime, his fears and prejudices, are an important reason for his aggressiveness. It is impossible to achieve any long-term sustainable agreements with him; regardless of the course and results of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the Kremlin will consistently strive to create the maximum number of new points of tension and instability in the world, both on the borders of the Russian Federation (Poland, Baltic countries, Finland) and far from them (Middle East, Africa, South America).
9. The Prigozhin's mutiny in June 2023 revealed the internal weakness of the Putin regime and the unpreparedness of Russia's security forces to defend it. At the same time, these events indicate a low probability of catastrophic scenarios involving the disintegration of Russia or a civil war on its territory. The likelihood of inertia-driven scenarios of change within the regime itself appears significantly higher, with minimal involvement of personnel from Russian law enforcement and security structures; to the contrary, influencing the process of change by armed groups of Russian resistance is getting more and more probable.

Summarizing, it should be said that policy of Putin appeasement, fully or partially satisfying his demands, will create new risks for the United States and the entire Euro-Atlantic community, as it will serve as a source of inspiration for other autocracies currently observing the outcome of this conflict, primarily China, Iran, Venezuela, and others. These same players are beneficiaries of the ongoing weakening of the Putin regime and erosion of Russian statehood. The longer the military uncertainty and tensions continue, the more dividends of geopolitical and economic nature they will be able to extract in their confrontation with the West.

The development of a common end-game picture shared by Rammstein coalition countries on a post-war global security system will allow for more effective coordination of resource allocation and expenditure to counter aggression and reduce the likelihood of conflict escalation and its spread to NATO territory. Achieving a swift victory over Putinism with minimal risks and costs is what all politicians concerned with long-term security and prosperity of their constituents should focus their efforts on.

The report presented here examines each aspect of the strength and weaknesses of Putin's regime and its military machine in maximum detail.

Section I. Kremlin's geopolitical objectives

After the collapse of the USSR, the slim and understandable picture of the world for many in Moscow - two superpowers: the USA and the USSR, two military blocs: NATO and the Warsaw Pact, their allies, and the third world as a field of global competition and geopolitical and ideological expansion - has changed dramatically. At the same time, the nature of these changes was perceived completely differently in the United States and in Russia. The former considered themselves winners in the Cold War, having crushed firstly fascism and then communism; the latter believed that by voluntarily undergoing a democratic revolution, they became part of the West and had the right to jointly manage the rest of the world with it.

However, when the euphoria passed and it turned out that in the eyes of many, the Soviet superpower had turned into a regional power (according to Obama) or even a gas station with missiles (according to Senator McCain), Moscow elites began to come up with various concepts of a "multipolar world," while creating small but sensitive problems for the collective West around the world - first during peacekeeping operations in the former Yugoslavia and the former USSR (Transnistria, Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, etc.), and then in Central and West Africa (Sudan, Sahel countries), the Arab world (Libya, Syria), and Latin America (Venezuela, Nicaragua, etc.).

The rise to power of Vladimir Putin in 2000 was marked by an attempt to rebuild a system of equal interaction with the United States after the events of 9/11 during the anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan.

However, equality in the understanding of the Kremlin and in the approach of the West turned out to be fundamentally different. Moscow was neither ready to adhere to basic democratic norms within Russia itself, nor to change its attitude towards post-Soviet countries as full members of the global community, rather than as a zone of exclusive interests of the Kremlin. The result of the accumulating disagreements was Vladimir Putin's famous Munich speech in 2007, de facto proclaiming a new Cold War.

The Obama administration's attempt to "reset" relations during Dmitry Medvedev's presidency in 2008-2011, based on the development of economic ties with Russia in the field of innovation and modernization of its economy, contradicted the business and domestic political interests of Putin's inner circle and failed. Key participants from the Russian side were eventually subjected to repression and were sidelined, and some even faced criminal prosecution.

Putin's return to the presidency, accompanied by mass protests by the middle class in major cities in Russia, marked a sharp attack on civil liberties and human rights, persecution of the opposition, and then a rapid rearmament, culminating in the annexation of Crimea and subsequently in the beginning of hybrid, and later full-scale aggression towards Ukraine, whose "crime" was to join the European Union and NATO.

All this happened against the backdrop of the Kremlin leadership's strengthening of bloc thinking, which set the strategic goal of a new redistribution of the world order in alliance with China and Iran, strengthening its influence in countries of the global South (upgrading interaction, including in the military-technical sphere, with India, the formation of the geopolitical alliance BRICS, etc.).

The return to Cold War thinking also led to the formation of proxy forces in NATO countries. The initial approach included the creation, following the example of Stalin's Komintern in the 1930s, of a coalition of far-right political forces coordinated through the "television channel" Russia Today (RT) and financed by Kremlin sources, followed by the fanning of anti-American sentiments in the far-left environment. All this was accompanied by financing from major Russian businesses of a number of Western (both European and American) think tanks and educational institutions, support for Kremlin-loyal Western politicians, and provocation of internal conflicts in

Western societies (for example, the campaign against shale gas extraction in the US, participation in separatist referendums in several European countries, etc.).

The quintessence of this policy became interference in the US presidential elections and a series of terrorist acts against Kremlin opponents in Europe (for example, the murder of Alexander Litvinenko and the attempted assassination of Sergei Skripal in the UK using weapons of mass destruction), which led to a major international scandal that scared the Kremlin itself. After this, Western governments began to pay attention to the scale of the offensive coming from Moscow, and the wave of outrage deterred several politicians who had previously actively interacted with the Putin regime.

The reaction of Western society to Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 greatly limited the Kremlin's ability to use the soft power tools created in the last decade and reduced the effectiveness of the network of influence agents and the military (GRU) and political (SVR) intelligence residencies. Many of the established connections moved into a non-public sphere, although this did not completely destroy Putin's established network of influence in the West.

Russia has found itself in a situation of international isolation. In fact, only a few countries, usually considered outcasts (North Korea, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Eritrea, Syria, Belarus), support Russia's position on the Ukrainian issue in UN votes. Even key countries that were expected to be part of Putin's anti-American bloc usually strive to publicly abstain from supporting the Kremlin and give it the opportunity to fight the collective West alone, extracting maximum economic and geopolitical benefits for themselves from this confrontation.

Proving its "rightness" and sustaining Putin's foreign policy concept is the only way for the Kremlin to get out of this impasse.

Putin's current foreign policy strategy

The basis of Putin's foreign policy strategy after the start of the large-scale invasion of Ukraine is coherent and coordinated actions in several directions:

1. The actual creation of a new "Unholy Alliance" - a military-political bloc in continental Asia (China-Russia-North Korea-Iran). At the same time, Putin even takes a subordinate role in relation to China, which is not yet ready to formally go beyond deepened economic cooperation (Russia's trade turnover with this country exceeds 30% of the country's foreign trade turnover and occupies a confident first position among other countries), although within the framework of such cooperation, it provides noticeable assistance to the Russian military-industrial complex, primarily in the field of high-tech products.
2. Strengthening economic ties with a number of countries that formally take a neutral position but de facto help the Russian economy and business survive (India, UAE), developing global and regional economic unions (BRICS, SCO, etc.).
3. Formation of an informal "dictatorship coalition," a club of mutual assistance for authoritarian regimes in Asia (Syria), Africa (Central and West African countries, Libya), and Latin America (Venezuela, Nicaragua, Cuba).
4. Destabilization of the domestic political situation in Western countries through political and military means, support for Kremlin-friendly regimes to come and stay in power (in Europe among them currently Hungary, Slovakia, and Serbia), direct assistance to far-right and active dialogue with ultra-left parties in the EU, use of media tools to influence the domestic political situation in the USA (intimidation of American and Western European political elites with the threat of military escalation, provocation of internal conflicts through RT and social networks).

5. Maximizing economic (and as a result, political) costs for the West from any activities aimed at containing Russia: primarily through increasing energy prices (which, among other things, provides additional income to Russia's budget), expropriation of Western property on Russian territory (thus creating a "pacifist" business lobby in the West), and exploiting the West's dependence on certain types of raw materials from Russia (uranium and titanium have come recently to the forefront after the failure of natural gas blackmail).

Putin seeks to increase his personal influence in the world by initiating and exacerbating new points of tension where Russia's position would be important for the international community in the interest of their resolution (intervention in Syria, covert support for Hamas in Israel, coups in West Africa, territorial conflict between Venezuela and Guyana, etc.). In doing so, he creates negotiating positions to promote and enforce his interests in other matters. He acts according to the classic logic of a street thug-racketeer: "attack - negotiations from a position of strength - partial retreat" with whatever he managed to take from the victim.

The only way to counter such an aggressive strategy is to demonstrate firmness and strength and not try to persuade the mobster not to attack, and this fully applies to Vladimir Putin. Any negotiations in this case mean increasing losses for the negotiating party.

The Russian leader is confident that Western democratic leaders, although they want to remove him from power and are already working on it, are also inclined to avoid military risks, are too soft and picky in their means to effectively counter crude Russian force. Putin and his inner circle do not see any immediate external military threat to themselves in Russia, Western weapons are not being used on Russian territory, and the worst scenario for them now is the loss of previously conquered territories. However, a hypothetical Western-inspired coup is currently perceived by the Russian leader as a much more serious and completely real threat.

At the same time, Putin believes that war protects him from this scenario, as sooner or later the West will get tired and start making concessions to the Kremlin; that he, Putin, will outlast any Western leader in his chair. And so far, the course of events only strengthens his confidence in this.

Foreign policy goals of the Russian leadership and personally of Vladimir Putin

External observers and the internal Russian opposition often like to portray Vladimir Putin as a megalomaniac, dictator, obsessed at least with the idea of Soviet revanchism, and at most as a conqueror standing in the same line as Stalin or Hitler.

In reality, of course, the situation is completely different. Having accidentally come to power due to the request of Boris Yeltsin's entourage for a strongman who could stabilize the rapidly transforming Russia in the 1990s and guarantee the protection of the not entirely legally privatized property of the big business, he repeatedly changed his rhetoric and actions in the field of foreign policy. In 2000, for example, just seven years before his Munich speech, the platform of his election program was based on three cornerstones: Russia's accession to the EU, WTO, and NATO.

The fact that it was not just a trick is evidenced by Putin's closure in 2002 of two strategic facilities: the radio-electronic center in Lourdes, Cuba, and the naval base in Cam Ranh, Vietnam. At the same time, after the events of September 11th, 2001, Putin opened Russian airspace to NATO aircraft, provided support to the US in operations in Afghanistan, and facilitated the establishment of an American military base in Manas, Kyrgyzstan. All of this caused not-so-hidden outrage among many representatives of the Russian military and conservative circles.

However, starting from 2005, the Russian president actively opposed American interests: he pushed for the departure of the US from the same Manas base, strengthened military-technical cooperation with Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba, built relationships with Hezbollah and Hamas, etc. The confrontation reached its peak in August 2008 when Russian army invaded Georgia - the first offensive operation of the Russian Armed Forces abroad since the collapse of the USSR. After a period of relative relaxation under President Medvedev (signing several disarmament agreements, giving Russia's consent to the operation in Libya), tensions reached a new level and since then, despite any intermediate agreements with the US and European countries, they have not decreased.

Understanding Putin's motives is not an easy task, but the most likely correct version is as follows: for the Russian president, maintaining the stability of his regime is a top priority. After events he considered to be a treacherous interference in the sphere of his interests (like the placement of missile defense systems in Eastern Europe and, especially, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2005), he no longer trusts the West. Restoring this trust is impossible, as Putin does not understand its aspirations and does not share the values of the free world, considering them only a cover for the cynical global business interests of Western elites.

Therefore, the Russian leader considered and considers the discrediting and cleansing of any pro-Western elites and sentiments within the country as the most important task. On one hand, he creates protective barriers between Russia and the West, and on the other hand, he strives for the maximum weakening (and if possible, destruction) of key Western international institutions, primarily the European Union and NATO. In addition, in the conditions of inevitable and long-term degradation of the Russian economy due to its increasing isolation, he needs "small victorious wars" that distract the population from poverty, strengthen his image as a winner and guarantor of stability within the country, and the main and only arbiter in intra-elite conflicts.

This situation cannot be rectified by any agreements or concessions to Putin. He cannot stop until he achieves a strategic defeat of NATO and the organization's dissolution. This is currently his genuine and main foreign policy goal, which he will pursue through political (including covert operations on Western territory) and military means. By declaring readiness to wage a "protracted war" until the victorious end, the Russian leadership has made it clear to its citizens, Ukraine, *urbi et orbi*: there is no price that Russia is not willing to pay to achieve the ultimate objectives of this war.

Section II. Internal political situation in Russia

The Russian governance model as a whole was formed by 1996 and was built as the alliance of state bureaucracy, security forces, and big business. Their common interest is to preserve and increase capital within the country, and extracting what is known as administrative rent from being in power: each position generates the right to manage and privatize a certain portion of national financial flows and wealth. This model is stable and creates an interest among all involved in the governance process to eliminate any political competitors and disruptors of the regime as a whole. Putin, in this regard, acts as the universal arbiter of conflicts, the highest regulator of the system, for which he, of course, receives his personal share of national wealth.

He manages the system through few trusted individuals in his inner circle, who exercise control over key financial-industrial groups and their leaders (whom literature commonly refers to as oligarchs, although they have not been such for a long time - rather, they serve as Putin-appointed top managers of their corporations).

In the political sphere, Putin has formed an informal analogue of the Soviet Stalinist Politburo on the base of the Security Council, which includes key security officials and heads of two parliamentary chambers. At the same time, there is a certain analogue of a system of checks and balances, where elements of the system compete with each other while remaining personally loyal to Putin, ensuring its manageability. The Security Council de facto competes with the Government (and Deputy Putin's Security Council Dmitry Medvedev competes with Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin); within the Security Council security officials compete with each other (under the supervision of Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev); and those overseeing big business (Kovalchuk, Rotenberg, Chemezov, etc.) compete for large government contracts and state appropriations.

At the same time, Putin has practically eliminated the autonomy of regional leaders, creating a situation of their dependence on finances distributed through the federal center. This is fundamentally different from the situation in the late USSR when the federal center depended on tax revenues from the national republics. The overwhelming majority of regions are led by professional managers who are not rooted in their regional elites and are easily interchangeable. The exceptions are Moscow, Tatarstan, Chechnya, and (to some extent) Yakutia, where leaders have independent political weight and a certain level of independence from decisions made in Moscow.

The entire system highly depends on Vladimir Putin personally. Therefore, when the Speaker of the State Duma, Vyacheslav Volodin, said in 2014 that "without Putin, there is no Russia," and then the key propagandist of Russian TV, Dmitry Kiselyov, clarified, "without Putin, Russia is nonviable," they were highly accurate. In any case, it can be said that "without Putin, there is no Russian Federation" as we know it. This is the Achilles' tendon of Putinism, well understood by the most advanced part of the Russian elite.

After Putin's removal, the system will inevitably be reformatted, and it may retain or even intensify its aggressiveness, but it could also completely lose it. This largely depends on how the Russian elite perceives the balance of power between the two main threats to their well-being: external military (and sanction) pressure and internal military threats. Possible scenarios for post-war transformation are discussed in Scenarios of post-war political changes in Russia of this report.

Public opinion in Russia after two years of war

Russian society is well aware of its helplessness in the face of the united elites under Vladimir Putin. The police, the courts, big business, the media, and officials are all together, with Putin as the head of this super-corporation. There is no alternative, no opposition capable of changing this situation, and the international community seems to accept it, so there is no point in resisting. This feeling has been growing among Russians since 1996 when the

opposition candidate running against Boris Yeltsin, who was leading at the beginning of the election campaign with a tenfold lead over the incumbent president, lost due to obvious violations of the electoral legislation, with the courts, oligarchs, media, and the West turning a blind eye. Since then, the screws have only tightened, and the predetermined nature of election campaigns has only increased.

Therefore, the prevailing opinion now is that the system is unbeatable, and it is not so difficult for Putin to maintain it without mass repression. The number of political prisoners in Russia is no more than 1,500 people, or 0.001% of the population, but this is enough to keep society in a constant state of fear. Combined with the presence of financial incentives for the most active citizens to avoid involvement in politics and instead engage in state-sponsored commercial projects or move to the West, the creation of political structures in Russia remains the domain of lone idealists, often supporters of "small deeds" at the local level.

As a result, Russian society is currently highly amorphous, apathetic, apolitical, and rejects any collective actions, both in favor and against the government. At the same time, 58% (data from CSP Platform) condemn the departure of opposition figures from Russia, while only 10% approve.

The core support for the war is relatively stable, comprising about a third of the population. Within this group, approximately 10% stay on imperialistic positions (such as restoring the USSR, Russian Empire, etc.), while the rest believe that the war is unpleasant but a necessary measure to "rid Ukraine of Nazis," "defend Russia from NATO aggression," and so on.

Committed critics of the war make up about 20%. The same proportion of the population was firmly opposed to the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Is this a large or small number? It amounts to at least 30 million people; such a population mass, if politically organized, would certainly be sufficient to change the regime. Unfortunately, it is not politically structured, and the most popular Russian opposition media resources have a reach that does not exceed 15% of this number.

"This is not our war" – convinced more than half of Russians, and only about a third tell pollsters that they feel the consequences of the conflict. Most likely, the subconscious feeling of the unjust nature of this war makes Russians distance themselves from what is happening.

Even residents of border territories (such as Belgorod, where shelling intensified throughout 2023, resulting in losses among both military personnel and civilians, and tension levels increased), even after explosions in the city center, do not start considering this war as their own. Some respondents in focus groups conducted in the region say that they will defend their land in the event of a Ukrainian offensive, but they do not show signs of mobilization as a result of shelling – on the contrary, the desire to leave and take their families to safer areas of the country dominates over participating in the war.

