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# Reverberations From Ukraine

The Rising Risk of Conflict in Europe and Eurasia

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## Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 set in motion a series of rapid and transformative changes in Europe and Eurasia, the speed and magnitude of which have not occurred since the Soviet Union collapsed. Because of the invasion, NATO has further expanded, with Finland and Sweden opting to join the alliance's ranks. European governments are spending more on defense. The European Union has revitalized its enlargement process, opening accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova in December 2023. Europe shed its reliance on Russian oil and gas, depriving Moscow of a critical source of leverage in its relations with Europe. Governments and citizens alike in countries where Russia has historically held influence are reevaluating their relationships with Moscow, increasingly wary of its role in their regions. Nowhere is this more true than in Ukraine, where Ukrainians are now more committed to escaping Russia's orbit and integrating more deeply into Europe and the West.

Despite those headwinds facing Russia, since its invasion of Ukraine the Kremlin has only grown more resolved to undermine European stability and the security architecture that underpins it. Russian President Vladimir Putin's full-scale invasion was the point of no return in his longstanding crusade against the West, and he is orchestrating significant changes inside Russia to better position the country to engage in what he has framed as an existential struggle with the West.<sup>1</sup> Beyond subjugating Ukraine, Putin's ultimate goal is to undermine the U.S.-led global order and usher in a new one more favorable to Moscow and its interests. To this end, Putin has doubled down on his efforts to convince Russians that they are under threat from a West bent on breaking Russia apart; to put the economy on a wartime footing; and to deepen cooperation with like-minded partners in China, Iran, and North Korea to offset Western pressure and amplify his global-reordering agenda.<sup>2</sup>

The confluence of those factors—shifting geopolitical dynamics and a weakened, yet evolving and resolute Russia—are increasing the risk of instability and conflict in Europe and the former Soviet space. For now, flash points are most likely to emerge or reignite on NATO's periphery, either as a result of Russian efforts to retain its influence where it remains (in Belarus and with the current government in Georgia), or to reverse a trajectory of declining influence (for example, in Armenia and Moldova). In other cases, the degradation of the Russian military and the fact that Moscow is bogged down with the fighting in Ukraine create conditions more conducive to regional actors seeking to advance their own objectives. Those changes contributed to Azerbaijan's decision to seize Nagorno-Karabakh by force from Armenia in September 2023.

Although instability and conflict remain most likely outside of NATO territory, the potential for conflict between Russia and NATO once the war in Ukraine ends remains a possibility, and one that is growing. Already, Western officials are warning of a military threat from Russia to countries along NATO's eastern flank. Estonia's intelligence chief said in February 2023 that "Russia has chosen a

path which is a long-term confrontation . . . and the Kremlin is probably anticipating a possible conflict with NATO within the next decade or so.”<sup>3</sup> The German and Danish defense ministers have issued similar warnings.<sup>4</sup> There are numerous factors at work to dissuade Russia from attacking NATO, but a Russia-NATO conflict could still occur, either inadvertently—as Putin’s increasingly brazen actions spur unintended escalation—or intentionally, should Putin come to question NATO’s, and especially the United States’, resolve to fight under certain conditions.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, changes within Russia in the aftermath of its invasion suggest that the risk of instability inside the country itself in the coming years has risen. Since coming to power twenty-four years ago, Putin has sought to personalize the political system and concentrate power in his own hands. Yet dynamics since the invasion have accelerated centrifugal forces that increase the prospects of a chaotic political transition in Russia.

Putin’s invasion of Ukraine brought war back to the heart of Europe. Given the reverberations that the war is producing, the conflict in Ukraine could be the start of a more turbulent era. Reducing the risk of such a future will require the United States and Europe to revive and update their strategy of containment, a strategy that as in the Cold War addresses the real and urgent risks stemming from what George Kennan called “Russian expansive tendencies.” An updated containment policy will include multiple lines of effort across various dimensions of the West’s relationship with Russia and should include increased efforts to: undermine Russia’s capacity for aggression, enhance deterrence of Russian conventional and hybrid threats, increase the resilience of countries on NATO’s periphery, create channels to decrease the risk of unintended escalation with Russia, and broaden the coalition of countries applying pressure on Moscow. Most urgently, however, such an approach needs to begin in Ukraine. Enabling Ukraine to thwart Russia’s objective there is the most immediate and impactful step the United States and Europe can take to ensure the future stability and security of Europe.

## Russian Intent and Capabilities

For Russia, the war in Ukraine is first and foremost about controlling Kyiv and its choices. In his speech on February 24, 2022, Putin articulated Russia’s goal to be the “denazification” of Ukraine—an intentionally vague objective but one that most likely meant toppling President Volodymyr Zelensky’s government and replacing it with a pro-Russian regime that would keep Kyiv neutral and firmly in Moscow’s orbit.<sup>6</sup> But Russia’s objectives go further than Ukraine. Putin simultaneously seeks to weaken Europe, undermine NATO, and push the United States out of Europe. That event, Putin appears to calculate, would provide the final, fatal blow to the European security order and potentially to the global order he seeks to revise. Putin has long harbored those objectives, but since his invasion of Ukraine, he appears more committed to accomplishing them and has fewer options available for changing course. In this way, Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine was the point of no return in his long-standing crusade against the West.<sup>7</sup> What is more, Putin has grown more tolerant

of risk over time.<sup>8</sup> He also appears intent on joining the ranks of history's great Russian rulers, and therefore he is unlikely to leave the difficult task of restoring Russia to what he sees as its rightful position of power to a future leader. For those reasons, the United States and its allies should prepare for a sustained period of heightened tension and a greater risk of instability and conflict in Europe and the former Soviet space.

