ANNUAL
CONFERENCE ON
RUSSIA

PERPETUAL CONFLICT RUSSIA AND THE STRUGGLE FOR EUROPEAN SECURITY

Editor George Spencer Terry

The Conference on Russia Papers 2026

The Conference on Russia Papers 2026

PERPETUAL CONFLICT
Russia and the Struggle for
European Security

Edited by George Spencer Terry

Editor-in-Chief:
Dr. George Spencer Terry, Baltic Defence College

Editorial Team:
– Eden Elizabeth Armstrong, Baltic Defence College
– Flavia Collier
– Clement Dillies
– Mari Paine
– Grete Põder

Cover Page: Kalle Paalits

Foreword

Brigadier General Alyvidas Šiuparis[*]

Russia remains the principal threat to European security. Its continued war against Ukraine exemplifies this, but its hybrid actions against European states – whether through drone incursions, airspace violations, or the indirect sponsoring of criminal or terroristic networks – demonstrates a willingness to escalate and attempt to coerce Europe and the broader Alliance into acquiescence and submission. However, since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Europe has begun to truly awaken as to the nature of the threat posed by Russia. Individual nations and international institutions alike, once divided in their threat perception or hesitant to spring into action, now confront this danger with greater clarity and resolve. Across the Atlantic, although differences in perspective in how to approach this threat persist, the bonds that tie the alliance together hold firm.

The Baltic Defence College embodies this unity in daily practice: the three Baltic nations coming together to educate and prepare the next generation of officers and military leaders. Our mission as the premier professional military education institution in the Baltic states is to provide advanced NATO-standard instruction and education to officers and civil servants at the operational, joint, and strategic levels, to conduct rigorous research in the realms of security and defence policy with a focus on the Baltic Sea Region and Russia, and to maintain a broader gaze and address the centrality of the Transatlantic link that functions as the cornerstone of our collective defence.

Within such an educational setting, the exchange of diverse and difficult views lies at the very heart of academic discussion and deliberation. Only through this honest debate can we come closer to correctly analysing and understanding the realities and truths of the complex world in which we live. These realities and truths, consequently, shape and condition the strategies for a more secure future as well as the operation environments in which we will have to manoeuvre. Our responsibility, therefore, is to prepare not only our students and officers, as future decision-makers and policymakers, but the readership of this volume as well to see the contemporary strategic

---

[*]   Brigadier General Alyvidas Šiuparis is Commandant of the Baltic Defence College in Tartu, Estonia.

landscape more clearly, without harbouring any illusions or clinging to wishful or idealistic thinking.

The opinions and arguments within this volume furnish converging and contrasting viewpoints on the enduring challenge of providing security to Europe amid the persistent peril of potential war. Russia, indeed, continues to be a threat to the Baltic states, to Europe, and the wider Transatlantic Alliance. However, all threats can be met, and of all the lessons that we can learn from Ukraine's arduous defence of its independence, its guardians have shown that there can be no replacement for enduring resolve and paradigm-shifting ingenuity. May this volume inspire that same resolve and ingenuity required to meet the challenges of our time.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Dr. George Spencer Terry[*]

Europe and Russia have long measured themselves against one another, both as strategic challenges and cultural mirrors. For centuries – from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, across the yawning steppes of Ukraine – every crisis, clash, and flashpoint reflects this dynamic: a Europe and a Russia at once at odds and deeply entwined, an alterity without which the civilisational self could not arise. Russia had its Slavophiles and Westernisers, both wrestling with what its relationship with Europe should be. Today, the neo-Slavophiles, revisionists, and imperialists have come to dominate, shaping the situation as it stands in 2026. This coincides with a moment in post-Cold War history when both the European security architecture and the international system are more unstable than at any point in the past three decades.

Russia's sustained pressure on, and attempts to dismantle, the post-Cold War security architecture in Europe have come to fruition. The war against Ukraine – as acknowledged by Russia – is far more than a regional conflict: it is a war against NATO, against Europe, against the West and what it represents. The rules of the so-called rules-based world order are not treated as universal norms but as peculiarities of a Europe and a West that Russia regards as in decline. Through coercion and threats of violence, Russia insists that its borders and spheres of influence remain negotiable by force, rather than subject to any rules it considers external and illegitimate. Understanding and analysing contemporary European security requires internalising this axiom: Russia can and will reject these ideational constraints. A unified, coherent deterrent posture and sober strategic foresight remain the continent's primary guarantees of peace and prosperity. Failure to maintain either carries a tragic human cost, as demonstrated by five years of full-scale war in Ukraine.

Therefore, the *Conference on Russia Papers 2026* poses the following questions: What threat does Russia pose to Europe? How can Europe respond? What are Russia's ambitions, and how is it seeking to realise them? What second-order effects arise from Russia's aggressive actions? This

---

[*] Dr. George Spencer Terry is a Lecturer in Strategic Studies at the Baltic Defence College in Tartu, Estonia.

volume engages with these questions through three analytical lenses, framing a paradigm of contemporary European security.

The first of these focuses on the European locus of the threat emanating from Russia, as well as the potential structuration of European autonomy and agency. It examines the challenge posed by Russia's attempts to export its governance model, how Russia has historically undermined European strategic agency, and what the EU can do to reinforce it. It considers how Europe might pursue strategic autonomy, France's efforts to position itself within these dynamics, and how Ukraine might collaborate with European countries for the repatriation of its citizens. Together, these discussions underscore that Russia remains inimical to Europe and that the continent must act, though the precise measures required remain subject to debate.

The second thematic section examines the Russian worldview, its idealised vision of the international system, and the specific actions and countermeasures undertaken by the Federation. It considers Russian conceptions of multipolarity, the influence of Russian strategic culture on its willingness to escalate and negotiate, its use of lawfare as a form of deterrence, varied deployments of hybrid and informational warfare, and its readiness to engage in open combat. Together, these analyses provide both an explanatory framework for, and a hypothetical toolkit of, Russian actions in the coming years.

The final section examines the specificities and secondary effects on European security arising from the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It addresses Russian perspectives on deterrence, maritime strategy, the lessons the war in Ukraine offers to non-state actors, and Russia's use of para-statal military forces as instruments of pressure on Europe. Together, these discussions demonstrate that Russia's *modus operandi* and strategies will produce long-reaching consequences, extending beyond Europe and beyond the immediate dynamics between Europe and Russia.

This work would not have been possible without the dedication of each contributing author and the entire editorial team. The arguments and perspectives presented in these chapters are solely those of the authors and do not represent the position of the Baltic Defence College. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the perspectives and discussions in this volume provoke critical reflection, inspire creative solutions, and encourage sober consideration of the future – an imperative for Europe, the Transatlantic Alliance, and beyond.

Russia the Harbinger: Gangsterism, Global Putinism, and the Crisis of the West

Brian Whitmore[*]

Abstract

The chaotic and dysfunctional politics of the post-Soviet Russia of the 1990s and the early 2000s was viewed at the time as a transition phase on the path to liberal democracy. But in fact, Russia's trajectory turned out to be something else entirely: a harbinger of where politics in at least some parts of the West were heading. Without the Soviet Union to embody the authoritarian threat, faith in the importance of liberal democracy became hollowed out. In the absence of the gravitas of the Cold War, politics became tabloidised, trivialised, and gamified – and Russia figured out how to hack the game. Through a campaign of active measures, political interference, and weaponised corruption, the Kremlin has aimed to export this model to advance its geopolitical agenda.

Putinism and Our Altered Consciousness

Sometimes, whether out of arrogance, carelessness, or the irresistible urge to be a troll, your adversary does you the favour of saying the quiet part out loud. This was certainly the case back in February 2019 when longtime Kremlin aide Vladislav Surkov published a widely circulated article in the Russian newspaper Nezavisimaya Gazeta titled "Putin's Long State". In his essay, Surkov made three broad arguments:

- Democracy is an illusion and works in the West only because people believe the illusion that they have choice.

---

[*] Brian Whitmore is an assistant professor of practice at The University of Texas-Arlington's McDowell Centre for Global Studies and a non-resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council Eurasia Centre. A shorter version of this chapter appears in Brian Whitmore's 2026 report for The Atlantic Council, "Russian Illusions: How the West Lost the Post-Cold War Era."

- Putin has created a system that can rule Russia for 100 years, if not longer, because he understands the "algorithm" of the Russian people – indeed, Surkov claims that Putin's Russia is the fourth manifestation of the Russian state, following Ivan III, who expanded the Grand Duchy of Muscovy, Peter I, who established the Russian Empire, and Vladimir Lenin, founder of the Soviet Union.
- Putinism – with its stress on sovereignty, populism, traditionalism, and patrimony – is the ideology of the future and will challenge liberal democracy for supremacy (Surkov, 2019).

And then he dropped this gem of a quote:

> Foreign politicians accuse Russia of interference in elections and referendums across the globe. In fact, it is even more serious – Russia is interfering with their brains, and they do not know what to do with their own altered consciousness. Since the failed 1990s, our country abandoned ideological loans, began to produce its own meaning, and turned the information offensive back on the West. European and American experts began to err in their political forecasts more and more often. They are surprised and enraged by the paranormal preferences of their electorates. Confused, they announced the invasion of populism. You can say so, if you have no other words. Meanwhile, the interest of foreigners in the Russian political algorithm is understandable – there is no prophet in their homelands, and Russia has long ago prophesied everything that is happening to them today (Surkov, 2019).

This was not simply a case of the famously mischievous and provocative Surkov having a little fun. Articles like this, written by senior Russian officials, and appearing in major publications, do not appear by accident. This was a forthright description of how the Russian elite views its conflict with the West and an expression of confidence that it is winning.

The Russian Political Algorithm

Surkov is hardly a random commentator. He has served as a senior aide to every post-Soviet president. As first deputy Kremlin chief of staff during Putin's first two terms, Surkov masterminded the system that became known alternatively as "sovereign democracy" or "managed democracy".

This post-modern version of authoritarianism took on the external forms and ceremonies of liberal democracy but twisted these into

Potemkin institutions controlled and manipulated by an overbearing executive. Its signature components included de facto state control of most electronic media, demonstrably sham elections, fake political parties, the subordination of the legislature and judiciary, regime-controlled youth groups, and government-organised non-governmental organisations, or GONGOs.

This Russian domestic political system that Surkov helped create, was, in essence, a mockery of Western democracy: deploying diversion, dramaturgy, disinformation, lawfare, and strategic corruption to maintain the continued rule of Putin and his oligarchic clique.

Peter Pomerantsev described Surkov's role as follows:

> Surkov has directed Russian society like one great reality show. He claps once and a new political party appears. He claps again and creates Nashi, the Russian equivalent of the Hitler Youth, who are trained for street battles with potential pro-democracy supporters and burn books by unpatriotic writers on Red Square. As deputy head of the administration he would meet once a week with the heads of the television channels in his Kremlin office, instructing them on whom to attack and whom to defend, who is allowed on TV and who is banned, how the president is to be presented, and the very language and categories the country thinks and feels in (Pomerantsev, 2014, p. 67).

This is Surkov's "algorithm of the Russian people" and understanding its logic is essential to understanding not only post-Soviet Russia–but ultimately what ails the post-Cold War West. The system Surkov built has evolved (or devolved) over Putin's quarter century in power. For Putin's first two terms, it maintained the external facade and the theatre of democracy, albeit in a tightly stage-managed form, as a facade to conceal oligarchic rule. Scholars describe such regimes as "competitive authoritarianism" (Levitsky and Way, 2020).

Beginning with Putin's third term, in 2012, Russian politics took on a more explicitly autocratic, repressive, and personalised form. The mask came off and the system began to resemble what political scientists call "consolidated authoritarianism" (see Gawryluk, 2021; Hawn and Tack, 2021) or what Russian political analyst Andrei Kolesnikov (2022) dubbed "hybrid totalitarianism".

And as for the claim from Surkov (2019) about 'the interest of foreigners in the Russian political algorithm', the pattern has been replicated to varying degrees in various contexts, where once-healthy democracies backslid into

more authoritarian models: in Victor Orban's Hungary, in Robert Fico's Slovakia, in Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Turkey, and in Narendra Modi's India. During its eight years in power from 2015–23, Poland's Law and Justice party seized control of that country's judiciary, public broadcasters, cultural institutions, and companies, but was defeated at the polls.

Moreover, commentators are increasingly noting the beginnings of a similar authoritarian shift in the United States. In June 2025, Russian émigré human rights activists Maria Kuznetsova and Dan Storyev published an op-ed in *The New York Times* titled, "Here's What's Happening in America, in Six (Mostly) Russian Terms", in which they admitted to feeling a sense of déjà vu.

> We both grew up in Russia in the early 2000s and lived through the country's gradual slide into authoritarianism under President Vladimir Putin. In our 20s we started working in human rights. Now we live abroad, knowing that a return to Russia would almost certainly mean jail. Over the recent months we have been noticing something worrying: The same markers of authoritarianism we know from our youth have been appearing in America (Kuznetsova and Storyev, 2025).

The authors cite several Russian concepts that now have fledgling American counterparts. Most notably: the "power vertical", Putin's highly personalised, top-down, executive-dominant system of governance and the "siloviki", the security service and military officials who make up the backbone of the Kremlin regime (Kuznetsova and Storyev, 2025).

The New York Times published a lead editorial asking: "Are We Losing Our Democracy?" on October 31st, 2025. To address the question, the Times editorial board comprised what it called a 'list of 12 markers of democratic erosion' including the stifling of dissent and speech, the persecution of political opponents, bypassing the legislature, using the military for domestic control, defiance of the courts, the declaration of national emergencies under false pretences, the vilification of marginalised groups, attempting control of the mass media and universities, the establishment of a personality cult, the use of political power for personal profit, and the manipulation of the law to retain power (The New York Times Editorial Board, 2025). The editorial concluded: 'The United States is not an autocracy today. It still has a mostly free press and independent judiciary, and millions of Americans recently attended the "No Kings" protests. But it has started down an anti-democratic path, and many Americans – including people in positions of

power – remain far too complacent about the threat' (The New York Times Editorial Board, 2025).

The chaotic and dysfunctional post-Soviet Russia of the 1990s and the early 2000s was viewed at the time as a transition phase on the path to liberal democracy. But in fact, Russia's trajectory turned out to be something else entirely: a harbinger of where politics in at least some parts of the West were openly flirting with an alternative model of authoritarian governance.

In an interview for the 2015 PBS Frontline Documentary "Putin's Way", political scientist Karen Dawisha, author of the book "Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia", noted that the central mistake Western policymakers and analysts made about post-Soviet Russia. 'Instead of seeing Russia as a democracy that was in the process of failing, we needed to see it as an authoritarian system that was in the process of succeeding', she said (Dawisha, 2015). We now live in a world where Russia is in the process of exporting that system, with varying degrees of success. It is a world where every social and political division in the West – whether over race, religion, region, history, gender, sexual identity, migration – is a potential wedge that Moscow will seek to exploit to undermine faith in democratic governance. It is a world where every election in a liberal democracy is a potential crisis. And it is a world where some Western governments – in Hungary, Slovakia, and the United States – are repeating Kremlin talking points and imitating Kremlin tactics.

The Crisis of the West and the Plot Against Liberal Democracy

As Putin consolidated and expanded his power at home in the first quarter of the 21st century, he was not just establishing an autocratic kleptocracy and attempting to restore an empire, he was also tapping into emerging global sentiments: distrust of institutions and anxiety about social, economic, and demographic change. It is not exactly an ideology, but sadly it has widespread appeal. Starting in 2012 or 2013, Putin and the Russian elite set about taking its authoritarian model global. And the ground was fertile. In many ways, Moscow was pushing on an open door with the West experiencing its most acute crisis of confidence in at least a generation.

The 9/11 attacks and their aftermath, the Iraq war and subsequent upheaval in the Middle East, the 2008 financial crisis, the subsequent Euro crisis, the migrant crisis, and the Covid-19 pandemic have all fed into this

angst and malaise. The economic and cultural shocks of globalisation have caused a critical mass of citizens in the West to become alienated and disenfranchised. Advances in technology have put us at the mercy of algorithms that maximise and amplify outrage and turn that outrage into dollars. Without the Soviet Union to embody the authoritarian threat, faith in the importance of liberal democracy became hollowed out. In the absence of the gravitas of the Cold War, politics became tabloidised, trivialised, and gamified. And Russia figured out how to hack the game.

Many are now saying that Western institutions are broken and liberal democracies dysfunctional. Many believe that Western liberal democracy is no longer working for them and they are seeking alternatives. The liberal democratic model of governance that appeared so triumphant and invincible three decades ago is today beleaguered and on the defensive. Populism, xenophobia, and authoritarian attitudes are sweeping Europe and North America. The United States is polarised, mired in political tribalism, and plagued by low public trust – its politics paralysed to the point of dysfunction. So deep is the disillusionment that according to a 2016 study, the share of young Americans who say it is absolutely important to live in a democratic country has dropped from 91 percent for those born in the 1930s to just 57 percent for those born in the 1980s (Mounk and Foa, 2016; Taub, 2016).

