



Lost in Translation: Western misconceptions about Putin's Russia

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Executive Summary

- Three types of fallacies prevent Western governments from developing an effective, long-term strategic approach to Russia that could contribute to sustainable peace in Europe. They also help the Kremlin consistently exert reflexive control over decision-making processes in the West.
- **First**, the West often misunderstands or underestimates the logic and practical consequences of Russian strategic culture, leading to flawed strategic communication with Moscow. Experts and policymakers tend to project Western political and strategic culture onto Russia or extrapolate the Cold War experience onto Vladimir Putin's personalist dictatorship.
- **Second**, Western officials continue to underestimate the connection between the nature of Russia's political regime and its revanchist foreign policy. As long as Russia remains authoritarian, aggressive wars will remain the Kremlin's main source of legitimacy.
- **Third**, the West's fear of fallout from political turmoil in Russia leads it to value the system's stability over the prospect of significant political change, even though such change could render Moscow less belligerent toward its neighbors.

Key Findings and Recommendations

1. Using assumptions derived from Western strategic culture to understand Moscow is counterproductive and dangerous. Russia's strategic culture is based on values, ideas, and rules that are fundamentally different from those of the democratic West. It privileges state sovereignty and security based on the logic of a zero-sum game, the arbitrary will of the rulers, and using force in international relations, while it sidelines the question of international law and human rights in international conflicts.¹ Russia regards Western readiness for dialogue and attempts at de-escalation as weakness and a green light for further aggression. The modus operandi of Russia's ruling elite is informed by a way of thinking with roots in the secret services and the criminal world.
2. The Kremlin sees democratic values as the greatest security threat and the West as an existential, systemic enemy. The logic of a zero-sum game excludes negotiations understood as a path to compromise, while violence is seen as a natural part of diplomacy. An imperial state that instills fear abroad is the core of Russian national identity.

3. For Russia, war is an all-encompassing endeavor with a strong cognitive component. It incorporates a variety of “peacetime” techniques (including the weaponization of language) designed to prepare for or replace a military attack. Primary among them is reflexive control, which aims to steer Western decisions to benefit Russia’s strategic interests and undermine democratic institutions.
4. Kremlin-sponsored propaganda presents the “existential” war against the West as the Russian state’s messianic mission, serving to legitimize Putin’s neo-totalitarian regime in the eyes of society. Putin has made himself a hostage to the war, likely continuing it as long as he remains in power, regardless of any cease-fire or peace agreement with Ukraine.
5. The West’s approach to Moscow requires three important changes that may address the security threats more effectively. First, the West’s strategic communication must be smart and flexible enough to create strategic dilemmas and ambiguities for the adversary. Second, any future attempt to normalize relations with Russia should require that Russia renounce its aggressive foreign policy and liberalize its domestic politics, regardless of who comes to power after Putin. Third, the West needs a sober analysis of Russia’s domestic political weaknesses and stability factors as well as the risks and opportunities of a possible regime change. This would make it possible to prepare appropriate and coordinated responses to challenges.
6. Turning away from the paradigm of Western strategic culture in relations with Moscow can increase the costs to Russia of its aggressive foreign policy and change Moscow’s calculations. The West must adopt a more muscular approach if it hopes to limit Russia’s scope for anti-Western reflexive control. Debates about possible negotiations with Russia only encourage Moscow’s hopes of tiring out the enemy.
7. It is in the West’s strategic interest to delegitimize Putin’s regime and bring about his departure from power, which could open a window for political change. Prioritizing Russia’s illusory stability over political change underestimates the threats posed by the current regime. A significant risk of destabilizing Russia is directly related to Putinism and the structural grievances it has created.

Introduction

Calls for negotiations with Russia and Ukrainian concessions in the name of peace have become louder in Western political discourse in mid-2024.² Significantly, these demands are usually directed at the victim of aggression (Ukraine) and not the aggressor (Russia).

Those in favor of a compromise with Moscow usually point to the growing costs of supporting Ukraine amid the military stalemate, the suffering of the Ukrainian people, Russia's military and economic resilience, and the risk of a direct conflict between Russia and NATO in the event of further military escalation. But these seemingly rational arguments ignore the broader context of Russia's strategic goals, openly communicated by the Kremlin and unchanged since February 2022. A compromise with Russia is unlikely, and trying to achieve it would threaten the future of the Western community and the stability of the global order.