Since the invasion of Ukraine, Putin and senior Russian officials have consistently signaled that Russia's interests lie beyond Ukraine. Speaking in March 2024, former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev repeated a previous statement by Putin that "Russia's borders do not end anywhere." "The more powerful the state," he asserted, "the further its strategic frontiers are located beyond its state borders . . . and the geographical ones can catch up with them after the fact."<sup>9</sup> For now, Moscow is most intent on sustaining Russian influence in what it views as its historic sphere of influence—which includes, at a minimum, the non-NATO countries that comprise the former Soviet Union. To achieve that goal, Russia will seek to maintain its political, economic, and military dominance over those countries and to limit their ability to pursue policies of their own choosing. Advancing those objectives has become even more important for Moscow in the aftermath of its invasion of Ukraine, as Moscow faces new (or in some cases greater) political headwinds because of its invasion. The Kremlin has become a less attractive economic and security partner for many countries in the region, and some governments and publics have grown wary of Russia's influence. China, the European Union, and other actors are also looking to increase their presence in regions like the Caucasus, the Balkans, and Central Asia. Moscow will be highly attuned to perceptions of its position as a great power and will intensely contest its changing role in these regions, making the post-Soviet space a critical focus of Russian efforts to maintain its influence and global standing.<sup>10</sup>

While the Kremlin views maintaining Russian influence in the former Soviet space as critical, revising the security order in Europe is Putin's ultimate objective. The Kremlin and its allies have accordingly increased their aggressive rhetoric toward some NATO member states, especially Poland and the Baltic states. In February 2024, for example, TV presenter and Kremlin propagandist Vladimir Solovyov warned that Russia is poised to "destroy" Poland, and in his interview with Tucker Carlson, Putin mentioned Poland repeatedly.<sup>11</sup> In January 2024, Putin repeated claims that Baltic countries are "throwing [ethnic] Russian people" out of their countries and that this situation "directly affects [Russia's] security"—statements that echo the justifications the Kremlin has previously given for its invasion of Ukraine.<sup>12</sup> In these ways, Moscow continues to telegraph its intentions, which underscore Russia's resolve to further expand its influence and undermine NATO.

So long as the fighting in Ukraine continues, Russia will have limited capacity to advance its objectives outside Ukraine. Russia's conventional military forces have been weakened in the fighting in Ukraine—Moscow has lost many tanks, armored vehicles, airplanes, and helicopters, for example—and while the war continues the Kremlin will lack the resources and institutional bandwidth to pursue significant efforts outside Ukraine, which remains Putin's priority. For those reasons, Russia will for now likely rely on nonconventional tools—influence operations, cyberattacks, assassinations, and other forms of sabotage—to destabilize its enemies. The Kremlin is already hard at work deploying those tactics in Europe and the former Soviet Union. Since Putin's invasion, the Kremlin has targeted Moldova in particular with efforts to weaponize corruption,

spread disinformation, and increase economic pressure to thwart the country's accession to the European Union and re-establish influence over President Maia Sandu. The Russian threat to Moldova is so significant that Paris signed a defense agreement with Chişinău in March 2024.<sup>13</sup>

Russia's heightened aggression has also been directed at NATO member states and, since its invasion of Ukraine, Russia has significantly ratcheted up its nonconventional attacks across Europe. European governments have uncovered numerous large-scale influence operations designed not just to reduce support for sustained assistance to Ukraine but to divide and weaken Europe. For example, in February 2024, French cybersecurity experts detected preparations for a large disinformation campaign in France, Germany, Poland, and other European countries, tied in part to the second anniversary of Putin's invasion of Ukraine and the European Parliament elections in June.<sup>14</sup> Russia has weaponized migrants at the Finnish border in an attempt to destabilize the country, sending more than a thousand migrants into Finland without proper documentation or visas and leading Helsinki to indefinitely close its border with Russia.<sup>15</sup> The Kremlin also stoked anti-Israel sentiment in France in the aftermath of Hamas's October 7, 2023, attack on Israel; killed a Russian soldier that defected from the war in Ukraine on Spanish soil; stepped up its jamming of GPS and navigation equipment in northern Europe and the Baltics; and has recently engaged in numerous acts of sabotage, including setting fire to a warehouse containing aid shipments for Ukraine, derailing railway cars, and attempting to attack military and logistics sites in Germany. European intelligence officials are now warning their governments about Russian plans to prepare covert bombings, arson attacks, and infrastructure attacks on European soil.<sup>16</sup> In its confrontation with the West, Russia is doubling down on its nonconventional tools and tactics.