As Michael McFaul, who served as US President Barack Obama's Ambassador to Russia, noted in an article in *The Atlantic* (2025), Putin understands that 'if the Cold War's central ideological struggle of communism versus capitalism was between states, this new ideological struggle of illiberal nationalism versus liberal internationalism is being fought primarily within states'. The fact that the Putin regime has long been attempting to export its governing model has hardly been a secret. Larry Diamond, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, wrote in *The Atlantic* in December 2016 that Putin had effectively launched 'an opportunistic but sophisticated campaign to sabotage democracy and bend it toward his interests, not just in some marginal, fragile places but at the very core of the liberal democratic order, Europe and the United States'. Diamond added: 'We stand now at the most dangerous moment for liberal democracy since the end of World War II' (Diamond, 2016).

In this regard, Moscow has been working to exploit and leverage divisions in an increasingly polarised West by deploying influence operations to inflame the culture wars in the United States and the battles over immigration and multiculturalism in Europe. A 2013 report by the

Kremlin-connected think tank The Centre for Strategic Communications, published a report recommending that Moscow seek to exploit divisions in the West over racial divisions, feminism, multiculturalism, and LGBTQ+ rights. According to the report, as the West becomes increasingly multicultural, less patriarchal and traditional, and more open to gay rights, Russia should act as a lodestone for those who oppose these trends (Whitmore, 2013).

Commenting on the report, the Russian political analyst Aleksandr Morozov drew a direct comparison to the Soviet-era Comintern, or Communist International, which sought to unite Western leftists behind the Kremlin's agenda. According to Morozov, 'it is a mistake to believe that Putin wants to lower a new Iron Curtain, build a new Berlin Wall and pursue a policy of isolationism. On the contrary, Putin is creating a new Comintern. This is not isolationism, but rather the maximum Putinisation of the world. The Comintern was a complex system that worked with ideologically sympathetic intellectuals and politicians. What we are seeing now is not an attempt to restore the past, but the creation of an entirely new hegemony' (Morozov, 2013). Unlike in the Soviet period, this would be attempted by uniting the anti-establishment far right behind the Kremlin. In a 2016 article, Peter Pomerantsev wrote that Putin had become 'the Che Guevara of the right', noting that 'for the "anti-establishment" Right, giving Putin the thumbs-up has become the equivalent of what pulling on a Che T-shirt has long meant for the Left'.

In the years that followed The Centre for Strategic Communications' report, Russia launched what can only be described as a non-kinetic guerilla war against the West that included several vectors: disinformation campaigns, election interference, support for separatists and xenophobic parties and movements, cyberattacks, strategic corruption, and stealth investments aimed at establishing pro-Moscow networks of influence. It included interfering in the 2016 Brexit referendum in the UK, the 2016 US presidential election, the 2017 French presidential election, and the 2017 German general election, just to name a few. Romania's Constitutional Court annulled that country's December 2024 presidential election after far-right candidate Calin Georgescu's shocking first-place finish in the first round. The court's decision came 'amid accusations of Russian interference, suspicious TikTok accounts and secret payments to online influencers' (Ings, 2025).

It also included an emerging alliance between Putin's Kremlin and high-profile figures on the Western far right, such as Tucker Carlson in the

United States, Nigel Farage in the United Kingdom, and Marine Le Pen in France. Along these lines, Russia enthusiastically supported, and sometimes financed, European populist and anti-immigrant parties such as the National Rally in France and the AfD in Germany. It has also backed white supremacists, neo-confederates, and state-level secessionist movements in the United States (Michel, 2021).

In the globalised world that has emerged in the post-Cold War environment, Russia has also used institutionalised graft and weaponised corruption as a conveyor belt for Russian malign influence abroad. In a 2012 report for Chatham House, James Greene explained how Putin has weaponised Russia's institutionalised corruption by turning it into an "extension of his domestic political strategy" of using the carrot of corruption and the stick of kompromat "to establish patron-client political relationships". According to Greene, 'by broadening this approach to the corrupt transnational schemes that flowed seamlessly from Russia into the rest of the former Soviet space – and oozed beyond it – Putin could extend his shadow influence beyond Russia's borders and develop a natural, captured constituency' (Greene, 2012).

The Rise of Gangsterism as Governance

Russia has multiple strategic goals behind its assault on Western liberal democracy. Primarily, it seeks to weaken and divide the West, both within countries and among members of the European Union and NATO, to prevent a unified front that would prevent Moscow's dominance of Ukraine and other parts of the former Soviet space. Electoral interference, disinformation campaigns, support for separatism, and exasperating wedge issues all work to advance these goals. A second goal is to undermine the post-Cold War international order by subverting a law-based system and replacing it with one in which great powers control spheres of influence and small nations enjoy limited sovereignty at best.

But underpinning these goals is the objective to promote and spread a system of governance that Moscow sees as an alternative to liberal democracy. In a 2021 article in *Lawfare*, Matthew Murray, Alexander Vindman, and Dominic Cruz Bustillos write: 'Politically, the Kremlin is driven to legitimise this kind of state-sponsored oligarchy at home by exporting and embedding it abroad as an alternative to democracy'. Such 'a systemic level of corruption', they write, 'places Putin's Russia in an increasing state of

tension with the Western neo-liberal order' (Murray, Vindman, and Bustillos, 2021).

The current Russian system emerged as a result specific conditions in that country, including:

- The fall of Marxism-Leninism as a ruling ideology, which in addition to precipitating the fall of the Soviet Union, also removed any ideological or institutional constraints on the exercise of power in Russia.
- An attempt, albeit half-hearted, to set up democratic institutions in the 1990s under the presidency of Boris Yeltsin.
- The steady erosion and corruption of those institutions throughout the Yeltsin years, beginning with the shelling of parliament in October 1993, the creation of a super-presidency, the rigging of privatisation auctions, and the establishment of oligarchic rule.
- The rapid destruction of Russia's weak institutions under Putin – including the legislature, the courts, the media, and civil society – as well as the culling, taming, and housebreaking of Russia's oligarchs, leaving him and his cabal of cronies to rule with impunity.

In the globalised world that emerged since the 1990s, they have been able to merge with international financial networks and infest Western economies and political systems.

> Drawing on imperial and Soviet traditions, KGB and Communist Party leaders displayed oligarchic tendencies to survive the transition to capitalism by creating new networks of loyal patrons based on shared interests. In the early 1990s, they moved billions in state resources and financial assets abroad, privatised the most profitable enterprises for themselves and their close associates, and began engaging in criminal activity (Murray, Vindman, and Bustillos, 2021).

What do you get when you have a ruling clique and no institutions to hold them accountable? First you get oligarchy, the unaccountable rule of the few. And then you get Gangsterism, in which this oligarchy is made monolithic and is dominated by one ruling clique. To paraphrase Lenin, Gangsterism is the highest stage of oligarchy. Recent articles by the author in *The Bulwark* and *The National Interest* outlined the seven tenets of Gangsterism as governance (Whitmore, 2024a; Whitmore, 2024b).

- Governance by a small cabal of elites and their cronies that relies on a web of patronage networks to enrich itself and maintain and exercise power outside formal, legal, and Constitutional institutions.
- A ruling elite that is willing and able to use extrajudicial force, including lethal force, to protect its interests, and eliminate threats real and imagined, at home and abroad, and is capable of doing so without accountability or fear of reprisal.
- A state structure that is characterised by weak and feeble institutions, officially sanctioned kleptocracy, the preponderance of unwritten and informal rules, roles, and codes, and an absence of the rule of law.
- A political regime that is defined by an impulse to expand and control markets and territory and is convinced that such expansion is essential for its survival because the existence of the rule of law near its borders threatens its survival.
- A regime that uses corruption as an instrument of statecraft with the aim of co-opting, controlling, bribing, and blackmailing allies and adversaries both at home and abroad.
- A regime that uses geopolitical extortion as an instrument of statecraft by stoking instability in neighbouring countries as a pretext for intervening to establish order, thereby functioning like an international protection racket.
- A regime that cloaks and justifies its predatory goals in grandiose rhetoric about traditions, values, religion, and history.

This is what we got in Russia once the independence of all the institutions – the legislature, the civil service, the courts, the media, the universities, civil society, were debilitated, enfeebled, and eroded. This is what governance without accountability looks like. And this is the political algorithm Putin's Russia is seeking to export to the West.

Works Cited

Dawisha, K. (2015) Interview in *PBS Frontline* documentary *Putin's Way*, 13 January. Available at: https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/putins-way/.

Diamond, L. (2016) 'Russia and the threat to liberal democracy: How Vladimir Putin is making the world safe for autocracy', *The Atlantic*, 9 December. Available at: https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/12/russia-liberal-democracy/510011/.

Gawryluk, J. (2021) 'Russia 2021 – consolidation of a dictatorship', *OSW Commentary*, 8 December. Available at: https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2021-12-08/russia-2021-consolidation-a-dictatorship.

Greene, J. (2012) 'Russian responses to NATO and EU enlargement and outreach', *Chatham House Briefing Paper*, June, p. 9. Available at: https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Russia%20and%20Eurasia/0612bp_greene.pdf.

Hawn, J. and Tack, S. (2021) 'Russia's adaptive authoritarianism', *New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy*, 7 June. Available at: https://newlinesinstitute.org/state-resilience-fragility/authoritarianism/russias-adaptive-authoritarianism/.

Ings, R. (2025) 'The TikTokers accused of triggering an election scandal', *BBC*, 30 April. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/articles/cqx41x3gn5zo.

Kolesnikov, A. (2022) 'Putin's war has moved Russia from authoritarianism to hybrid totalitarianism', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 19 April. Available at: https://www.carnegieendowment.org/posts/2022/04/putins-war-has-moved-russia-from-authoritarianism-to-hybrid-totalitarianism?lang=en.

Kuznetsova, M. and Storyev, D. (2025) 'Here's what's happening in America, in six (mostly) Russian terms', *The New York Times*, 9 June. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/09/opinion/america-russia-authoritarian-language.html.

Levitsky, S. and Way, L. (2020) 'The new competitive authoritarianism', *Journal of Democracy*, 31(1), pp. 51–65.

McFaul, M. (2025) 'The tragic success of global Putinism', *The Atlantic*, 10 March. Available at: https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2025/03/tragic-success-global-putinism/681976/.

Michel, C. (2021) 'American disunion: How Russia has cultivated American secessionists and separatists in its quest to break up the US', in *The Kremlin's Malign Influence Inside the US*. Washington, DC: Free Russia Foundation, pp. 71–88. Available at: https://www.4freerussia.org/the-kremlin-s-malign-influence-inside-the-us/.

Morozov, A. (2013) 'The new Comintern', *Colta.ru*, 10 December. Available at: https://www.colta.ru/articles/media/1466-novyy-komintern.

Mounk, Y. and Foa, R. S. (2016) 'Yes, people really are turning away from democracy', *The Washington Post*, 8 December. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/12/08/yes-millennials-really-are-surprisingly-approving-of-dictators/.

Murray, M., Vindman, A. and Cruz Bustillos, D. (2021) 'Assessing the threat of weaponised corruption', *Lawfare*, 7 July. Available at: https://www.lawfareblog.com/assessing-threat-weaponized-corruption.

New York Times Editorial Board (2025) 'Are we losing our democracy?', *The New York Times*, 31 October. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/10/31/opinion/trump-autocracy-democracy-report.html.

Pomerantsev, P. (2014) 'The hidden author of Putinism: How Vladislav Surkov invented the new Russia', *The Atlantic*, 7 November. Available at: https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/11/hidden-author-putinism-russia-vladislav-surkov/382489/.

Pomerantsev, P. (2016) 'How Putin became the Che Guevara of the right', *Politico*, 3 November. Available at: https://www.politico.eu/article/how-vladimir-putin-russia-became-che-guevara-of-right-wing/.

Popescu-Zamfir, O. (2025) 'Russian interference: Coming soon to an election near you', *Carnegie Europe*, 13 February. Available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2025/02/russian-interference-coming-soon-to-an-election-near-you?lang=en.

Surkov, V. (2019) 'Putin's long state', *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 11 February. Available at: https://www.ng.ru/ideas/2019-02-11/5_7503_surkov.html.

Taub, A. (2016) 'How stable are democracies? "Warning signs are flashing red"', *The New York Times*, 29 November. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/29/world/americas/western-liberal-democracy.html.

Whitmore, B. (2013) 'Vladimir Putin: Conservative icon', *The Atlantic*, 20 December. Available at: https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/12/vladimir-putin-conservative-icon/282572/.

Whitmore, B. (2024a) 'In Russia, mafiaism is the new communism', *The Bulwark*, 28 March. Available at: https://www.thebulwark.com/p/in-russia-mafiaism-is-the-new-communism.

Whitmore, B. (2024b) 'Russia's strategy of capture', *The National Interest*, 22 February. Available at: https://nationalinterest.org/feature/russias-strategy-capture-209588.

From Structure to Agent: EU Strategic Agency

Dr. George Spencer Terry[*]

Abstract

This chapter argues that Russia has systematically treated the European Union as a latent strategic actor while simultaneously working to degrade its agency. Through targeted information campaigns, elite capture, espionage, and sabotage, Moscow has exploited the Union's structural and decisional constraints – vetoes, unanimity, and consensus-driven paralysis – rendering it rhetorically assertive but materially impotent. At the same time, the EU possesses dormant instruments capable of strategic effect: TEU 31(1), TEU 44, crisis procedures, reverse qualified-majority voting, and financial levers that could enforce compliance and coordination. Framed within the paradigm of next-generation warfare, these mechanisms could enable the Union to act collectively without radical treaty change. By mapping Russian interventions against EU institutional weaknesses, the chapter also demonstrates a conscious yet immobilised Europe, performing weakness while nonetheless remaining capable of mobilisation. It concludes that deliberate, audacious activation of existing tools, including coalitions of willing member states, conditional funding, and operationalised crisis powers could awaken the Union as a coherent strategic actor, one that can defend its interests, counter external subversion, and translate its normative authority into tangible geopolitical influence, creating the conditions for a more confident and self-directed European strategic posture.

Introduction

Josep Borrell, former Vice-President of the European Commission and High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, called for a renewed European "geopolitical awakening" in the aftermath of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This same Borrell was humiliated a year earlier, in February 2021, with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov berating the Union as "illegitimate" and an "unreliable

---

[*] Dr. George Spencer Terry is a Lecturer in Strategic Studies at the Baltic Defence College in Tartu, Estonia.

partner" to his face in Saint Petersburg (Herszenhorn and Barigazzi, 2021). However, in the previous decades, Russia saw many of its former satellites in Central and Eastern Europe rush to join the Union as soon as they achieved independence, and European flags were waved at Maidan in 2014 in support of EU accession. Before Maidan, NATO was presented as the sole source of confrontation by Moscow, yet after Maidan and especially today, Europe is treated more inimically than any other actor. In 2014, Europe could counter Russian influence, and it could continue to do so in 2025. However, the prevailing discourse in Europe seems to be inverted, recognising the Russia threat yet downplaying the Union's potential to counter it.

In response, calls for strategic autonomy have been outlined at the national and institutional levels to face Russia and other global challenges, noting that 'military capability development cannot be reduced to the interests and values of a single member-state' (Brøgger, 2025) and that the Union 'has become increasingly mature especially as a crisis management actor, finding new and innovative ways to overcome the institutional limits linked to its hybridity' (Riddervold and Rieker, 2024). However, this autonomy – in whatever form it takes – presupposes strategic agency, 'how political actors use their ideas, experiences, and beliefs to advance their political goals' (Dura, 2024, p. 556), that is, their ability to act in order to achieve their strategic objectives.

This chapter, therefore, will argue that Russia has and continues to treat the European Union as a latent strategic actor armed with next-generational warfare capabilities. While the Union recognises its own role and deficiencies, it remains shackled by perceptions of its institutions and procedures. These institutions and procedures, however, provide the necessary means to achieve a strategic agency – short of next-generation sovereign actorship – that is critical for the Union's continued survival and prosperity in the fraught contemporary geopolitical environment.

First, an articulation of next generation warfare will be presented and how the Union fits into this paradigm. Next, European decisional constraints will be presented, compared with states ambitions within European public statements and policy documents. These will be contrasted with Russian active measures that have moved to degrade the Union's strategic agency. Finally, the chapter will conclude with measures that the Union can take to strengthen its strategic agency using the instruments already at its disposal.