First, Russia recognizes neither Ukraine's sovereignty nor its democratically elected authorities.³ A sovereign Ukraine is perceived as an existential threat to Putin's regime, while its "reconquest" is supposed to become his historical legacy. This explains why the Kremlin is trying to either control or destroy this large, resource-rich European state with scorched-earth tactics. This goal is unlikely to change unless Putin faces deep financial crisis or serious domestic turbulence due to the growing socioeconomic costs of the invasion (the "guns or butter" dilemma). Discussing a peaceful settlement while Russia still believes in its ultimate victory would suggest that Ukraine's right to exist as a sovereign state is negotiable. Moreover, political and economic concessions Moscow will demand in exchange for peace would help it to replenish its depleted military potential and continue the invasion in more favorable circumstances.⁴ In this context, Ukraine's incursion into Russia's Kursk region in August 2024 is a powerful postscript to President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's call in July for Russia's representatives to be present at the next peace summit.⁵ If negotiations are to bring sustainable stability for the region, Putin must begin to see the continuation of war as a threat to his rule rather than an opportunity to make it stronger.

Russia's goal remains the demilitarization (disarmament) and the so-called denazification of Ukraine, entailing egregious interference in the internal affairs of this young democracy.⁶ And given that "Nazism" in this context means Ukrainianness, it would also mean a campaign of forced Russification akin to that in the occupied territories, intended to erase the local population's Ukrainian identity and reduce it to a politically harmless folklore.⁷ The everyday reality of the people in the occupied regions (terror, political murders, torture, expropriation) would take hold in any other territory conquered by Russia.

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Second, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine is merely part of a broader confrontation with the West and a way to disrupt a transatlantic community based on institutions, values, and interests. That much was clear in demands Russia made to the US and NATO in December 2021 for a fundamental overhaul of the European security order, including a significant reduction of the US military presence in NATO countries and the transformation of Central Europe into a security buffer zone.⁸ Moscow is aware that the strength of the alliance and the military power of the US are the only effective barrier against the political and economic infiltration of Europe by dictatorial regimes such as China and Russia.

Third, the war's outcome (whether Russia wins a relative victory or is punished for the invasion) will directly impact global stability and the future of the international legal order. The result of the global confrontation between the democracies and the anti-Western coalition of dictatorships (Russia, Iran, North Korea, China) will have immense consequences for the security and well-being of Western societies, as well as for the stability of international economic relations. If Russia emerges from this

Photo: Russian T-72 B3 main battle tanks drive during a rehearsal for the Victory Day parade, which marks the anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany in World War Two, in Red Square in central Moscow, Russia May 7, 2021. Credit: REUTERS/Evgenia Novozhenina.



war of aggression with territorial or political gains, the risk of global proliferation of nuclear weapons — increasingly perceived as the only reliable means of deterrence against the powerful — goes up exponentially.

Although Russia has not yet attacked a NATO state militarily, the Kremlin's official statements and the increasing scale of Russian subversive activities show that Moscow is at war with the West.⁹ On the other hand, the West rarely sees Russian actions as part of a coordinated military effort to pursue strategic objectives, which only encourages Russia to interfere even more aggressively.

Despite some changes after February 2022, the West's policy toward the Kremlin remains inconsistent. Based on half-measures and self-restraint, it has led to, among other things, a military stalemate in Ukraine and Russia's adaptation to economic sanctions, which are being introduced too slowly and too modestly. Western politicians remain reluctant to significantly increase investment in Europe's security, and their fear of an escalation has restricted Ukraine's self-defense, encouraged Moscow's ambitions, and facilitated Russia's mobilization of domestic resources for a protracted war.

This policy brief analyzes three misconceptions that prevent Western governments from developing a long-term strategic approach toward Russia that could contribute to sustainable peace in Europe. First, misunderstanding Russia's strategic culture leads to flawed strategic communication with Moscow. Instead of dampening the Kremlin's appetite for aggressive wars, it fuels Russia's hopes for a final victory. Second, the West underestimates the link between the autocratic model of rule and revanchist foreign policy. Third, while political change in Russia is essential for lasting peace in Europe, the West tends to value Russia's stability more highly, underestimating the damage to the global security order caused by the continuation of the current regime.