Nuclear threats are part of this nonconventional arsenal of aggression. Since the invasion of Ukraine, Moscow has increased its nuclear intimidation efforts, including escalatory and ambiguous rhetoric about its potential use of nuclear weapons, a decision to deploy nonstrategic nuclear weapons in Belarus, its suspension of its participation in New START, and a May 2024 announcement that it would hold a military exercise to rehearse the use of tactical nuclear weapons in combat.<sup>17</sup> Those actions are designed in part to weaponize fear—to raise the specter of military escalation with Russia, including the use of nuclear weapons, to dissuade sustained support for Ukraine and sow divisions within Europe about how to respond to the rising Russian threat. Given Russia's heightened sense of vulnerability—resulting from the degradation of its conventional forces, sanctions and export controls that will hinder the reconstitution of those forces, and the expansion and strengthening of NATO—Russia will rely more heavily on nuclear weapons in its security policy and its efforts to divide and weaken Europe.

Once the war in Ukraine ends, however, Russia will once again pose a significant conventional threat to Europe and the former Soviet space. Given the degradation of its relations with the West, the Kremlin is planning to increase the size and disposition of its military beyond pre-war levels; former Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced in December 2022 the country's intent to increase the target size of its armed forces from a pre-war level of 1 million (a number never achieved in practice) to 1.5 million.<sup>18</sup> Putin's appointment of Andrey Belousov, an economist, as the new minister of defense further reflects the importance Putin places on rebuilding the Russian military and sustaining the confrontation with the West. Belousov's appointment reflects Putin's belief that

success in a war of attrition will be based largely on Russia's economy, and Belousov will be tasked with integrating the defense economy with the wider economy and getting more efficiency out of it.

Although the timeline for the reconstitution of Russia's conventional forces is uncertain—the estimated range varies from two to ten years—the fact that it will ultimately rebuild its military (and seek to incorporate lessons from its war in Ukraine) is certain. Putin has gone through the difficult steps of shifting Russia's economy to a wartime footing and, rather than reversing such changes, could instead look for new opportunities to justify a continuation. The war in Ukraine has become the primary justification for the Putin regime and its actions, and even if the conflict in Ukraine ends, it is likely that Putin would seek a new confrontation to legitimate and secure his regime. Alternatively, even if Putin does not seek out conflict, the mobilized capacity he has at his disposal will better enable him to seize on opportunities as he sees them.<sup>19</sup>

The threat Russia poses to Europe will likely persist beyond the Putin regime. The historical record shows that, for all post-Cold War autocrats (except monarchs) in power for twenty years or more, authoritarianism persists in their countries past the leader's departure in 76 percent of cases.<sup>20</sup> When such leaders are also older personalist autocrats, authoritarianism endures—either under the same regime or a new one—92 percent of the time. In those cases, the same regime insiders often remain in place after the longtime leader departs—a prospect that would be made more likely in Russia if Putin dies of natural causes in office or if he is ousted in an elite-led coup. The prospects of continuity are made even greater by the fact that, since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the security services have grown even more influential. The more Putin has come to rely on repression, the more power he grants to the security forces, which have long held particularly paranoid and hostile views of the United States. Unless there is significant turnover among the ruling elite when Putin goes, Russia's confrontational posture will endure. Some scholars have argued that a nationalist authoritarian leader could reverse course and pursue a less confrontational approach with the West, given the damage that the Ukraine war is doing to Russia's future.<sup>21</sup> However, Putin has saddled his successor with thorny problems—the status of Crimea and the other territories Russia has illegally annexed, wartime reparations, and accountability for war crimes—that could open up a new leader to accusations of capitulation should he de-escalate tensions with the West. Other futures are possible, but the West should expect the confrontation to outlast Putin.

## The Risk of Instability and Conflict on NATO's Periphery

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has had uneven effects on its relations with countries in its so-called near abroad. Some countries, including Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Georgia under its current government, have moved closer to the Kremlin since the invasion. Other countries, however, view Moscow with greater trepidation and express increasing concern that they could be the next target of Russian aggression. Russia's invasion has also reduced the attractiveness of Moscow as a security provider and economic partner and prompted those countries to look to other powers, such as the European

Union, China, Iran, and Turkey, as alternatives. Yet given the importance that Russia places on maintaining its influence in countries and regions where it has historically held sway, Russia is unlikely to quietly accept its deteriorating role.<sup>22</sup> New flashpoints and conflicts could emerge from Russian efforts to reverse its trajectory of declining influence—flashpoints that would be most likely in Moldova and Armenia.

## *MOLDOVA*

Of all the countries in Europe and the former Soviet Union, Moldova is probably at greatest risk of a Russian incursion, especially if Moscow views itself as successful in Ukraine. Since Russia's full-scale invasion, President Sandu has accelerated Moldova's pro-Western trajectory amid concerns that it could be Russia's next target. Moldova applied for and received EU candidacy in June 2022, and it has also sought to distance itself from Russian-led organizations such as the Commonwealth of Independent States. The Kremlin views Moldova's EU candidacy as unacceptable, just as it saw Ukraine's association agreement with the European Union in 2014 as unacceptable—a dynamic that ultimately led to Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea. Like Ukraine, Putin views Moldova as being part of Russia's historic lands. In the early days of Russia's full-scale invasion, the Kremlin signaled its intent to conquer territory in Ukraine's south, which would extend Russia's control all the way to Transnistria, the pro-Russian breakaway region in eastern Moldova where Russia maintains a contingent of troops. Russia's goals in Ukraine have not significantly changed, and if Moscow were to make territorial gains in Ukraine's south giving the Russian military geographic proximity from which to wage its operation, the risk that the Kremlin would move into Moldova would grow.