An Actor of Next Generation Warfare

As a post-modern, post-sovereign organisation, the European Union is often not treated as a strategic actor in its own right, let alone an actor of next generation warfare. However, through its member states it has many of the potential instruments of next generation warfare. Vladimir Slipchenko's articulation of 6th Generation Warfare assumes two main additions to the previous generations: precious strike capabilities and an apparatus for informational warfare (Gareev and Slipchenko, 2007). Drawing on the examples of the United States during the Gulf War and the Yugoslav War, this was viewed as the ability to effect regime change without boots on the ground (Bartles, 2022). In a looser, more circuitous way, Gerasimov stresses the more practical implement of how these effects would be achieved in terms of force ratios between conventional and non-conventional capabilities, including state or institutional power (Gerasimov, 2013; Johnson, 2019). From the perspective of the People's Republic of China, Qiao and Wang presuppose the interlaced and coordinated aspects of all spheres of state action in relation to their understanding of next generation warfare (Qiao and Wang, 2015). The generations to come are nebulous, the unknowable future of future warfare, but seem to revolve around the potentiality of integrating AI into achieving these strategic goals.

Slipchenko, Qiao and Wang, and even Gerasimov wrote their analyses of next-generation warfare not as prescriptive courses of action for their own states but as descriptions of primarily American but broadly Western foreign policy following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Although these authors cannot be treated as representative voices of the strategic cultures of their respective states, there is good reason to situate their impact on forming the opinions and thinking of the decisionmakers in contemporary Russia and China – meaning that the United States, or more broadly NATO or even the European Union, were viewed as practising this mode of warfare.

Slipchenko's typology of generations focuses primarily on the most technologically advanced capabilities and how they work in concert in order to achieve strategic goals; the whole-of-government approach is not absent, but it is implicit in that the resources would need to be used synergistically. In Qiao and Wang, it is active, conscious coordination of all instruments of state power for the achievement of strategic goals. Regarding other understandings from the United States, it is a mix of multi-domain operations, next-generational technological integration, and an

assumption of the hybridity of the conflict (Spencer et al., 2018; Fox, 2021). For more precision, this chapter privileges a composite definition based on Slipchenko and Qiao and Wang, that next-generation warfare constitutes these precision-strike and informational capabilities used in concert with the synthesis of all instruments of government to achieve strategic goals. What this dynamic demonstrates is that as next generation warfare expands to realms not purely related to defence and security as they have been previously, those competencies that the Union had previously developed become all the more relevant for the achievement of strategic goals.

Of course, the European Union lacks its own direct ownership over the instruments of previous generations of warfare, including but not limited to its own armed forces. Simultaneously, its individual member states maintain their own armed forces and capabilities, including nuclear, that they use in the pursuit of their own national interests. Nevertheless, its institutions taken together with its Member States have the capabilities that Slipchenko outlines: France, Germany, Spain, and Italy already have precision-strike complexes, potentially autonomous through domestic GNSS receiver industries such as Safran and Thales, and strong domestic electronics bases such as Airbus and Hensoldt, as well as joint cooperation in Galileo PRS. The informational dimension is less coordinated; however, the Union has been able to foster affective relationships even if not consciously for the achievement of any strategic objectives. In comparison with other great powers, the European development of AI capabilities is only behind the United States and China (*The 2025 AI Index Report*, 2025). This consciousness of effort, this unified agency, is therefore what the Union is currently missing in material terms. Therefore, through its member states, the Union has these autonomous precision-strike capabilities, it has the ability to build affective ties in the populations of foreign states and only lacks the agency to tie these capabilities together – but can it develop such an agency?

European Decisional Constraints and Strategic Ambitions

While capabilities are not bound to the Union and have arisen primarily from the defence procurement, development, and policy lines of the individual member states, this affective dimension has stemmed primarily from the heritage of 'normative power Europe' (Manners, 2002), in which the Union transcends typical realist self-interested state behaviour while exporting its

own values and ethical frameworks through non-coercive means. As such, the normative foundation continues to function as both internal nomos and external justification. While militarisation does not necessarily affect the normative dimension (Manners, 2006), much of this potential militarisation, or at least forays into security matters that have remained almost completely the sole competence of the member states as TEU 31(4) precludes any security or defence related discussions without full consensus. Attempts at changing this status quo are not even made as this is seen as a threat to European cohesion. Even discussions about the use of EU troops in Ukraine were met with complete dismissal (Lunday, 2025).

This consensus is one of the main limiting factors of the Union. Elite capture in a smaller Member State is all that Russia needs to block any strengthening of institutional authority or purview through several low-investment ventures in bribery or disinformation campaigns. In a sense, the Union has within it its own version of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth's *Liberum Veto* in which even the most destitute member of the *Szlachta* could be bought off by an adversarial foreign power to block any executive decisions by the state; this paralysis is what eventually led to the dismemberment of the Commonwealth in 1793. The issue of non-imposition of new sanctions packages, limitations on the purview of current sanctions packages, and the struggle over the continuation of sanctions have epitomised this dynamic. While there have been continued threats and statements to cut out regressive and blocking Member States in the voting process through Article 7 procedures, these threats have not been acted upon due to the requirement of unanimity (*Timeline – Article 7: the story so far*, 2025). Potential veto in the Council continues to dominate European thinking on the realm of possibilities in terms of its own agency.

This weak agenda-setting with nominal commitment to normative considerations, the predominance of mediation in the face of antagonistic member states, and a lack of political dirigisme mark the main drivers of this paralysis. Weak agenda setting means not having the requisite military capabilities, and this mediation of exclusive interests is impossible with the antagonistic actors, wherein negotiation and consensus is a definitional possibility. None of these premises regarding the Union's constraints are novel, and this 'combination of strategic cacophony and capacity gaps', paired with unilateral vetoes or threats of veto, has led to a situation in which 'Europeans are currently not in a position to autonomously mount a credible deterrent and defence against Russia' (Meijer and Brooks, 2021, p. 42).

The Strategic Compass for Security and Defence first brought to the fore-front this will to military and geopolitical agency that would allow the Union to mount a credible deterrent and defence, detailing at the Union-level a need for strategic autonomy and sovereign agency ('A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence', 2022). However, what was outlined therein was little more than a collective ambition and call to action: position without implementation, which would be a competency of the Commission and Council, and no fiat. This represented naught but a continued leaning on normative considerations with at least a recognition of the necessity of strategic agency.

The strategic defence initiative, Readiness 2030, formerly and fractiously named ReArm Europe (*Press Statement by the President on the Defence Package*, 2025), does nothing to alleviate the issue of the lack of a dedicated EU military as a tool of power as the Union continues as it did previously, engaging with a certain principle of subsidiarity with the Member States. This responsibilisation of duty to the Member States leaves it up to them to spend – in whatever way they see fit – this money on defence. The issue is similar to that of NATO during the Hague Summit – this dual use infra-structure may not quantitatively increase defence or security, only working to fulfil domestic political promises or renovations – but would still be calculated as such to fulfil official quotas within the calculation standards. Therefore, this right of activating the national escape clause of the Stability and Growth Pact risks the same outcomes. Without any consequences for non-compliance with capability goals, desires to achieve deterrence and defence translate into repaving rural roads, building bridges, or paying military pensions. As the ReArm Europe was paired with an implicit responsibilisation of 1.5 percent of Member State GDPs to be spent on defence, including 150 billion of loans to Members States for investment in defence in 'pan-European capability domains' and the mobilisation of private capital to the tune of 800 billion EUR, this additionally risks 'creative' implementation from those member states that do not perceive any sort of imminent threat to their security. In an idealised paradigm, Commissioner for Defence and Space Andrius Kublius would streamline this process and ensure its efficacy; however, the Commissioner's current purview straddles a blurred line between policy proposal and implementation, tending more toward the former.

Russia's Actions towards European Instruments

Russia has continuously pushed back at the Union's claims of speaking from a universal normative position. In discursive terms, from the early 2010s, the term *Gayropa* began to surface prominently in both Russia and international media discourse. In institutional terms, Russia's response to the 2013 ECHR Markin Case on gender equality as well as Russia's increasing adoption of anti-Gay propaganda laws in the early 2010s represented an early overt challenge to European normative claims regarding human rights. These discourses, at the same time, plays into a more direct challenge of the Union's normative legitimacy, both its legitimacy in speaking on behalf of those norms and the those norms *per se*. Queer rights and gender equality are but a signifier of the European conceptualisation of human rights, and more fundamentally, these human rights signify one of the main vectors of the Union's influence over global normative frameworks.

One explanation is that this was naught but a development in Russia's own domestic 'cultural turn' in which its own exceptional cultural values were to be reinforced (Robinson, 2017). However, billions of roubles were invested annually in these informational apparatuses specifically targeted to spread anti-establishment views amongst European domestic audiences, with RT, RT France, RT DE, RT en Español and Sputnik International in several targeted European languages, such as Polish, Swedish, Czech, and Romanian. Even in the context of the full-scale invasion, when Russian spending on social welfare and human capital has decreased by 16 percent (Wiśniewska, 2024), funding to state media has remained stable or even increased since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, demonstrating its perceived utility even in a time of resource prioritisation. It has been a consistent investment even from before the 2014 invasion of Ukraine, going back to the early 2010s.

Through these informational channels, as well as targeted support towards Eurosceptic and anti-establishment parties through financing and other means, Russia has attempted to effect elite capture in some member states that would be aligned with destroying consensus within the Union, having some sort of an internal, implicit veto in the European Council. This capture has led to the blocking of additional sanctions packages as well as even the discussion of accession procedures. At the same time, this continued self-limitation stems from continuing to view consensus as a necessary component of any Union-level policy direction. Other than Russia fostering

its relations with anti-establishment forces in the Union, the aforementioned Borrell visit exemplified this dynamic of delegitimising the Union; days after having debased Borrell in front of the world, Lavrov respectfully engaged with Finnish President Niinistö (Porre, 2020), showing that any engagement with Russia would be reduced to bilateral relations and that Brussels would be cut out of any part of this process.

Espionage and sabotage, also well within the parameters of those Russian actions targeted at EU instruments, work in concert with these informational and influence efforts. This comes both in the form of political espionage – exemplified by the case of Tatjana Zdanoka, a Latvian member of the EU legislature who worked as a FSB asset in the European parliament (Dobrokhotov, Weiss, and Grozev, 2024), as well as Novica Antic, a Serbian national and active FSB asset who met with MEPs in Brussels to curate Russian narratives in the European Parliament (POLITICO Staff, 2024b). Russia spyware was also found the work phones of several MEPs (POLITICO Staff, 2024a). At the same time, although events from before the 2022 full-scale invasion were evident – such as the Czech ammo depo destruction in 2014 (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 2024) – Russian sabotage against European industry was ramped up significantly, with Russian plausibly deniable attacks on the defence industry across the Union (Edwards, 2025; Jones, 2025). While this could be interpreted as attempts to undercut capability to furnish Ukraine with the capabilities that it needs to continue fighting against Russia, these actions nonetheless undercut the Union's own ability to produce those capabilities in order to stand on its own.

In short, Russian actions since the early 2010s – even before the 2014 invasion of Ukraine – targeted the Union's potential levers for achieving strategic agency. Norms were dismissed as illegitimate, Eurosceptic parties were targeted in order to destroy Union cohesion and potentially buy off elites for veto privileges, espionage as engaged with to disrupt the Union from within its institutions, and sabotage was employed to erode the material capabilities of the Union's member states. It displays a constant, targeted effort in order to make sure that the Union cannot achieve any active, coordinated posture in terms of the Common Foreign and Security Policy more specifically or its strategic goals more generally.

Strengthening Strategic Agency

Russia has treated the Union as a strategic competitor and has done everything possible to degrade its agency as such. At every possible opportunity and with little investment of resources, Russia's returns are incredibly high: through the time-tested application of *divide et impera,* Europe remains in a state of split personality, split being. While it desires to act upon its strategic potential – and attempts to achieve this 'awakening' that Borrell had promised in 2022 – Europe is in a profound state of sleep paralysis, fully conscious but unable to move.

What is required to awaken, therefore, is the political will to set the agenda from the level of the Commission and Council. Its task is not to create consensus but to demand it. This would be akin to, but an advanced form of, the example provided by 'the leadership of Juncker and Mogherini, and among member states… to re-state the EU project and show political unity' drawing upon 'EU integration as the most effective course for collective action in defence' through 'their diverse 'usages' of Europe' (Béraud-Sudreau and Pannier, 2021, pp. 11–12). Even after 24 February 2022, the Commission and Council was able to 'put the EU in a favourable position to actively shape the complex economic response' through sanctions (Helwig, 2023, p. 26). Therefore, whenever the Commission and Council decide to take a proactive role in agenda-setting, to will certain competencies into existence.

The constraints on decision-making, however, provide the instruments for their reformation. There already exist the mechanisms for bypassing unanimity latent within the EU's legal architecture. TEU 31(1) allows for stated abstentions in the place of veto and the transfer of such competencies to qualified majority voting (*EUR-Lex – 12016M031 – EN*, 2016). In the spheres of strategic agency, Article 31(3) *passerelles* limited to sanctions, cyber, or hybrid – treated in a broad, conceptual, and primarily developmental and economic form – should be forwarded by the Council in order to make them the most palatable to the member states and move these competences toward future qualitative majority voting (QMV) in order to make position and implementation more streamlined in the case of future crises – the 'military and defence implications' stated in TEU 31(4) should be muted. In such a framework, abstentions should be incentivised while vetoes should be punished. Crisis declaration by QMV would also frame from decision to implementation of position. After a set period, implementation of positions set during the crisis declaration could only be reversed by QMV. Although

this would be the least feasible, it could be done in those areas agreed upon for the *passarrelles*. TFEU 122, which relates to the disbursement of funds to those Member States 'seriously threatened with severe difficulties caused by natural disasters or exceptional occurrences beyond its control' (*EUR-Lex – 12008E122 – EN*, 2008) can be used as a chassis for these strategy-adjacent measures adopted by QMV to blur the lines between economy and strategic agency and tighten these incentive structures.[1]

Article 44 allows for 'the implementation of a task to a group of Member States which are willing and have the necessary capability for such a task'. While TEU 44 is treated as a foundation of smaller coalitions (*EUR-Lex – 12016M044 – EN – EUR-Lex*, 2016), there is no necessity that it be articulated in such a way; a group could be the entirety of the Union, barring one or two member states who represent the most obstinate and antagonistic parties. With positions set by the Council and Commission, implementation criteria for these tasks can be set as well, paired with a compliance scorecard for the member states for implementation; persistent non-alignment with CFSP positions as would triggers automatic, formulaic budget offsets as financial regulation runs under the aegis of QMV. Access to EU defence and resilience funds, as well as MFF top-ups would become dependent alignment with agreed CFSP acts within this tightened paradigm, as these general financial rules would also be under the aegis of QMV.

Within such a position, automatic deduction mechanism for Union funds would be the consequence of non-alignment. This metric would allow for a more quantitative approach of measuring for sanctions under Article 7, but more importantly, a metric for positive incentives for implementation. To this effect, a law under the Defence Industrial Single Market Act (114/173) with reverse QMV disbursement rules for capability development. This would be paired with enhanced cooperation under TEU 20/TFEU 329(2) in those matters of the CFSP that are not strictly security related (*EUR-Lex – 12016E329 – EN – EUR-Lex*, 2016), that is, those competencies that would be slowly accrued through the usage of TEU 31(1). The concert of these dynamics allows for a recursive process: QMV in a growing set of competencies related to strategic agency through TEU 31(1), positive monetary incentives for meeting implementation criteria and punishments for not meeting them, and almost Union-wide tasks through TEU 44 and TEU 20/TFEU 329(2).

---

[1]   Under TEU 48(7), any national parliament may veto a proposed *passerelle* within six
    months of notification.

Such a push has not been lobbied for previously as those vetoes have traditionally acted as protection against a perception of larger state dominance and concerns of a creeping federalisation, alongside the 'scepticism in Central and Eastern Europe against ideas of strategic autonomy that go beyond EU efforts in support of member-state and alliance policies' (Helwig, 2023, p. 26). Nevertheless, the neo-mercantilists and neo-liberals have united in seeking 'to reduce a whole range of external dependencies in relation to defence and security questions, raw material supply, international monetary arrangements, and wider industrial issues' (Lavery, McDaniel and Schmid, 2022, p. 74) and the *passarrelles* could be justified exactly under this logic. This would not be a response to the crisis, but a response to the weaknesses that the crisis has uncovered.

Domestic ratification politics have meant that there has been a high political risk associated with changing the treaties and using *passarrelles* as procedural tools, but constructive abstention, liberal use of Article 44, and reversed QMV in broadly-security adjacent budgetary instruments allow for change *without* opening treaties. Despite the fact that Eurosceptic and so-called populist parties have historically mounted the most pressure against any sort of tightening of decisional power, nevertheless, 'many populist parties do not fully exclude the possibility of some form of international cooperation' even within the Union, and 'if the preferences of populist and non-populist parties across Europe to address a particular security concern overlap', the likelihood of cooperation increases (Henke and Maher, 2021, p. 401). At the same time, the precedents of the post-COVID fiscal measures, NextGenEU, energy solidarity, and joint procurement have at least somewhat softened elite and public resistance, and the EU budget, RRF funds, and defence-industrial subsidies can act as new material incentives to both groups. The instrumental use of inefficiency to extract concessions in the past will not be as effective now, as paralysis carries higher and material given an increasingly anarchical international system and deepening domestic polarisation.