The paper contains policy recommendations that address these issues. It calls for better adaptation of the West's strategic communication to the strategic culture of the adversary, delegitimizing Putin's regime, openness to the idea of political change in Russia as a strategic interest of the West, and developing a strategy to support Russian democratic communities in exile.



Photo: Russian President Vladimir Putin holds a portrait of his father, war veteran Vladimir Spiridonovich Putin, as he takes part in the Immortal Regiment march on Victory Day, which marks the 77th anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany in World War Two, in central Moscow, Russia May 9, 2022. Credit: REUTERS/Maxim Shemetov/File Photo.

We Say One Thing and They Hear Another: Why the West looks vulnerable in Russia's eyes

The perceived weakness of the West appears to have been one of the main factors behind Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. The West's decades-long dialogue with Moscow proved futile: Every time the West sought compromise and tried to avoid escalation, Russia felt invited to push even harder using bellicose rhetoric, active measures, and military attacks against neighbors.

Sources and features of Russia's strategic culture

In this paper, strategic culture is defined as a set of shared norms, values, beliefs, assumptions, and narratives that shape a state's understanding of the goals and

instruments of security policy, in particular, the approach to issues of peace and war and the conditions for the use of force in international relations.¹⁰

Five factors have largely shaped Russia's strategic culture under Putin's personalist dictatorship. First, the head of state and his inner circle make essential decisions in national security and foreign policy without any control from a broader elite or society. Their overriding goal is to ensure the survival of the regime, which state propaganda equates with the survival of Russian statehood.

Second, the autocratic model of rule is projected onto the sphere of international law and politics. State sovereignty is not defined in legal terms but in terms of military power and geopolitical expansion; those who impose their will by force enjoy more sovereignty than others.¹¹ International agreements are regarded as binding as long as they do not restrict the "sovereign."

Third, the core of Russian national identity discourse is a strong, imperial state. After the collapse of the USSR, leaders offered no cohesive concept of post-imperial collective identity to a deeply atomized society. The public's disappointment with democratic reforms in the 1990s paved the way for a revival of the great-power identity under Putin's rule, while alternative sources of collective identity (the idea of civic nationalism, ethno-nationalism, or regional identities) have been systemically marginalized.¹² The state-promoted identity is based on negative, confrontational elements: Russia is portrayed as a besieged fortress surrounded by enemies (the West) who seek to destroy it. The image of the enemy has little to do with objective threats but is rather intended to serve the interests of the ruling group.

Fourth, former KGB officers, including Putin, have a dominant position in the system. Their worldview and modus operandi were shaped by the Cold War confrontation with the West.¹³

Fifth, criminal values, rules, and methods permeated Russia's political and strategic culture after politics became intertwined with organized crime in the 1990s. A large group of political players, including Putin, were involved in mafia activities at the time.¹⁴

As a result, Russian strategic culture has the following characteristics:

1. Democratic values, presented as the West's secret weapon against "Russian civilization," are seen as the most significant security threat.

This threat must be combated by all means, including military force. The West is seen as an existential enemy in a clash of civilizations. This fear and loathing springs not from what Western politicians do or say, but from what the West is. Russia views NATO to a large extent as a tool for the expansion of the Western democratic community and an effective instrument for its defense. NATO's alleged encroaching on what is imagined as Russia's

sphere of influence was rather a pretext than a reason for the 2014 and 2022 invasion: Before Russian aggression there was no serious discussion about Kyiv's membership in NATO, either within the alliance or in Ukraine.¹⁵

In what is presented as a holy war of so-called traditional values against the "Satanism" of the West, Russia needs a forward defense and a *cordon sanitaire* to prevent harmful ideas from contaminating Russian society.¹⁶ Moscow also strives to fight the evil at its source, hence the attempts to influence the domestic political situation in Western democracies to polarize societies and undermine their confidence in their governments and democratic procedures.