Russia has already increased its nonconventional attacks on Moldova to halt its westward trajectory and create conditions that would facilitate a future move against the country. In February 2023, President Zelensky warned that Ukrainian intelligence intercepted information showing that Russia planned to establish control over Moldova—a warning that Moldovan intelligence confirmed.<sup>23</sup> Since then, Moscow has sustained information operations against Moldova similar to those that the Kremlin used before its invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, distributed over 200,000 Russian passports to people in Transnistria who the Kremlin claims are Russian citizens, and stepped up its threatening rhetoric against the country. In March 2024, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov accused Chișinău of “following in the footsteps of the Kyiv regime” by “canceling everything Russian” and “discriminating against the Russian language.”<sup>24</sup>

The Kremlin will be particularly focused on influencing Moldova's upcoming presidential election and referendum on EU accession in October 2024 and parliamentary elections in 2025—Moscow's preference is to achieve its objective of controlling Chișinău through political means before considering more forceful measures.<sup>25</sup> Russia will increase its hybrid attacks to undermine Moldova's pro-European leaders and support the pro-Russian parties, now united under a “Victory” election bloc, which was announced in Moscow in April 2024 and is backed by pro-Russian billionaire Ilan Shor. Moscow's goal is to influence the outcome of those upcoming elections and install a pro-Russian government that will remain subservient to Moscow. Beyond the electoral arena, Transnistria and Gagauzia—a pro-Russian autonomous region in the country's south—will remain potential flashpoints for instability. Both regions have gone through the now familiar steps of



requesting Moscow's help, facilitating potential future Russian efforts to increase control. Transnistria's leaders in March 2023 called on Moscow to "protect it against the pressure of Moldova." Likewise, the pro-Russian leader of Moldova's Gagauzia region traveled to Moscow in March 2024 and asked Russia for its support, accusing Chişinău of "oppressing" people's rights in the region.<sup>26</sup> Moscow has cultivated inroads in those two regions that it could use to foster future instability in the country.

## ARMENIA

As in Moldova, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has accelerated Yerevan's pro-Western trajectory and a deterioration in relations with Moscow. Even before 2022, Russia-Armenia relations were strained. Armenia's 2018 Velvet Revolution and the emergence of one of the movement's leaders, Nikol Pashinyan, as prime minister unnerved the Kremlin, given its disdain for so-called color revolutions. Azerbaijan's lightning operation to occupy all of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023—a move enabled by Russia's preoccupation in Ukraine—only hardened Pashinyan's doubts about the value of the Russian alliance. Since then, Yerevan canceled planned Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) exercises in the country in 2023, suspended Armenia's CSTO participation altogether in 2024, publicly stated that Russia could no longer be relied on as a reliable defense partner, and announced it is considering applying for EU membership.

Armenia's moves have precipitated a Kremlin backlash. Putin allies, including Kremlin propagandist Margarita Simonyan, the editor-in-chief of the state-owned broadcaster *RT*, have called Pashinyan a traitor—the ultimate criticism that Putin levies against his enemies—and threatened "there will be no Armenia in five years—just as there is no longer any Karabakh in the form in which the Armenians needed it. . . . Armenia will not exist at all, you will see."<sup>27</sup> Pro-Russian actors have already sought to capitalize on existing criticisms of Pashinyan after Azerbaijan's invasion of Nagorno-Karabakh. Kremlin officials, propagandists, and influencers on Telegram fueled anti-government sentiment and called for the overthrow of Pashinyan and his government. Russia also retains significant leverage that it could use to destabilize the country should Moscow decide it wants to rein in what it views as a wayward ally. About 40 percent of Armenia's exports go to Russia, and Yerevan remains highly dependent on Russian imports, especially energy and grain. The Kremlin, therefore, retains leverage it can use to stoke instability in Armenia with the goal of unseating Pashinyan and ushering in a pro-Russian president.

Concurrently, there is a risk of renewed Azerbaijani aggression against Armenia as Baku seeks to expand its influence in the region amid the Kremlin's distraction in Ukraine. Baku, in particular, could seek to push its claim to what it calls the "Zangezur corridor," the strip of Armenian land connecting mainland Azerbaijan and its Nakhchivan exclave, which President Ilham Aliyev now asserts should be controlled entirely by Baku. Aliyev has even threatened to seize the corridor by force if Armenia does not comply.<sup>28</sup> Warming ties between Azerbaijan and Russia could further embolden Baku to pursue its aims. Just days before Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Putin and Aliyev signed a wide-ranging political-military agreement. Russia's lack of response to Azerbaijani violations of the ceasefire after the Nagorno-Karabakh invasion ceasefire and its blockade of the Lachin corridor, even after several Russian peacekeepers were killed by Azerbaijani artillery fire,

further suggests an understanding between Moscow and Baku. Such geopolitical realignment in the region raises the prospects of renewed conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

While Russian influence has declined in some former Soviet states because of its invasion, other countries have drawn closer to the Kremlin. Russia is likely attuned to the need to sustain its influence where it remains, potentially leading Russia to overreact to signs of shifting political dynamics in such countries, or to pursue assertive actions to further enhance its power.