Therefore, the reason that none of these changes had been implemented in the past was that the Union was fearing potential cracks in cohesion and her Member States were acting rationally under the previous structural incentives and lack of political will. Cohesion is now more threatened by inaction or the perception that the Union cannot act, and those incentives have shifted due to the crisis precipitated by the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, making a centralisation of certain competencies newly plausible

under the current circumstances. This crisis provides that exact opportunity to strengthen the Union's strategic agency, as 'when serious and immediate security concerns are involved, data suggests that the priority changes in favour of EU security' even if the new direction contradicts previous Union norms and procedures (Rieker and Riddervold, 2022, p. 469). The Costa proposal shows that there are such formats of finding creative workarounds for moving toward QMV, where there is the will to do so (Fortuna, 2025).

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that that Russia has and continues to treat the European Union as a latent strategic actor armed with next-generational warfare capabilities. It has placed itself within the ongoing debate of if and how the Union might achieve its ambitious self-realisation of strategic autonomy – and even more foundationally, strategic agency – amid deep crises. By analysing the concept of next generation warfare, going through the perceived decisional and institutional constraints of the Union and how it articulated its ambitions in policy documents and statements, as well as how Russia has consistently taken actions to degrade and ignore this agency. It has also highlighted how the Union can achieve a higher degree of strategic agency while using the instruments and competencies that it already has in place. By sequentially implementing measures led by the Commission, from moving toward more security and defence related positions being moved under the aegis of TEU 31(1), to Defence Industrial Single Market Act (114/173) under reverse QMV, to compliance scorecard from TEU 7 considerations, to TEU 44 missions, to crisis implementation competencies being applied thorough TEU 31(1), a roadmap for achieving this strategic agency was presented. At the same time, while this development of strategic agency does not fully allow the Union to act as a completely sovereign actor of next-generation warfare in terms of capabilities, it nevertheless allows for a more streamlined process regarding both decisions, competencies, and implement of position from the side of the Union.

Strategic agency does not mean strategic autonomy *per se* or a break in the Transatlantic security relationship. Nonetheless, the Union requires this strategic agency either for a renewal of the liberal international order in which it was forged or for its continued survival and flourishing in the world to come. Achieving this higher degree of agency will make the Union a

more impactful Transatlantic ally and give it the ability to push back against undue pressure and domestic meddling. The current lack of strategic agency is something that Russia has leveraged in its attempts to break apart the Transatlantic relationship; claiming that Europe is weak yet bellicose, it tries to present itself as strong and resolute to the United States. The Union must prove that the opposite is true.

Works Cited

"A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence" (2022). European Union. Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic_compass_en3_web.pdf.

Bartles, C. (2022) "Sixth-generation war and Russia's global theatres of military activity," in *Russian Grand Strategy in the era of global power competition*. Manchester University Press, pp. 71–97. Available at: https://www.manchesterhive.com/display/9781526164643/9781526164643.00011.xml.

Béraud-Sudreau, L. and Pannier, A. (2021) "An 'improbable Paris-Berlin-Commission triangle': usages of Europe and the revival of EU defence cooperation after 2016," *Journal of European Integration*, 43(3), pp. 295–310.

Brøgger, T.E. (2025) "A 'Europe of defence'? The establishment of binding commitments and supranational governance in European security and defence," *Journal of European Integration*, 47(3), pp. 403–422.

Dobrokhotov, R., Weiss, M. and Grozev, C. (2024) *Exclusive: Latvian Member of European Parliament is an agent of Russian intelligence, leaked emails confirm*, *The Insider*. Available at: https://theins.ru/en/politics/268694.

Dura, S. (2024) "The European Pillar of Social Rights: How strategic agency shaped the European Union's flagship social initiative," *Social Policy and Administration*, 58(4), pp. 554–567.

Edwards, C. (2025) *The Scale of Russian Sabotage Operations Against Europe's Critical Infrastructure*, IISS. Available at: https://www.iiss.org/research-paper/2025/08/the-scale-of-russian--sabotage-operations--against-europes-critical--infrastructure/.

EUR-Lex – 12008E122 – EN (2008). OPOCE. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/tfeu_2008/art_122/oj/eng.

EUR-Lex – 12016E329 – EN – EUR-Lex (2016). Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/tfeu_2016/art_329/oj/eng.

EUR-Lex – 12016M031 – EN (2016). Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/teu_2016/art_31/oj/eng.

EUR-Lex – 12016M044 – EN – EUR-Lex (2016). Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/teu_2016/art_44/oj/eng.

Fortuna, G. (2025) *Commission backs Costa's plan to sidestep Hungary's veto over Ukraine's EU bid*, *POLITICO*. Available at: https://www.politico.eu/article/commission-backs-council-president-costa-plan-sidestep-hungary-veto-ukraine-eu-bid/.

Fox, A. (2021) "Using Hybrid War Theory to Shape Future U. S. Generational Doctrine," *Small Wars Journal by Arizona State University*, 4 February. Available at: https://smallwarsjournal.com/2021/02/04/using-hybrid-war-theory-shape-future-u-s-generational-doctrine/.

Gareev, M. and Slipchenko, V. (2007) *Future War*. Fort Leavenworth, KS: Foreign Military Studies Office.

Gerasimov, V. (2013) "The Value of Science in Foresight: New Challenges Require Rethinking on the Forms and Methods of Warfare," in. *Voroshilov General Staff Academy Conference*.

Helwig, N. (2023) "EU Strategic Autonomy after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Europe's Capacity to Act in Times of War," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 61(S1), pp. 57–67.

Henke, M. and Maher, R. (2021) "The populist challenge to European defence," *Journal of European Public Policy*, 28(3), pp. 389–406.

Herszenhorn, D.M. and Barigazzi, J. (2021) *Borrell stands by as Lavrov calls EU 'unreliable partner,'* POLITICO. Available at: https://www.politico.eu/article/borrell-stands-by-as-lavrov-calls-eu-unreliable-partner/.

Johnson, D. (2019) "General Gerasimov on the Vectors of the Development of Military Strategy". *NATO*. Available at: https://www.ndc.nato.int/general-gerasimov-on-the-vectors-of-the-development-of-military-strategy/.

Jones, S. (2025) *Russia's Shadow War Against the West*, CSIS. Available at: https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-shadow-war-against-west.

Lavery, S., McDaniel, S. and Schmid, D. (2022) "European Strategic Autonomy: New Agenda, Old Constraints," in M. Babić, A.D. Dixon, and I.T. Liu (eds.) *The Political Economy of Geoeconomics: Europe in a Changing World*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 57–80.

Lunday, C. (2025) *German defence chief slaps down von der Leyen's talk of EU troops for Ukraine*, POLITICO. Available at: https://www.politico.eu/article/pistorius-slaps-down-von-der-leyens-talk-of-eu-troops-for-ukraine/.

Manners, I. (2002) "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40(2), pp. 235–258.

Manners, I. (2006) "Normative power Europe reconsidered: beyond the crossroads1," *Journal of European Public Policy*, 13(2), pp. 182–199.

Meijer, H. and Brooks, S.G. (2021) "Illusions of Autonomy: Why Europe Cannot Provide for Its Security If the United States Pulls Back," *International Security*, 45(4), pp. 7–43.

POLITICO Staff (2024a) *Brussels spyware crisis expands: Two MEPs hit in phone-hacking security breach*, POLITICO. Available at: https://www.politico.eu/article/nathalie-loiseau-elena-yoncheva-pegasus-spyware-european-parliament-security-defense-subcommittee/.

POLITICO Staff (2024b) *Russia using Serbian agent to infiltrate EU bodies, Western intel says*, POLITICO. Available at: https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-use-serbia-agent-spy-infiltrate-eu-institutions-western-intelligence/.

Porre, M. (2020) *President Niinistö met with Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia Sergey Lavrov, Tasavallan presidentti Sauli Niinistö*. Available at: https://www.presidentti.fi/niinisto/en/news/president-niinisto-met-with-minister-of-foreign-affairs-of-russia-sergey-lavrov/.

Press statement by the President on the defence package (2025) *European Commission*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_25_673.

Qiao, L. and Wang, X. (2015) *Unrestricted warfare*. Translated by A. Santoli. Brattleboro, Vermont: Echo Point Books and Media.

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (2024) "Czechs Confirm Russian Involvement In Blasts At Ammunition Depots In 2014," 29 April. Available at: https://www.rferl.

org/a/czech-police-vrbetice-blasts-russia-gru-ammunition-depots/32925105. html.

Riddervold, M. and Rieker, P. (2024) "Finally coming of age? EU foreign and security policy after Ukraine," *European Security*, 33(3), pp. 497–516.

Rieker, P. and Riddervold, M. (2022) "Not so unique after all? Urgency and norms in EU foreign and security policy," *Journal of European Integration*, 44(4), pp. 459–473.

Robinson, N. (2017) "Russian Neo-patrimonialism and Putin's 'Cultural Turn,'" *Europe-Asia Studies*, 69(2), pp. 348–366.

Spencer, J., Beehner, L. and Thomas, N. (2018) *Putting Concepts of Future Warfare to the Test*, *Army University Press*. Available at: https://www.armyupress.army. mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/March-April-2018/ Spencer-Future-Warfare-Concepts/.

The 2025 AI Index Report (2025). Stanford University Human-Cantered Artificial Intelligence. Available at: https://hai.stanford.edu/ai-index/2025-ai-index-report.

Timeline – Article 7: the story so far (2025) *Consilium*. Available at: https://www. consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/article-7-procedures/timeline-the-story-of-article-7/.

Wiśniewska, I. (2024) *Russia's budget for 2025: war above all*, *OSW Centre for Eastern Studies*. Available at: https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/ osw-commentary/2024-11-22/russias-budget-2025-war-above-all.

Taking Security into its own Hands: European Defence Self-Reliance in an Era of Global Competition

Rosaria Puglisi and Lt. Gen. (ret.) Fernando Giancotti[*]

Abstract

Under shifting global power dynamics, Europe faces a dual challenge: Russia's protracted confrontation with Europe and growing questions over the reliability of US security guarantees. These pressures expose Europe's vulnerability and demand accelerated defence self-reliance. While recent initiatives have aimed at boosting budgets, industrial modernisation, and procurement, deterrence requires more than resources. The critical gap lies in the capacity to transform investments into deployable capabilities and to engage society across the continent. Two priorities are highlighted: establishing a permanent European multi-domain command-and-control structure to integrate land, maritime, air, space, and cyber components into coherent operational planning, coordinated with political and interagency governance, and strengthening civilian preparedness and resilience; ensuring that governments, private actors, and societies can respond effectively to crises and hybrid attacks. Together with industrial modernisation, these measures provide the foundation of Europe's strategic autonomy and the most immediate steps towards credible deterrence and resilience in a volatile international environment.

Introduction

Russia's ongoing war with Ukraine, in combination with the return of the Trump administration and its new approach to Europe, have dramatically altered the security landscape of the continent, prompting what French President Macron has called a "profound strategic awakening" (Jaque et al., 2025). At no time has the asymmetrical dual challenge to European security emanating from Moscow and Washington been more palpable than at the Trump-Putin Summit in Anchorage, in August 2025. Against the backdrop

---

[*]   Rosaria Puglisi is an Associate Fellow at the Istituto Affari Internazionali in Rome, Italy and a former international civil servant. Lt. Gen. (ret.) Fernando Giancotti is a Teacher at the Centre for Higher Defence Studies in Rome, Italy.

of the Russian President's apparent full rehabilitation – despite ongoing US sanctions and an outstanding international warrant for war crimes – the optics and atmospherics of the summit pointed to a strategic realignment between the two leaders. This unfolded in the backdrop of the US' continued decoupling from Europe, not only in terms of commitments but also on a shared normative framework. Remarkably, neither President Zelensky nor any European representative were invited to what turned out to be a 'strikingly convivial reunion' (Baker and Rogers, 2025) – one in which the future of Ukraine and the security of Europe would be discussed.

Because of its aggressive and revisionist foreign policy, Russia remains a clear and present danger to Europe. It is determined to erase Ukraine's statehood, unravel the post-Cold War security architecture, and drive a wedge between the US and its European allies. Transatlantic strains are no less troubling. American open hostility toward Europe led the Munich Security Conference Chairman Christoph Heusgen to warn in his 2025 closing remarks that 'our common value base is not that common anymore' (The New Yorker, 2025). This was an early signal of what subsequent events would confirm: the urgency for Europe to accelerate on its path towards defence self-reliance, within NATO, if possible, outside it if necessary (Glancy, 2025). [1]

That the security of Europe starts in Ukraine is a conviction that has been consolidating in European political and defence circles since the Russian full-scale invasion. Many leaders, such as former Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin, have framed the European support to Kyiv as a matter of "self-interest" (The Economist, 2025b). Finland, together with other Northern and Eastern European countries, has demonstratively enforced a "Ukraine is Europe's first line of defence" narrative by donating weapons from its own national defensive stockpiles (Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic, 2022; Folketinget, 2022; Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Lithuania, 2022; Kallas, 2023).

US Vice President JD Vance's momentous speech in Munich signalled a change in the transatlantic environment: the US administration's announcements that Europe would not be involved in peace talks between Washington and Moscow and a US force posture review entailed a potential drawdown from the continent because of new strategic realities. Europe, both at the EU and pan-European level, has been confronted with what UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer called 'a generational challenge' (The Economist, 2025a).

---

[1]   On the debate about the European role in NATO see Droin et al., 2024; Daalder, 2025.

The US pivot away from Europe is – in the view of one realist thinker – part of a "natural shift" in US foreign policy preferences, the end of an 80-year cycle created after World War II and now perceived as obsolete (Friedman, 2025; Autocracy in America, 2025). US impatience with continued European defence underspending has been consistently signalled, making it unlikely for the current course of action to be significantly reversed, regardless of the White House's occupancy (Bergman, 2024). This is a harsh reality that the Europeans have come to reckon with.

Unexpectedly, swift decision-making has followed in both EU and NATO formats, aimed at demonstrating to the US administration the relevance of European security while genuinely reinforcing capabilities in the face of unrelenting Russian threat.[2] At the same time, a whirlwind of diplomatic initiatives – spanning from the Weimar Plus to the Coalition of the Willing in support of Ukraine, to bilateral security arrangements – have been plotting out a network of alternative security guarantees should the US commitment to Article 5 wane (Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office, 2025; Élysée, 2025; Marsh and Piper, 2025; Chancellery of the Prime Minister of Poland, 2025; Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street, 2025a). Most remarkably, France and the UK have started discussing deeper nuclear coordination to ensure that any extreme threat to Europe would prompt a joint response (Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street, 2025b; The Economist, 2025c).

The future of European security lies in both diplomacy and hard realities – weaponry, manpower, and willpower (Glancy, 2025). While a crucially important debate rages on military spending, other lesser discussed matters deserve wider attention. Of these, the modernisation of the European defence industry and the streamlining of finance and procurement procedures to stimulate innovation are key aspects of capability

---

[2]   To reverse the decline engendered by years of post-Cold war defence neglect, the European Council endorsed in March 2025 the 'White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030', proclaiming urgency in accelerating defence readiness over the next five years. In May, the €150 billion Security Action for Europe (SAFE) fund to finance joint procurement of defence projects was approved, with a majority 'buy European' clause (Council of the European Union, 2025a; Council of the European Union, 2025b; European Council, 2025a; European Council, 2025b). In June, the NATO Summit in The Hague concluded with landmark commitments: a new 5 % of GDP defence spending target for member states (3.5 % in core military needs, 1.5 % on broader security-related costs, including support to Ukraine), a reaffirmed 'ironclad commitment' to Article 5, the acknowledgement that Ukraine's security enhances NATO's own (NATO, 2025).

and preparedness-building. The establishment of a coherent and effective European military command and control structure and the development of societal preparedness and resilience is what the remainder of this chapter will be devoted to.

MULTIDOMAIN Command and Control

Public debate in Europe has so far centred on raising budgets and stimulating the defence industry. While indispensable, these measures alone cannot guarantee deterrence, which depends above all on the capacity to transform resources into effective and deployable capabilities, applied coherently in support of shared political objectives. In this respect, Europe still faces a critical weakness: although in 2024 EU Member States collectively spent €343 billion on defence (Council of the European Union, 2025c) – more than twice Russia's estimated wartime expenditure of $149 billion (SIPRI, 2025) – the continent continues to lack the structures – the central "brain" – that would allow these resources and forces to be employed coherently and decisively.