Similarly – that is, in no way – Russians react to the growth of the armed resistance movement in Russia. Despite the significantly increased scale and scope of the actions, it does not currently elicit any noticeable response (neither negative nor positive) from general public. According to the "Rospartisan" resource, which aggregates data on resistance in the Russian home front, there is sometimes an increased response from those wishing to join the movement, but only after the most notable operations that receive coverage in the mass media. Some noticeable (and positive) public response was observed only after drone attacks on Rublevka suburb - a place of compact residence for representatives of the political and business elite (including Putin himself). In all other cases, the reaction of citizens is equally detached - neither sympathetic nor condemning.

Paradoxically, in present-day Russia, the level of social optimism is extremely high. According to VCIOM data in December 2023, 53% look to the future with optimism, 11% with pessimism. 63% are confident that 2024 will be

a good year for Russia. These are all record-breaking indicators for the entire observation period, meaning that Russians believe that life is currently difficult, but it will improve. At the same time, the main demand for 2024 (45%) is the end of the war, and only 13% expect improvements in the economy. The desire for peace is growing, and throughout 2023, it strongly and persistently prevailed over the desire to win.

Apparently, it is the factor of maintaining optimistic expectations for the future that will be key in preserving the ruling regime in Russia. As long as Putin manages to maintain Russians' confidence that things won't get worse, people will remain passive and loyal to the regime. However, the loss of a sense of certainty against the backdrop of visible weakening of central power can dramatically change this situation.

Although all pollsters confirm high ratings for Putin and the Russian institutions of power, it cannot be said that there is a nationwide love for the tyrant. Rather, it is more accurate to speak of fear of change and the absence of an alternative. This makes Putin a figure that Russians remove from the perimeter of criticism, although their attitude towards most points of Kremlin policy and government-led economic reforms is usually strongly negative.

This is especially evident in the attitude of remote provinces towards Moscow and its inhabitants. Throughout Putin's years in power, the percentage of citizens expressing their dislike for the capital's residents to sociologists has consistently hovered around 80%, with the strongest sentiment found in major cities (St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, Voronezh) and in the Siberian regions.

This attitude was vividly demonstrated during the Prigozhin uprising in June 2023 and the raids by armed groups of the Russian opposition (Legion "Freedom of Russia" and Russian Volunteer Corps) on Russian territory. The residents greeted the military with enthusiasm, perceiving them as their own, with a clearly anti-Moscow undertone. This clearly demonstrates the demand for a capable opposition with its own power resources and shows that Russians are agnostic for ideologies, and willing to support both democratic and anti-democratic forces if they are ready (and able) to act against the established status quo, from which they see no other way out.

The attitude of Russian elites towards the evolution of the Russian political system

Russian elites, as noted above, have been living in a strange symbiosis with Russian power since the mid-1990s, the time of large-scale privatization. On one hand, this power has been and remains the source of their wealth (assets, government contracts, and preferences). On the other hand, until 2022, the state has been the main source of insecurity, capable of intervening at any moment and seizing any property at its discretion.

For this reason, Russian businesses, in the years following the collapse of the USSR, willingly provided support to the Kremlin, which created their fortunes, at any request. They organized public and political campaigns, invested in strengthening Putinism both in the West and within Russia. However, at present, especially after the start of the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the business elites feel extremely uncomfortable.

The usual strategy of Russian businessmen and officials – to make money in Russia without asking unnecessary questions, following all the instructions of the Kremlin, and then exporting the earned capital to the West – has proven vulnerable in the face of international sanctions policy. Currently, both the business and government circles feel like hostages with nowhere to run, and this causes them acute dissatisfaction. Since the system that has been feeding them all these years suits them perfectly, they believe that the source of the problem is personally Putin, who, in their opinion, violated the basic agreement between them - complete political loyalty in exchange for personal security and protection of capital.

These people are accustomed to solving all their problems with cash and do not understand why the West and Ukraine refuse to take their money, which many are willing to pay, in exchange for dropping future claims against them. They (including the bureaucracy) sincerely do not consider themselves responsible for the actions of the political regime and even feel loyal to the West. The elites are willing to pay, but they are not willing to go against the Kremlin, which, on one hand, controls their sources of income and, on the other hand, can apply repression, including physical, against them and their families. The instinct for self-preservation and the habit of obeying authorities are currently prevailing, and a significant portion of big business has returned their capital to Russia, while another part is trying to establish new bases for their operations in loyal jurisdictions, primarily in the UAE, Indonesia, Singapore, and some others.

However, most representatives of the Russian elite would welcome a return to the situation as it was before 2022. They are loyal to the regime but not reliable. In a situation of revolutionary change, they will not defend the Kremlin, although they will make every effort to prevent the situation from spinning out of control and the country from descending into the chaos of civil war. Putin understands this well, especially since this state of things was vividly demonstrated during the Prigozhin uprising in June 2023. This creates an atmosphere of uncertainty for the Russian leader and fuels his paranoia, even towards his closest circle.

To some extent, this situation resembles the period before Stalin's death - the elites are tired of the leader, afraid of unpredictable repressions, property redistribution, and want a respite. However, no one dares to make the first move, and everyone is waiting for the "black swan" that will start a chain of rapidly developing events, which will end in a major power struggle under the Kremlin's carpet. It is not excluded that such a "swan" could be a military defeat on the Ukrainian front or a serious provocation in the pattern of the short-lived Prigozhin uprising, which will push one or another elite group to take action.

Political opposition to Putinism

Throughout all the years in power, Putin's key task has been to prevent the emergence of any political alternative within the country that could contend for power. He achieved this by creating unique preferences for so-called systemic political parties (i.e. those parties that recognized Putin as the uncontested leader in exchange for guaranteed seats in national and regional parliaments), directly bribing promising politicians by using capital and opportunities provided by big business, as well as through the discrediting and special services operations against those actors who refused to follow the unconstitutional and unfair rules of the game proposed to them (non-systemic forces).

Politicians, journalists, or whistleblowers who went too far and began to pose problems for Putin with their activities were simply physically eliminated. This is how Yuri Shchekochikhin, Anna Politkovskaya, Alexander Litvinenko, Boris Nemtsov, Sergei Magnitsky, and many others were killed. Assassination attempts on Alexei Navalny, Vladimir Kara-Murza, Sergei Skripal (this list could also go on for a long time) have gained a lot of international attention.

After the annexation of Crimea and especially following the large-scale invasion of Ukraine, most non-system politicians found themselves squeezed out of the country. Moreover, even in emigration, many are afraid to directly challenge the regime, fearing threats of physical violence against themselves and their remaining relatives in Russia. They are trying to seek protection by being recognized as a legitimate alternative to the regime by Western governments (although actively competing with each other on this issue and thereby diminishing their political prospects).

The opposition to Putin, which had been traditionally divided for many years into leftists, neoliberals, and nationalist conservatives, underwent a reformatting after the large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Some of the oppositionists supported the war and effectively disappeared as a political factor in the shadow of the systemic political parties. Others stood against it and got split into two factions: one (Alexei Navalny, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Maxim Katz, etc.) promotes a pacifist position, avoids criticizing Russian soldiers on the front lines, and adheres to a line of nonviolent civil disobedience; while the other (Ilya Ponomarev, Garry Kasparov, Mark Feygin, etc.) considers it necessary to support Ukraine's fight against aggression in every way, including armed struggle alongside the Ukrainian army against Putinists on the front lines, and carries out armed resistance actions against Putinism at the home front. The ideological differences in both groups have effectively taken a back seat.

Initiating political projects in modern Russia is now exclusively the Kremlin's prerogative, and although it inherits the neoliberal concept that dominated the country in the 1990s, remnants of defeated left and conservative-nationalist projects are fully incorporated into it. By 2022, the opposition has degenerated into the single slogan of "Russia without Putin," unable to describe to society what kind of Russia it will be and who will govern it. The authorities skillfully tied all opposition actions to unpopular topics, thereby neutralizing the only noticeable opposition agenda - the fight against corruption and elite privileges. The invasion of Ukraine gave oppositionists a new impetus and a new subject to speak about, which, however, required radicalization that not many were ready for.

None of the parts of the Russian opposition have the ability to communicate with the mass electorate within the country, neither for agitation nor for revolutionary appeals, and in fact, they all see their audience at present exclusively in the elites - inside Russia (in an attempt to gain allies in a possible coup situation), and the West (as a potential source of legitimacy for the possibility of communication with Russian elites and participation in new power architecture after the coup). At the same time, the moderate part of the opposition believes that in a power transition situation, they will be able to influence it by mobilizing people to the streets, while the armed part believes that since the transformation will inevitably go beyond the constitutional scenario, only forces with their own armed people will be allowed to participate in the changes.

At the same time, both parts of the Russian opposition actively argue with each other, and curiously this fight is often fueled by Western politicians and foundations, who tirelessly emphasize the expediency of forming a united front of Russians who desire change in their country, but at the same time try to avoid any suspicions that they are helping those who are engaged in real political struggle and resistance against Putinism. The competition for recognition from their side (and the resources they distribute, as all significant businesses remain under Kremlin control and no sizeable political donations are available) has a highly negative impact on the effectiveness of opposition structures.

Meanwhile, the protest movement in modern Russia has taken on a completely different character. During Putin's years in power, there were two truly serious waves of protests in the country that could have led to a change in power: the movement against the monetization of social benefits in 2005, and the protests of the urban middle class against election fraud in 2011-2012 ("Bolotnaya movement"). The invasion of Ukraine in 2022 sparked a short-lived mass protest, but it was nowhere near the scale of the previous two waves, although in the first weeks of the war, draconian laws prohibiting any anti-war campaigns had not yet been passed.

This passivity was caused, rather, by the unwillingness of political leaders and the major liberal media, firstly, to acknowledge themselves as part of a people of a nation that started the unjust war, and secondly, to openly call for the defeat of their own army. The realization of the necessity of this came gradually (and to this day, many

opposition-minded citizens have not come yet to this understanding). This allowed the regime to tighten the screws again, practically shutting down all opposition media and squeezing out the remaining activists from the country. Moreover, even in emigration, Russians often show more enthusiasm for attending rallies in support for some internal political affairs, like expressing solidarity with political prisoners, than for rallies against the war.

In this situation, the protest remaining in Russia has either become even more moderate and focused on everyday issues (such as ecology, housing and utilities, urban development, etc.), or, on the contrary, it has radicalized (resistance and urban guerilla movement, initially appearing as arson attacks on military enlistment offices, and then as attacks on infrastructure objects and military propagandists). In both cases, it is very small in number, although the former shows a tendency towards further decline, while the latter, on the contrary, is growing rapidly.

The most promising in terms of influencing the political situation is nonviolent protest by women mobilized to the front as soldiers of the Russian army. Women demand rotation after a year of service and the return of their husbands home, however, the Russian leadership fears involving new segments of the population in an extremely unpopular mobilization, and therefore ignores such demands. This protest is not yet directed against Putin, but it is quickly evolving towards political demands. For now, Kremlin is trying to suppress it with bribery and persuasion, but as the number of participants inevitably increases, they will have to either satisfy it or suppress it. Both options are a direct path to destabilization and the growth of mass discontent.

Meanwhile, the Muslim conservative region of Dagestan, located on the shores of the Caspian Sea and consistently showing the highest voting results for Putin and his party "United Russia," demonstrated a new scale of protest. In the fall of 2022, the people took to the streets for the first time in decades protesting the mobilization into the Russian-Ukrainian war, armed and inspired by Islamic preachers. The police dispersed, and the bewildered authorities suspended the mobilization in their region. (By the way, the neighboring region of Chechnya, where Putin's ally Ramzan Kadyrov's dictatorship reigns, also became the second region to do so, as it turned out even notorious Kadyrov couldn't ignore public opinion in his territory either).

If the state does not demonstrate strength and shows a loss of monopoly on the use of force, the pacification of the ongoing process of internal radicalization can only be achieved through a change of power. Thus, a year later, in the fall of 2023, in the same Dagestan, a crowd, inflamed by Kremlin's anti-Israel TV propaganda, staged a Jewish pogrom. Despite the fact that Putin personally always uses pocket Jewish organizations in Moscow throughout his career to lobby his interests worldwide, including the United States, traditionally anti-Semitic security and police forces once again failed to resist armed individuals.

The same powerlessness was demonstrated during the Prigozhin uprising. Security forces in Moscow are no different from those in Dagestan or Rostov. Putin's law enforcement, despite their excellent equipment and funding, are ready to disperse liberal rallies, beat the urban intelligentsia with batons, but are not ready to defend the Putin state against serious challenges. The events of 2023 in Russia clearly show that an organized power group, in the event of its appearance, will be able to knock out the Kremlin in the struggle for power.

2024 Elections and their impact on the political stability in Russia

Despite its clearly personalistic and authoritarian nature, Putin's system of governance requires a regular ritual to confirm its legitimacy. First and foremost, this is necessary for Putin himself, who must confirm his level of popular support to the elites. This is to address their legitimate concerns that, in case of weakening central power, the country will enter another phase of property redistribution, which carries risks, including physical threats, for key businessmen.

Therefore, the question of recognizing Putin's right to govern (primarily, of course, recognition within the country, although recognition from other countries is also important) is the key factor in internal political stability and elite unity. Moreover, in 2012, the legal right for Putin to be reelected as the president has already been questioned by most lawyers, and from 2024, the Russian Constitution unequivocally prohibits it.

In a sense, for the desired confirmation of Putin's rights, it is not so important how much it corresponds with the actual will of the citizens. Officially declared, even if only on paper, the result will be sufficient to show the manageability of the system, loyalty, and capability of each of its parts to fulfill the tasks set before it by the highest political leadership - provided, of course, there is no serious disobedience and other forms of abnormal societal reaction. Criticism without mass protests, however, is quite permissible.

The upcoming "elections," which will take place in March 2024, however, differ from everything that has happened before. Firstly, their legal basis is the unlawfully amended Constitution of 2020, otherwise Putin would not have the right to run. Secondly, the voting procedure is stretched over three days, which makes independent observation impossible, plus voting via the Internet will be widely used, which is also impossible to independently verify (and previous experiences suggest that the authorities actively use it for falsifications). Thirdly, after February 2022, a series of laws were passed that sharply limit the possibility of speaking freely during campaigns, and criticizing the war or the annexation of Crimea is punishable by years in prison. Finally, voting in these elections will take place in the occupied territories of Ukraine, which is directly prohibited by the norms of international law.

Because of this, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), which unites representatives of the parliaments of practically all European countries, adopted Resolution No.2519 on October 13, 2023, supported by the report of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights (rapporteur Hon. Pieter Omtzigt from the Netherlands), No.15827 on September 22, 2023. It explicitly states: "The Assembly calls on the member states of the Council of Europe to recognize Vladimir Putin as illegitimate after the end of his current presidential term and to cease all contacts with him, except for humanitarian contacts and for the purpose of achieving peace."

This represents a fundamental change in the established tradition since 2012, when many Western countries (including the United States) recognized Russian elections (both presidential and parliamentary) as unfair and unfree but did not question their results and did not reject the legitimacy of the authorities formed on their basis.

It should be emphasized that refusing to recognize the legitimacy does not mean the impossibility of conducting negotiations or other communications with the current, essentially illegal, authorities in Russia. However, firstly, this shows the current Russian elites that the world views their leaders as usurpers and criminals, and secondly, it opens the way for opposition Russians to form shadow government bodies that can eventually become fully legitimate.

Gradually undermining the legitimacy of the current Russian authorities and thus not imposing, but stimulating internal changes is a more careful and balanced approach than the abrupt actions that have been taken previously, for example, towards Venezuela. It is reasonable to carry out these actions in alliance with other countries in the Rammstein coalition, granting the leading role to countries with extensive expertise in internal Russian affairs, primarily Ukraine and Poland.

Section III. Russian economy

Since the very start of Russia-Ukrainian war the Western analysts both underestimated and overestimated the Russian economy. They underestimated it believing that the sanctions and restrictions imposed on it would cause a widespread meltdown: ‘the ruble being reduced to rubble, the economy staying on track to be cut in half in the coming years and not even ranked among the top 20 in the world’, as President Biden promised while addressing a crowd in Warsaw one month after the Russian invasion – but nothing like this happened in the following years. They overestimated it believing that the economic difficulties and financial losses experienced by the corporate sector and wealthy businessmen would force President Putin to change his policies and to reduce the military pressure on Ukraine. Two years deep into the war, one may feel the need to rethink both the current stance of the Russian economy and the Western expectations about its perspectives.

By the end of 2023 the Russian economy has delivered mostly bad news to those who expected it to falter facilitating Ukraine’s path towards victory. In 2023 it recovered from the blow of 2022 and produced 3.5 percent GDP growth alongside with formidable increase of real average wages by 8 percent. The Russian government succeeded in diversifying its exports, channeling entrepreneurs’ activity into finding ways for ‘parallel imports’ (i.e. smuggling sanctioned goods), and stabilizing the financial system (by the end of 2023 the ruble-dollar exchange stood at 90.3 rubles per dollar being just 17 percent lower than at the start of the war, while inflation remained moderate at around 8 percent [it needs to be mentioned that in 2014-2016 the ruble fell by 55 percent, and inflation averaged 13.4 percent during the years on the ‘Russian economic miracle’ in 2000s], so these figures aren’t the worst for Putin’s Russia). Many experts speculate that in 2024 inflation rates might be much higher creating additional pressure on the Kremlin, but it’s only a probable, and not a predestined, scenario.