### *BELARUS*

Putin has used his invasion of Ukraine to increase Russian control over Belarus, incrementally eroding Belarusian sovereignty. Belarus's President Aleksandr Lukashenko has long sought to limit Russian influence over the country by playing Russia off the United States and Europe. But since 2020, Moscow's influence over Minsk has increased significantly thanks to Putin's backing of Lukashenko's crackdown on a well-organized opposition movement that threatened to topple him. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, integration has deepened. Belarus's already-high economic dependence on Russia has grown, largely resulting from Western sanctions on Belarusian exports in response to the country's supporting role in Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Now, two-thirds of Belarus's trade is with Russia.

Even more significant is the countries' growing military integration. A few days into Russia's war, Belarus dropped its neutral status, giving it legal cover to host Russian troops and weapons. In March 2023, Putin said Russia would station tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, while retaining control of them. Russia also sent Belarus an undisclosed number of Iskander short-range missiles—which are capable of carrying nuclear warheads—and a S-400 air defense missile system. Moscow has also positioned MiG fighter jets (capable of delivering hypersonic weapons) within Belarus.

Several dynamics could prompt Moscow to assert greater control over Minsk. Not only does Russia seek to use Belarus as a proxy for its own influence, but the country also holds strategic importance as a buffer between Russia and NATO. Any threat of regime change—especially given the lack of a clear succession plan in Minsk—or a future attempt by Minsk to distance itself from Moscow could trigger a direct Russian intervention, unilaterally or potentially under the auspices of the CSTO (as it did in Kazakhstan to shore up the embattled President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev). Alternatively, in his broader confrontation with the West, Putin could continue to look for opportunities to threaten Europe and the United States and signal his resolve to sustain the contest. To this end, should Putin seek to pursue another escalatory step in the confrontation, Russia could forward deploy its troops in Belarus, bringing Russian forces closer to NATO's borders.

### *GEORGIA*

The authoritarian-leaning Georgian Dream government in Tbilisi has drifted closer to Moscow, expanding its relationship with Russia both politically and economically since the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Georgia's government has not openly criticized Russia's invasion or joined international sanctions against Moscow. It has also promoted increased trade and travel with Russia.

In 2022, Georgia's exports to Russia increased by 6.8 percent to \$652 million while Georgian imports of Russian goods increased by 79 percent to \$1.8 billion, the highest level in the past sixteen years. Tbilisi has also restored direct flights between the two countries, and Moscow has abolished the visa requirements imposed on Georgian nationals in the early 2000s. Notably, the Georgian Dream government is also deepening relations with China, further signaling its shift away from the West. A majority of the Georgian public, however, remains committed to deepening ties with Europe and the West; 79 percent of respondents to a survey conducted between October and November 2023 expressed support for EU membership.<sup>29</sup>

These countervailing forces—the pro-Russian turn of the Georgian Dream government and the pro-Western commitment of the public—have already spurred tension and instability in the country. After retracting controversial legislation resembling Russia's "foreign agents" laws last year amid widespread public backlash, the Georgian Dream government moved again in May 2024 to jam the laws through. Although Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili vetoed the bill, Georgia's legislature overturned that veto, paving the way for the law's entry into force. Western officials warn that the legislation's passage could derail Georgia's current bids to join the European Union and NATO. As a result, tens of thousands of Georgians took to the streets in May 2024 to protest and express support for the country's European future. The Georgian Dream government responded to some of those protests with violence, threats, and intimidation of the protesters and members of the political opposition.

The growing chasm between Georgians and their current government raises the risk that the two sides will clash over their visions of their country's future, generating further instability in the country. A poll conducted earlier in March 2024 showed that Georgian citizens are supportive of political (54 percent) and economic (52 percent) cooperation with the EU, but do not believe that the government is doing enough to ensure EU membership.<sup>30</sup> The country's election in October 2024 could provide a flash point in the increasingly polarized society.

## Conflict With NATO

Russia will remain intent on maintaining—and expanding where possible—its influence in the former Soviet space. Yet Putin's ultimate objective is to undermine NATO and restore some semblance of its former empire—an expanse that includes countries now within the NATO alliance. Putin's specific aims within that larger vision are difficult to surmise. In December 2021, with its forces massed on Ukraine's border, Moscow put forward a list of demands required for lowering tensions. Among its demands, the Kremlin proposed barring Ukraine's entry into NATO, an end to NATO's further eastward expansion, and NATO's removal of any troops or weapons deployed to countries that joined the alliance after 1997—which would include Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and the Balkan countries. The demands could be seen as an extreme opening bid in Moscow's

desired negotiations with Washington, but they offer insight into how Russia would seek to reconfigure Europe.

Even beyond rolling NATO back and re-establishing a new version of the Russian Empire, however, Moscow is also likely looking for an opportunity to break the NATO alliance—to discredit Article V and its promise of collective defense—with the goal of fracturing the West and returning Russia to what it views as its rightful role as a great power in Europe and globally. So long as the war in Ukraine continues, Russia will lack the capacity to take on NATO. Putin continues to view NATO as a credible deterrent and currently has no intent to widen the war in Ukraine and directly challenge the alliance. Yet, even with numerous factors working to dissuade Russia from directly challenging NATO, there remain plausible pathways to conflict between NATO and Russia.