2. Russia's destructive potential determines its international standing.

Unable to build its international position on innovation and attractive soft power, Russia presents the destructive potential of its nuclear arsenal as the most critical indicator of its strength.¹⁷ War crimes are intended to punish Kyiv for choosing the path of democratic development and integration into the transatlantic community and to force other "post-Soviet" states into Russia's so-called sphere of privileged interests in the spirit of the 1945 Yalta agreement.

3. International politics is perceived, above all, as a sphere of confrontation, constant struggle among secret services, and permanent special operations. Its instruments include a range of active measures aimed at destroying the opponent's ability to resist.¹⁸ Manipulation, deception, and blackmail go hand in hand with a high propensity to take risks.
4. Russia is guided by the logic of a zero-sum game. This approach rules out negotiations as Western political culture understands them. The Russian negotiating style resembles the practices of an army, which does not negotiate but sets conditions from a position of strength.¹⁹ Similarly, there should be no illusion that Russia is willing to cooperate with a "hostile" West about jointly combating global threats (especially given its announcement to supply third parties with weapons for attacks on the West).²⁰ Although Russia has cooperated in some areas in the past, its ultimatums of 2021 signaled a more dire stage in relations with the West.
5. The leadership model, like that of the criminal world, is based on "hegemonic masculinity." Intimidation, contempt for the weak, and a willingness to retaliate for real or perceived insults serve to demonstrate strength and brutality, which are the primary source of legitimacy.²¹ Conciliatory language, calls for dialogue, and compromise are perceived as weakness, and weakness is an invitation to aggression.²²
6. The instruments of defense against perceived threats are not *a priori* limited. There are no predetermined rules and no red lines that must not be crossed.²³

7. Force is seen as a natural part of diplomacy and a rule-making factor that replaces the existing system of written law.²⁴
8. Foreign policy is based on extortion. Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko advised his diplomats: "Demand something that never belonged to you. Make ultimatums. Do not spare threats; offer negotiations as a way out of the situation. There will always be people in the West who will fall for it. Do not give an inch in negotiations, but squeeze out more. They will go for it. You can consider yourself a diplomat when you get half or two-thirds of what you did not have before."²⁵
9. Quasi-tribalism prevails. The rules apply only to one's group, while obligations to outsiders do not have to be considered.²⁶ The stronger party has the right to ensure its security at the expense of the sovereignty and even the existence of other nations, including through the doctrine of pre-emptive aggression.²⁷

Although the Russian government explicitly refers to the legacy of the USSR in its aggressive foreign policy, there are several fundamental differences between the Cold War experience and dealing with Putin's Russia. These complicate the West's relations with Moscow and destroy the hope of a lasting understanding with Russia without its prior defeat on the battlefield.

1. Unlike under the Soviet collective leadership, Putin's personalist dictatorship has no control mechanisms against the leader's whims and violations of international agreements.
2. Putin's Russia is a revanchist state, fomenting a "Weimar syndrome" (resentment of the collapse of the USSR as a result of Western plots) from the start.
3. In Putin's Russia, the collective memory of war as a catastrophe that must never be repeated has faded. War has been normalized as an instrument of foreign policy.

Russia's definition of war

In Russian strategic culture, war is an all-encompassing endeavor with a strong cognitive component. Aware of the relative weakness of its army, Russia has always tried to use it only after painstakingly preparing the ground for aggression through subversion and propaganda.²⁸ The Kremlin does not make a clear distinction between peace and war, and even seemingly peaceful areas of activity such as sport, science, or business are channels for infiltrating enemy territory.

One element of this broad-based war is cognitive warfare, which incorporates techniques of psychological warfare, propaganda, indoctrination, disinformation (aiming to discredit support for Ukraine in Western societies), symbolic violence, reflexive control, and others. The Kremlin views these techniques as no less important than military force.