The government succeeded in offsetting the effects of the arrest of Bank of Russia’s reserves in Europe and shifted to the Chinese yuan as a new reserve currency. Even while most of the efforts aimed on the ‘export substitution’ had failed, the Chinese goods – from passenger cars to smartphones and from personal computer to clothes – flooded the Russian market as the consumer confidence rose (by late 2023 China even secured its global leadership in passenger vehicles exports due to its significant control over the Russian market where its market share exceeded 60 percent).

As the Russian budget allocated trillions of rubles for the war efforts and military industry, recording a Rub 3 trillion deficit the second consecutive year, these funds promoted growth in different sectors of the economy, pushing corporate profitability to levels unseen both in Russia or abroad (in 2023, the net profits of the corporate and banking sector exceeded 20 percent of country’s GDP compared to 10.7 percent in the U.S.).

The major mistake made by the Western strategists that had forced them to underestimate Russia’s economic strength consisted in viewing Russia’s economy as if not an elaborated version of the Soviet one (the rhetoric of Soviet revival is very popular in the country and might contribute to such an approach) than as an ineffective economic system dominated by state-own corporations. If they were right, the sanctions introduced in 2022 had good chances to succeed – but the Russian private entrepreneurs performed extremely well in diversifying their businesses and inventing new production and supply chains that prevented the downturn.

On its part, the recent hike in military spending produces growth in the Russian industrial sector and boosts demand through the entire economy. Russia now has the lowest unemployment rate in its history, which drives wages higher as the businesses need to compete with the state enterprises and military-industrial complex that leads the way.

The mobilization of 2022 and the subsequent events created a completely new reality as the authorities now use to pay the soldiers a salary (of Rub 200 thousands min) that is three times higher than the nation's average, while the death payments exceed the money an average Russian male may earn in 30 years if he lives in almost all Russian regions except the capital cities where the salaries are much higher. Recently the recruitment pay was elevated from another Rub 200 thousand to around Rub 600 thousand as the authorities try to attract more new soldiers to the army ranks.

The military efforts in fact create additional areas of 'relative affluence' as the money allocated by the government become the source of funds for 'Russia's new wealthy', as the officials use to call those engaged in the war or those who receive the compensations for the fallen soldiers. By early 2024 it might be said that both President Putin and the team of his economic advisors and aides created a system that may survive against the current sanctions for years to come.

Short-term economic stability and long-term challenges

Of course, there are some long-term threats to Russia's economic prosperity – but I would say these days few people really anticipate them. The Western sanctions became beneficial to the Russian business environment for many reasons: they brought billions of dollars back into Russia since the 'oligarchs' were squeezed out from abroad and returned to the country; it allowed Russia not to repay its foreign debts, and it untied Putin's hands for nationalizing dozens of billions in foreign-owned properties and handing it to his loyalists (some call this transfer 'the robbery of the century' as the amount of the seized property exceeds \$100 billion exceeding the value of ill-famous 1996 privatization by around hundred times).

In addition to that, it was the 2022 export bonanza which produced Russia's all-time-high foreign trade surplus at \$332.4 billion. So therefore, these days few people in Russia expect some severe crisis approaching, and President Putin may extend his rule over the country relatively safely as the economic growth in 2024 and 2025 might beat most of the current forecasts that put it at 1.3 and 0.9% (it should be reminded that the World Bank anticipated a mere 0.3% growth for 2023 last January and later consequently revised this figure upwards six times during last year).

But at the same time these features of the Russian economy put the Western powers in a somewhat better position they were in mid-2022. One-and-a-half year ago the combined industrial assets of the Western-owned companies in Russia reached \$170 billion, the investors expected the Russian debts of around \$35 billion to be repaid, and the European customers were seriously dependent on the Russian energy supply. Since those times, most of the assets in Russia have been lost, the Russian debt payments were discontinued, and the Europeans, wasting up to €800 billion on additional energy bills, became mostly independent from Russian supplies in energy and other commodities.

It all means that in 2024 there are quite few reasons to fear any possible Russia's economic collapse: the Western exposure into the Russian markets and Western dependence upon Russian supplies currently are significantly lower than at the start of the war. If the Russian regime tumbles, and Russia dips into anarchy, economic impact would be negligible for the Western nations. Even the oil and gas exports are now re-directed to Asia, and any Russian government would rely on them for securing its budget revenues – so there is no risk of shortage in the energy markets. Also, the Western (i.e. European and North American') exports to Russia declined by around 50% in 2022 alone, and there are just couple of international corporations that harvest more than 2% of their revenue in the Russian Federation. When experts are talking on such a perspective, they call it 'sinking without producing a crater' meaning that even a profound collapse of the Russian economy, if it happens after its general decoupling from the West is almost completed, will cause little trouble for the world.

The impact of sanctions

Why Russia proved so resilient facing the Western sanctions and what should be done these days for contributing to the destruction of Putin's regime?

The answer might be that the Western powers had tried to use a sanctions policy that was too broad and was aimed at too ambitious goals. By 'too broad' we mean that the sanctions were designed for affecting the most sensitive elements of the Russian economy: currency reserves and banking sector, oil and gas production, and communications, but in no area, they were harsh and fast enough to cause a deep crisis.

The Western governments mistakenly believed these sanctions can 'immobilize' the Russian economy – but they didn't consider two major points. One was the fact that Russia had an alternative: oil and gas can be diverted to other markets, high-tech good can be supplied by China, and the lack of reserves was compensated by additional earnings – so by the end of 2022 it appeared that the sanctions were not so biting.

Another was the fact that sanctions levied on such a huge economy backfired bitterly – and it should be mentioned that the Europeans lost more money in 2022-2023 pursuing their sanctions policies than did the Russians themselves. The cost of the sanctions for energy consumers, air companies, tourist industry and, last but not least, for European exporters was disastrous – the combined losses or additional spendings might well approach €1 trillion. Even in the United States the rise in gasoline prices was referred to as 'Putin's inflation'. The major consequence of such a policy immediately became the notion that the resistance to Russia is too costly – the sanctions overall cost was around 7-8 times higher than entire military and financial assistance to Ukraine released by the EU nations between February 2022 and now. It was a huge mistake since it would be much more effective to channel the misused funds to into buying arms and ammunition for the Ukrainian army or supporting Ukraine's struggling economy.

The idea of forcing international companies to stop their operations in Russia, stop paying taxes there, and quit creating jobs for citizens of the aggressor country seemed completely justified. However, in practice, the vast majority of foreign enterprises were not suspended, but were transferred to Russian owners for a nominal fee, and now continue to operate and pay money to the state budget - actually, more than before, because profits are not taken out from the country, and the investment burden remains on those who built the enterprise. Moreover, this applies not only to cases of forced confiscation - in most cases, the sale to Russians was voluntary, based on the principle of "recovering at least some costs." The latest example is the sale for an amount less than 1000 dollars to a Russian owner of the Hyundai automotive plant, in which the Korean corporation invested over 200 million dollars.

When we said 'aimed at too ambitious goals' we meant that many Western policymakers believed, for example, that personal sanctions imposed on Russian officials or oligarchs may ignite a kind of a revolt against President Putin – but while this probably might happen in Russia of 1990s when the central government was weak and the business community was independent and rich, in early 2020s to rise against the Kremlin is a suicidal move, so almost no one decided to change sides without firm guarantees that that was what the West actually wanted and that they will be acquitted of all sins as the result.

As nobody (even Ukraine) was ready to give anybody any assurances, even those businessmen who happened to be out of the country at the start of the war or managed to escape before the first sanctions were imposed, finally returned home since the Russian authorities imposed just slightly elevated taxes on their businesses while the Ukrainian and Western policymakers speculated on ceasing up to a half of their fortune for getting sanctions lifted – with no guarantees this will in fact happen. At the end, instead of recruiting wealthy businessmen as the

West's loyal supporters and creating strict requirements for lifting the sanctions in exchange for leaving Russia and condemning its aggression against Ukraine, the West depicted itself in Russians' eyes as a lawless society where even the judiciary cannot secure them from arbitrary persecution, and guarantee their property rights on assets which have been many times confirmed legal and transparently acquired by the Western authorities themselves. Nowadays, the Russian business is less loyal, but more integrated with the Putinism than it was in late 2021 – and not because of the Russian propaganda but because of the Western actions.

Therefore, one may argue these days the sanctions policy per se cannot become an effective tool for the West if it wishes to undermine Putin's regime. On the other hand, the military defeat of the Russian armies also cannot become per se something that might cause a deep and profound crisis of the regime since it may rather consolidate the Russians around Putin in the wake of the Western advances. For any significant change in the internal dynamics of Russia to happen, both economic and military measures should be taken, both in more creative and agile manner than it has occurred before.

The way forward

What the economic and military strategy aimed on the demise of Putin's regime may look like these days? It should be composed of three major elements.

Firstly, within the new sanctions package, not particular enterprises nor another dozens of wealthy businessmen nor regional governors should be addressed but the broader economic fabric, the facilitating infrastructure of the Russian economy.

The most important measures here would be to impose sanctions on the Moscow Exchange that will stop the dollar and euro exchange into rubles, as well on all the Russian banks and financial companies for fully dissociating the country from the Western financial system (it's inexplicable why 36 Russian banks are currently under sanctions while 290 are not, and why the Moscow Exchange operates as usual while the St. Petersburg became sanctioned and had almost discontinued its operations).

All the foreign banks which are involved into transactions that facilitate Russia's 'parallel imports' should be warned that such activity would be considered violation of the sanctions' regime, and they will be fined and later banned from all dealings in Euro and Dollars.

The sanctions imposed on Russian large businesses, should be expanded also to the foreign businessmen who decided to keep their businesses in Russia running (such as CEOs of Raiffeisenbank, Total Energies, Auchan, Bayer, etc.), and as well to those who decided to take their assets in Russia over. The Western business, both financial and industrial, must suspend their Russian operations entirely by the end of 2024 – otherwise the sanctions not only remain ineffective but will soon be turned into an instrument of unfair competition between the Western companies themselves.

Secondly, the Western powers should revise their sanction policies towards the Russians who are now put on the sanctions lists. The main mistake here is that the Minister of Defense who leads the genocidal war in Ukraine, the Duma deputies who voted for annexing Ukrainian territories, the businesspeople who just pay taxes into Russian budget, and local officials who have little connection to the war, are all put in the same position with no chance to restore their compliancy with international requirements.

To avoid political implications, they could be separated into several categories: the first would cover all those accused in military crimes or in warmongering; the second would be composed of those actively supporting the war by being engaged in central government, managing the occupied territories or military enterprises; and the

third might include those who associated with the regime but were not personally involved into the war efforts or imperialistic propaganda. The recent category should be the main focus of enforcing compliancy, like was stipulated in the materials of Yermak-McFaul sanctions task force:

1. Condemn the war and/or Putinism;
2. Stop supporting Putin's regime (neither by working for him nor by paying taxes);
3. Start supporting Ukraine's resistance.

If these people comply with the demands – sanctions could be lifted. The main idea here is to divide the Putin's elites into categories seducing their members to get rid of sanctions and showing them reliable ways of doing so, and – which is not less important – to create suspicion inside the Russian elite through lifting some sanctions which the Kremlin may see as some proof of treason. Would this happen, such a new measure may open way to intra-elite conflicts while today the personal sanctions just solidify Putin's lackeys into one single and united group.

Thirdly, the major focus should be shifted to providing Ukraine with military and financial assistance for repelling the Russian aggression. The most important step here would be to propose a credible and legally sustainable way for unlocking the Russian assets frozen in the Western jurisdictions and putting them to work for the sake of Ukraine. As we now are facing a war of attrition, the West should secure the lifelines for Ukraine for at least two to three years sending a signal to Moscow there will be no discontinuity in either military supplies or financial assistance.

Even if Ukrainian Armed Forces would not be able to conduct any significant offence both in 2024 and in 2025, giving them continuous support with Russia's own money would slowly destroy the Russians' confidence and create basis for a growing dissatisfaction with President Putin's policies. The West should become accustomed to the fact that its proxy war with Russia will take many years and may come to an end only with Putin's departure from power (as President Zelenskyy recently said, 'he won't finish this (war), until we all finish him together').

Finalizing this part, we should acknowledge that the Western powers made many miscalculations and mistakes while taking on Russia economically in 2022. The strength of President Putin and the resilience of the Russian society stems from the fact that since 2014 the 'old' strategy of 'exchanging economic benefits for political non-participation' has been eroding. With a continuous decrease in real disposable incomes between 2013 and 2021, most of the Russian citizens lost any hopes for economic improvements and therefore became almost immune to financial hardships (at least to those that might be caused by the current sanction policies).

If Ukraine and the West want to win the war with Russia, they should better concentrate, on the one hand, on complete deterrence of crucial sectors of the Russian economy like the financial or communications ones rather than on introducing hundreds of sanctions against arbitrary chosen people and enterprises, and, on the other hand, on masterfully creating rifts and splits inside Russia's political and economic elites aiming on Putin's removal from power. Without a regime change in Russia which seemingly became a kind of a taboo in the West, nothing will change – and economically the Russian collapse, if it happens, will not cause any significant headaches for the West after two years of war, of sanctions, and of effective pivoting of the Russian economy towards both 'the East' and 'the South'.

Section IV. Russian military potential

Speculations about the "weakening Russian army" as of the beginning of 2024 turns out to be highly exaggerated.

The development and buildup of Russia's military potential is driven by the Kremlin's plans to continue the existing practice of achieving political goals using military force.

The Kremlin's confidence in the feasibility and success of this approach is largely due to the overall favorable for Russia geopolitical situation in the world; conflicts in various regions that affect the interests of major global players and require attention and resources; the crisis of international institutions and security mechanisms; the depletion of military arsenals of world armies, and the slow pace of replenishing needs by the military-industrial complex (despite the economic potential superiority of the collective West, its industry is currently unable to meet the needs of large-scale armed confrontation in a short period of time).

The possibility for Ukraine and the collective West to achieve a breakthrough on the battlefields of the Russo-Ukrainian war without political changes within Russia appears quite limited and entirely depends on the scale of deliveries of modern weapons. Overall, Western support will only lead to success when it initiates a process of political changes within Russia that will eliminate the source of aggression. Until then, any possible ceasefires and conflict freezes without achieving of real strategic goals of the Kremlin, even if supported by Ukrainian society, will only be temporary in nature, and confrontation will escalate each time at a higher level after the accumulation of new military capabilities for a new phase of aggression.

What the United States and Europe will do in the next six months will depend on which of two main scenarios materialize. According to the first scenario, Ukraine increases its forces to resume offensive operations and weaken Russian military power to such an extent that Kyiv can enter negotiations with enough leverage to impose a lasting peace. If the second scenario will happen, the lack of supplies and trained personnel will drag Ukraine into an exhausting struggle that will lead to its depletion and submission to Russia.

International partners of Ukraine should remember that the first result is desirable not only for Ukrainians. It is necessary to protect the international norms according to which states do not change their borders by force. Mobilized and unpunished Russia will create and strengthen a permanent threat to NATO, which will require endless efforts from the US and Alliance members to do in Europe. This will limit the American ability to project power in the Indo-Pacific region, significantly increase the risk of a conflict outbreak around Taiwan, distract from events in the Middle East region, etc.

Western policymakers must realize that long-term investments in their defense production capacities are readily available and will ultimately benefit all of Ukraine's allies. The combined defense budgets of the 54 countries supporting Ukraine exceed \$100 billion per month. At the same time, the current support for Ukraine costs these states less than \$6 billion per month.

Despite a number of objective problems with repairs and modernization, even the existing stocks of conventional munition and military equipment in Russia, complemented with growing production, can not only sustain continuation of fighting, but allows Moscow to get engaged into military confrontation with border NATO member countries on a horizon 3 to 5 years from now.

The Russian military-industrial complex (MIC) has effectively been put on a "military tracks," giving Russia an advantage over the collective Western military production, at least in the short term.

Sanctions and tightening of export controls by the international community did not deprive Russia of access to technology and components for military purposes, but also simultaneously stimulated import substitution and localization of production.

Assessments and forecasts regarding Russia are still possible, considering multiple contributing factors and strategic turbulence, but in terms of "hybrid warfare," Russia is almost prepared already and, in a few years, may be fully prepared for new aggressions against other countries, including armed invasions and territorial captures. As an example, the Baltic countries (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia) could be subjected to a combined lightning-fast ground offensive operation (measured in hours, maximum a few days) before any significant response from NATO.

It is well known that "generals always prepare for past wars." In the event of Russia initiating a military conflict/aggression against any other country, it will not be a copy of the current war against Ukraine, but rather a utilization of lessons learned during the ongoing conflict. It is logical to assume that preventive/perspective design of the new tactics of the Russian Armed Forces is already being carried out by the General Staff.

In Russia, a system of strategic state and military planning has been established and is functioning (different from Western approaches, which are heavily influenced by democratic procedures, changes of power and policies because of elections). It uses tools of adaptive planning, change management, etc. There are reasons to believe that scenarios of armed confrontation between Russia and Western countries are already being worked out and are at various stages of planning.

The state of the Russian Armed Forces after two years of war

The ongoing war has become a serious challenge for the Russian army. It was not prepared for a protracted war in this form, and the plan of the special operation initially looked different, most likely based on the experience of the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the partial occupation of Georgia in 2008, and the operation "Danube" - earlier invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.

As a result, the Kremlin has placed a bet on conducting a protracted war in which Russia has the advantage over Ukraine in both military and economy and can capitalize on its nuclear status to the Kremlin's benefit. To win in such an asymmetric war would be very difficult for Ukraine; it is unlikely that a large nuclear state will ever formally surrender.