This shortcoming is not new. NATO and national militaries have long pursued capability development as a systemic process, combining equipment, doctrine, training, leadership, and logistics into a functioning whole. The EU, by contrast, has been constrained by treaty provisions and the persistence of national priorities, which have prevented the emergence of a comprehensive military system able to protect the Union in its entirety. The institutions that have been created – the EU Military Staff, the European Defence Agency, and the Military Planning and Conduct Capability – perform useful functions, but their mandates were established at different times to address distinct challenges. These predated the EU's still recent and not uncontroversial assumption of a defence role; consequently, their mandates and scale are suited only to limited operations. They remain, therefore, inadequate in the face of strategic threats.

The ongoing development of Europe-wide initiatives on the industrial front – the European Defence Fund, the European Defence Industrial Development Programme, the more recent European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act, the Strategic Compass, and the 2025 White Paper on Defence Readiness – are of great importance and reflect a clear ambition to consolidate Europe's defence base. Yet, as the

European Court of Auditors already warned in 2022, the operational return on such investments will require time, common standards, and – above all – an overarching political direction. Similarly, the EU's operational record demonstrates both professionalism and limitations (European Court of Auditors, 2022). The Union has twenty-one ongoing missions, twelve civilian and nine military, involving some 4,000 participants (European External Action Service, 2025). While generally effective in fulfilling their mandates, these missions remain marginal to the continent's emerging strategic environment.

The paradox is therefore evident. Europe possesses substantial resources, credible military forces, and a growing array of industrial and institutional initiatives, yet it lacks the one element that would bind them together: a permanent command structure. The EU Concept for Military Command and Control already recognised this in 2019 when it noted that 'the EU does not have a standing military Command and Control (C2) structure for military executive operations; therefore, clear and effective C2 arrangements are needed to ensure the successful planning and conduct of military CSDP missions and operations'. Without such a structure, Europe cannot convert potential into power. Europe urgently needs a permanent joint operational command, with its own land, maritime, air, space, and cyber components, as clearly articulated by Special Advisor on European Competitiveness Mario Draghi and former Head of the French Armed Forces Thierry Burkhard (Draghi, 2024; The Economist, 2025).

A permanent Multi-Domain Operations (MDO) command would address this gap.[3] By integrating land, maritime, air, space, and cyber components, it could undertake strategic and operational planning for the European theatre, oversee joint exercises, and identify capability shortfalls. More broadly, it would serve as a driver of integration: aligning budgetary

---

[3]   In Multi-Domain Operations, command and control is understood as a distributed and interconnected system rather than a linear hierarchy (NATO C2 Centre of Excellence, 2021): strategic leaders set goals, effects and rules of engagement, operational commanders synchronise actions across domains, and tactical units act with delegated authority to seize fleeting opportunities. This requires cyber, space, ISR, fires, and electronic warfare nodes linked through federated networks and shared data services that connect sensors, effectors and decision-makers into one decision ecosystem. Automation, AI, and decision-support tools accelerate the human-machine cycle, while political and interagency structures ensure governance of cross-domain effects, data sharing, and interoperability, especially in the information environment and in cyberspace, with active civilian contributions (NATO Allied Command Transformation, 2023).

allocations with operational requirements, orienting the defence industry towards operational demands, and consolidating enablers such as intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance, mobility, logistics, and interoperability.

An MDO approach would replace outdated Cold War and counter-insurgency doctrines with a framework that reflects the changing character of warfare. Technological acceleration, hybrid tactics, and the growing speed and complexity of operations mean that actions must be generated simultaneously across the physical, cognitive, and virtual dimensions, with societal preparedness and resilience as an integral component.

To achieve this, MDO requires a deeper, multi-level understanding of both adversaries' and NATO/EU domain-specific capabilities, so that strategic anticipation and information superiority can be synchronised and applied rapidly to disrupt an opponent's response. Holistic by design, it rests on a whole-of-government approach, with decision-making and guidance extending to the political-strategic level. In the EU context, this implies the active engagement of the European Council, the European External Action Service, the Political and Security Committee, and military structures in a single continuum of decision-making that links operational effectiveness with political responsibility.

Establishing such a command is within reach. European officers already serve daily in NATO's Command Structure and have trained together in NATO, bilateral, and EU frameworks. A staff of a few thousand – drawn from the Union's 1.5 million service members – would suffice to create an initial operational capability, at a modest cost compared with larger industrial programmes.

More importantly, an effective EU command would provide a powerful response to the appeal for the Union to finally 'do something' as it was first launched in the Draghi Report: a demonstration of self-belief, a credible first step toward deterrence, and a clear signal to allies and competitors that Europe is taking full responsibility for its own security (Draghi, 2024). Such a profoundly political act need not be construed as directed against any specific opponent, but rather as the essential security enabler of the strategic autonomy the EU requires – one commensurate with its global role (Biscop, 2019). At the same time, it would answer recent and insistent American calls for Europe to assume a larger share of the transatlantic defence burden. Framed in this light, the initiative would be a complement to NATO's command-and-control system – inevitably involving further investment

and some overlap yet delivering greater resilience and strengthening Europe's ability to manage multiple contingencies – including those that could arise should a US pivot to Asia create opportunities for adversaries to test European security in Washington's absence.

The NATO-EU Berlin Plus arrangements remain conceptually valid and would allow a new structure to complement NATO operations under agreed mandates (Council of the European Union, 2002; NATO, 2003). Ideally, all twenty-seven EU Member States would participate. In the case that unanimity proves elusive, Article 20 of the Treaty on the European Union provides for enhanced cooperation by a coalition of the willing. Including the United Kingdom would be both strategically desirable and politically prudent: despite Brexit, London remains one of Europe's principal military actors, and convergence on defence goals is clear and valuable.

The central issue, however, remains political. Who would assign the mission and ensure coherence between political and operational directives? Broad convergence on the need to enhance security already exists, as demonstrated by the expanding array of initiatives. Yet in an emergency there will be no time to improvise; cohesion must be built in advance, as the Ukrainian reaction to the full-scale invasion demonstrates. The responsibility for this preparation – and for defining the strategic guidance that underpins it – falls squarely on Europe's political leadership.

The first step in this direction must be the coordination of operational capabilities already in place and their linkage to longer-term defence programmes, within a Whole-of-Force/Whole-of-Government approach that also prepares the population for a grave emergency. Beyond political symbolism, this would set in motion a process of organic growth grounded in field-level practice rather than abstract debate. Establishing a Multi-Domain European C2 capability is the fastest path to meaningful deterrence – complementary to diplomacy and not inherently adversarial. It can be done immediately, for Europe must be protected now. The window of vulnerability is already wide open: hybrid warfare is under way, drone incursions have already targeted EU countries, and the probability of further conflict cannot be excluded. Nor can Europe continue to assume that others will provide for its security.

Civilian Preparedness and Societal Resilience

That the armed forces are only one aspect of defence and resistance is one of the many lessons-learned from the war in Ukraine. When in 2014, Russian unmarked forces infiltrated the Donbas, Kyiv was undergoing a phase of great institutional fragility. Debilitated by years of corruption and mismanagement, the central administration was unable to react promptly. As a result, the onset of hostilities propelled into action individuals and civil society organisations in support of and, if necessary, *en lieu* of the state to perform tasks the state was unable to attend to (Puglisi, 2018; Puglisi, 2024). Hundreds of "little hands" took upon themselves the 'multiple and at times minuscule functions, which, combined, constitute the social fabric of the defence' (Lebedev, 2025, p. 13). Participation in what a Ukrainian volunteer defined 'co-construction of the national defence' transformed individuals' perception of their role as citizens filling with new meaning the very idea of civic engagement (Lebedev, 2025, p. 30).

The defence system that has emerged in Ukraine spontaneously and intuitively, through a set of trials and errors in the interplay between state and society, echoes aspects of Nordic countries' total defence. The Commander of Finland's Armed Forces – a super-power in the matter – describes it as a set of structured relations where not only every ministry has clearly articulated responsibilities to fulfil in case of war, crisis, or conflict, but every organisation, public and private, and every individual is trained and equipped, well-aware of the place to take. Additionally, Finland – a country of 5 million – counts 700 thousand trained reservists and active military personnel ready to take up defence positions. This is part of the country's 'social contract' and constitutes the backbone of societal resilience (The Telegraph, 2025).

The Russian strategy of massive attacks to civilians and civilian infrastructure in Ukraine has spurred a convergent debate on societal preparedness also in European circles. Building on the EU's experience in civil protection, crisis management, and CSDP operations, the 2025 European Preparedness Union Strategy frames resilience as both a strategic and societal bedrock of EU security. A whole of government/whole of society approach integrates civilian and defence instruments across all governance layers and societal actors into action points ranging from foresight and population preparedness to civil-military coordination and public-private cooperation (Niinistö, 2024; European Commission and

High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2025).

A whole-of-government/whole-of-society approach is one of the centrepieces of the 2025 UK Strategic Defence Review (SDR), where domestic resilience is cited as an integral pillar of national and deterrence security. Military preparedness and societal responsibility intertwine in the SDR setting in motion a 'concerted, collective effort involving – among others – industry, the finance sector, civil society, academia, education, and communities' (UK Government, 2025, p. 93). The defence of the homeland – an obligation rooted in Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty requiring that Allies maintain their capacity to resist armed attacks – implies a change of mindset in the way we think about defence – the SDR argues (UK Government, 2025). [4]

Recent opinion polls across Europe indicate both rising concern for security and persistent national divergences in threat perception and defence preferences. Security and defence rank as the top priority for EU action with an overall 77% viewing Russia's war in Ukraine as a direct threat to the EU. Despite a high support for a stronger EU role, nonetheless, national preferences on specific policies diverge sharply within the continent. Majorities in Spain, Britain, and France back a European peacekeeping force for Ukraine, against a prevailing opposition in Germany and Italy. The UK tends to support a European army, and France and Germany favour reintroducing conscription. Significantly, only a minority considers defence spending too low, with only 23% supporting the use of EU funds for military purposes and highest rates registered in Estonia, Finland, and Lithuania – respectively 50%, 46%, and 46% (European Commission, 2025a; European External Action Service, 2025; Institut Jacques Delors, 2025; YouGov, 2025).[5]

---

[4]   NATO frames societal resilience as encompassing the ability of governments, civil society, individuals, and the private sector to withstand, recover from, and adapt to major shocks. The NATO Seven Baseline Requirements adopted at the 2016 Warsaw Summit guide this effort, focusing on continuity of government, essential services, and critical infrastructure (NATO, 2016). For a more detailed analysis of NATO's evolving concept of societal resilience, linking civil preparedness and defence, and a review of the Seven Baseline Requirements (Christie and Berzina, 2022).

[5]   The spring 2025 Eurobarometer shows that 78% of EU citizens are concerned about the Union's capacity to safeguard peace over the next five years, and an overwhelming 81% support a common EU security and defence policy – the highest level recorded since 2004 (European Commission, 2025a). For more data and analysis on European public opinion trends on relations with the US under Trump, relations with Russia, the war in Ukraine, and its more likely outcomes (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2025; Puglierin et al., 2025).

Although an overall majority appear clear-eyed about the risks emanating from Russia – an average of 48% defines Moscow as an adversary – country variations span from 14% in Bulgaria to 74% in Denmark (Puglierin et al., 2025).

Mainly determined by historical and geographical circumstances – proximity to the Russian border and exposure to Russian domination, but also permeability to Russian disinformation narratives – differences in threat perceptions and defence spending preferences are also impacted by patterns of public communication. Research highlights a substantial shift in news reporting on security and defence issues, framed primarily in national terms before the Russian full-scale invasion and increasingly as a European concern after. This indicates the potential for increased European integration in the defence sphere face to shared security risks (Fernandez et al., 2023).

A contrario, poor information and ineffective communication dilute public awareness, undermine preparedness, and represents a security risk in itself. With Europe confronting its gravest threats since the end of the Cold War, hard choices on alignment, alliances, defence spending, military readiness, and civilian engagement loom large. In this context, unserious or ineffective messaging hampers essential debate, confuses public opinion, gives divisive populist forces space to weaponise the defence narrative, and opens the door for Russian disinformation to polarise societies.

The uproar caused in Italy and Spain by the initial branding of the European Commission's defence initiative 'Re-Arm Europe', – criticised by the Italian Prime Minister as misleading and overly militaristic – could have been avoided if a language more mindful of national sensitivities had been employed. [6] Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini's comment to President Emmanuel Macron – 'put your helmet on, your jacket, your rifle, and go to Ukraine' – demonstrates how populist theatrics can derail critical policy debates, in this case undermining discussions on security guarantees for Ukraine (Reuters, 2025b).[7]

Populist parties can be expected to exploit European voters' resistance towards rearmament and deeper security integration, by crafting messages that prioritise immediate economic and social benefits against long-term difficult, but necessary strategic commitments. As a result, Europe may

---

[6]   The ensuing criticism prompted the Commission to rename the initiative 'Readiness 2030', with the specific funding programme retitled 'SAFE' to better reflect its comprehensive scope (Euronews, 2025)

[7]   On why mainstream leaders must frame issues like European defence compellingly to prevent populist distortion and agenda-setting (Chatham House, 2024).

falter not because of a lack of leadership, but because public opinions remain fragile and easily manipulable (Ganesh, 2025).

The Ukrainians still reproach their government for having failed to adequately prepare the country for war on the eve of the full-scale invasion – failure to inform, failure to instruct and failure to arm (Lebedev, 2025, p. 35). This is a lesson of enduring relevance, and one Europe would do well to heed as it considers how to strengthen its own resilience.

Conclusions

'Europe is in a fight. A fight for a continent that is whole and at peace. For a free and independent Europe', declared European Commission President von der Leyen in her 2025 State of the Union Address. Delivered in the immediate aftermath of the Russian drones' incursion into Polish territory, her message was nonetheless far-reaching. It embraced 'a world where major powers are ambivalent or openly hostile to Europe, a world of imperial ambitions and imperial wars', in which 'dependencies are ruthlessly weaponised' (European Commission, 2025b).

Despite its dwindling economy, Russia is set on a path of protracted confrontation with Europe, preparing for a permanent state of war, with Ukraine being only the first front (Lucas, 2025). Should a ceasefire in Ukraine be achieved, Moscow would be able to reconstitute its military capacity and launch a large-scale attack against a neighbouring country within five to ten years, as various national intelligence services predict. Long-term rearmament plans further point to the Kremlin's preparations for a potential future conventional war against NATO (Institute for the Study of War, 2025, p. 27). Yet hybrid aggressions have been occurring with increasing regularity – targeting critical infrastructure across the continent, from undersea cables sabotage in the Baltic Sea to cyber-attacks on the UK National Health Service – and are expected to increase (Verhelst, 2025). Russia remains a clear and present danger for Europe, but it is not the only one in an international context marked by power competition, where the reliability of longstanding allies can no longer be taken for granted.

Achieving defence self-reliance is an urgent task for Europe – demanding, but not impossible. It requires above all a significant shift in mindset, one that embraces a more comprehensive understanding of security. Industrial modernisation is essential to fill the gaps left by years of post-Cold War

underfunding, but it is only the tip of the iceberg. As the war in Ukraine demonstrates, in increasingly complex and interdependent societies, security is a much broader objective: it encompasses energy independence, connectivity, financial and economic structures, robust infrastructures, and social protection systems (Letta, 2025). It also entails societal cohesion in the face of emergencies and resilience against disinformation and the risks of polarisation. At the core of these efforts lie policy harmonisation and relentless coordination, based on a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach that brings together military and civilian sectors, enhances effectiveness, and ensures full preparedness. The establishment of a European multidomain command-and-control system and the development of national strategies to foster greater societal participation in defence and security stand as the two immediate priorities to reach these objectives.

Works Cited

Autocracy in America (2025) The Realist [podcast]. Interview with George Friedman. 8 August. Available at: https://podcasts.apple.com/it/podcast/autocracy-in-america/id1763234285?i=1000721174864andr=1129.

Baker P and K. Rogers (2025) "Trump and Putin put on a show of friendship but come away without a deal," *New York Times*, 15 August. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/15/us/politics/trump-putin-alaska-ukraine.html.

Bergman, M. (2024) "A More European NATO", *Foreign Affairs*, 21 March.

Biscop, S. (2019) "European Strategy in the 21st Century: New Future for Old Power," Abingdon: Routledge.

Chancellery of the Prime Minister of Poland (2025) "Poland and France sign historic security and cooperation treaty in Nancy," Press release, 9 May. Available at: https://www.gov.pl/web/primeminister/poland-and-france-sign-historic-security-and-cooperation-treaty-in-nancy.

Chatham House (2024) "How Will Gains by the Far Right Affect the European Parliament and EU," 11 June, Available at: https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/06/how-will-gains-far-right-affect-european-parliament-and-eu.

Christie, E.H. and Berzina, K. (2022) "NATO and Societal Resilience: All Hands on Deck in an Age of War," GMF Policy Brief. Washington, DC: German Marshall Fund of the United States, 20 July. Available at: https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/2022-07/NATO%20and%20Societal%20Resilience%20All%20Hands%20on%20Deck%20in%20an%20Age%20of%20War.pdf.