### *ACCIDENTAL AND UNINTENDED ESCALATION*

The war in Ukraine has increased the chances of accidental escalation that could lead to a direct conflict between NATO and Russia. The risk of such an escalation has risen as Russia has demonstrated its willingness to take ever-riskier actions near NATO territory. Several incidents underline the risk: in November 2022, for example, a missile—ultimately determined to be an errant Ukrainian air defense missile launched in response to Russian strikes—landed in Poland, killing two Polish citizens. In March 2024, a Russian missile violated—likely accidentally—Polish airspace during a Russian missile attack on Ukraine; Russian drone debris has fallen inside Romania; and in March 2024, a Russian missile exploded near a convoy carrying President Zelensky and Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis in Odesa.<sup>31</sup> The risk of accidental escalation is highest in and around the Black Sea, which is bordered by three NATO countries and has become an “increasingly dangerous cauldron of military and geopolitical tensions.”<sup>32</sup>

The risk of unintended escalation—escalation that stems from deliberate intimidation or coercion that the perpetrator does not view as escalatory but that its opponent interprets as such—has also risen. This development is, in large part, because throughout the course of the war it has become more difficult for the United States and NATO to discern Russia’s “red lines,” and vice versa. Russia’s lack of response to various threats previously considered to cross Russia’s red lines—for example, Ukrainian strikes into Russian territory or the West’s provision of increasingly sophisticated weapons systems—has increased uncertainty in the West about what actions would really trigger an escalatory Russian response. The fact that Russia has not yet responded does not mean there are no actions by the United States and its European allies that would cause Russia to escalate. In this context of increased ambiguity, a scenario where the West misreads Russia and takes an action that the Kremlin ultimately deems escalatory is easy to imagine.<sup>33</sup>

This risk could be amplified by possible Kremlin concerns about a decline in the credibility of its threats. As the war has continued, the West’s initially cautious approach has given way to more assertive support, including the provision of sophisticated weapons systems to Ukraine. Such concerns, to the extent they exist, could lead the Kremlin to respond more harshly than expected to any given Western action to reestablish the credibility of its threats, similarly setting off an escalatory spiral.<sup>34</sup>

The Kremlin is also likely uncertain of where the West's red lines lie. As Putin grows more brazen in his actions to antagonize the West, he could misjudge and take a step too far by pursuing an action that elicits a stronger than expected Western response. Putin's trajectory since he returned to office in 2012 has been one of increasing tolerance for risk, as he has come to judge that doing so pays off.<sup>35</sup> It is plausible that Putin's brazenness becomes out of control or an anxious NATO ally responds more forcefully than Putin anticipates, once again setting off an escalatory spiral. Looking forward, an approach by NATO member states to increase strategic ambiguity—or generate greater uncertainty about what they are willing to do to support Ukraine—could also raise the risk of unintended escalation. Increasing Western strategic ambiguity could be useful in compelling Russia to act with greater restraint, but it could also simultaneously contribute to an overall environment of uncertainty.

### *INTENTIONAL ESCALATION*

After twenty-four years in power, and as the longest serving Russian leader since Joseph Stalin, Putin is intent on creating his legacy as a great Russian leader. Putin likely views the destruction of NATO as a feat that, if achieved, would catapult him to the upper echelons of historical Russian rulers. The costs of a direct conflict with NATO would be tremendous. Yet thinking among Russian leadership seems to accept that worthy accomplishments require high costs, and that the higher the costs, the more worthy the accomplishment. Putin will likely be looking for opportunities to directly test NATO with the goal of discrediting Article V and undermining the alliance. To this end, there is one scenario that stands out as the most plausible path to a Russia-NATO conflict: Putin decides that NATO—and most importantly the United States—lacks the resolve to fight under specific conditions.<sup>36</sup> Political factors in Washington and European capitals could change Russia's calculus about the West's political will to fight. The re-election of former President Donald Trump, for example, would raise serious questions in both the Kremlin and NATO capitals about the United States' commitment to Europe, potentially leading the Kremlin to revise its calculus about the credibility of NATO's collective defense. Similarly, the growing traction of far-right parties and leaders in Europe—many of whom harbor sentiments sympathetic to Moscow—could also convince the Kremlin that NATO would struggle to reach consensus on responding to Russian aggression against a NATO member in Russia's periphery.

Perhaps most concerning of all, however, would be the effect on Putin's calculus of U.S. engagement in a major conflict with China in the Indo-Pacific. If the United States were to become involved in a major conflict with China in Asia, the military balance in Europe could look quite different to the Kremlin, and the threat of Russian opportunistic aggression against NATO would increase. In this case, the Kremlin could judge that Washington would have neither the political interest and support nor the resources to come to Europe's defense. The Kremlin could reach a similar conclusion should the United States be forced to respond to a growing number of smaller but significant conflicts, for example in the Middle East or on the Korea Peninsula.

Further complicating the picture is the Kremlin's propensity for both risk-taking and miscalculation. Already, the Kremlin has seriously underestimated both its ability to rapidly defeat the Ukrainian

military and Western resolve in response to the invasion. Political science research shows that personalist autocrats like Putin are the most inclined to make mistakes, in part because they surround themselves with “yes men” and loyalists who tell the leader what they want to hear.<sup>37</sup> The Russian regime remains highly personalized, and if anything, rising repression makes it even less likely that Putin receives unvarnished advice. Although Putin is unlikely to test NATO now, opportunistic aggression intended to undermine the alliance cannot be ruled out in the coming years.