Therefore, Russia's strategy consists of systematically upgrade and use its existing advantages in mobilization resources and military industrial potential while simultaneously working on reducing the foreign assistance provided to Ukraine. The war of attrition has already required Russia to reorganize its economy and industry, consolidate the regime and strengthen its power as well as to rebuild its military forces, which were seriously weakened by the first year of active fighting.

At the same time, among Ukrainian and Western audiences, there has been a certain euphoria regarding serious losses and weaknesses of the Russian army, which poses a significant danger for a sober assessment of the situation and the making forecasts.

On the one hand, the significant losses of the Russian Armed Forces in the war against Ukraine is an established fact (however, it is appropriate to speak of significant losses on both sides). But their quantitative and qualitative assessment causes a lot of disputes. For example, as of the beginning of 2023, Estonian military intelligence estimated that a serious amount of usable weapon systems, which are not so modern but still combat-ready, is

still stored in Russian bases and arsenals, and can be used (especially in case of conducting repairs or modernization).

Russia had already suffered noticeable losses in tanks and light armored vehicles – about 20-25% of the initial military power. Losses in artillery were also estimated at around 10% of the 5,000 combat-ready systems that Russia had before the war. By the end of 2023, the number of losses had increased, and according to consensus estimates, Russia lost approximately 315,000 people, at least 2,200 tanks, about 4,400 infantry fighting vehicles and armored personnel carriers, which constitutes at least 32% of their combined pre-war potential. The losses reduced the complexity and scale of Russian offensive operations, which failed to achieve significant success in Ukraine since the beginning of 2022.

At the same time, Russia was able to preserve and strengthen its conventional military forces by improving the conscription model and replenishing stocks of outdated Soviet-era equipment. Moreover, due to prohibition imposed on Ukraine on using Western weapons against targets on Russian territory, losses in delivery means for precision weapons (Iskander missile systems, S-300/-400 air defense systems, bomber aircrafts, coastal missile complexes, etc.) are either absent or limited to activities of resistance and saboteur groups on the Russian territory. Simultaneously, the military actions stimulated the Russian command to search for and implement new solutions and options for defend the occupied territories.

Regarding the ground component, the enemy, with the forces of the combined group of troops, continues offensive actions on the territory of the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine with the tasks of reaching the administrative borders of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, as well as preventing the loss of occupied territories in the south and, if possible, achieve their expansion.

Overall, as of the beginning of 2024, the current situation continues to be assessed as one that does not provide grounds for optimistic forecasts regarding a breakthrough and the possibility of achieving significant successes for either side during at least the winter campaign of 2023-2024, and possibly until the end of the current year.

NB: *As of the beginning of the year, the ground forces of the Russian Federation participating in combat operations against Ukraine approximately consist of: brigades - 63; regiments - 141; battalions - 102; squads - 46. In the Kursk, Belgorod, Voronezh, Rostov regions, and in Crimea, there are 11 tactical missile groups (44 Iskander missile systems). Taking into account losses and replenishment of combat units, the strength of the aggressor's forces is estimated as follows: personnel - up to 460,000; tanks - 2,940; armored combat vehicles - 6,900; artillery systems - 4,690; multiple rocket launchers - 1,120; missile systems - 44.*

Additionally, the National Guard of the Russian Federation (Rosgvardiya) consists of: one brigade; five battalion tactical groups; 44 tactical groups; 111 consolidated police units (OMON - 76 and SOBR - 35). The total strength is as follows: personnel - up to 35,000; tanks - 30; armored combat vehicles - 645; artillery systems - 203; helicopters - 20.

Russia's operational-tactical and army aviation in temporarily occupied territories and around Ukraine consisted of approximately 315 combat aircraft and around 290 helicopters. The Air Force and Air Defense Forces of Belarus have 29 combat aircraft and 29 helicopters (15 of which are attack helicopters) in their combat composition.

The transfer of additional weapons, military and special equipment, and the maneuvering of troops between operational directions in the fighting areas continues from the territory of the Russian Federation.

There are also no reasons to believe in reduction of the intensity of missile and aviation attacks against Ukraine. The intelligence agencies confirm that the depletion of Russia's missile stocks will not occur any time soon, considering the quantity and intensity of current missile and aviation strikes, the existing stockpiles, and the pace of their production increase. The Russian Armed Forces maintain a sufficient reserve of precision strike weapons. Therefore, the trend of attacking both military and civilian targets will continue in 2024.

Accordingly, the continuation of missile strikes with high-precision means, including ballistic missiles, strike UAVs, and guided aviation bombs, is expected on administrative and industrial centers, energy infrastructure, aviation concentration areas, troop reserves, ammunition, and fuel stocks throughout the territory of Ukraine. The possibility of intensifying strikes on energy infrastructure remains depending on weather conditions.

Overall, Russia continues its strategy of prolonging the war, attempting to retain and expand temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine, for which it will continue to transfer additional troops, weapons, military and special equipment from the Russian inland to the operational areas, as well as to produce more cruise and ballistic missiles and strike UAVs.

In the long-term perspective, Russians are taking measures to ensure the replenishment of troops, introducing new methods of attracting/motivating citizens to join the army, which confirms their intentions to conduct a prolonged war. Western intelligence agencies also confirm active preparations and additional measures to equip the Russian Armed Forces, while attempting to carry them out in a highly secretive manner.

After the failure of offensive operations in 2023, both from Ukraine and from Russia, the narrative that the war has reached a deadlock is being promoted in the international media. The perception of an indefinite but static conflict evokes a sense of fatigue in the capitals of Ukraine's partners, and this is advantageous for Russia. However, such a representation of a stalemate situation may be erroneous. Both Moscow and Kyiv are striving to restore their offensive combat potential. But in a conflict of this scale, this process takes a long time.

Although the first half of 2024 may bring little change in control over Ukrainian territory, the material resources, training of personnel, and losses suffered by each side will determine the long-term trajectory of the conflict. Therefore, the collective West is currently faced with a choice: to support Ukraine so that it can defend its territory and launch a successful offensive, or to succumb to Putin's pressure, retreat, and force its ally, Kiev, into a humiliating bargain with the Kremlin in negotiations for a ceasefire from a position of weakness. This will undoubtedly be perceived as a military defeat not only for Ukraine but also for the entire West and will cast doubt on the geopolitical leadership of the United States.

Uncertainty regarding long-term assistance to Ukraine not only poses the risk of Russia gaining an advantage on the battlefield but also gives Moscow additional geopolitical confidence. The wavering of Western countries has already undermined previous attempts to push Russia into negotiations, as the Kremlin now has valid reasons to believe it can hold out longer than the West. And if new pressure does not happen in early 2024, the Kremlin's resolve will only strengthen.

The biggest obstacles to Ukraine in winning the war are of a political nature. Financing Ukraine is often perceived as simply providing money to Kyiv. However, this is a deeply deceptive notion. A significant portion of the assistance that Ukraine needs is investments from its partners in its own defense production and national security as a whole. A significant portion of the aid to Ukraine will be returned in the form of taxes and will contribute to the creation of new jobs in the defense industries of NATO member countries. In times of economic crisis, such investments, with effective communication policies, should not be hidden but be widely advertised to become welcomed by the societies of the countries of Rammstein coalition.

Some leaders in Western capitals raise their voice to intensify negotiations to end the war in Ukraine. However, this position does not take into account the scale and nature of Russia's actual goals or what the Kremlin can realistically offer. Putin is not interested in simply seizing part of Ukrainian territory or even establishing full control over Ukraine. Russian leader has repeatedly stated that he wants to change the ultimate logic of the system of international relations and security.

If the US will persuade its partners to make concessions to Russia in order to achieve a symbolic ceasefire, two things are likely to happen with opposite results from what is expected. Firstly, Russia will persistently violate the ceasefire regime, as it has done before with all previous versions of the Minsk agreements, while simultaneously rebuilding its army to complete the tasks of occupying Ukraine and selecting new victims for its aggressive policies. Secondly, Russia will prove to its allies that the United States and the "collective West" can be defeated through persistence and audacity. This will likely lead many of US's security partners to seek alternatives, eventually reducing the existing level of American influence worldwide. While the active phase of the Russian-Ukrainian war continues, the Kremlin will not seek direct armed conflict with NATO in the form of "conventional warfare." However, Moscow will expand the sphere of confrontation with the West in the format of "hybrid warfare." A possible ceasefire in Ukraine will only increase Putin's capabilities.

In fact, the failed rebellion of Prigozhin helped to better understand the ambitions of the Kremlin. The remnants of his mercenaries were reorganized into a kind of expeditionary corps under the direct control of the military and intelligence services. Since the summer of 2023, Russia has been actively engaging with the governments of Western and Central African countries, promising them military support in exchange for getting rid of the presence of Western troops and winding down economic projects of Western countries. Russian intelligence and sabotage activities in European countries have also been intensified.

Thus, there is a risk of misinterpreting both the current state of the Russian army (and the security forces in general) and the level of losses of the Russian Armed Forces in the war against Ukraine in the context of potential military threats to Western countries. After all, the above only prompted the Russian leadership to implement measures to restore and enhance its military potential.

As confirmation of this thesis, it is appropriate to provide an example that took place quite recently: on December 9, 2023, an expanded meeting of the Collegium of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation was held at the National Defense Control Center, which was attended by President Putin. In his speech, he noted that for the Armed Forces of Russia, year 2023 "was intense, however, the military professionally and courageously achieved the objectives" of the "special military operation" in Ukraine. The President also drew the attention of those present to the fact that during the operation, problems were identified that need to be resolved in the near future, in particular: to rebuild communication systems; increase the production of precision ammunition and UAVs; improve air defense systems and start actively using modern reconnaissance technologies, and he particularly emphasized that the strategic goals of the war remain unchanged.

It should not be ignored that in 2023, thanks to the implementation of the national arms procurement program, the work of defense enterprises, the level of modern weapons and equipment of the strategic nuclear forces of the Russian Armed Forces as a whole has reached 95%, and the naval component has reached almost 100%. The state defense procurement plan has been fulfilled by 98%.

Commenting on the current situation in the combat zone in Ukraine, Putin stated that Russian forces "hold the initiative, while the enemy has already depleted their reserves." According to him, all attempts to defeat the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation "have been shattered by the courage and resilience of the Russian soldier."

Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu provided a similar assessment. In his opinion, the Russian army is currently the most prepared and combat-ready in the world; all plans for staffing the army and navy have been fully implemented this year; all planned activities for operational and combat training have been completed; the military education system is actively developing; the pace of military-technical cooperation with foreign countries is increasing; all plans for the military-industrial complex have been fulfilled; significant patriotic and cultural projects have been implemented; overall, all tasks set for the Armed Forces for 2023 have been completed; the required level of defense capability of the country has been ensured.

Accordingly, the priority tasks for 2024 have been determined by the military-political leadership of the Russian Federation:

- continue the special military operation until the tasks set by the Supreme Commander-in-Chief are fully implemented;
- focus main efforts in combat training on the qualitative preparation of newly formed units, as well as on the cohesion of new formations and existing military units;
- ensure the preservation of peace and stability in Syria and Karabakh for Russian military contingents in a changing environment;
- implement a complex of measures for operational and combat training taking into account the "threats of further NATO expansion to the East";
- prepare and conduct the strategic command and staff exercise "Ocean-2024";
- complete the work on putting the nuclear missile complex "Sarmat" on combat duty in the Strategic Missile Forces;
- Put two new Tu-160M strategic missile carriers into service in the aviation strategic forces;
- Introduce an atomic submarine cruiser of the Borei-A project "Knyaz Pozharsky" into the fleet, as well as three other submarines and 11 naval ships;
- Increase the production volumes of high-precision hypersonic missile complexes "Kinzhal" and "Zircon", and increase missile and ammunition supplies by 1.8 times;
- Continue work on other perspective weapons;
- Increase the number of contract servicemen, increasing staffing of new formations to 745 thousand people by the end of the year;
- Ensure timely construction of military and social infrastructure facilities, considering the growing needs of the armed forces.

Any armed conflict allows for the practical testing of pre-war approaches to war preparation and conduct. Considering that the actual war between Russia and Ukraine began in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and the implementation of the "Novorossiya" project, the Russian side had enough time to study the realities of modern armed conflict and prepare for a large-scale aggression against Ukraine.

Currently, due to the centralization of the state military management system in Russia, the time for studying combat experience, searching for high-tech solutions, and implementing innovations in military operations has been significantly reduced.

Moreover, it can be stated today that most Russian military personnel, totaling over 650,000 individuals at all levels of the military hierarchy, possess now extensive combat experience in modern large-scale warfare on an extended theater of operations, which is not available by the majority of NATO member countries' servicemen.

The Russian army learns lessons from the ongoing war and adapts to the conditions that initially created many problems. This primarily concerns changes in tactics, the mass use of drones and electronic warfare means; transitioning to deep defense in certain areas of the front; abandoning the use of large military groups; seeking ways to increase firepower, primarily artillery; adapting the supply system of the front line to the conditions of using long-range precision weapons. The expansion of tasks and significant prolongation of the war puts before the leadership of Russia the task of increasing and strengthening the army.

Russia has mobilized its military industry and increased its defense budget to over \$100 billion, which accounts for 5.5% of GDP. Preliminary budget planning includes similar amounts for the period 2025-2026. Moscow is actively seeking opportunities to establish and increase arms and ammunition supplies from other countries, and it is succeeding in doing so. Thanks to supplies from Iran or North Korea, Russia will be able to buy time to develop its own military industry.

Mobilization resource

For prolonged armed conflicts, the availability of human resources is always a sensitive issue. Today, there are grounds to believe that this issue is being more or less successfully addressed in the Russian Federation, and this indicator ensures the achievement of the Kremlin's military and political objectives. In particular, the Russian authorities claim that the flow of volunteers and contract soldiers is not decreasing, the plan to attract servicemen to the troops is being exceeded, so there is no need for a new mobilization. In December of last year, Russian President Vladimir Putin publicly acknowledged the politic sensitivity of a potential second wave of mobilization and emphasized that he does not see the immediate need for it. He noted that within the campaign to recruit volunteers, 486,000 people were recruited in a year. After the partial mobilization, a campaign began to attract people to sign contracts with the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation on a voluntary basis. By the end of 2023, it was planned to recruit more than 412,000 people.

Currently, there are 244,000 mobilized individuals in the military operation zone, with 41,000 being discharged "due to reaching the maximum age, health issues, etc." On November 13, 2023, Dmitry Medvedev announced that approximately 410,000 people had been enlisted in the Armed Forces under contract since January 1. On October 3, 2023, Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu confirmed that there were no plans for a new mobilization and promised not to send conscripts to the front. On June 20, 2023, the State Duma passed a law on conscripting suspects and convicts into the Russian army under contract. Prior to this, partial mobilization was conducted in Russia in September and October 2022, with 300,000 people being called up according to the Ministry of Defense. The recruitment of contract soldiers is expanding overall, including from remote or depressed regions and social groups, who, thanks to their service in the Russian Armed Forces, receive a noticeable social lift and become fully loyal to the Kremlin regime.

The above is reinforced by systematic work on managing and controlling the information space, clear control of attitudes in military formations and their command, including through the presence of a system of indoctrination and psychological support for troops, the use of a wide range of administrative and other coercive measures, which are complemented by activities at the state and regional levels to attract individuals to military service, motivate and provide social care for servicemen and their families.

A significant part of the personnel, whose service involves direct combat contact with the enemy (infantry, airborne troops, tank crews, etc.), has gone through "combat training" (including numerous "meat grinders") and, in terms of their professionalism and combat spirit (in other words, their ability to withstand the negative factors of modern warfare), is at a higher level compared to the majority of personnel in similar units of NATO member countries' armed forces.

Surprisingly for many, Russian society as a whole shows a high tolerance for losses, significantly higher than expected based on the experience of wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya. The threshold of psychological resilience towards the growing number of dead bodies and destruction among the general population and the personnel of Russia's security forces is objectively higher compared to Western countries (this is also confirmed by the results of sociological surveys regarding the high level of support from citizens for the "Special Operations Forces" and the war against Ukraine as a whole). As a result, this becomes a serious advantage for the Russian Armed Forces in the event of an armed confrontation with NATO member countries.

The search for non-conventional solutions for the staffing of the Russian Armed Forces is also underway. In particular, Vladimir Putin recently signed a decree on granting Russian citizenship to foreign citizens who have signed a contract for military service and their family members. In the more distant perspective, the mobilization resource of the Russian Armed Forces, currently estimated at 3 million people, may approach exhaustion, which will lead to an increase in political costs and a demand for revolutionary changes, but this requires time and effort on behalf of international community.

Political control of Putin over the Russian Armed Forces and public opinion within the Russian army

The invasion of Ukraine became a challenge for the regime, the Russian army, and a test for public opinion in the country. Most assessments until 2022 assumed that Russian society would be much less approving of the war with Ukraine; however, the regime managed to maintain control over information policy, narratives of the war, and public sentiments as a whole.

Uniformed personnel in the Russian Federation has historically been selected and promoted on the basis of loyalty to the authorities, exclusion of personal political ambitions, while professional or moral qualities were considered secondary.

In rare cases, high positions in the military hierarchy were occupied by true professionals who enjoyed true support by their troops but demonstrated independence of views. But that often ended in their resignation or even death, including during the current Russian-Ukrainian war.

In general, the Russian army to some extent mirrors the general public opinion in the country. It can be said that the so-called "special military operation" is perceived as a unfortunate but necessary measure; criticism of the top political leadership is quite limited; although tactical plans and strategic objectives may become the subject of harsh discussions within the Russian Armed Forces personnel. Overall, after the crisis period of the summer of 2023, the Kremlin regained control and initiative in promoting its narratives to the Russo-Ukrainian war. Most dissatisfied individuals, including those in the army, are marginalized.