Table 1. Cognitive Warfare Tactics Used by Putin

Techniques of Cognitive Warfare	Tools
Psychological warfare	Lulling vigilance
Propaganda	Misleading
Indoctrination	Discrediting Western elites and democratic procedures
Disinformation	Overloading the adversary with contradictory information
Symbolic violence	Paralysing decision-making processes through intimidation
Reflexive control	Fomenting internal divisions in the opposing camp
Language	Doublethink, semantic chaos, relativism, false symmetrism, and whataboutism

Table: Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA)
Source: Compiled by Author

Russia's use of reflexive control aims to sway Western decisions to benefit its strategic interests. Tools include blunting the opponent's vigilance, misleading (by assuring willingness for dialogue, cooperation, and lack of aggressive intent), discrediting Western elites and democratic procedures in the eyes of Western audiences, overloading the adversary with contradictory information (alternating between nuclear blackmail and pseudo-negotiation offers), paralyzing decision-making processes through intimidation (punching above one's weight), and fomenting internal divisions in the opposing camp.²⁹

Moscow saw the West's leniency toward Russia's aggressive behavior in Eastern Europe in recent decades as *de facto* recognition of its revanchist ambitions and confirmation of a weak and divided West. The appeals of the proponents of peace at any price reinforce Russia's belief that its reflexive control is bearing fruit.



Photo: Members of the Youth Army military-patriotic movement attend a ceremony of projecting portraits of Russian service members killed in Russia-Ukraine conflict and the symbol «Z» onto the State Council building in Simferopol, Crimea April 8, 2024. Credit: REUTERS/Alexey Pavlishak.

Language as a tool of Russia's cognitive warfare

The idea of language as a weapon comes from the Russian secret services and the long tradition of state propaganda, but it also reflects the deep mistrust and atomization that afflict social relations in Russia. Lies have become an attribute of strong, arbitrary power and fit into the deeply rooted Soviet legacy of doublethink based on the belief in two opposite things at the same time.³⁰

The primary function of weaponized language is not to explain but to manipulate. Words are often used to signal an intention contrary to the actual one, laying waste to meaning. Semantic chaos is intended to bring dangerous relativism into public discourse. The aim is to cast doubt on the existence of objective information. Propaganda narratives manipulate the cause-effect relationship and blame Russia's enemies for its own misdeeds.³¹

Understanding Russia's intentions requires deconstruction of the vocabulary used in disinformation campaigns. Some selected examples in Table 2.

Table 2. Russia's Vocabulary for Disinformation Campaigns³²

Vocabulary	Definition
Nazis	Supporters of democratic values and Ukrainian national identity; opponents of Russian revanchism (the fight against "Ukrainian Nazism" is presented as the continuation of the "Great Patriotic War")
Russophobia (often equated with Nazism)	Containment of Russia's infiltration of Western democracies; condemnation of Russia's war of aggression
Russia's security concerns	Invention of non-existent threats to justify aggression against neighbors as "self-defense"
Security guarantees for Russia	Guarantees that Russia can attack its neighbors with impunity
Negotiations	Forcing the opponent to accept Russia's demands in entirety, which are often expanded in the course of negotiations
Peace	A temporary stage between two wars
Dialogue	Talks that serve to legitimize Russia's autocratic regime without benefiting the opponent
Russia's sovereignty	The right to unilaterally impose its will on other states without regard to international law

Table: Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA)
Source: Compiled by Author

Domestic Repression and External Aggression: Why the war will continue until there is political change in Russia

The crackdown on human rights, civic activism, free speech, and democratic opposition in Russia proved to be a prerequisite for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the swift suppression of any significant domestic anti-war protests.³³ By 2022, there were no longer any horizontal networks and organizations that could have organized major public resistance to the aggression.

Three pillars of Putinism

Putin's personalist dictatorship rests on three political cornerstones: the over-centralization of state power, systematic disempowerment of citizens, and the lack of confrontation with the totalitarian past. Contrary to its official name, the Russian Federation is, in fact, a unitary state in which there is neither a separation of powers nor autonomy for the regions. Falsified elections and massive violations of human rights and constitutional freedoms have deprived citizens of their political agency. The institution of local self-government has been hollowed out. Ethnic-national and regional identities are gradually being erased, while their expressions are often described as extremist, which corresponds to the totalitarian goal of homogenization and atomization of society.