## Instability in Russia

Perhaps paradoxically, the steps that Putin is taking to strengthen Russia’s ability to confront the West could be weakening his grip on power, raising the risk of future instability in the country. Research on how longtime leaders like Putin tend to exit office supports this possibility. The most common way that autocrats like Putin exit office is by dying of natural causes; 40 percent of longtime leaders have exited this way—a mode of departure most likely to usher in regime continuity. However, if they do not die in office, leaders like Putin are most likely to be ousted by bottom-up forces such as civil wars and revolts.<sup>38</sup> Since the end of the Cold War, a third of personalist dictators who were in power for twenty years or more were toppled in those ways. Although Putin appears secure for now, the lack of effective institutions to channel dissent in Russia means that any mounting opposition to his regime could spill over, producing more violent and chaotic dynamics within the country.

The overconcentration of power and fear within the Russian system has slowed decision-making, leading to inaction that provides the space for small issues to spiral into larger problems for the regime. Most vividly, Putin was slow (or unwilling) to address the problems that Wagner Group chief Yevgeny Prigozhin created within the political system, enabling the most significant challenge the Putin regime had faced since coming to power. Similarly, in the aftermath of Hamas’s attack on Israel, a wave of antisemitic and anti-Israel protests swept across the North Caucasus. Local and regional authorities did little to respond, afraid to act in the absence of cues from the central government or specific directives from Moscow.<sup>39</sup> The events culminated in a high-profile riot at an airport in Dagestan, where hundreds of people stormed the runway to protest a flight arriving from Israel. The system Putin has established, characterized by fear and centralized power, raises the risk of inaction that could allow seemingly small events to develop into problems the regime cannot control.

Moreover, Putin’s fear of instability has led him to loosen his monopoly over the use of force in Russia, presumably to better equip the security services to maintain control. For example, he has allowed regional governors to stand up their own private military companies to deal with domestic unrest.<sup>40</sup> Putin’s National Guard—the Rosgvardia—can now access heavy arms.<sup>41</sup> The war in Ukraine has also resulted in large numbers of soldiers, many of them with mental health issues or drug addictions, returning to Russia with their weapons, with many concentrated in lower-income

regions. The rigidity of the Russian political system, which makes it prone to inaction, and the increasing militarization of Russian society are increasing the risk of more turbulent times.

## Recommendations for a New Containment: How to Deny and Deter the Kremlin

For Putin, there will be no turning back from his confrontation with the West. With ties to the United States and Europe broken and his resolve to undermine the European and global orders hardened, he is committed to the course. Reducing the risk of instability and conflict in Europe and the former Soviet space will require the United States and its allies to build on ongoing efforts to constrict and constrain the Kremlin's ability to sustain aggression in Ukraine and more broadly beyond Russia's borders. In many ways, such an approach will resemble the containment strategy first set out in the 1940s, a strategy designed to apply steady and forceful counterpressure on a regime whose paranoia and insecurities represented a clear danger to the West, just as the Putin regime does today.<sup>42</sup> Critically, today's containment strategy should also be based on the geographic containment of the Kremlin. During the Cold War, containment was at its core about addressing "Russian expansive tendencies."<sup>43</sup> Such concerns are once again real and urgent. Given the rising threat to security and stability that Russia poses, the United States and its allies should pursue the following objectives.

***The United States and its European allies should ensure Ukraine's victory.*** The most decisive action that the allies can take to curb the rising threat that Russia poses to European stability and the global order is to ensure Ukraine's victory, defined at a minimum as a political settlement on Kyiv's terms. Such a settlement would only be possible and durable if the United States and the West bring Ukraine into NATO and the European Union. The alternative is far more grim. If Russia views itself as successful in Ukraine, Moscow would be more likely to press on with its attempts to undermine the sovereignty of its other neighbors. A Russia that views itself as successful in Ukraine would also be more likely to directly test NATO once it has reconstituted its forces, particularly if the Kremlin comes to question U.S. resolve to defend Europe. Defeating Russia in Ukraine is also central to Washington's and its allies' ability to disrupt the growing cooperation among Moscow and its like-minded partners in Beijing, Tehran, and Pyongyang. Washington cannot ignore Russian aggression in Europe, for example, to focus on rising Chinese power in Asia. They are linked.

***The United States and its European allies should undermine Russia's capacity for aggression beyond its borders.*** Russia under Putin will never be a stakeholder in European security—a fact that likely will persist past Putin's departure. The United States and its allies, therefore, should continue to aim at weakening the Kremlin's capacity to pursue aggression beyond Russia's borders. Russia is actively and effectively working to circumvent an unprecedented sanctions and export control regime. The allies should do more to prevent it. In January 2024, the International Working Group on Russia Sanctions proposed several measures that would increase the efficacy of efforts to deprive

Russia of critical inputs for its war machine. The United States and its allies should follow those recommendations to address inconsistencies in the export controls regime by aligning, simplifying, and expanding regulations across jurisdictions; strengthening government institutions tasked with implementation and enforcement of sanctions and export controls (especially outside of the United States where experience with export controls is more limited); incentivizing the private sector to step up compliance; targeting third-country circumvention with coercive measures like asset freezes and transactions bans on violating companies; and improving multilateral cooperation on export controls including by facilitating the exchange of information.<sup>44</sup>

***The United States and NATO should strengthen their deterrence of Russian conventional threats.***

The United States, in cooperation with its NATO allies, should address shortcomings in the defense industrial base to ensure a sustained weapons supply to Ukraine over the long term, and to ensure preparedness for future conflicts. This step will require greater spending on defense. NATO member states have already agreed that 2 percent of gross domestic product as a benchmark for defense spending is the floor and not the ceiling. European governments should now pledge to officially increase the defense spending target. Likewise, at the NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, in July 2023, the alliance adopted new regional defense plans for countering the Russian threat. Those ambitious plans provide member states with guidance on how to upgrade their defense and direct military spending. It is now incumbent on the allies to make the investments and commitments needed to fulfill NATO's plans.