However, the sudden for many invasion of 2022 revealed some conflicts and polarization of opinions within the Russian army, primarily at the command level. Disputes between the Ministry of Defense and the General Staff on one hand, and the commanders of individual major formations (for example, the conflict between Gen. Gerasimov and Gen. Popov, the commander of the 58th Army) about methods of conducting the war, ammunition supplies, or rotation. They cast doubt on the very idea of conducting a "special operation" and are not related to criticism of the top political leadership. Similar contradictions can be observed between other influential groups within the General Staff and the Ministry of Defense.

Sanctions restrictions have also not led to a noticeable change in the lifestyle of the military leadership at all levels and their families.

Overall, the Russian army does not demonstrate signs of decay or a crisis of trust. Despite numerous speculations and assumptions about the "crisis of disobedience" (mass refusal of troops to follow orders), mostly based on intercepted conversations, the army remains a manageable force without significant internal contradictions that would go beyond the usual. For example, frequently mentioned ethnic conflicts ("Tuvinians," "Kadyrovites," etc.) most likely do not have a significant influence on the state of minds in the Russian army. Most disagreements and conflicts are based on a violation of subordination in the senior leadership and the distrust of some generals towards the Ministry of Defense. The peak of these processes occurred during the most challenging period for the Russian army in terms of military defeats - the second half of 2022.

The most critical moment, close to a split, came in the summer of 2023, and its illustration was the Prigozhin uprising. Even though it was not a systemic problem, this incident demonstrated deep differences in the assessment of goals and methods of war among Russian military leaders. The confrontation between the Wagner PMC and the Ministry of Defense is widely known, and the Prigozhin rebellion showed the world (and helped the Kremlin identify) weaknesses in the structure of the Russian armed forces. As a result of the rebellion, several senior officers were detained, interrogated, or dismissed. Overall, the rebellion was suppressed, and the Kremlin regained control of the situation. In a sense, it even accelerated changes that allowed for the resolution of the private military companies issue.

Paramilitary and proxy groups

Before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and during the initial periods after it, Russia actively used private military companies (PMCs) in its policy - a tool that allowed projecting military capabilities while avoiding responsibility.

It continues to do so now, although the Wagner PMC rebellion has provoked a number of structural changes. The Kremlin has realized the risks of a "militarized country" with a huge number of veterans, retired military/law enforcement personnel (as well as employees of the military-industrial complex), and patriotic-minded youth who have the potential and motivation to carry out their professional activities not only in the security sector but also in potential domestic political confrontation. In this regard, in 2023, the state decided to strengthen its influence and control over their activities, including preventing the creation of armed monopolies (such as the Wagner PMC) and the emergence of various militarized formations in the hands of local authorities. On the other hand, within the power structures (Russian Armed Forces, National Guard), volunteer formations receive comprehensive support.

A recent example is the emergence of a special "security" structure created by the authorities of Moscow at the Kremlin's direction, which since the summer of 2023 has been acquiring more and more characteristics of a paramilitary structure. In November 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin granted the authorities of Moscow the power to create a special security structure allegedly for the protection of the capital's subway system. Subsequently, it was named the "departmental security of the Moscow government." Since July 2023, this structure has begun to acquire more qualities of a paramilitary organization, in particular, it has been granted permission to use firearms. Authorities plan to attract 15,000 people to it, of which several thousand have probably already been recruited. This is another example of the Russian tradition of creating paramilitary structures independent of the regular army.

The project also provides an opportunity for Moscow residents to voluntarily take on "patriotic" duties during wartime, thereby avoiding deployment to the front lines in Ukraine. Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyenin has successfully limited the direct impact of the conflict on the city's residents, who are relatively well-off. After all, most Russians who contribute to the Russian statistics of losses in Ukraine come from poorer provinces.

Private military companies and other militarized formations played a dual role in Russia. On the one hand, they provide an additional military resource with special skills and a fairly high level of experience and discipline. On the other hand, they reflect the emerging trends of regionalization in Russia. Starting from the summer of 2022, a wave of creating regional voluntary battalions swept across the country: several dozen of them were created in various regions of Russia. The war created a demand for such structures, but at the same time intensified speculation that regional battalions could become a harbinger and tool of political conflicts within Russia. However, in 2023, the Russian leadership managed to overcome crisis in relations between various militarized formations and the state, suppressed the rebellion of Prigozhin, and established effective control over private military companies within the framework of the overall structure of the Russian army.

PMC "Wagner" operated in Africa, the Middle East, and Ukraine, particularly known for its involvement in heavy fighting in Bahmut (the group's numbers in Ukraine reached 50,000 people). The group's work in the CAR, Libya, Sudan, and Mali played an important role in advancing Russian interests in Africa. After Prigozhin's rebellion, the group received new leadership and became less independent, remaining an instrument of Russian policy. Based on the model of PMC "Wagner," several other groups were organized, such as the Crimean "Konvoy," "Shield," "Patriot," "Redoubt," "Slavic Corps," etc. "Patriot" has closer ties with the Russian Ministry of Defense; PMC "Shield," actively participating in Russia's invasion of Ukraine, increased the size of its composition to several thousand people; and PMC "Redoubt," whose work is coordinated by military intelligence (GRU), became the largest formation of mercenaries in Russia after the Wagnerites' mutiny.

Kadyrovites, organized into several units, such as OMON "Akhmat-Grozny," with a strength of several thousand people, also participated in wars in Syria and Ukraine. These units were integrated into the Russian Armed Forces and the National Guard. PMC "Espanola" was created, involving nationalist radicals, including soccer fans (ultras), to participate in combat operations against Ukraine.

Cossack (traditional Slavic mercenaries) volunteers also participate in the war as a numerous and active militarized formation. The Cossack movement has existed in various forms in Russia for a long time, and in the context of the ideology of the "Russian World," additional functions are assigned to it. The Cossacks have formed several units to participate in the war against Ukraine, and in addition, new structures are being created in the occupied territories, where the topic of Cossackhood is historically relevant.

Thus, numerous private military companies and other paramilitary formations were created and used by the Kremlin to conduct hybrid operations inside the country and abroad. At the initial stage of their use, they were mainly employed to perform police functions in the occupied territories. After the failure of the initial plan for a rapid defeat of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, they were used as one of the ways to quickly replenish the combat ranks with trained military personnel in place of destroyed elite Russian military units. While the General Staff and the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation were establishing a system of management and staffing of the army in accordance with the new requirements of real war, private military companies (in particular, Prigozhin's) were even entrusted with conducting operations at the operational level (like storming and capturing Bahmut and Soledar). At the moment, these PMCs and other paramilitary formations are either integrated into the overall system of the Russian Armed Forces under unified command, or deployed to foreign theaters of hybrid warfare, or ceased to exist.

Western intelligence agencies note that the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardiya) is actively increasing its resources and personnel in response to growing threats to Russia's internal security, largely caused by the war against Ukraine. Since October 2023, units of the former private military company "Wagner" have been incorporated into the composition of the Rosgvardiya, and on January 3, 2024, the "Vostok" battalion from the

so-called Donetsk People's Republic joined as well. Russia is also making efforts to restructure the "Kaskad" group, which specializes, among other things, in the use of drones, in order to subordinate its units to the Rosgvardiya. In July 2023, the State Duma allowed the Rosgvardiya to use heavy weapons. These new capabilities, along with the addition of experienced veterans from other groups, will likely lead to a significant increase in Rosgvardiya's combat readiness. However, as demonstrated by the example of the Prigozhin's mutiny, the likelihood of utilizing this potential in a situation of political destabilization raises serious doubts.

This rebellion in June 2023 showed a certain weakness of Putin's regime and the unpreparedness of Russia's security forces to defend it. The uprising demonstrated the society's and the security forces' desire to remain neutral towards all kinds of "revolutionaries," which indirectly signals a refusal of the military personnel to intervene in political struggles on either side in the future.

At the same time, these events indicate a low probability of catastrophic scenarios such as the disintegration of Russia or a civil war on its territory. The likelihood of inertia-driven scenarios of change within the regime itself appears significantly higher, with minimal involvement of the personnel of Russian law enforcement and security structures.

Russia's offensive potential in cyberspace

In addition to traditional capabilities of armed resistance in the Russian Armed Forces, the development of capabilities for cyberspace warfare continues. Using the example of Ukraine, the intensity of Russian cyber-attacks against critical infrastructure, state and private information resources, and other destructive actions in cyberspace remains high. Quite recently, on December 25th, 2023, there was another massive attack by the Russian hacker group APT28 against users in Ukraine and Poland. In December, the leading Ukrainian mobile operator "Kyivstar" also suffered a severe attack. The hacker attack led to the destruction of about 40% of the company's systems, causing a massive disruption in its operations. The attackers had two goals: to destroy the infrastructure itself and to sow chaos among the population.

During the massive Russian aviation strike on Ukraine on the night of December 28-29, 2023, disruptions in the operations of major providers were also noted, indicating attempts at comprehensive influence on Ukraine by the aggressor, including in cyberspace.

Thus, the potential and influence of Russian hacker groups de facto have already been recognized, and in the event of any conflict, they will be systematically exercised. Russia demonstrates both readiness and ability to carry out offensive cyber operations at a strategic level, which significantly complement other "methods of influence."

The threat of confrontation with the NATO

The Union of Russia and Belarus in the west directly borders six NATO countries: Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland, and Norway.

In the north lies a vast zone of strategic economic and military interests - the Arctic.

In the east, Russia has direct access to the territory of the United States (and indirectly to Canada). In the Black Sea, the Russian fleet interacts with Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey.

The western and northern directions are the most dangerous in military terms. It is not coincidence that the plans of the Russian Armed Forces for 2024 include the restoration of the abolished Leningrad and Moscow military districts by Dmitry Medvedev in 2010, which indicates Moscow's interest in reinforcement of its northwestern

flank under the pretext of countering alleged threats from Finland. In fact, this means doubling intelligence activity and intensifying the creation of footholds that can be used primarily against the Baltic countries and in the direction of Arctics.

The initiated transfer of Wagner PMC forces to Belarus, which was halted after the murder of Yevgeny Prigozhin, may well indicate attention to the problem of the so-called Suwalki Corridor - a territory on the border between Poland and Lithuania, separating Belarus from the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad Oblast. This area appears to be the most probable for conducting military provocations against the NATO bloc.

It is also worth noting that the capital of Lithuania, Vilnius, is less than 50 km from the Belarusian border, which opens up the possibility of a swift strike in that direction.

Finally, it is precisely this area that the Kremlin has chosen to deploy tactical nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory. It is unlikely that this is a random coincidence.

Also recently, the Russian side has been intensifying its aggressive rhetoric, accusing the West of preparing for a conflict in the Arctics, which may also indicate preparation for a direct conflict with NATO. Russian media resources increasingly mention the Arctics as an area of expanding Russian influence, while simultaneously testing public opinion and reactions both domestically and abroad. Although official sources claim that Russian military presence in the Arctics aims at economic development rather than a show of force, this should not mislead anyone.

Recent statements from the Kremlin about this region may be part of a broader Russian strategy, which amplifies the informational background to justify Russian aggressive plans in the Arctics against the West.

Using the example of the history of a large-scale invasion of Ukraine, informational campaigns precede military actions, which is why the situation in the Arctics requires close attention from the international community. Western intelligence agencies have previously pointed to Russia's efforts to reorganize and expand its military capabilities for operations in the Arctics regions. This only confirms hypotheses about preparations for war against Western countries and NATO as a whole. The escalation of nuclear rhetoric and potential preparations for nuclear tests in the Arctics may be part of the Kremlin's strategy to destabilize the West and project its strength.

Russian nuclear threat

Russian nuclear weapons play an important role in war: they prevent the escalation of conflict to disadvantageous levels for Russia and make victory over Russia in the traditional sense of the word fundamentally impossible in the eyes of many in the West.

Russia's foreign policy is guided by the principle of strategic initiative, which is ensured by the presence of large arsenals of nuclear weapons – approximately 5,977 warheads, of which about 1,500 have been decommissioned or await dismantling. A total of 1,588 strategic warheads are deployed in Russia. This arsenal significantly surpasses any other, except for the one controlled by the United States.

Assessing the state of Russia's nuclear weapons is not easy. According to some estimates, up to 60% of Russian missiles have technical deficiencies. In addition, the ability of Russian specialists to provide maintenance of individual components of nuclear warheads is also questionable, especially when it comes to fairly old nuclear means. On the other hand, Russia is completing a long and expensive program to modernize its nuclear weapons: on the eve of the invasion of Ukraine, Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu stated that the share of modern weapons in the nuclear triad had reached a record 89.1%. There is no doubt that a significant portion of Russia's nuclear

arsenal is in working condition, and when planning strategic countermeasures against Moscow, no one should assume otherwise.

However, as of the beginning of 2024, based on open sources of official assessments from the major foreign states, their defense departments, and intelligence agencies regarding the threat of the Russian Federation's use of weapons of mass destruction (hereinafter referred to as WMD), the following conclusions can be drawn:

- at the moment, there is no information about an immediate threat of Russia using nuclear weapons against Ukraine and/or its partners;
- the potential threat of nuclear weapons use has significantly increased compared to the period before February 24, 2022, and reached its highest level by the beginning of October 2022. However, as a result of pressure exerted on the Russian leadership by foreign countries and international organizations (including in the format of nuclear deterrence actions against Russia by demonstrating readiness for asymmetric countermeasures), by the beginning of 2023, this threat has somewhat decreased. In relation to Ukraine, the level of threat of impact ranges from regional to national, with the possibility of radioactive contamination spreading to neighboring countries in the event of the use of nuclear weapons;
- during the Russian-Ukrainian war, the relevance of "dirty bomb" technologies in the information space has increased, and the threat of their use, including subsequent accusations against the Ukrainian side, has also increased. The level of threat of impact ranges from targeted to local;
- overall, the threat of the use of nuclear weapons and "dirty bomb" technologies by Russia in 2023 is primarily assessed as a means of exerting informational pressure on the leadership and general population of the Western nations;
- there remains a constant threat of technogenic emergencies with radiation contamination of the area due to the potential destruction of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant and other nuclear energy facilities. By the beginning of 2023, the level of threat increased due to the release of water by the occupiers from the reservoir that supplies the cooling systems of the mentioned nuclear power plant. The level of threat ranges from local to regional in the event of significant destruction;
- the threat of technogenic emergencies with chemical contamination of the area remains at the same level due to the destruction of chemical plants or storage sites for hazardous chemicals (such as chlorine reserves for water purification, etc.), primarily at the facility level and partially at the local level. The level of threat ranges from local to regional;
- there were recorded cases of the use of chemical toxic substances by Russian forces at the tactical level (dropping grenades with toxic substances from unmanned aerial vehicles, etc.), and they continue to periodically occur.

The Kremlin deliberately shapes a sustainable perception of Russia's national interests in Russian society and the international community, justifying geopolitical dominance in the post-Soviet space and nuclear weapons as a tool to guarantee real national sovereignty.

Throughout 2023, there were a series of events that confirmed the Kremlin's intentions to increase its nuclear potential and use existing opportunities to blackmail the global community with the threat of its use.

In particular, in November 2023, Russia withdrew from the treaty banning nuclear tests. Then the Kremlin conducted a series of tests of the "Yars" and "Bulava" missiles - carriers of nuclear warheads, which, although partially unsuccessful, provided developers with necessary information for their further improvement.

Vladimir Putin recently took part in a flag-raising ceremony on two nuclear submarines. This demonstrates the Kremlin's intention to expand its naval capabilities far beyond its traditional spheres of influence. The increase in nuclear rhetoric and potential preparation for nuclear tests in the Arctics may be part of the Kremlin's strategy to destabilize the West and demonstrate its power. Experts note that the demonstrative use of nuclear weapons by Russia in the Arctics, although unlikely, could backfire on Putin and lead to serious international consequences.

At the same time, Russia is developing other means of delivering nuclear weapons that can overcome modern and future missile defense systems. In particular, Putin has threatened Western countries with the hypersonic missile "Avanguard," which, according to Russian propagandists, has no analogues in the world and cannot be intercepted by any missile defense system.

Simultaneously, active development of non-nuclear components of strategic influence continues, primarily long-range precision weapons capable of overcoming missile defense systems. The experience of using missiles such as "Kinzhal," "Onyx," and strikes from S-300/-400 air defense systems against ground targets during the war against Ukraine has stimulated their active development while increasing production capacities.

The Russian side is also actively developing the hypersonic missile project 3M22 "Zirkon," designed to strike ships and land targets (with a warhead weighing 300 kg, reaching speeds of up to 6 Mach, and a firing range of 400 kilometers, subsequently increased to a thousand kilometers). Currently, the carriers of these missiles are the nuclear submarine K-560 "Severodvinsk" (project 885 "Yasen") and the frigate "Admiral Gorshkov" (project 22350), which are part of the Russian Northern Fleet. Despite the presence of these missiles in the armed forces, their use for strikes against Ukraine from ships is questionable. However, this does not mean that it is impossible during the current Russian-Ukrainian war and highly possible against targets in NATO member countries. Experts believe that as of the current year, Russia may already have stationary and/or mobile launch systems for "Zirkon" (for example, an adapted coastal missile complex "Bastion"). In 2022, the Russian Ministry of Defense announced that "Zirkon" has been put into service and serial production of this missile has begun.

Also, the deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus near the NATO borders indicates Russia's continued speculation on its nuclear arsenal. Western intelligence confirms tactical nukes transfer to Belarus as a means of additional pressure on the North Atlantic Alliance to decrease its military assistance to Ukraine. New nuclear storage location is a military airfield in the city of Lida, Grodno region, located 40 kilometers from the border with the NATO member country - Lithuania. The Belarusian Air Force unit equipped with Su-25 Frogfoot aircrafts is the most likely means of delivery.