War crimes are the logical consequence and the most brutal expression of the patriarchal culture of violence that is deeply rooted in the political system. Violence is part of the "traditional" value system that the state apparatus and the Orthodox Church promote, with xenophobia, chauvinism, misogyny, and homophobia part of the state's official policy. Moreover, those in power patronize the citizens and expect them to give up their rights and freedoms and place their lives in the hands of the political leadership.³⁴

A distorted view of national history serves to legitimize the dictatorial model of rule as the only one compatible with Russian "spiritual values." Security agencies identify with their Soviet precursors (Cheka, NKVD, KGB), who were responsible for mass terror³⁵ Officials whitewash political repression, presenting it as essential for maintaining order and stability. Putin's regime can take advantage of the legacy of Soviet terror as no court has ever punished USSR's crimes, which has facilitated the chain of government impunity that stretches from the USSR to present-day Russia.

War as a source of political legitimacy

The Russian ruling elite knows that the repressive, kleptocratic, and archaic model of government, based on central control over development and deep social inequalities, cannot compete with the innovative potential and the soft power of the West.³⁶ Sources of legitimacy must be found not internally (economic growth, high living standards, efficient state institutions that inspire public trust) but externally (national security and prestige, a revival of the imperial past).

The “holy” war against the West, with its strong messianic undertone, is often presented as the Russian state’s *raison d’être*, with leaders deliberately cultivating mass resentment of “enemies of Russia.”³⁷ Over the last two decades, the model of governance based on a permanent state of emergency due to military conflicts and economic crises has changed the language of communication between government and society and the boundaries of what is acceptable in domestic politics.³⁸ War is normalized as a natural state of the state and society, a profitable business, and a path to rapid social advancement and prosperity for disenfranchised groups. One of the authorities’ openly stated aims is to breed a new elite of war beneficiaries who have a vital interest in resisting all change.³⁹

Putin has made himself a hostage of war. Its end would likely lead to a sudden erosion of public support for the regime and inconvenient questions about the socioeconomic costs of the invasion. The Kremlin apparently fears that a halt to expansion would lead to an implosion of the heterogeneous state, where over-centralization and repression keep a lid on social, economic, political, and ethnic tensions.

Neototalitarian social engineering

Putinism differs from Soviet totalitarianism in that there is no mass uniparty or officially proclaimed state ideology, and the state’s borders remain open to most of the population. At the same time, several features distinguish the current phase of Putinism from its earlier, authoritarian phase. These include an unprecedented level of state interference in the private lives of citizens, a developed cult of the leader, and broad, coordinated attempts at social engineering, especially through the education system and state-controlled media.⁴⁰

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine has led to previously marginal, fascist thought becoming the focus of official discourse. The cult of action as opposed to critical reflection, the cult of death on the battlefield, militarism, hostility toward the “other” or the rejection of modernism in the name of ideological purity are ascendant.⁴¹ The aim is to create a new man, *homo putinicus* — an ideal soldier on the front line of cognitive warfare and military operations, a product of an atomized, homogenized society united only by obedience to authority and hatred of the enemy.⁴²



Photo: Street-art painting by the artist Djoulay La Papaye, in the streets of the 13th arrondissement of Paris, depicting two women wearing Slavic crowns made of flowers, one in the colors of the Ukrainian flag, the other in the colors of the Russian flag. On the left, the Ukrainian woman sheds a tear and wears earrings with the Peace and Love symbol. On the right, the Russian woman, who is looking at the Ukrainian woman, is wearing a big earring with the Peace and Love symbol. Between her, a white dove and a word in Cyrillic. Behind them, the Russian and Ukrainian flags. France, Paris, 2022-03-05. Credit: Maeva Destombes / Hans Lucas.

Kremlin-promoted propaganda needs no formal institutions, as it spreads like a virus through pop culture and the internet.⁴³ At the same time, the authorities carefully suppress alternative ideas through mass censorship, surveillance, and encouraging citizens to denounce the “wrong-headed.”⁴⁴ Russians who speak out against the war have been rendered speechless: The language they could use to describe their emotions and reflections has been banned, and there is no space where it is safe to use it.