Council of the European Union (2002) "EU–NATO Declaration on ESDP," 16 December. Brussels: Council of the European Union. Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_19547.htm.

Council of the European Union (2025a) "SAFE: Council adopts €150 billion boost for joint procurement on European security and defence," Press Release 27 May. Available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/05/27/safe-council-adopts-150-billion-boost-for-joint-procurement-on-european-security-and-defence/.

Council of the European Union (2025b) "Defence industry and joint procurement – Council conclusions," 27 May. Available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/05/27/defence-industry-and-joint-procurement-council-conclusions.

Council of the European Union (2025c) "EU defence in numbers," 2 September 2025. Brussels: Council of the European Union. Available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/defence-numbers/.

Daalder, I. H. (2025) "NATO without America. How Europe Can Run an Alliance designed for US Control," *Foreign Affairs*, 28 March.

Draghi, M. (2024) "The Future of European Competitiveness: A Competitiveness Strategy for Europe," [Report]. Part A and Part B. Brussels: European Commission. Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness/draghi-report_en.

Droin, M., S. Monaghan and J. Townsend (2024) "NATO's Missing Pillar. The Alliance needs a More Powerful Europe," *Foreign Affairs*, 14 June.

Élysée (Presidency of France) (2025) "Statement of the Co-Chairs of the Coalition of the Willing," Press Release, 17 August. Available at: https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2025/08/17/statement-of-the-co-chairs-of-the-coalition-of-the-willing-17-august-2025.

Euronews (2025) "Brussels Confirms 'Rearm Europe' Rebrand after Backlash from Italy and Spain," 21 March. Available at https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/03/21/brussels-confirms-rearm-europe-rebrand-after-backlash-from-italy-and-spain.

European Commission (2025a) "Eurobarometer," Spring 2025: Public opinion in the European Union. Fieldwork March–April 2025, Publication July 2025. Brussels: European Commission. Available at: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3372.

European Commission (2025b) "State of the Union 2025: speech by President Ursula von der Leyen," 10 September. Brussels: European Commission. Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/state-union/state-union-2025_en.

European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (2025) "European Preparedness Union Strategy," 26 March. Available at: https://www.preventionweb.net/media/105664/download?startDownload=20250824.

European Council (2025a) "European Council conclusions on competitiveness, European defence and security, and migration," 20 March. Available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/03/20/european-council-conclusions-on-competitiveness-european-defence-and-security-and-migration/.

European Council (2025b) "European Council meeting (20–21 March 2025) – Main results," 21 March. Available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2025/03/20-21/.

European Court of Auditors (2022) 'Special Report 18/2022: Resilience of EU institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic'. In Moonen, G. (ed.) *Journal No. 2 | 2022: The EU Recovery and Resilience Facility – a jump to a resilient Europe?* Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, pp. 54–66.

European External Action Service (2025) "Key findings of the Spring 2025 Eurobarometer on security, defence and the EU's role," Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/key-findings-spring-2025-eurobarometer-security-defence-and-eus-role_en.

European Union External Action Service (2025) "Missions and Operations," 30 January 2025. Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/missions-and-operations_en.

Fernández, O., M. Vandendriessche, A. Saz-Carranza, N. Agell and J. Franco (2023) "The impact of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine on public perceptions of EU security and defence integration: a big data analysis," *Journal of European Integration*, 45:3, pp. 463–485.

Folketinget (Danish Parliament) (2022), "Speech by Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen to the Danish Parliament on support to Ukraine," May. Available at: https://www.ft.dk/samling/20212/almdel/FOU/.

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (2025) "Weimar joint statement on Ukraine and Euro-Atlantic security," 12 May. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/weimar-joint-statement-on-ukraine-and-euro-atlantic-security.

Friedman, G. (2024) "The Euro-American Shift," *Geopolitical Futures*, July 8. Available at: https://www.geopoliticalfutures.com/the-euro-american-shift/

Ganesh, J. (2025) "Trump's Ambiguity Is the Worst of All Worlds," *Financial Times*, 20 August. Available at: https://www.ft.com/content/8bd4ccbe-fd88-4070-bfe9-4c24b9fab54f.

Garton Ash, T., Krastev, I. and Leonard, M. (2025) "ALONE IN A 'TRUMPIAN' WORLD: THE EU AND GLOBAL PUBLIC OPINION AFTER THE US ELECTIONS". Policy Brief. European Council on Foreign Relations, 15 January. Available at: https://ecfr.eu/publication/alone-in-a-trumpian-world-the-eu-and-global-public-opinion-after-the-us-elections/.

Glancy, J. (2025) "Europe says it's rearming, but does it have the stomach to face Putin?" *The Times*, 16 August. Available at: https://www.thetimes.com/world/russia-ukraine-war/article/trump-putin-summit-rearmament-europe-3sk7gqztf.

Institut Jacques Delors (2025) "A Devalued United States, a Desire for European Defence, and Consolidated Support for Ukraine," Policy Brief. Available at: https://institutdelors.eu/en/publications/a-devalued-united-states-a-desire-for-european-defence-and-consolidated-support-for-ukraine/.

Institute for the Study of War (2025) "Russian offensive campaign assessment," 22 July. Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War. Available at: https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-22-2025/.

Jacque, P, V. Malingre and P. Ricard (2025) "Europe Decides to take its security in its own hands, without breaking with the US," *Le Monde*, 7 March. Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/03/07/europe-decides-to-take-its-security-into-its-own-hands-without-breaking-with-us_6738910_4.html.

Kallas, K. (2023) "Remarks at the Munich Security Conference 2023," Munich Security Conference, February. Available at: https://securityconference.org/en/msc-2023/speakers/kaja-kallas/.

Lebedev, A. C. (2025) "Ukraine: La Force des Faibles," (Editions du Seuil).

Letta, E. (2025) "European Security Is a Much Broader Objective Than Defensive Military Effectiveness," *Le Monde*, March 11, 2025. Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2025/03/11/enrico-letta-european-security-is-a-much-broader-objective-than-defensive-military-effectiveness_6739031_23.html.

Lucas, E. (2025) "Wake up West, Russia's Ready for Perpetual War," *The Times*, July 17,. Available at: https://www.thetimes.com/comment/columnists/article/wake-up-west-russia-war-donald-trump-5kscn3w32.

Marsh, S. and E. Piper (2025) "UK and Germany hail wide-ranging treaty, deepening ties in face of threats," *Reuters*, 17 July Available at: https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/uk-germany-hail-wide-ranging-treaty-deepening-ties-face-threats-2025-07-16/.

Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic (2022) "Helping Ukraine defend itself is our own defence," Press Release. Available at: https://www.army.cz/en/ministry-of-defence/newsroom/news/helping-ukraine-defend-itself-is-our-own-defence-239930/.

Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Lithuania (2022) "Statement by Defence Minister Arvydas Anušauskas on military aid to Ukraine," April. Available at: https://kam.lt/en/news/-

NATO (2003): "NATO-EU concluding Berlin Plus arrangements," 17 March. Brussels: North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. Press release (2003)027Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_19544.htm.

NATO (2016) "Warsaw Summit communiqué," 8–9 July, para. XX. Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm.

NATO (2025) "Brussels Summit communiqué – Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in The Hague," 25 June. Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_225678.htm.

NATO Allied Command Transformation (2023) "Multi-Domain Operations," Available at: https://www.act.nato.int/activities/multi-domain-operations/.

NATO C2 Centre of Excellence (2021) "Multi-Domain Command and Control (MDC2)," – Long Study 1.0. Available at: https://c2coe.org/wp-.

Niinistö, S. (2024) "Safer together – strengthening Europe's civilian and military preparedness and readiness," Special Adviser report to the President of the European Commission. 30 October. Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/document/5bb2881f-9e29-42f2-8b77-8739b19d047c_en.

Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street (2025a) "Lancaster House 2.0: Declaration on modernising UK-French defence and security cooperation," Press release, 10 July. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/lancaster-house-20-declaration-on-modernising-uk-french-defence-and-security-cooperation.

Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street (2025b) "Northwood Declaration: 10 July – UK-France joint nuclear statement," Press release. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/northwood-declaration-10-july-2025-uk-france-joint-nuclear-statement.

Puglierin, J., A. Varvelli, and P. Zerka (2025) "Transatlantic Twilight: European Public Opinion and the Long Shadow of Trump," *European Council on Foreign Relations.* February 12. Available at: https://ecfr.eu/publication/transatlantic-twilight-european-public-opinion-and-the-long-shadow-of-trump/.

Puglisi, R. (2018) "A People's Army: Civil Society as a Security Actor in Post-Maidan Ukraine," – Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest, 2018/2 N° 2.

Puglisi, R. (2024) "Defence Bottom-up. Volunteer Battalions at the onset of the Russian war in Ukraine," in Kaunert, C., A. MacKenzie, and A. Nonjon (Eds) In the Eye of the Storm. Origins, Ideology, and Controversies of the Azov Brigade, 2014-2023 (*ibidem* – Verlag).

Reuters (2025b) "France Summons Italian Ambassador over Challenge to Macron on Ukraine," 23 August 2025. Available at https://www.reuters.com/world/france-summons-italian-ambassador-over-challenge-macron-ukraine-2025-08-23/.

SIPRI (2025) "Unprecedented Rise in Global Military Expenditures as European and Middle East spending surges." Available at: https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2025/unprecedented-rise-global-military-expenditure-european-and-middle-east-spending-surges?

The Economist (2025a) "The Nightmare of a Trump-Putin deal leaves Europe in shock," 17 February. Available at: https://www.economist.com/europe/2025/02/17/the-nightmare-of-a-trump-putin-deal-leaves-europe-in-shock.

The Economist (2025b) "Now is the time for Europe to show strength, not division, argues Sanna Marin," 19 February. Available at: https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2025/02/19/now-is-the-time-for-europe-to-show-strength-not-division-argues-sanna-marin.

The Economist (2025c) "France's top general says Russia could attack in five years," 31 July. Available at: https://www.economist.com/europe/2025/07/31/frances-top-general-says-russia-could-attack-in-five-years.

The New Yorker (2025) "The Trump Administration Trashes Europe and NATO," 20 February. Available at: https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-lede/the-trump-administration-trashes-europe-and-nato.

The Telegraph (2025) Ukraine: The Latest. Episode: "Russia bombs American factory in one of war's largest attacks, defying Trump peace efforts," [podcast]. 21 August. Commentary by Lieutenant General Pasi Välimäki. Available at: https://podcasts.apple.com/it/podcast/ukraine-the-latest/id1612424182?i=1000722961020andr=2943.

UK Government (2025) "THE STRATEGIC DEFENCE REVIEW 2025 – MAKING BRITAIN SAFER: SECURE AT HOME, STRONG ABROAD". 2 June. Chapter 6: 'Home defence and resilience: a whole-of-society approach'. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/683d89f181deb72cce2680a5/The_Strategic_Defence_Review_2025_-_Making_Britain_Safer_-_secure_at_home__strong_abroad.pdf.

Verhelst, Koen (2025) "Putin Is Stepping Up 'Aggressive' Hybrid Attacks on Germany, Spy Chief Warns," *Politico Europe*, July 21, 4:03 pm CET, accessed on 27 August 2025. Available at: https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-aggressive-hybrid-attacks-germany-spy-chief-martina-rosenberg/.

YouGov (2025) "Where does Western Europe stand on Ukraine, Donald Trump and national defence?" 6 March. Available at: https://yougov.co.uk/international/articles/51741-where-does-western-europe-stand-on-ukraine-donald-trump-and-national-defence.

The Repatriation of Ukrainian War Refugees as a Factor of European Security

Dr. Mykola Nazarov[*]

Abstract

This chapter examines the "human dimension" of European security, focusing on the issue of Ukrainian war refugees and the potential for their repatriation. Pushing people out of Ukraine is becoming one of Russia's most important strategies for achieving its so-called "special military operation" goals. Cynical attacks on civilian infrastructure in Ukraine, including thermal and electrical generation, combined with information and psychological operations are working towards this goal daily. The consequences of people leaving Ukraine could be painful for both Ukraine's future and European security. The situation of millions of Ukrainian citizens, who are unable to find fulfilment in the EU and have no place to return home, represents a real catastrophe for the European continent. To avoid this, Ukraine and its allies need to start planning the return of their citizens today, with appropriate adjustments to the state's socio-economic policy.

Introduction

The annexation of Crimea and the beginning of Russia's proxy war against Ukraine turned a new page in the relations between both Ukraine and Russia, and between Russia and the West. Prominent Ukrainian researcher and statesman Volodymyr Horbulin notes that in 2014, Russia de facto launched a global hybrid war against the West, and one of its fronts was localised in Ukraine (Horbulin, 2017). Horbulin states that Russia is not solely responsible for the destruction of the old-world order; the West shares responsibility, and their interaction has led to the latest form of global confrontation – hybrid warfare. In turn, Russia's geopolitical goal in unleashing the global hybrid conflict was to destroy the existing world order.

---

[*] Dr. Mykola Nazarov is a non-resident research fellow at the International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS) and senior fellow at Sumy State University (Ukraine).

Ambiguity was the main attribute of Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine during the period between 2014 and 2022. The aggressor cited the "civil war" in Ukraine, the inalienable right of Donbas residents to defend their cultural and linguistic rights, and their hostility towards the idea of Ukraine ever joining NATO. After 2022, Russia dropped its mask and openly invaded Ukraine. However, Russia's strategic goals have not changed. Despite its change in tactic, its goals remain the destruction of Ukraine as a sovereign country and forging Russia's return to global political leadership with the use of force.

To implement this strategic plan, Russia is using an array of tools such as occupying territory through a scorched-earth tactic, destroying Ukraine's major metallurgical enterprises, damaging energy infrastructure and gas production facilities. In addition to these tools, one proves to be particularly insidious: the creation of conditions that trigger a mass exodus of the population from Ukraine. It is well established that a state is inconceivable without human resources; therefore, efforts to forcibly displace people from a territory gradually undermine the practical significance of the struggle to control it. In this section, we will delve into the issue of Ukrainian war refugees in detail, their current status in EU countries, and the prospects for their reintegration into Ukrainian society.

The Crisis of Depopulation

In 2025, around 6.9 million Ukrainians continue to reside abroad as a consequence of the war (UNHCR, 2025). The migration dynamics in Ukraine, four years into the war, remain unfavourable: the number of individuals returning home is less than those departing. Donald Trump's triumph in the US presidential election was perceived as an opportunity to initiate peace negotiations with Russia. A durable peace accord or ceasefire, or at least the initiation of a negotiation process, could potentially serve as a catalyst for some citizens to return home. Thus far, US-Russia conversations have transitioned to matters of international and bilateral ties, excluding Ukraine (Ivanova, 2025).

The depopulation of Ukraine has been a topic of considerable discussion for the past three years owing to the significant migration of its population. The Russian invasion in 2022 displaced millions of Ukrainians, resulting in some individuals becoming homeless and certain areas falling under

Russian control. Nonetheless, depopulation has been a protracted trend, characterised by phases of both acceleration and deceleration. Demographers estimate that Ukraine's population was 52 million in 1991, declining to 42 million by 2015 (Dettmer, 2025). During the 30 years of independence, around 3 million Ukrainians have become economic migrants, with a significant number relocating to Poland and Germany. As of the end of October 2023, Eurostat reported that 63.2% of Ukrainian citizens in the EU were women (Eurostat, 2025a). Given that one-third of forced migrants overseas are children and adolescents, their non-return may result in irrevocable demographic losses for Ukraine. Alongside the persistent conflict, the primary factors prompting emigration from Ukraine are an adverse economic climate and political instability.

Depopulation is significantly exacerbated by low birth rates and relatively high mortality, both of which are notably influenced by migration and the effects of war. In 2024, Ukraine experienced a mortality rate nearly three times higher than its birth rate, with 176,679 live births and 495,090 deaths reported (Ministry of Justice of Ukraine, 2025). This adverse trend results in a further socio-economic issue: an ageing population accompanied by a decline in the working-age demographic. The World Health Organisation (WHO) projects that by 2050, nearly 25% of Ukraine's population will be aged over 65, accompanied by a notable decrease in the youth demographic. This demographic shift will necessitate substantial changes in the country's labour policies (World Health Organisation, 2023).

Ukrainians Under Temporary Protection in EU: The Case of Estonia

As of 24 February 2022, 54,000 Ukrainian refugees have registered for temporary protection in Estonia. By June 2025, approximately 34,000 individuals held active temporary protection status, representing about 3% of the host nation's population (Eurostat, 2025b). The figures reported by the Police and Border Guard Board and Statistics Estonia may under-represent the total number of Ukrainian citizens in the country (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia, 2025).