It is important to note that precision-guided weapons (PGW) are non-nuclear strategic means of influence that, in terms of their destructive effect (application effect), come close to nuclear weapons but at the same time do not have such limitations (primarily political and environmental) on their use. Therefore, the lack of resolve and willingness to use actual nuclear weapons in Russia can be compensated by PGW, against which the collective West currently does not have sufficient resources for effective counteraction.

Nuclear weapons carriers

Type	Quantity	Manufactured	Warheads and payload (kilotons)	Assigned warheads
Land-based ballistic missiles				
SS-18 Satan (PC-20B «Voevoda»)	40	1988	10 x 500/800 (MIRV)	400
SS-19 Stiletto («Avanguard»)	6	2019	1 hypersonic	6
SS-25 Sickle (PC-12M «Topol»)	9	1988	1 x 800	9
SS-27 Sickle B (PC-12M1 «Topol-M») mobile	18	2006	1 x 800	18
SS-27 Sickle B (PC-12M2 «Topol-M») silo	60	1997	1 x 800	60
SS-29 Sickle B (PC-24 «Yars») mobile	153	2010	4 x 100 (MIRV)	612
SS-29 Sickle B (PC-24 «Yars») silo	20	2014	4 x 100 (MIRV)	80
SS-30 (PC-28 «Sarmat») silo	?	2022	10 x 500 (MIRV)	?
Total	306			1185
Naval-based ballistic missiles				
SS-N-23 Skiff (PCM-54 «Sineva»)	5/80	2007	4 x 100 (MIRV)	320
SS-N-32 (PCM-56 «Bulava»)	5/80	2014	6 x 100 (MIRV)	480
Total	10/160			800
Nuclear-capable bombers				
Tu-95MC6/MC16/MCM	55	1984/2015	6-16 cruise missiles AS-15A ALCM or 14 cruise missiles AS-23B ALC, plus bombs	448
Tu-160/M	13	1987/2021	12 cruise missiles AS-15B ALCM or AS-23B ALCM, plus bombs	132
Total	68			580

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The ability of the Russian Armed Forces to use precision weapons at the strategic level is characterized by the number of its carriers within the composition of the Aerospace Forces of the Russian Armed Forces:

Carriers of air-to-surface cruise missiles (as of January 2023)		
Airfield	Carrier	Quantity of carriers
Shaikovka	Tu-22M3	11
Engels	Tu-160/Tu-95MC/Tu-22M3	2/7/2
Ryazan/Dyagilevo	Tu-95MC/Tu-22M3	4/8
Olenia	Tu-95MC/Tu-22M3	14/40
Belaia	Tu-160/Tu-22M3/MiG-31K	9/38/9
Ukrainka	Tu-95MC/Tu-22M3	25/2
Soltsty	Tu-22M3	1
Kazan	Tu-160/Tu-95MC	2/1
Akhtubinsk	MiG-31K	1
Savasleika	MiG-31K	8
Mozdok	MiG-31K	2
Total number of air-to-surface cruise missiles (est.): X-22/32 – 190, X-101/X-555/X-55 – 118, hypersonic X-47M2 «Kinzhal» – 63		

In other words, in the context of the presence of controlled missiles RM-48U to the S-400/S-300 air defense systems, numerous tactical groups on the Iskander missile system, and other high-precision means of attack in the border areas of Russia and Belarus (usually with a distance of 20-30 km from the border), there is a high risk of mass destruction of ground objects throughout the depth of the territory of Poland, the Baltic states, and Finland in the event of Russian aggression against these states.

The resolve and ability of the Kremlin to use nuclear arms

The strategic concept of Russia's use of its nuclear arsenal at the moment is based on nuclear blackmail of Europe and the world as a whole in order to slow down Ukraine's armament and ultimately end the Russo-Ukrainian war on Russia's terms.

At the regulatory level in the Russian Federation, there is a defined procedure for the use of nuclear arms. In 2020 Vladimir Putin issued a decree on the basic principles (doctrine) of state policy in the field of nuclear deterrence. This is a strategic planning document that formulates the official views on the essence of nuclear deterrence and the conditions for the use of nuclear weapons by Russia. The document states that Russia considers nuclear weapons exclusively as a means of deterrence, its "policy in this area is defensive in nature and aimed at maintaining a nuclear potential at a level sufficient to ensure nuclear deterrence." It also emphasizes that the use of nuclear weapons can be a forced measure.

According to this document, Russia reserves the right to use nuclear weapons in the following cases:

1. upon receiving information about the launch of ballistic missiles attacking the territory of Russia or its allies;
2. in the event of an enemy's use of nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction against Russia or its allies;
3. when critical objects necessary for retaliatory nuclear forces are targeted;
4. in the case of aggression against Russia using conventional weapons, when the very existence of the state is threatened.

Nuclear doctrine is a formal document, but it is important. In this case, it allows Russia to establish "red lines," exert pressure on the West, and manipulate its allies, primarily Belarus.

The President of the Russian Federation is responsible for the state policy on nuclear deterrence, while the Ministry of Defense and the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces are involved in direct planning. The main type of a military threat, which would require nuclear deterrence to neutralize it, named the deployment of nuclear arms (or the delivery systems) on the territories of non-nuclear states. The doctrine also refers to the deployment of adversary missile defense systems, medium and short-range ballistic and cruise missiles, high-precision non-nuclear and hypersonic weapons, unmanned strike drones, and directed energy weapons. Another type of threat that may require nuclear deterrence, according to the document, is the placement of air defense and strike systems in space. Uncontrolled proliferation of nuclear weapons, technologies, and equipment is also classified as one of the most dangerous military threats.

It is not difficult to notice that out of the four conditions for the use of nuclear weapons, only one point (2) mentions the enemy's nuclear weapons. The other three allow for a nuclear response in case, firstly, to the shelling of Russian territory with ballistic missiles (including medium and short-range), secondly, to any undefined and unambiguous "impact" on critical objects, the destruction of which would lead to the failure of nuclear retaliatory actions, and thirdly, to aggression using conventional weapons, when the very existence of the Russian state is threatened.

It can be assumed that the current leadership of the Russian Federation may seriously consider the possibility of actually using nuclear weapons only in the latter case. In all other cases, the Kremlin's thinking will mainly revolve around the threats of its use to exert pressure on participants in military-political relations.

The events of the current Russo-Ukrainian war clearly confirm this conclusion. In response to Russian aggression, the Ukrainian side has already deployed and actively uses anti-missile defense systems (at least, we are talking about the Patriot missile system), medium and short-range cruise and ballistic missiles, precision non-nuclear weapons, and strike drones against the Russian Armed Forces.

Despite this, the current level of direct threat of Russia using nuclear weapons against Ukraine remains below the threshold that would require immediate decisive countermeasures from the international community. It is unlikely to increase even with the growing threat of Russia losing the occupied territories of Ukraine, including Crimea, which it illegally incorporated into its territory. Vladimir Putin has never shown suicidal tendencies, rather the opposite.

The threat of nuclear weapons, as a deterrent factor for NATO countries, is much more effective. And it is working perfectly now, influencing the pace of arms supplies to Ukraine, which matches the Kremlin's immediate objective.

A few days after the invasion, Putin ordered the Minister of Defense and the Chief of the General Staff to put the nuclear forces of the Russian army on a special regime of combat duty; and by the summer of 2023, he promised to deploy Russian tactical nuclear weapons on the territory of Belarus. These steps were taken as part of a complex of various measures to pressure the West in order to neutralize and restrain its efforts to counter Russian aggression in Ukraine.

It is predicted that the leadership of the Russian Federation will further use the factor of nuclear weapons and demonstrate a direct threat of its use (including through demonstrative actions of immediate deployment of carriers and preparations for strikes in combination with information activities and provocations) for political

pressure on the military-political leadership of Ukraine and foreign countries, as well as pressure on the population of the state to destabilize the socio-political situation in the country.

At the same time, there are currently no objective grounds to expect direct and open sabotage of the potential Putin's order to use nuclear weapons. However, the technical and organizational complexity of the multi-stage system of transmitting commands from the President of the Russian Federation to the launch of a nuclear missile, taking into account the overall technological and institutional degradation in Russia, raises doubts about its 100% reliability.

It is necessary to consider scenarios in a situation of internal political chaos. For example, the mental state (such as serious mental deviations or a sense of hopelessness) of individuals authorized to make a decision and/or give a command to use nuclear potential. A scenario of conspiracy by a group of individuals (such as patriotically inclined military personnel) to take control of nuclear weapons and use them for nuclear blackmail in the event of a direct threat to Russia in conditions of government inaction, although unlikely, can also be dangerous.

However, within the framework of the current system of keys (codes and permissions) in Russia, the danger of unauthorized use of nuclear weapons practically exists only in relation to the submarine component of the nuclear triad. The greatest danger is actually in the possibility of manufacturing dirty bombs - however, for this purpose, it is much more effective to use nuclear waste from nuclear power plants than nuclear warheads.

Not by chance, the most probable scenario of a radiation catastrophe continues to be considered an accident at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant with a loss of power to the circulation pumps, which will lead to the disruption of cooling of the reactor's active zone.

Finally, the scenario of Russia's collapse raises concerns for many, in which nuclear weapons come under the control of the governments of new states emerging on the country's territory. However, they will be unable to use nuclear weapons without access to the Command Center in the Moscow region; however, the potential threat of selling nuclear devices to third countries with their own delivery systems undoubtedly exists. It is worth mentioning that the storage sites for nuclear devices and means of their delivery are located in the ethnically Russian regions of the Federation, and there simply is no known base and/or launch site on the territory of the national republics. Therefore, this danger appears largely unfounded.

All types of threats associated with nuclear weapons in situations of chaos scenarios can only be mitigated through the preparation of special operations forces, which must counteract such actions. And in the current situation of weakening Russian statehood, there are all grounds to carry out such activities and training.

In conclusion, it should be said that the presence of nuclear weapons in Russia and the potential possibility of its use should not dominate as the main argument in decision-making centers of Western countries regarding support for Ukraine. At the same time, Russia's nuclear status will continue to determine NATO's policy of nuclear and non-nuclear deterrence towards Russia.

The military-industrial complex of the Russian Federation

After almost two full years of the war Russia's ability to continue fighting looks even more solid than in summer of 2022, when the Russian army was decimated to an extent a massive mobilization became inevitable; the Russian military production seemed unable to produce the needed munition, and Ukrainian armed forces successfully advanced in Kharkiv and Kherson regions.

However, the Russian military-industrial complex, which had significantly degraded over the past 30 years, underwent a reboot in 2022-23 and is now capable of sustaining production, modernization, and repair of conventional weapons in significant quantities, including innovative systems such as UAVs, electronic warfare, precision weapons, etc. Due to the ban for Ukraine to use Western weapons against targets on Russian territory, the Russian military-industrial complex remains practically invulnerable to the Armed Forces of Ukraine, unlike production facilities in Ukraine.

Russia has tripled its official military budget from Rub 3,11 trn in 2021 to Rub 10.8 trn in 2024 (and these numbers shouldn't fool anyone since, e.g., in 2023 when the total military allocations for the full year were projected at Rub 4.99 trn, Rub 5.59 trn were spent in the first six months of the year) and expanded its military production. Overall, in 2022-2023 the number of factories and enterprises that belong to the military industry, grew in Russia by 360 units, or by around a ¼ of their pre-war quantity, while at least 520 thousand new employees got their jobs in the sector. Of course, most of these newly established facilities are smaller than the Soviet-era enterprises, but they are much more flexible and market-oriented thus being able to provide a lot of high-quality produce.

One should also mention that the major problem the Russian military industry faced at the initial stage of the war – an acute shortage of semiconductors and chips – was set aside as their 'informal' imports skyrocketed starting from late 2022 and now exceed the pre-war levels.

Recently the Russian officials claimed that 'in communications technology, in missiles, electronic warfare and reconnaissance means the overall output grew more than fivefold; in armored weapons – by three times, in aviation equipment and drones – by two times'. Some of confidential sources in Moscow not only confirm these data but add that the number of tanks produced and modernized monthly last autumn was up to five times higher than prior to the war reaching 35-50 units a month (the most common Western estimates put it at around 200 units per year).

This may well happen because – even it sounds ridiculous – the military industry still represents rather a small fraction of the Russian economy. One needs to realize that for producing 1000 tanks per year only 0.12% of Russia's steel production is needed, and for stuffing 10 million of 152-mm shells with explosives Russia needs to reduce its ammonia exports by just 4 percent. Since the Russian budget is well funded by domestic borrowing and increases in tax proceeds (the deficit for FY 2023 was easily covered by domestic borrowing), there is no doubt that Putin will either increase the military spending further in 2025 or at least keep it at 2024 levels which is more than enough to boost the military production by up to 25-40% annually.

This has a direct impact on the situation on the battlefield. For example, in the summer of 2023, the Russian artillery fired about 5,000 shells per day, and towards the end of the year, it was almost twice as much. In the next year, the total number of available shells for the Russian army is forecasted to be approximately 5 million, including a doubling of their production compared to 2021. According to Russian authorities, in 2023, the Russian industry also increased the production of tanks and armored vehicles by about twice compared to 2022. President Putin promised that by 2025, Russia will produce and upgrade 1,600 main battle tanks. The monthly production of precision missiles is estimated to be around 50-120 units, and strike drones - at least several hundred. Taking into account foreign supplies, Russia can use up to 500-600 strike drones per month on the territory of Ukraine, and this number is likely to increase in the future.

The Russian factories these days seem unable to produce the most advanced military systems *en masse*, but what they can assemble is more than enough to continue destroying Ukraine firing three times more shells than the Ukrainian army does and sending hundreds of missiles every week to ruin Ukrainian cities. One should bear in

mind that all deliberations about existing chances to undermine the Russian military industry by sanctions should be stopped – this is a misleading paradigm that fools both the Ukraine’s defenders and their Western allies.

On the one hand, in Russia, there has been a hidden mobilization of old Soviet enterprises that, over the years of reforms and the absence of military orders, have lost a significant part of their potential. It has been supported by significant funds from the budget, the attraction of necessary personnel resources, and the activation of scientific support for military projects. On the other hand, private enterprises are actively involved in the interests of the security forces today, and start-up companies are supported, also receiving financial injections from the state, successfully bypassing international sanctions as a whole.

In Russia, mass production of modern strike means, unmanned systems, and other types of weapons has been deployed, the demand for which is determined by the Russian-Ukrainian war. The transition of the Russian economy to military rails continues, and the production of many military products within Russia is higher than in Western countries, which allows the Kremlin to keep up the scale of military operations. Moreover, by increasing military production and expenses for security forces (5.5% of GDP, 30% of the country's budget goes to defense, plus 10% for internal security), Putin will no longer be able to wind them down without serious social costs, which will inevitably push him towards future escalation of military actions both within and beyond Ukraine.

In this context, attention should be paid to Russia's procurement of the new missile systems (KN-23, KN-24, etc.) and other attack means in Iran and North Korea. Negotiations for the acquisition of short-range ballistic missiles from Iran are actively progressing, and they could potentially be delivered as early as this spring.

Moscow plans to further increase all key indicators of the Russian defense industry. These plans may not necessarily be easily or fully implemented, as the sanctions regime continues to impose restrictions on the operation of the Russian military production. However, the contradictory experience of sanctions over almost two years suggests that Russia retains a significant portion of its military-technological capabilities and is capable of increasing them, albeit at the expense of disproportionately high defense expenditures.

Section V. Scenarios of the future

The search for possible scenarios for resolving the situation surrounding the Russo-Ukrainian war is currently the subject of brainstorming sessions among foreign policy and military departments, both among the member countries of the Rammstein coalition and those opposing it.

Many politicians openly fear public discussions on this topic, as they believe it could provoke a negative reaction and escalate the conflict from the Kremlin's side, even to the point of nuclear threat. Some of them even consider any actions aimed at removing Putin and supporting Russian efforts to bring about political changes in Russia as a threat to the West. It is like considering the main threat to allies in 1944 the removal of Hitler due to potential instability in the Third Reich.

It should be acknowledged that NATO, by providing support to Ukraine, is already a party to the conflict in Europe. It is impossible to develop a strategy of behavior in wartime without taking any risks, except financial ones, without envisioning possible ways to end the conflict, without formulating our own interests (both publicly and in limited competent circles), and without analyzing the real, not just declared, limitations faced by the opponent and key players.

In this section, we attempt such an analysis, inviting the reader to engage in more in-depth discussions of the issues raised.

The aspirations of the main players following the Russian-Ukrainian war

The minimum acceptable scenario for Putin

The main task for Putin is to emerge from the war as a winner in the eyes of Russians, that is, to be able to say within the country that "we have achieved the desired results" (protected Russians in Ukraine, eliminated the threat from NATO, defended Crimea, etc.). For Russian elites and allied countries, it is important for him to be able to say that the West, with all its power, could not impose its will and values on Russia, which has only 2% of the world's GDP, that is, that it can compete on equal terms with the entire G7. This will particularly enhance Russia's status in its relations with China, which is currently clearly waiting to see how the conflict ends.

It is not so important for Putin whether international sanctions will continue to be in effect. The Russian economy has adapted to economic (sectoral) sanctions to some extent, and individual sanctions currently work in the Kremlin's interests, ensuring loyalty and dependence on the elites.

Possible and desired by many in the West ceasefire with the preservation of control over the actually captured territories of Ukraine, which Putin will use to regroup before the next military adventure - an option that the Russian leader is ready to go willingly and without prolonged hesitation (although, of course, he will try to bargain for disarmament, Ukraine's neutral status, or something else).