It is highly doubtful that the authorities will realize their aspirations. The Russian public is mainly passive and fatalistic, with most people trying to distance themselves from the state.⁴⁵ For decades, the embrace of great power rhetoric and geopolitical revanchism served primarily as compensation for the political disempowerment of citizens, economic hardships, and the lack of a vision for the future. Still, the widespread acceptance of the war expressed in public opinion surveys shows the state holds sway over how people behave.⁴⁶ Moreover, the reflex of “downward adaptation” (constant adjustment to deteriorating conditions of living), persists in the next generation of Russians, making it even more challenging to lead the country out of authoritarian dependency.

Recommendations for the West

Although the West's policy toward Russia has changed significantly in the last two years, it is still insufficient to defend Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, effectively deter Russia from aggression against NATO, or create lasting peace in Europe. Achieving these goals will require not only far-reaching changes in NATO's defense and deterrence policy or in the Western sanctions regime.⁴⁷ A revision of the West's cognitive patterns, mental maps, and strategic communication is also urgently required.

Creative adaptation to Russia's strategic culture

Moving away from the paradigm of Western strategic culture in relations with Moscow could raise the costs of Russia's aggressive foreign policy and give the West more influence over Moscow's calculations. The best way to avoid escalation is to demonstrate military, economic, and political preparedness for it. While the perceived weakness of the West provoked Russian nuclear blackmail after February 2022, crossing Russia's "red lines" regarding military support for Ukraine has not resulted in Moscow's retaliation.⁴⁸ The US announcement that it would deploy long-range missiles in Germany is one example of proactive strategic communication with the Kremlin.⁴⁹ Strengthening Western societies' resilience by raising public awareness of the severity of security threats while preventing defeatism and panic, and pooling resources to counter Russian hostile actions, is also key.

The West must create strategic dilemmas and ambiguities for the adversary and present it with *faits accomplis* to narrow Russia's scope for reflexive control. So far, the West has more resources, but Russia has more resolve. A decision to admit Ukraine to NATO would make Europe much safer, as it would dash Russia's hopes of realizing its ambitions in "gray" buffer zones left in the EU/NATO neighborhood by the collapse of the USSR.⁵⁰ Practicalities of the accession, including the actual scope of Article 5, would depend on the military situation in Ukraine, but this strategic decision should not depend on whether Kyiv liberates all the occupied territories.⁵¹ There is a risk that if Ukraine were admitted to NATO, Moscow would test the alliance's solidarity with Kyiv, but — given the Kremlin's anti-Western strategic goals — it is likely to do that anyway in the Baltic states or Poland if NATO backs away from this strategic decision under Russian blackmail.⁵² In which case Russia would be tempted to further test the limits of the West's "weakness" and escalate its anti-Western hybrid warfare to destabilize the socio-political and economic situation in "hostile" states.

Under no circumstances should the rhetoric and actions of key Western states — especially the US — suggest the weakening of NATO's political cohesion. If the Kremlin were to conclude that Article 5 of the Washington Treaty was an empty

promise, it would be strongly tempted to conduct a limited military operation on NATO's eastern flank, despite Russia's relative conventional weakness. Moscow could add some nuclear blackmail to obtain significant concessions, leading to the destruction of the current European security order.

Debates about possible negotiations with Russia while it still believes in its ultimate victory only bolster Moscow's ambition to tire out Ukraine and the West. If Russia sees itself forced into actual negotiations by developments on the battlefield, it will know how to make Kyiv an acceptable offer. Conversely, the longer the hope of victory in Russia persists due to the West's apparent indecision, the greater the Kremlin's ability to mobilize resources for the war.

Delegitimization of Putin's regime

Although official Russian discourse either demonizes the West or denigrates it as a dying civilization, Putin's regime longs for respect from Western capitals, above all Washington. The Kremlin sees it as an essential source of its legitimacy at home and abroad.⁵³

For decades, the West has legitimized the increasingly repressive Putin regime in the eyes of Russian society, the ruling elite, and other state leaders. The revenues from economic cooperation with the West enabled Russia to channel massive resources into the army, the security apparatus, the propaganda machine, and subversive operations against Western democracies. At the same time, the regime has paid little cost for its massive human rights violations. Thousands of individuals responsible for political assassinations, politically motivated trials, the brutal suppression of peaceful protests, and the shutdown of independent media have never made it onto the sanctions lists, perpetuating a sense of impunity for state criminals.