As NATO allies are increasing defense spending, they should allocate some funds to investments in the capabilities that the United States would have to redeploy to the Indo-Pacific in a potential confrontation with China. The allies should first work to build a shared understanding of the threat that opportunistic aggression poses to NATO. Based on that shared understanding, allies should game out the specific capabilities that could not be available if the United States is engaged militarily elsewhere as a roadmap for future investments. Doing so will be critical to maintaining deterrence and reducing the risk that Putin is tempted to test NATO in the event of a conflict in Asia.

***NATO should increase deterrence and resilience against Russia's use of hybrid tactics.*** Given the degradation of its conventional forces in Ukraine and its resolve to confront the West, Russia has significantly increased its use of hybrid attacks against Europe. Addressing that threat will require the allies to develop greater coordination between the European Union and NATO. The allies should also consider building a collective response mechanism for hybrid warfare tactics, especially election interference. Given the sustained and likely growing threat of Russian tactics aimed at disrupting democratic institutions and processes—as well as other authoritarian actors like China and Iran—the United States and Europe, along with like-minded partners, should band together to put in place a collective defense mechanism—akin to NATO's Article V—to raise the costs for Russia and others seeking to undermine democracy. At a minimum, the allies need to collectivize their response to Russian hybrid tactics to raise the costs that Russia faces, as they did when multiple countries expelled Russian diplomats in the aftermath of Russia's attempted poisoning of double agent Sergei Skripal in the United Kingdom in 2018. Currently, the Kremlin recognizes that the costs for its hybrid acts are minimal, and, absent a change in response, it will continue its efforts to pick the United States and Europe apart.



***NATO should bolster its most vulnerable partners.*** NATO and its member states should step up assistance to the alliance’s most vulnerable partners, especially Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova. Already, positive steps have been taken. France, in particular, is charting a productive course that other allies should follow. Paris signed a defense pact with Chişinău in March 2024 and moved to increase defense ties with Yerevan in February 2024.<sup>45</sup> The European Union followed suit, pledging a \$290 million financial package for Armenia in April 2024. Washington should build on such efforts. In Moldova, the United States and its allies could provide air defenses, heavy weapons, and training, including in cyber defense, to beef up Moldova’s deterrence against Russia.

***The United States and NATO should consider measures to minimize the threat of accidental or unintended conflict and shape the environment for an eventual return to arms control.*** Russia is not currently a willing or credible arms control partner and instead appears intent on weaponizing risk to advance its aims. The United States and NATO should therefore calibrate their expectations for what can be accomplished with Russia but continue to consider modest steps to reduce the acute risk of unwanted conflict. Those steps include declarations in advance of major military exercises, advance notifications of certain types of strategic deployments, and some transparency regarding nuclear activities that have the potential to fuel Russian threats of preemptive attack. NATO states should also collectively, in groups and with the United States in the lead, do the preparatory work necessary to consider what role arms control can play in addressing Russian threats to NATO, along with deterrence and defense. Engaging with the ways arms control could address the rising threats that Russia poses to the alliance has value in preparing for the possible application of these tools later, but also by assisting NATO states in identifying and prioritizing risks facing the alliance.

***The United States should work to grow the coalition of countries aligned with Washington.*** The ability of the United States and its allies to levy costs on Russia for its aggressive action will depend on their ability to marshal a coalition of countries willing and able to punish Russia for its actions. Despite the unprecedented unity among the United States and its allies, few non-U.S. allies joined the sanctions against Russia. Likewise, limiting the ability of Russia and its partners to undermine U.S. interests and global stability will require competing with not just Russia, but also China, across the globe. The United States should prioritize outreach to Brazil, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and Turkey, in an effort to deny Russia and China advantages in those states and encourage their governments to choose policies that favor the prevailing order.

## Conclusion

U.S. and European policymakers have repeatedly stated that Putin’s invasion of Ukraine has been a strategic failure. As CIA Director Bill Burns articulated, “Putin’s war has already been a strategic failure for Russia—its military weaknesses laid bare; its economy badly damaged for years to come; its future as a junior partner and economic colony of China being shaped by Putin’s mistakes; its revanchist ambitions blunted by a NATO which has only grown bigger and stronger.”<sup>46</sup> That could

very well end up the case, and making this war a strategic failure for Russia is a vital policy objective. But that mission is not yet accomplished. Russia is in many ways adapting and, even if weakened, retains significant capacity for destruction. The United States and its allies should prepare for a long-term confrontation with Russia and prevent Moscow from producing the turmoil it seeks to create.

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