However, there is no need to harbor illusions: the ceasefire will not be a stable peace, and even under the conditions of a ceasefire, Putin will make every effort to prevent Ukraine from restoring its investment attractiveness and achieving political stability, and to remain a constant burden on the West. Of course, the restoration of Ukrainian infrastructure will also come at the expense of Western taxpayers.

Advantages of this scenarios for NATO countries

- Quick cessation of hostilities, the possibility of achieving an end to the hot phase of the war even before the elections in the United States and the United Kingdom.

Risks for NATO

- For many, this will appear as a defeat and a sign of weakness for the West. The implementation of this scenario will be a direct invitation for China to start an operation against Taiwan, for Venezuela against Guyana, and this will also affect the situation in the Middle East.
- The development of the military "Unholy Alliance" with China, Iran, and North Korea; the continuation of hybrid operations worldwide.
- After a respite, the danger of military confrontation between Russia and NATO countries will sharply increase.
- The political situation and the human rights crisis in Russia will deteriorate rapidly.
- Ukraine will demand additional financial injections, and its recovery will be fully funded by the West.

The minimum acceptable scenario for Russian government and business elites

The main goal of Russian elites is to return to the point before February 2022, or even better, to somewhere in 2010 when all the advantages of developed Putinism were combined with good relations with the West.

Essentially, Russian elites want to preserve Putinism without Putin at the helm of the state.

To achieve this, they are willing to sacrifice many things, but in a way that does not lose control over the state machine, preserving it in its unchanged form. Therefore, we can assume the maximum parameters of an acceptable compromise for them:

- International immunity from prosecution for bureaucrats and military personnel;
- Retaining Crimea while withdrawing from other occupied territories;
- No reparations payments (with the actual, but not public, abandonment of frozen assets of the Central Bank of Russia);
- Preserving the Russian legal and law enforcement system, gradual liberalization of domestic policy without abrupt movements.

Their main request to the West is the lifting of sanctions, primarily personal ones. If this happens, Russia will focus on developing trade relations with China, India, and countries in the global South.

Advantages of this scenarios for NATO countries

- Russia's exit from the war;
- The possibility of declaring victory for the West;
- Respite (possibly prolonged) in the confrontation with Russia

Risks for NATO

- Probable resentment in Russian society, similar to the situation after World War I in Germany;
- After a lull, there will be a sharp increase in the danger of conservative political forces coming to power in Russia, followed by a military confrontation with NATO countries;

- The political situation and human rights crisis in Russia will not change and will be preserved;
- Those responsible for the war will not be punished and will feel assured of their impunity in the future;
- There will be further economic and geopolitical strengthening of China;
- Ukraine will demand additional financial injections, and its recovery will be fully funded by the West.

The minimum acceptable scenario for Russian security forces

Russian security forces under the rule of Vladimir Putin have developed into a full-fledged corporation over the years - a branched structure consisting of numerous competing groups, but with common interests and values. From the very first days of his rule, the Russian leader built them as a counterweight to the business elites that had formed and subordinated the post-Soviet state bureaucracy during Boris Yeltsin's time, known as the "systemic liberals".

As a result, today the security forces maintain different aspirations and a general hostility towards the "systemic liberals", and when analyzing key interest groups in Russia, they should be considered separately.

At a time when "system liberals" are focused on the past, the "golden age of Putin," and consider the war a tragic misunderstanding, a mistake imposed by conservatives in the Kremlin, the security forces take a completely opposite position, believing that Putin has finally managed to break free from Western control and strengthen Russia's true sovereignty. In this environment, nostalgia for the USSR, the lost status of a superpower, and the times when the United States and the Soviet Union competed equally around the world are widespread. Back then, it was done on a non-commercial basis, so to speak, but now the security forces have learned to live and earn in a market economy. Therefore, their main task is to regain the lost status in new conditions and with the opportunity for unlimited enrichment in a global confrontation.

If this corporation comes to power, it will raise the stakes in the confrontation. It is quite possible that the power of the security forces will not last long, as they will inevitably undermine the economy while fighting against the "system liberals." However, they will manage to unleash a war with NATO and escalate the situation in Ukraine.

Advantages of this scenarios for NATO countries

- The onset of certainty for the aggressor;
- Increasing probability of an economic collapse in Russia.

Risks for NATO

- Sharp escalation of confrontation with the West, up to a military conflict with NATO and the threat of nuclear confrontation;
- Intensification of hostilities in Ukraine and increased destruction of critical infrastructure objects, a new influx of refugees, both from Ukraine and from Russia.

Ukraine's readiness for compromises

Ukrainian military and political leadership, despite serious consolidation of power in their hands after the start of Russia's large-scale invasion in February 2022, still maintains its democratic nature and is heavily dependent on public opinion in their country. When choosing between good relations with any influential Western country and

domestic political constraints, it will always prioritize listening to its own citizens, particularly the most radically patriotic part of society.

Despite the very high level of support for President Zelensky among voters (trust level in December 2023, according to KMIS data, was 77%), taking unpopular measures risks mass anti-government protests. The army enjoys absolute trust in society (96%), 80% of Ukrainians are ready to fight until full restoration of territorial integrity, and only 14% are willing to make any territorial concessions. Even in the East of Ukraine, in the conflict zone, only 22% of citizens express readiness to freeze the conflict. Even Russian-speaking citizens are not ready for territorial compromises (27% in favor, 65% against).

In Ukraine, there is a growing understanding that without political changes in the Kremlin, establishing lasting peace will be impossible. However, the prevailing sentiment in society is still the desire to separate from Russia, to see Russia collapse and cease to exist. This restrains the Ukrainian leadership from developing and implementing a strategy to combat Putinism within Russia, limiting it to purely military intelligence tasks. Support for partisan movements within Russia by Ukraine, as well as the formation of a number of national battalions on the front lines composed of representatives of the Russian people, still appears to be a backup plan, although its significance and contribution to the outcome of the war is growing visibly. These created tools can become a key element of the overall strategy of the Rammstein countries, aimed at directing future political changes in Russia in the desired direction.

Russia is trying to divide society and demotivate Ukrainians by using information special operations (provoking internal political conflicts, inflating corruption suspicions against those responsible for defense, etc.), as well as direct terror against the civilian population (particularly evident during attacks on the energy infrastructure in the winter of 2022/23), in order to stimulate their acceptance of the Kremlin's demands. So far, these attempts have not succeeded, although there has been some revival of political discussions in the autumn of 2023.

All together, this sets the boundary conditions for possible actions by the Ukrainian authorities, who are focusing all their efforts on non-controversial tasks: the immediate organization of military resistance, negotiations on material and military-technical support from allies, as well as planning for the future reconstruction of the country. They are most afraid of divisions within Ukrainian society and among allies, and they avoid taking steps that could provoke them.

All Ukrainians have learned from the course of the war since 2014 - the size of Russia in the event of military aggression does not allow and will not allow Ukraine to defend itself alone in the future. This is precisely why Ukraine strives to join NATO and the European Union, participation in which, it is assumed, will provide the opportunity, if not to obtain direct military protection, then at least to increase and strengthen its own defense potential to the necessary level to defend sovereignty.

Therefore, at the moment, no scenario of the world that involves Ukraine publicly rejecting NATO and the EU and abandoning the goal of liberating occupied territories seems realistic.

At the same time, certain compromises can potentially be offered to Ukrainian society, which have a chance of being positively perceived by the society.

Currently, two possible alternative lines (packages) of such compromises are seen:

1. De-occupation of the main (continental) territory of Ukraine; transitional period for Crimea; provision of certain guarantees to the Russian-speaking minority; accession to the EU, but not to NATO; international security guarantees for Ukraine;

2. Ceasefire along the actual line of contact without concluding peace; simultaneous accession of the free part of Ukraine to NATO, and then to the EU.

The alternative will be to continue the war until the victorious end, until the complete de-occupation of the territory of Ukraine and the return to the borders of 1991 (more precisely, February 2014).

Overall, this war between Russia and Ukraine has a practically religious character: the former metropolis seeks revenge on its closest relatives for apostasy, rejection of traditional values, and the beginning of modernization according to the European model. The immediate and long-term goals and interests of the parties are therefore incompatible. It simply cannot end with a ceasefire or a simple peace treaty between war-weary states.

The Russo-Ukrainian war and China

China today appears as a power that benefits from any scenario of events. It does not need to be an active player on either side, it is sufficient to maintain neutrality (slightly more favorable towards the Kremlin, but no more than that).

Russia, by getting involved in a serious conflict with NATO and attacking Ukraine, has significantly increased its dependence on this country. Trade turnover has sharply increased. Chinese companies have gained access to sectors of the Russian economy that were previously closed to them until 2022. In the case of the automotive industry, for example, this has allowed China to become the world's largest exporter of automobiles. While the cost of energy resources has significantly increased for the West, China, on the contrary, has been able to obtain exclusive discounts on oil, gas, and other raw materials.

In the event that Russia wins the war in Ukraine (including the implementation of a scenario of frozen conflict with the Kremlin holding onto newly captured territories), the influence of NATO and the United States in the world weakens, and China naturally takes over the role of geopolitical arbiter, at least in the Global South. Additionally, a sense of impunity arises, and the barrier to making a decision regarding the annexation of Taiwan is sharply reduced. A full-fledged military-political bloc with Russia under Beijing's leadership will begin to form, involving all of Central Asia and Iran.

If Russia loses the war with Ukraine and power in the Kremlin begins to waver, especially in the event of chaos, China will have the opportunity to establish a protectorate over the resource-rich regions of Siberia and the Far East, if not annex them, giving it powerful competitive advantages in the global economy. In fact, it will free itself from the main constraint on its growth - the lack of resources.

China loses in only one case - if as a result of political changes in Russia, it becomes an ally of the EU and the US. In this scenario, the military-political and economic containment of the growing eastern superpower will reach a new level, hinder the implementation of Xi Jinping's main project "Silk Road" without the consent of the West, and significantly limit the ambitions of the Chinese leadership.

Victory for the Rammstein coalition

The position of the majority of countries that have decided to support Ukraine after the start of Russia's large-scale aggression in February 2022 is based on the following principles:

1. Preventing Ukraine's military defeat and the collapse of its economy;
2. Avoiding direct military conflict between Russia and NATO and losses among Alliance forces;
3. Not recognizing the legitimacy of Russia's territorial claims and the concept of spheres of influence.

All these principles are based on what should NOT happen. At the same time, there is currently no formulated and agreed-upon image of victory (or at least a desirable outcome of the war) within the framework of the Rammstein coalition (or separately within the NATO bloc).

This raises logical questions for many Western politicians about the adequacy of the resources allocated to the set tasks, as well as the correspondence of the steps taken by Western governments to real national interests. Ultimately, it is difficult to allocate resources and measure results if you do not know where you need to go.

Unfortunately, by the end of the second year of the large-scale and bloody war in the center of Europe, taking the side in the conflict, taking extensive (from sanctions and diplomatic pressure to direct assistance with weapons and finances) and costly measures to support Ukraine, calling their relationship with Ukraine allied, and only UK out of all NATO countries has concluded an alliance agreement with Ukraine that would provide for mutual obligations and security guarantees between the parties.

Indecisiveness and uncertainty of goals on the part of key NATO member countries, primarily the United States as the leader of the Alliance, have created conditions for turning the war into a protracted massacre, daily claiming thousands of human lives, destroying infrastructure, homes, and nature in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine, with no visible prospect of its end. Such a position cannot but evoke regret.

Putin directly and repeatedly stated that he is waging this war not against Ukraine, but against NATO. Based on common sense, **victory for the West can only be considered the final elimination of the threat emanating from Russia through the aggressive actions of the Putin regime, and the establishment of long-term and durable peace for all allied countries.** The liberation of Ukrainian territory from the occupiers and even the defeat inflicted on the Russian army can and should be elements of this victory, but clearly do not replace it as a whole.

The additional objectives that can be achieved as a result of this conflict may include:

- Destruction of the nuclear arsenal and demilitarization of the Russian Federation;
- Creation of a unified economic space with Russia, opening Russian markets for investment, sales of Western products, and supply of cheap energy resources;
- Formation of a unified military-political and economic containment belt against China;
- etc.

The expediency of setting these and/or similar objectives should be up to the political leadership of NATO countries.

Scenarios of post-war political changes in Russia

When analyzing possible scenarios for future political transformation in Russia, analysts usually do not take into consideration the existing system of institutional and legal constraints in the country. Undoubtedly, in a situation of revolutionary change (whether it be a popular uprising or an armed mutiny), the main factor will be the power resource on which a contender for power can rely.

To the contrary, in a situation of a managed succession of power or even a palace coup, the leader cannot be a person (or a group of individuals) who is not endowed with certain legally justified privileges within the current system, allowing him to claim power (for example, in a monarchy, the leader of the coup must be a person who is closely related to the displaced monarch).

All of this radically narrows down the range of possible scenarios that can be implemented in modern Russia. For simplicity, all paths of political development in this report are grouped into five basic scenarios:

Scenario	Probability	Pros	Contras	Risks for the US and its allies
<p>"Inertial". Putin remains at the helm of the Russian Federation indefinitely.</p>	<p>High</p>	<p>Predictability</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long-term return to the times of the Cold War with the confrontation of the collective West against the new military-political "Unholy Alliance" China-Russia-Iran-North Korea; • A signal to all authoritarian regimes about the absence of universally accepted rules of the game that the world community will force them to follow; • Restoration of Ukraine at the expense of the West 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risks of escalation and beginning of the new military conflict involving NATO countries; • Emergence of new hotbeds of global instability (Taiwan, Middle East, Africa, Latin America)
<p>"System-liberal". A representative of the government and business elites, known in Russia as systemic liberals, comes to power. The most likely candidate is the current Prime Minister, Mikhail Mishustin, who appears to be a compromise figure for the majority of influential groups in Russia.</p>	<p>Elevated</p>	<p>Return to the usual ways of interacting with Russia that were in place before the aggression in Ukraine</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refusal of integration of the Russian Federation into the number of "normal" Western countries, long-term preservation of the undemocratic nature of the regime and problems with human rights; • Impunity of military criminals; • Strengthening of China; • Restoration of Ukraine at the expense of the West 	<p>High probability of growth of imperialistic sentiments in Russian society, thirst for revenge, which will lead to a new war in the future</p>

<p>"Siloviki". At the helm of the country stands an alliance of security officers' ("siloviki") clans, united under the collective leadership of the Security Council of the Russian Federation. While Secretary of the Council Nikolai Patrushev and his apparatus allies will play a key role in this scenario, there is no legal way for them to claim formal political leadership, which is most likely to be given to the sole deputy of Putin in the SCRF - Dmitry Medvedev.</p>	<p>Moderate</p>	<p>Elimination of Putin as a symbol of aggression</p>	<p>The new regime will be even more aggressive than the current one: Russia will become an even more undemocratic country, and the military situation will escalate to a new level</p>	<p>Military confrontation with NATO, up to a nuclear conflict</p>
<p>"Democratic revolution". The instability that arises in the Kremlin due to any external factors leads to mass peaceful protest actions in major cities, relying on the opposition's power bloc formed with the support of Ukraine as a partisan movement and national units, currently gaining combat experience as part of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (Legion "Freedom of Russia" and others). With the legitimization of the democratic coalition by Western countries, a significant part of the business and bureaucratic elites, desiring normalization of relations with the West, joins it.</p>	<p>Low</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russia becomes an ally of the West; • Democratic institutions and human rights are restored in Russia; • Weakening and effective containment of China; • Economic cooperation between Russia, the United States, and the European Union; • Russia finances the recovery of Ukraine; • Punishment of war criminals 	<p>This scenario cannot be implemented without support from the Rammstein coalition countries</p>	<p>The emergence of a new authoritarian leader in a democratic environment, who may in the future return to implementing imperialistic policies</p>
<p>"Chaos." An unsuccessful attempt of a change leads to a conflict of all against all. The removal of Putin creates a vacuum of legitimacy, opposition of regional elites, that leads to the disintegration of the country and civil war. Power in the Kremlin is transferred to the most radical conservative circles, who cannot ensure the integrity of the elites, economy, and the country as a whole.</p>	<p>Lowest</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elimination, possibly for good, of one of the important geopolitical rivals of the West - Russia; • Cessation of the war in Ukraine 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unpredictability of future development; • Ukraine's recovery will be funded by the West. 	<p>Loss of control over nuclear devices on the territory of the Russian Federation</p>

It should be noted that all major political changes in Russia, firstly, began from the top, although often the initiators of these changes lost control over them (for example, Gorbachev's "perestroika" or the February Revolution of 1917). Secondly, although the transformations were always initiated and implemented by the Russians themselves, most cases of change occurred against the backdrop of serious foreign policy upheavals and with the involvement of foreign forces. For example, the 1905 revolution occurred against the backdrop of defeat in the war with Japan and was actively supported by Japanese military personnel; legends also circulate about the role of Germans in the October Revolution of 1917 (which occurred as a result of failures during World War I).

Similarly, military achievements, occupations, annexations, and the addition of new territories to Russia's sphere of political influence always provoked the Russian state to qualitatively strengthen its military machine and suppress civil liberties within the country.

Taken together, this allows us to assert that the outcome of the current war is directly related to the direction of the evolution of the Russian political system, and the external factor will play an important role in the upcoming changes. Whether this external factor will come from the West and bring values of freedom and democracy, or whether it will be a wind from the East that brings even more authoritarianism and troubles to Russia's neighbors and all of Europe - history will show, and the countries of the Rammstein coalition can and should influence it.