The highest proportions of temporary protection beneficiaries per thousand individuals among EU member states were recorded in Czechia (35.7), Poland (27.1), and Estonia (25.8), compared to the EU average of 9.5. As of 31 December 2024, Ukrainians represented over 98.3% of individuals granted

temporary protection within the EU, with nearly half being women (44.8%) and children (approximately 31.9%); adult men constituted less than 23.2% of the total (Eurostat, 2025c). The majority of Ukrainian refugees in Estonia successfully legalised their stay via the temporary protection mechanism. This status facilitates adaptation to socio-cultural conditions and enables access to the labour market, along with social and medical services.

In 2024, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) conducted a Socio-Economic Insights Survey and organised workshops with refugees, NGOs, and government partners to assess the primary needs of refugees in Estonia. This initiative revealed ongoing challenges in protection, education, livelihood, and healthcare (UNCR, 2025). Statistics reveal that 93% of Ukrainian refugees express a sense of safety, and approximately 77% report maintaining positive relationships with the host community in Estonia (ERR, 2024).

The survey indicates that the largest proportion of Ukrainian citizens (27%) entered Estonia in March 2022. Data indicates a significant decline in new arrivals over the subsequent months and years. Approximately 65% have been displaced for more than two years, with 50% having arrived within the first three months after the full-scale invasion. Middle-aged women and children constitute the majority of Ukrainian refugees. The male-to-female ratio in Ukrainian households in Estonia is roughly 40% male to 60% female. Over fifty percent of households have children (51%), with one-third of household members being minors, predominantly aged 5 to 17. Approximately 22% of Ukrainian households in Estonia consist of single-parent families, lacking male members aged 18 and older. Individuals over the age of 60 comprise 9% of Ukrainian refugees, whereas those within the active age range of 18 to 59 account for 60%. Three percent of households included breastfeeding or pregnant women, while forty-one percent contained individuals with chronic health conditions (ERR, 2024).

The primary mechanism employed by the EU to assist Ukrainian war refugees is the formulation of Refugee Response Plans (RRPs). The Estonian government's objective regarding immigration is to integrate Ukrainian refugees into the national social support and protection framework. This will guarantee that refugees receive the essential conditions for attaining self-sufficiency and independence, facilitating their integration into Estonian society while preserving their connection to the Ukrainian language and culture. Despite the government's and civil society's coordinated efforts, refugees still encounter difficulties in effectively supporting themselves

and their families. RRPs' partners in Estonia will continue their efforts to address challenges, including language barriers and job shortages, in collaboration with government initiatives through 2025–26.

As of 1 September 2024, Estonia has revised its regulations regarding rental compensation for Ukrainian refugees, restricting eligibility to those who have arrived recently (Visit Ukraine, 2024). Refugees residing in the country for over a year may qualify for rental assistance only if they submit their application within the initial six months following the issuance of their residence permit. Local authorities provide compensation, which is subsequently reimbursed by the state via the Social Insurance Board.

The available data support the assertion of successful adaptation among Ukrainians. Notable mechanisms of government support policy in Estonia include simplified bureaucratic procedures for acquiring temporary protection status, the provision of free Estonian language courses and adaptation training, and housing compensation. For effective repatriation, the Ukrainian government must recognise the need for a streamlined process and adjust social protection policies to support returnees, especially in the early stages of reintegration, while considering socio-cultural factors.

Estonia's policies regarding Ukrainian war refugees in 2025 reflect a dual approach of providing immediate assistance while also focusing on long-term integration strategies. High rates of employment and education enrolment among refugees suggest successful adaptation; however, economic vulnerabilities and decreased financial assistance present significant risks. Estonia's provision of temporary protection, healthcare, and education, coupled with support from civil society, enhances its appeal as a destination for Ukrainian refugees. Addressing war fatigue among Estonians, ensuring equitable labour conditions, and sustaining support for vulnerable groups will be essential in the future.

Does Ukraine Have a Plan to Repatriate Ukrainian Citizens?

In September 2025, the EU Council adopted a new Recommendation on a coordinated approach to the expiry of temporary protection for displaced persons from Ukraine. According to the document, temporary protection for Ukrainians in the EU will end after March 4, 2027, and will no longer be extended (European Council, 2025). Following the adoption of the recommendations, the leaders of Germany and Poland confirmed in their

statements that the EU should ensure a managed process for Ukrainians to return home (Nöstlinger and Hülsemann, 2025; President of Poland, 2025). Thus, Ukraine, in cooperation with its European allies, needs to formulate a strategy for the return of Ukrainians home and the creation of the necessary conditions for this.

In November 2024, the President of Ukraine introduced the 'Internal Resilience Plan' to the public (President of Ukraine, 2024). Despite the document remaining unpublished, several key elements can be inferred from the presentation. The plan comprises ten points that should serve as the basis for establishing social resilience in Ukraine. The document addresses the provision of new weapons to the front, the stimulation of the economy via programmes supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and the reconstruction of affected territorial communities. The president emphasised the importance of human capital and the necessity of establishing favourable conditions for Ukrainian citizens to live abroad and return to their homeland.

The plan outlines targeted strategies for the preservation of human capital, including the allowance of multiple citizenships, the reform of the diplomatic service, the provision of free school meals, post-war reconstruction efforts, and the reintegration of military veterans into the civilian workforce. The government has restructured the Ministry of Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories into the Ministry of National Unity to facilitate the coordination of these tasks (Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communications of Ukraine, 2024). Successful implementation necessitates structural changes in the economy, as Ukraine can no longer depend on profits from large Soviet-era enterprises, many of which have been destroyed by hostilities or have significantly lost production capacity. The state's economic policies will focus on supporting SMEs by establishing preferential conditions for businesses in the post-war period.

The Ukrainian authorities acknowledge that addressing intricate economic and social issues is unfeasible without mitigating the demographic crisis. The repatriation of Ukrainian citizens is emerging as a strategic objective for the authorities, aimed at preserving national identity and bolstering the economy. Furthermore, Ukraine is expected to require an annual influx of labour migrants, estimated at 300,000 to 400,000 individuals (Agroreview, 2025). The immigrant workforce is poised to enhance economic growth while also markedly altering the ethnic composition of Ukraine.

In the previous year, the Ukrainian government approved the Strategy for Demographic Development of the State, which is set to guide policies until 2040 (Ukrainian Government Portal, 2024). The strategy aims to ensure sustainable, long-term population reproduction and enhance key socio-demographic characteristics by increasing the resilience of the state and society in the face of demographic changes, particularly those resulting from armed aggression, epidemics, poverty, and other adverse factors (Libanova, 2024). The strategy encompasses five objectives: enhancing the birth rate in Ukraine, decreasing premature mortality, adapting to an ageing population, (re)distributing the post-war demography, and addressing migration challenges.

The document outlines Ukraine's policy for the repatriation of refugees under Strategic Goal 1, which aims to foster conditions that promote population migration growth and mitigate the outflow of Ukrainians abroad (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2024a). The experience of developed nations in addressing the demographic crisis linked to chronically low birth rates indicates that a primary strategy for stabilising the demographic landscape is the maintenance of a positive migration balance, defined as the ratio of incoming individuals to outgoing ones. This primarily addresses the repatriation of Ukrainians from overseas.

This strategic goal pertains not only to individuals who departed following the full-scale invasion but also to those who left prior, in addition to the current Ukrainian diaspora. The return must occur in alignment with the fundamental principles established by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), specifically ensuring safety and dignity. Minimising youth emigration from Ukraine constitutes a strategic priority. The government intends to implement contemporary training programmes aimed at retaining youth in the country, aligning with labour market demands and global trends, including the instruction of soft competitive skills to enhance professional development (European Commission, 2024). Effective practices, such as academic integrity, the internationalisation of higher education, and a focus on student-centredness in universities, are expected to persist. Furthermore, establishing partnerships between educational institutions and businesses is essential for integrating practical courses, internships, and dual education, which combines theoretical knowledge with real-world experience in the workplace.

The Ukrainian government has approved a plan of measures for implementation from 2024 to 2027, designating responsible officials and

establishing deadlines (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2024b). In 2025, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of National Unity will prioritise support for Ukrainians returning from temporary residence abroad and their subsequent adaptation in Ukraine, following the government's approval of the pertinent legislation. The authorities are tasked with implementing awareness and educational campaigns, in addition to offering free legal and psychological support to facilitate full reintegration. Dmytro Kuleba, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, recently emphasised the importance of using appropriate language and tools to encourage Ukrainians to return home, while cautioning against excessive pressure (Kuleba, 2024).

The Ministry of Infrastructure was assigned the responsibility of developing social housing funds, preferential mortgage programmes, rental subsidies, and other housing support mechanisms for the period 2026–27, to be made available upon return to Ukraine. Over the next three years, the EU will allocate €50 billion to support Ukraine's state budget, promote investment, and offer technical assistance for the programme (Ukraine Facility, 2024). Ukraine intends to increase domestic production of construction materials, targeting an annual output of 5–6 million windows, 300 thousand tonnes of glass, and 13 million m³ of thermal insulation materials (Recovery of Ukraine, 2025).

A crucial step in the repatriation process involves identifying high-risk areas, particularly border regions and those near the demarcation line, and evaluating the feasibility of resettling residents from these locations, while considering the requirements of the defence forces. The Ministry of National Unity is responsible for this task and will collaborate with the Defence Ministry and civil-military administrations to establish the methodology for identifying areas appropriate for residential or military use.

Conclusions

Ukraine is one of the major fronts in the global confrontation between Russia and the West. In addition to direct military tools of influence on Ukraine, Russia is actively inducing migration flows as a strategic tool. The exodus of the population from the territory of left-bank Ukraine is one of Russia's important goals at this stage of the war. Therefore, it is important for Ukraine and the West to develop countermeasures: to create reliable

and adaptive institutional mechanisms for the return of Ukrainians to their homeland to normalise socio-economic processes in the country.

The government's policy framework aimed at facilitating the return of Ukrainians is currently under development, with only a limited number of strategic documents published to date. The Ministry of National Unity is responsible for coordinating the activities of various government entities and formulating a cohesive repatriation policy. The conclusion of the active conflict phase is expected to initiate extensive reconstruction efforts in Ukraine and facilitate the strategy for repatriating Ukrainians.

The repatriation of Ukrainians from abroad presents significant challenges for authorities and constitutes a critical societal issue. Effective institutional mechanisms and a favourable psychological atmosphere are essential for motivating individuals to repatriate. Post-war Ukraine will face significant challenges due to depopulation, including labour market shortages and an escalating tax burden on enterprises. The success of the return of Ukrainians from abroad notwithstanding, the state is likely to require the attraction of up to 400,000 labour migrants annually, which will undoubtedly present new challenges for societal integration.

Works Cited

Agroreview (2025) "The need for labor migrants in Ukraine for economic recovery is growing," 25 April. Available at: https://agroreview.com/en/newsen/agripolicy/the-need-for-labor-migrants/.

Dettmer, J. (2025) "The depopulation of Ukraine," Politico, 14 March. Available at: https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-refugees-war-russia-europe-demographic-population/.

ERR. (2024) "Ukrainian refugee arrivals to Estonia in 2024 a third of previous years," 28 November. Available at: https://news.err.ee/1609534585/ukrainian-refugee-arrivals-to-estonia-in-2024-a-third-of-previous-years.

European Commission (2024) "Ukraine: Reform of General Secondary Education – the New Ukrainian School," 13 December. Available at: https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/news/ukraine-reform-general-secondary-education-new-ukrainian-school.

European Council (2025) "Protection of displaced Ukrainians: Council adopts recommendation about transition out of temporary protection," 16 September. Available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/09/16/protection-of-displaced-ukrainians-council-adopts-recommendation-about-transition-out-of-temporary-protection/.

Eurostat (2025a) "International migration, citizenship," 26 April. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/migration-asylum/international-migration-citizenship/database.

Eurostat (2025b) "4.3 million under temporary protection in December 2024," 10 February. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20250210-1.

Eurostat (2025c) "Beneficiaries of temporary protection at the end of the month by citizenship, age and sex – monthly data," 25 July. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_asytpsm/default/table?lang=en.

Horbulin, V. (2017) "Ukrainian front of the hybrid world," *Hybrid Warfare and National Security*, 1(2017), pp. 3–6. Available at: https://niss-panorama.com/index.php/journal/article/view/18/18.

Ivanova, P. (2025) "Donald Trump dashes Ukrainians' hopes of returning home," *Financial Times*, 2 April. Available at: https://www.ft.com/content/e0448bb9-8b75-441f-9cfa-28cd0846fe63.

Kuleba, D. (2024) "Right words are necessary: Ukraine's Foreign Minister comments on return of Ukrainians from abroad," *RBC-Ukraine*, 18 June. Available at: https://newsukraine.rbc.ua/news/right-words-are-necessary-ukraine-s-foreign-1718717044.html.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia (2025) "Estonia's aid to Ukraine," 23 February. Available at: https://vm.ee/en/estonias-aid-ukraine.

Ministry of Justice of Ukraine (2025) "Information on the results of the work of state civil registration bodies in 2024," 20 January. Available at: https://minjust.gov.ua/actual-info/stat_info.

Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communications of Ukraine (2024) "Culture as the foundation of national resilience: strategy for preservation and

development," 4 December. Available at: https://mcsc.gov.ua/en/news/culture-as-the-foundation-of-national-resilience-strategy-for-preservation-and-development/.

Libanova, E. (2024) "Ukraine's Plans for Demographic Recovery," Kennan Institute, 22 February. Available at: https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/KennanCable_88.pdf.

Nöstlinger, N. and Hülsemann, L. (2025) "Merz tells Zelenskyy Ukrainian men should stay home and fight," *Politico*, 13 November. Available at: https://www.politico.eu/article/friedrich-merz-tells-volodymyr-zelenskyy-ukrainian-men-should-stay-home-and-fight/.

President of Poland (2025) "President vetoed the amendment of the Act on Assistance to Ukrainian Citizens," 25 August. Available at: https://www.president.pl/news/president-vetoed-the-amendment-of-the-act-on-assistance-to-ukrainian-citizens,105753.

President of Ukraine (2024) "Volodymyr Zelenskyy Presented Ukraine's Internal Resilience Plan," 19 November. Available at: https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/volodimir-zelenskij-predstaviv-plan-vnutrishnoyi-stijkosti-u-94505.

Recovery of Ukraine (2025) "Projects of national programmes," 25 April. Available at: https://recovery.gov.ua/project/programme/recovery-and-upgrade-of-housing-and-regions-infrastructure.

Ukrainian Government Portal (2024) "Government approves the Strategy of Demographic Development of Ukraine," 2 October. Available at: https://www.kmu.gov.ua/en/news/uriad-ukhvalyv-stratehiiu-demohrafichnoho-rozvytku-ukrainy.

Ukraine Facility (2024) "Plan for the implementation Ukraine facility 2024–2027," 1 February. Available at: https://www.ukrainefacility.me.gov.ua/en/.

UNCR (2025) "Regional Refugee Response Plan for the Ukraine Situation, Estonia Socio-Economic Insights Survey (SEIS)," 26 February 2025 . Available at: https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/114717.

UNHCR (2025) "About the war in Ukraine," 12 April. Available at: https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/ukraine/.

Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (2024a) "On approval of the action plan for the implementation in 2024–2027 of the Demographic Development Strategy of Ukraine for the period until 2040," 1 November. Available at: https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1091-2024-p#Text.

Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (2024b) "Strategy of demographic development of Ukraine for the period until 2040," 30 September. Available at: https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/922-2024-p#n12.

Visit Ukraine (2024) "Estonia has changed the conditions for payment of rental compensation for Ukrainians: new rules," 10 September. Available at: https://visitukraine.today/blog/4723/estonia-has-changed-the-conditions-for-payment-of-rental-compensation-for-ukrainians-new-conditions-for-receiving-rental-compensation-in-estonia.

World Health Organisation (2023) "Health data overview for Ukraine," 15 December. Available at: https://data.who.int/countries/804.

France and Shifting European Geopolitics: An Opportunity for Leadership

Emilija Pundziūtė-Gallois[*]

Abstract: This article analyses how France's role in European and global geopolitics is evolving in response to recent challenges, such as Russian aggression in Ukraine, shifting US policies, and China's rise to power. As the EU's only nuclear power and a major diplomatic and military force, France is well positioned to strengthen European strategic autonomy, a concept that has long been a part of French foreign policy and is now gaining relevance. While French foreign policy remains rooted in Gaullist principles emphasising national sovereignty and independent decision-making, it has been tempered by increasing interdependence and the need for cooperation with European allies. France has played a leading role in providing political, diplomatic, and military support to Ukraine, and has intensified its efforts towards European defence coordination by expanding partnerships and investing in its defence industry. France's stance has hardened in relation to Russia, although pragmatism may remain important if future European security necessitates re-engagement with Russia and adaptation to China's global influence. France's leadership is paramount in advancing European strategic autonomy, security, and multilateralism, though success hinges on internal consensus and coordinated European action within a rapidly evolving global landscape.