It is in the West's strategic interest to delegitimize Putin's regime and bring about his departure from power, which could open a window of opportunity for political change. Although the entire Russian state bears responsibility for the war of aggression, no one has made himself as much of a political hostage to the war as Putin. He will likely continue the invasion at all costs as long as he remains in power (even if its dynamics and means may change, including a temporary cease of its hot phase.)

The West should not recognize Putin, who ran unconstitutionally for his fifth term in 2024 when the elections were held in the occupied territories of Ukraine, as the legitimate president of Russia and its representative on the international stage.⁵⁴ Since the International Criminal Court issued a warrant for his arrest in 2023, Putin has been an internationally wanted criminal. The Kremlin's outrage at the warrant showed that this was a severe blow to the Russian head of state's image.⁵⁵



Photo: MOSCOW, RUSSIA – DECEMBER 28, 2021: A Memorial society supporter and law enforcement officers are seen outside the Russian Supreme Court during a hearing of arguments of the Russian Prosecutor General's Office and international public organization Memorial Society (a non-profit organization declared a foreign agent in Russia).Credit: Gavriil Grigorov/TASS «

Openness to the idea of political change in Russia as a path to lasting peace in Europe

Sustainable peace in Europe will not come without a more pluralistic, competitive form of government in Russia. The West, however, remains wary of political change there, particularly regarding the security of its nuclear arsenal, territorial integrity, and a possible spillover of instability beyond its borders. The continuation of the authoritarian model in post-Putin Russia is often seen as the lesser evil.

Prioritizing Russia's stability leads to underestimating the threats posed by Putinism, namely the structural grievances it has produced together with the lack of institutional checks and balances in the system.⁵⁶ Putinism is based on an unprecedented top-down criminalization of the state, lawlessness, systemic violence exacerbated by war crimes, degradation of state institutions, and devaluation of human life. Law enforcement's focus on persecuting political opponents leads to avoidable terrorist attacks.⁵⁷ The longer this system continues, the more risks and threats it will pose.

In advance, the West can try to maximize the advantages and contain the turbulence of various scenarios of change. To avoid a Russian relapse into imperialism, future attempts to normalize relations with the Kremlin must be contingent on Moscow's renunciation of aggressive foreign policy and the liberalization of Russian domestic politics.⁵⁸

Working out a strategy of support for Russian democratic communities

Many actors who could have steered Russia in a more pluralistic and peaceful direction (political opposition, civil society activists, independent journalists, researchers, artists, and writers) were forced to leave the country and are now active abroad. Systemic, long-term support from like-minded Western states will enable these actors to continue their work in exile, learn more about democratic governance, and organize assistance for those repressed in their homeland. This would be not only a humanitarian endeavor but, above all, an instrument of European security.

Political exiles are invaluable for future change in Russia. Most are unlikely to be critical agents of change in the politics of the post-Putin state, but they can play an essential role in formulating solutions, norms, and political visions for a transformation of their country in line with the ideas of liberalization and pluralism. They can draw on societal demands for self-governance, political change, and fatigue with the current leadership, which will only build if the regime weakens due to Russia's military defeat and the impact of sanctions.⁵⁹ Exiles can be a "conveyor belt" of these ideas to the Russian public, using means that are still available despite increasing censorship.⁶⁰ In particular, strengthening ethno-national minorities and local and regional communities can be an effective tool against the resurgence of Russian imperial revanchism.⁶¹

Conclusion

Even if Russia never signs on to Western interests and goals, aggression and war crimes do not have to remain part of its foreign policy. Change is possible, but it will require long-term, coordinated efforts of the democratic West in the face of the biggest security threat since 1945.

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Endnotes

- 1 Although the way in which Western governments implement democratic values and norms on the international stage often gives rise to legitimate criticism, Western strategic culture differs from its Russian counterpart in the area of laws and public debate on the instruments of foreign and security policy. Generally, Western strategic culture is based on the idea of non-military competition for international influence, a win-win paradigm of international relations, and rejection of war and revanchism as a means of achieving foreign policy goals. The freedom of public debate in the West means that leaders can be held accountable on issues of security, human rights, respect for legal norms, and the safety of civilians in international conflict.
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