Russia's collapse possibility and its consequences

It is expedient to examine the scenario of Russia's disintegration similar to the process that occurred in 1991 in the former USSR, which often emerges in the media and expert discussions. There is an opinion that the empire did not completely collapse that time, but this process will inevitably come to conclusion someday because there is no difference between Russia and the USSR.

Those in favor of fragmentation foresee not only the secession of ethnic republics but also predict that distinctly Russian regions (like Siberia, the Urals, and the Russian Far East) might break away. This argument appears to have some merit: Russia is comprised of 55 oblasts and krais, in addition to 22 ethnic republics.

However, there is a big difference between the Soviet Union, where ethnic Russians, though a majority were making up less than 51% of the entire USSR population, while today's Russia ethnic Russians make almost 72%. The Soviet constitution provided for the right of the constituent republics to secede, and Russian constitution doesn't. Local elites in the ethnic Russian republics are more interested in divvying up subsidies they receive from Moscow than in independence (while republics in USSR controlled their taxes), and with few exceptions national-liberation movements in these republics are quite weak. Finally, only in very few Russian republics local indigenous ethnic population represents overwhelming majority.

These facts make us argue that despite potential regime changes and instability, Russia's disintegration remains highly improbable. Except for a few Muslim republics in the North-Eastern Caucasus, and one or two republics in Eastern Siberia, the likelihood of new states emerging is almost negligible.

Chechnya is the primary candidate for secession. This small, feisty nation of one and a half million people has consistently resisted Russian control, seizing every opportunity to break free. In the late 1990s, Chechnya nearly achieved independence. However, in September 1999, Vladimir Putin, then the newly appointed Prime Minister of Russia, initiated a new war against Chechnya. This conflict elevated his reputation and led to his selection as Yeltsin's presidential successor. Following his 2000 conquest of Chechnya, Putin appointed the

Muslim religious leader (Mufti) Akhmat Kadyrov as the republic's puppet leader. After Kadyrov's assassination, his son Ramzan succeeded him, establishing a semi-autonomous, heavily subsidized by Kremlin authoritarian regime. This regime, with its own military force (formally part of the Russian National Guard), participates in Russian aggression against Ukraine. While there are no opinion polls in Chechnya, it is widely believed that Kadyrov's regime is deeply unpopular. Should he lose the Kremlin's support, it's likely that Kadyrov and his associates would be forcefully ousted. Currently, many Chechens opposing this regime are fighting alongside Ukrainians against Russia.

Chechnya's potential secession could be closely followed by Ingushetia, a narrow strip of land with a population of half a million, nestled between North Ossetia and Chechnya. The Ingush people are ethnically akin to the Chechens, but they did not join their fight for independence in the 1990s, opting instead to remain with Russia in hopes of reclaiming Prigorodny Rayon, a part of their ancestral land annexed by Stalin to the predominantly Christian North Ossetia. However, Boris Yeltsin, Russia's first democratically elected president, did not meet the Ingush expectations, and now the Ingush people are poised for an opportunity to break away from Russia. Ingush volunteers, too, are engaged in combat against Russia in Ukraine.

Dagestan emerges as the third most likely candidate for separation. As the largest republic in the North Caucasus, with a population exceeding three million, it is Russia's most heavily subsidized region, receiving \$946 million annually. This financial support has been a key reason why Dagestan has not pursued secession. However, if regime change in Moscow and subsequent instability in Russia lead to a cessation of Russian financial aid, it is highly probable that Dagestan will seek independence. Dagestan is a multiethnic region, home to over 30 ethnic groups and 14 languages that are not mutually intelligible, suggesting that interethnic tensions could arise post-separation.

In all three republics, Islamist elements are notably present. The most radical jihadists, after engaging in guerrilla warfare against Russian forces, relocated to Syria to join ISIS. Many of these fighters were either killed or captured, and those who survived and evaded capture have settled in Turkey, starting families and businesses. Very few will return to the North-Eastern Caucasus. Predicting the exact nature and structure of any potential new states is challenging, but there is a significant likelihood that they could be Islamic states. Opposition leaders have discussed the possibility of an Islamic confederation uniting Chechnya, Dagestan, and Ingushetia. Regardless of the form these new entities might take, their initial stages are likely to be marked by instability and possibly armed ethnic conflicts.

Nationalist sentiments are also very strong in the largest Russian republic, which is Yakutia, also known as the Sakha Republic. Despite its vast size, larger than Argentina, it has a population of slightly less than one million people. Yakutia is known as the coldest inhabited place on Earth, with the Northern Pole of Cold located here, and it is almost entirely covered by permafrost. The region is rich in minerals, with 25% of the world's diamond deposits found here, alongside sizeable oil, gas, coal and gold assets. Separatist sentiments among the Yakuts, who make up 55% of the Sakha population, are quite strong. Many Yakut volunteers have even joined the Siberian battalion, which is fighting against Russian forces alongside Ukrainian forces.

Buryatia is another Siberian republic where separatist sentiments are quite pronounced. Recently, the Center for the Prevention of Separatist Threats, Nationalism, Mass Disorder, and Extremist Crimes was established in Buryatia. Many Buryat volunteers have also joined the Siberian battalion. Buryatia shares a common border with Mongolia, both religiously and ethnically related. Technically, this republic, with a population of almost one million people, qualifies for independent statehood. However, the challenge lies in the fact that ethnic

Buryats make up less than a third of the republic's population, with more Buryats residing outside of Buryatia than within it, while ethnic Russians represent almost 60%.

Another Siberian republic bordering Mongolia is Tuva, which is almost 90% monoethnic. It has a population of 337 thousand people and is the most economically disadvantaged region in Russia, with life expectancy comparable to that of Sudan. Federal subsidies make up 80-95% of the republic's budget. In the mid-1990s, there was a surge of anti-Russian nationalism, but for the past two decades, there have been no reports of separatist sentiments. However, if the flow of subsidies from Moscow were to cease, a resurgence of nationalism would be quite plausible.

The most populous Russian republic is Tatarstan, with a population of four million people, located in the Volga region. While Tatarstan, unlike the North Caucasian republics, boasts a developed economy, oil resources, and a historical memory of independence (the Kazan Khanate was conquered by Ivan the Terrible in 1552), and in the 1990s nationalist/islamists trends were quite strong here, there are two primary reasons why Tatarstan cannot achieve independence. The first reason pertains to its ethnic composition: ethnic Tatars constitute slightly more than half of the republic's population (62% of all the Tatars live outside of Tatarstan), and the other half is not particularly inclined to live in an independent Tatarstan. The second reason relates to its geography: Tatarstan is entirely surrounded by Russian territory and lacks access to an international border. To date, there is only one example of a country located within another country – Lesotho – and this precedent is not particularly encouraging.

For the rest of the Russian republics the odds for separation are much lower.

There are many speculations about possible emergence of independent states with purely ethnic Russian population: Siberia, Urals, Russian Far East, etc. Practically all these projects are unfeasible for several reasons. It would be sufficient to mention just one: most of these regions are either adjacent or located in relative proximity to China. Ethnic Russians living in the Asian part of Russia suffer what used to be called in the 19th century the Yellow Peril syndrome: they fear/hate China and would never risk their destiny by creating new weak states which by default would become completely dependent from China. The only real potential for separation would be possible in Kaliningrad oblast, which before 1945 used to be northern half of German East Prussia. The oblast borders two EU countries: Poland and Lithuania and is separated from Russia by territory of Belarus and Lithuania. The so-called Baltic republic supporters see the future of their region as a part of the European Union.

As previously discussed, the scenario of Russia disintegrating due to a regime change in Kremlin seems unlikely. Advocates of this idea assert that Russia maintained its imperialistic tendencies even after the Soviet Union's collapse, suggesting that dividing Russia into a dozen or more new states is the only solution.

If Putin's regime were to be replaced by a democratically elected government, it could lead to a reformation of Russia into a genuine federation where regions would have a greater say in shaping their futures and more control over the financial resources generated within their territories. This shift towards greater regional autonomy and fiscal control could promote stability within the country.

While it's possible that a few new states might emerge along the southern borders of Russia, or in Siberia, this would not necessarily result in a dramatic alteration of Russia's overall configuration. The country's geographical boundaries and its status as a significant global player are likely to remain largely intact, even in the event of political reforms and increased regional autonomy.

The most effective strategy to prevent disintegration lies in embracing freedom, establishing procedures for civilized separation, and supporting the few opposition groups that recognize this necessity. By allowing regions to exercise autonomy, the likelihood of fragmentation decreases, as it addresses the root causes of discontent. Moreover, civilized divorce procedures provide a structured, peaceful framework for addressing differences, which can prevent escalations into conflict.

Crucially, it is imperative to support the minority opposition groups that understand and advocate for this approach. Smaller nationalists and regionalists movements also should not be rejected and blacklisted as stability threats but integrated in overall strategy of democratizing Russia. A civilized dialogue and possibility for them to design their national projects and offer them to the general population of respective regions to sustain or disapprove, like Western nations regularly do, will not destabilize, but promote peace in the country.

Rather than resorting to military interventions in case of signs of separatism, which are already promised by some of the oppositionists, this strategy fosters an environment where differences can be resolved through dialogue and mutual respect, leading to more stable and harmonious regional relationships.

Conclusion

The democratic nature of Western governments, regular change of power, and frequent highly competitive elections are pushing politicians towards simple and popular solutions, giving preference to those that provide quick positive results. During times of war, such an approach does not always lead to optimal results.

In the year 2024 in two key states of the Rammstein coalition - the United States and Great Britain - will be marked by highly competitive elections. All politicians need to demonstrate tangible "here and now" successes to voters, but short-term situational gains can turn into long-term losses.

One of the obvious temptations is to achieve the fastest possible cessation of hostilities, stop bloodshed, and transition to a situation where there is neither peace nor war, passing the problem on to their political successors. We have seen where this leads, as exemplified by the Minsk agreements: the war is suspended, but then it starts again on a much larger scale.

Another temptation is to switch to a transactional approach in relations with Russia, i.e. to propose exchanging every concession from the West for a concession from Russia. The problem is that the likelihood of stopping the "trade" after the first step will be maximum - the inhabitants of the Kremlin will undoubtedly be interested in lifting the sanctions, but all other proposals for them will be purely optional. Make a one-time exchange: lifting sanctions for the suspension of the hot phase of the war - and they will start opening champagne back in Moscow.

By the way, the transactional approach does not work in the opposite direction as well, as the history of this same war has shown: gradual increase in pressure instead of a steep one, step by step after every new aggressive action by the Kremlin, actually greatly reduced the effectiveness of the measures applied by the West. For example, the threat of disconnecting Russia from SWIFT at the beginning of the war looked something comparable to the use of nuclear arms, but when it actually happened, the Russian banking system had already prepared and practically did not even notice this blow.

When developing a Western strategy to achieve victory in response to Russian aggression, it is necessary to remember the following:

1. Russia is conducting another, far from the first, aggressive war in its recent history. In a deeper historical perspective, this is a continuation of the imperial policies of the tsarist, imperial, and Soviet models of Russian expansionist politics. At the same time, it does not care neither for adversary's nor even its own losses. Losses are not a significant factor for the authorities or the population of the Russian Federation.
2. No peaceful initiatives or possible breaks in hostilities will mean a refusal to continue the war for the current Russian military-administrative leadership. They perceive any politeness as weakness.
3. Russia is by no means alone in its actions. It is waging a war in alliance with Iran and North Korea, receiving weapons from them and assuming publicly undeclared obligations. In fact, China stands behind this aggressive bloc, and the whole set of political, financial, trade, and economic circumstances proves that Putin sees himself as a junior partner to Beijing. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Russia's war against Ukraine is a test for the West, primarily the United States. Russia is acting in it to a large extent a proxy formation for China, just as Hezbollah is for Iran. The possible success of Russian aggression or even its relative failure will show to all those who wish to repeat something similar against Taiwan, Israel, or another country that it is feasible, and that there will be little or no consequences for it.

4. The same conclusion will be made in Moscow. Considering increased military production, it will be imperative to put it to use. And then the next target for Russia will be one of the NATO countries - Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, or Poland. This derives from the notions of traditional spheres of influence, as well as from self-evident geopolitical realities - all other directions of possible Russian expansion are already regions of interest for its senior partner, China. It is enough to remember that Putin's attempt at armed intervention in Kazakhstan ended for him in three days, even though it appeared much less egregious from the standpoint of international law. The war in Ukraine, on the other hand, has been going on for almost two years, and there is no end in sight.
5. Invasion of Ukraine is a much bolder and more aggressive challenge to the West than even the USSR allowed itself. The attack on Poland in 1920 was carried out in the haze of a romantic dream of a "world revolution," and at that time, with the support of France and other Western allies, the young Polish state gave the Bolsheviks a worthy resistance. The occupation of the Baltic countries and aggression against Finland happened during World War II, when the leading powers had other priorities. After the end of WWII, the USSR did not allow anything similar in Europe. Even the blockade of West Berlin and, especially, the attempt to threaten the United States from Cuban territory met with strong resistance from the leader of the free world - and Moscow backed down. Now there is no strong resistance, and the Kremlin tries to push the limits.
6. The current level of assistance of the United States and the entire Rammstein group is significant enough for Ukraine to continue its effective resistance, but it is completely insufficient for it to achieve victory. Any victory, even as modest as the return of its territories occupied by Russia after the start of large-scale aggression. Especially the restoration of the territorial integrity of Ukraine within the borders of 1991, once guaranteed (in exchange for Ukraine giving up its nuclear arms) by the United States, Great Britain, and the Russian Federation (sic!). To the contrary, Putin's Russia which not only occupied Crimea but also a large part of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, as well as parts of the Kherson and Zaporizzhia regions, has declared their annexation in full and is now trying to seize these regions completely. The occupiers plan to hold fake "presidential elections in Russia" in March on the already proclaimed lands, which, just because of this, cannot be recognized as legitimate by civilized countries.
7. All this is happening against the backdrop of growing instability in various regions of the world - in South America the Maduro regime threatens war with neighboring Guyana, in Africa there are civil conflicts and military coups here and there, in the Middle East terrorist structures wage war against Israel and do not hide their aggressive intentions towards the US and the West as a whole. At the same time, Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis are not only openly supported from Tehran and Moscow, but they also shell Israel, American bases in the region, and ships in the Red Sea with Iranian, Russian, and North Korean missiles and projectiles. It is quite symptomatic that numerous terrorist groups in the Middle East, proclaiming themselves as fighters for Islam and Islamic values, do not notice at all the hundreds of thousands of Muslims killed by the Russian army in Chechnya, Dagestan, Syria, not to mention Afghanistan. Aggressive-terrorist objectives and methods bring them much closer together than formal differences.
8. An obvious conclusion can be drawn - the war in Ukraine is the largest, longest, and, alas, giving the aggressor the largest chance to succeed in the global conflict between barbarism and civilization, in the clash of dictatorships and the world of democracy. They have not been able to break Israel with the forces of Iranian proxies, but they still hope to break Ukraine. Preventing this is a task that goes far beyond not

only Ukraine itself but also the whole of Europe. Stopping Putin there means protecting the security of the West, NATO, and the national interests of the United States. To achieve this, the Armed Forces of Ukraine need much more powerful weapons in much larger quantities and the ability to use them not only across the entire width but also the entire depth of the front, including communications, bases, warehouses, and production facilities on the territory of Russia itself.

9. But the real punishment for the aggressor and the best prevention of the expansionist wars will be the complete destruction of the regime, the whole ruling group that is responsible for starting the war, for hundreds of thousands of victims, for torture and killings of innocent people, for rocket and other bombings of cities and villages. No pacification will be interpreted correctly not only in Moscow, but also in Tehran and Beijing - retreat for all of them is always temporary, always just a maneuver before a new offensive. To understand this, it is enough to look at the barbaric destruction of Kherson by Russian artillery, from where the Russians recently retreated and which they continue to consider their territory. Or at the aggression of Hezbollah against Israel, which continues even though it does not help Hamas in Gaza.
10. The United States (and the West as a whole under American leadership) needs and is critically dependent on victory in this war. After power in Iraq largely shifted to pro-Iranian groups instead of Saddam Hussein's regime, after the defeat of ISIS in Syria proved beneficial to Iran, Russia, and the criminal Assad, after the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the US can and should regain strategic initiative for the forces of good and peace. This can be done by crushing not only Putin, but the entire Putin regime, the entire power system that currently controls Russia. Right now, when Russian aggression is so brutal, provocative, and open, it is the most opportune moment to put an end not only to it here and now, but also to its origins, to the very cause. All the necessary prerequisites exist for this - a large and ready-to-fight country, Ukraine, as well as the Russian armed and political opposition based in Ukraine and Poland. We don't need to fight for them, we need to help them fight themselves. With sufficient assistance, these forces can and will achieve victory because the Putin regime is fragile and cannot withstand a strong blow, as the events of last June clearly demonstrated. What the Ukrainian army desperately needs, America has in its warehouses. Bringing the forces of the Legion "Freedom of Russia" to the level of the Wagner PMC to enable Russians to liberate themselves is not just a feasible task for America, but a very simple one.

Summing up this report, its authors want to emphasize that their main goal was to show that contrary to popular belief, in military terms, Putin's regime, despite suffering a series of significant defeats in Ukraine, is no longer weakening but rather strengthening. The logic of its development will inevitably lead to a military confrontation with the NATO bloc - if not tomorrow, then the day after tomorrow. This is also because the strengthening of Russia's military potential is happening in parallel with the growth of political dissatisfaction and internal instability. Therefore, now, while the regime is vulnerable and entangled in the Ukrainian war, it is necessary to rationally and effectively use the resources available to the West and, most importantly, demonstrate political will. These two things can and should for a long time or even permanently eliminate the threat from the east of Europe and restore peace on the continent.

If the United States does not present this will, no one will.