Introduction

In recent years, changing geopolitical configurations within the Euro-Atlantic area, starting with Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and the United Kingdom's exit from the EU, followed by the economic strains caused by the pandemic and the United States' increasing disengagement from European defence, as well as China's growing global influence, have increased France's centrality in contemporary dynamics. As the European Union's sole remaining nuclear power and the continent's most influential

---

[*]   Vytautas Magnus University

political and military force, not to mention a historical initiator and active promoter of European integration, France is well placed to take on a leadership role. The return of Donald J. Trump to the US presidency in 2025, coupled with his unpredictable foreign policy choices, has made it clear that European states must invest more in their own security, enhance their economic power, and strengthen their political influence. The French concept of European strategic autonomy, which had previously mostly evoked scepticism, if not rejection, suddenly started to look like a serious vision. The current situation seems like a perfect opportunity for France to affirm its relevance and enhance its power, provided it is willing to take on the leadership role that Europe requires.

French foreign policy is often characterised by a policy of "grandeur" (Boniface, 1998; Gauchon, 2016; Rieker 2017). This is usually traced back to the Gaullist tradition, which has shaped some of the most distinctive and enduring features of French strategic culture. In this tradition, particular importance is placed on the sovereignty of France, namely its ability to make decisions on issues it deems to be of vital interest and its capacity to implement those decisions. This requires a degree of independence from any outside power, competitor or ally, as well as the freedom to choose partners. At the same time, French leaders since de Gaulle have sought to exert political influence in global politics, occasionally exceeding their actual economic and political weight. In seeking to play in the same league as other great powers, such as the United States and, during the Cold War, the Soviet Union, France has rather ably compensated for its lack of strategic weight through active diplomatic involvement in global affairs, such as promoting international institutions, cultivating diplomatic networks and generating visionary ideas.

France's articulation of its sovereign national interests and initiatives in relation to the regional and global order has been historically characterised by constant ambivalence. David Cadier has explained the dynamics of French foreign policy through the milieu goals approach, demonstrating how France seeks 'to shape the environment and external conditions in which it and other states operate' (Cadier, 2018, p. 1352). French policymakers react to geopolitical shifts in the international environment, trying to influence their dynamics so as to avoid negative constraints on France's national interests. For instance, France has frequently acted as a regional balancing force and a competitor to US hegemony in Europe, implicitly or explicitly

seeking to distance the latter from the former (L'Orient-Le Jour, 1998; Faure, 2020).

Similarly, France has promoted a European security architecture that extends beyond democratic European states and involves Russia closely, thus affirming its independence in choosing partnerships. Nevertheless, France remains integrated into the so-called Euro-Atlantic community, which encompasses the EU and NATO (especially since 2009, when France rejoined the NATO military command structures), and this involves a considerable dispensation of sovereignty. Despite regional balancing in Europe, France has aligned its positions with those of the United States on the most important strategic issues and has always been viewed with distrust in Moscow as being part of the Western camp (Gomart, 2003).

Since its creation and throughout its evolution, the European Union has been guided by distinctive French leadership, with prominent figures such as Jean Monnet, Robert Schuman, François Mitterrand and Jacques Delors championing the common market and promoting European political union. Following this vision, especially since the 1980s, French national interests became concurrent within European ones, with the latter serving as an extension of the former. As Ole Waever aptly noted, French European policy is a strategy to make Europe 'what France should have been and should somehow remain' (Waever, 1990). Maintaining this consonance requires active leadership in European affairs and monitoring developments for any constraints that could affect French sovereignty, which is still highly valued by many French opinion leaders and decision-makers.

Dialogue between these opinion leaders and decision-makers, politicians, public intellectuals, and various interest and advocacy groups is an important factor to be taken into account when analysing foreign policymaking in France. For example, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs is said to contain two major opinion groups, the "Gaullists" and the "Atlanticists", who influence French diplomacy on matters of independent positioning or alignment with the United States (Lequesne 2020). Florent Pouponneau and Frédéric Mérand (2017) have demonstrated the influence of groups of experts in nuclear research and production, as well as in Middle Eastern affairs, on shifts in French nuclear non-proliferation policy throughout the second half of the 20th century. Ringailė Kuokštytė (2023) argues that France's commitment to European common defence depends more on the interests of national defence industries than on the government's political will to lead the process of European integration in this field. In addition to

these dynamics, France's position in the international arena can never be decoupled from democratic deliberative processes within the country.

Analysing the past of French foreign policymaking helps us to understand the country's most recent positions within the changing geopolitical environment. Several elements stand out here. Firstly, the concept of European strategic autonomy has taken on a new significance and become a key item on the European diplomatic agenda since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and following the re-election of Donald Trump as President of the United States. Secondly, France has actively supported Ukraine in its war efforts, and its role has grown recently. Thirdly, France has re-evaluated its relationship with Russia and is reviewing its engagement with China. These three dimensions reveal the contours of French foreign policy within the new European security architecture.

Promoting European Strategic Autonomy

The notion of strategic autonomy first appeared in the French National White Book on Defence in 1994, but later found its way into European documents, most notably in the 2016 'Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy'. The 2022 European "Strategic Compass" also referred to strategic autonomy, although there was little agreement among the member states on what this idea entailed in practical terms. Should it include an autonomous foreign policy, an integrated defence policy, a European procurement policy, or industrial capacity (Česnakas, 2023)? To some Atlanticist European partners, especially those in Eastern Europe, this idea seemed like a continuation of France's perceived ambition to decouple Europe from the United States. Given Europe's limited deterrence and defence capabilities, as well as its unclear political will to defend countries such as the Baltic States, this idea was considered dangerous, as it risked diminishing American involvement in Europe.

Recently, however, the idea of a more autonomous Europe, capable of acting independently of the United States, has gained traction. Since President Donald Trump's re-election in the United States, this has become more urgent. When the US administration cut military aid and intelligence sharing with Ukraine in March 2025, it became clear that Europe, whose interests are served by defending Ukraine, was unable to replace a number of American capabilities. The pressure from the United States on European

NATO members to increase their national defence budgets has also intensified. The risk of the United States not taking up its Article 5 responsibilities – a threat brandished by Donald Trump (Kube, Lee, and Tsirkin, 2025) – has made European investment in its own security one of the major conditions for the survival of not only Europe, but also the transatlantic alliance.

The White Paper for European Defence, released in March 2025, contains provisions that could help Europeans strengthen their defence capabilities. In the meantime, France has demonstrated its willingness to lead these efforts. In introducing the 2025 National Strategic Review, Emmanuel Macron stated that 'Europeans must provide themselves with the means to control their own destiny and develop their sovereignty' (SGDSN, 2025, p. 2). The document designates France as 'a driving force behind European strategic autonomy' (SGDSN, 2025, p. 55). France is increasing investment in its defence industries and plans to be prepared 'for the possibility of major high-intensity engagement near Europe by 2027–2030' and 'to remain fully in control of its national and European destiny by 2040–2050' (SGDSN, 2025, p. 27). France's defence budget is set to reach 64 billion euros by 2027, doubling the spending level of 2017 (Greene, 2025).

France's ambition to lead the European effort is anchored in partnerships with several European allies in various formats: Germany (through the Treaty of Aachen), the United Kingdom (through the Treaty of Lancaster House), Poland (through the Treaty of Nancy and the Weimar Format), and others in the Mediterranean, Scandinavian, and Baltic regions. Consultations with partners have been intensive. France has also offered to extend its nuclear deterrent to its European allies (in March 2025, Emmanuel Macron invited partners to undertake a strategic dialogue in this respect). Although several countries have indicated their openness to such talks, it remains unclear how this sharing would function. French leaders claim that their nuclear deterrent has always had a European dimension in that their vital interests are now inseparably connected to those of other European nations. 'Now that the European construction … is so advanced, it's very difficult to think about the situation where the vital interests of let's say Sweden or Poland or Romania would be affected … without French vital interests being affected too…' says Héloïse Fayet, specialist of the French nuclear strategy (IFRI, 2024). Nevertheless, this remains contingent on the President of France, since he or she is ultimately responsible for the use of French nuclear weapons and establishes the principles of nuclear doctrine for each term of office (Maitre, 2025).

Although defence spending commitments have increased throughout Europe, the results of this surge are yet to be seen. The biggest problem with European defence capabilities is not so much limited spending levels, but duplication, a lack of coordination, and gaps in the development of certain strategic capabilities – the so-called "strategic enablers" – for which Europe is still heavily dependent on the United States. The development of new capabilities in Europe faces a dilemma: on the one hand, armaments are needed at very short notice to assist Ukraine; on the other hand, investment in defence industries requires long-term strategic planning and visibility, neither of which is ensured by the situation in Ukraine. Furthermore, the situation on the contemporary battlefield is changing rapidly, and requirements are evolving, particularly in the field of drone warfare. While many European industries produce high-end military technologies, today's war in Ukraine is partly, though not entirely, fought with cheaper, expendable weapons. Coordinating planning is not an easy task in Europe, which is composed of 27 states that possess a variety of technologies produced in a wide range of countries and have different understandings of threats and strategic objectives of European defence. Since 2022, European strategic cultures have moved towards convergence, but the "strategic cacophony", referred to by Hugo Meijer and Stephen Brooks (2021), has not yet been overcome.

France is facing another dilemma on the domestic front. While giving preference to European military production for military aid in Ukraine or for a more autonomous European defence, it is struggling to set the French military industry in motion. The budget deficit and public debt, coupled with the difficulties of adopting budget laws in a divided parliament and chronic government instability, do not allow for the necessary visibility that defence industries need to properly plan the expansion of their activities. Each time the government falls, as it has several times in the past year, there are delays to orders and payments (Kayali, 2025). Notably, France has not contributed to the PURL initiative, which was established by the United States in agreement with NATO in July 2025. Seeing this initiative as a way for American military industries to profit, the French leadership would prefer to support European (including French) companies. However, uncertainty over production capacity in France itself problematises this intention. In terms of industrial and defence spending, Germany is rapidly overtaking France (Rahman, 2025). Although German Chancellor Friedrich Merz has expressed a positive attitude towards European industrial

production, Germany's preference for transatlantic cooperation, as well as the difficulties of implementing common European defence industrial projects (such as FCAS, Future Combat Air System, developed by French, German and Spanish companies), may jeopardise the French project of European preference and complicate its leadership role, at least in the short term.

Leading the European Support to Ukraine

Perhaps the greatest recognition should go to the French leadership for their efforts in organising political and diplomatic support for Ukraine, where Emmanuel Macron has demonstrated his presidential diplomacy skills. In February 2024, he was the first European leader to suggest sending European troops to Ukraine. France also distinguished itself in the summer of 2023 when it declared its support for Ukraine's NATO membership. Although these ideas were put on hold for some time, they may bear fruit in the future. At least the idea of a military presence in Ukraine has paved the way for the European countries to mobilise more quickly when the need arose to propose concrete security guarantees for Ukraine in March 2025.

The resolute leadership of France and the United Kingdom has established a coalition of countries willing to work on security guarantees for Ukraine. Concrete military planning is underway, with around 200 planners from 30 international partners, and the establishment of headquarters in Paris in July 2025 (UK Government, 2025). The so-called reassurance force has focused on the future regeneration of Ukrainian forces and the protection of Ukrainian airspace once hostilities cease, as well as safety in the Black Sea. However, other possibilities are being considered, particularly before a ceasefire or wider peace agreement is reached. In September 2025, Macron announced that 26 countries had pledged to deploy troops to Ukraine (Tidey, 2025). This military instrument, developed specifically for the situation in Ukraine, could potentially serve as a foundation for strengthening European defence capabilities in the future. It is also important to note that this effort has been coordinated with the EU, NATO, and the United States.

The question remains as to whether Europeans aspire to support Ukraine's security independently or in cooperation with the United States. Preliminary analysis of how Europe could defend itself from Russia without

the United States has shown that it is possible, but would require considerable effort (Burlikov and Wolff, 2025). For now, however, this scenario is not fully on the table. Many European states cherish their partnership with the United States – for the Baltic States, for example, it is clear that the United States remains the only force capable of deterring Russia – while others, such as the United Kingdom, have highly integrated defence systems with the United States. Therefore, there is little willingness to decouple European security from that of the United States in the long term. In the short term, Europe lacks the essential capabilities for this decoupling. Plans for European autonomous action are therefore being made with the understanding that the United States will remain a major ally. Its representatives are involved in continuous close consultation with the Europeans. The successful launch of concrete military planning for Ukraine on the European side provides more visibility on transatlantic burden-sharing and is therefore seen as beneficial to both sides of the Atlantic. France also seems to accept this idea of keeping the Americans involved, as, under current circumstances, Gaullist tradition gives way to pragmatic Atlanticism.

Balancing the European Security Architecture

The final element that should be noted in the changing French position within the European security architecture is its attitude towards Russia. Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent imposition of European sanctions, which were supported by France and Germany, bilateral relations between France and Russia have been rather lacklustre. Vladimir Putin's popularity among the French public also declined, not least due to Russia's intervention in Syria in support of Bashar al-Assad. According to the French Institute of Public Opinion, 84% of the French population held a negative view of Vladimir Putin in March 2025, compared to 72% in 2015 (IFOP, 2025; IFOP, 2015). In 2019, Emmanuel Macron initiated a renewed dialogue with Russia, forcefully imposing this presidential decision on somewhat sceptical French diplomats and security officials (Elysée, 2019b). Bilateral talks were initiated on a number of issues and at different levels, including between various ministries. However, they did not lead to a breakthrough and quickly stalled.

The stance of the French leadership began to change significantly in spring 2022, when it became evident that diplomatic efforts were ineffective

in countering Putin's destructive intentions in Ukraine and Europe. Next to the military action in Ukraine, Russia increased its disruptive influence and sabotage operations in Europe itself, putting European resilience under extreme pressure. Since 2022, Russian hybrid warfare activities in Europe have more than doubled and have increased tenfold compared to 2020 (Edwards and Seidenstein, 2025). The unpredictability and relative ease with which Russian actors can damage European societies, democratic politics, infrastructure, cybersecurity and air safety makes defence efforts especially challenging. By summer 2025, France had clearly identified Russia as a major threat not only to Ukraine and Eastern Europe, but also to itself and to Europe as a whole. A significant event was the rare press conference given by the French Chief of the Armed Forces, Thierry Burkhard, in July 2025, in which he stated that: 'The Kremlin has chosen France as one of its preferred targets' and 'defeat in Ukraine would increasingly be a European defeat' (Armée Française, 2025).

That being said, further consideration must be given to the outlook of the French position on Russia and the possibility of future cooperation with it in establishing a post-war European security architecture. A notable aspect of Emmanuel Macron's 2019 discourse was his assertion that Russia is a European power (Elysée, 2019a). While the war in Ukraine has altered France's stance on Vladimir Putin's intentions and objectives, there is no evidence that the prevailing perception of Russia as part of the European family has shifted. Prominent observers have highlighted the Russophile tendencies of certain French political and societal forces (Schmitt, 2017) and the infiltration of Russian agents of influence within French opinion-making circles (Vaissié, 2016). Despite Putin's assertions that Russia constitutes a distinct civilisation, French political and intellectual circles, referring to the ages-long Russian involvement in the affairs of the European continent, may reconsider the concept of "European Russia" and attempt to incorporate it into the future European security architecture. This fixation on a "European Russia" may also be supported by geopolitical considerations based on Russia's geographical proximity to the European Union and its many historical and cultural affinities with the continent.

The prospect of France adopting a softer stance towards the Kremlin may in fact be closer than we think: the 2027 presidential or early parliamentary elections could see right-wing political forces come into power, and these are known to be more lenient towards Russia. Marine Le Pen, the leader of the National Rally, is an admirer of Vladimir Putin and has met him

several times. Public opinion polls show that Le Pen's supporters are less concerned about the war in Ukraine (27% are not concerned, compared to 17% of the global population), and have a lower opinion of Volodymyr Zelensky (only 56% have a positive view of him, compared to 64% of the global population and 86% of Emmanuel Macron's supporters) (IFOP, 2025). While all French political forces initially condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and expressed solidarity with Ukraine, opinions today diverge when it comes to the deployment of French armed forces in Ukraine or the maintenance of sanctions on Russia beyond a hypothetical ceasefire. These views remain subdued while Ukraine struggles for survival and Putin continues to portray France and the West as major Russian enemies. However, they remain a factor if conditions change.

The French position within the future European security architecture (hypothetically, once the war in Ukraine is over) will also depend on China's position within the global economic and security order. The recent manifestations of an 'unlimited partnership' between Russia and China, and their pretensions to forge an alternative world order that rejects liberal values allegedly imposed by the West, highlight the need to reinvigorate multilateralism and reaffirm the role of the West. France is leading efforts of de-risking European economic relations with China without decoupling, i.e., engaging in pragmatic dialogue, maintaining trade relations, and cooperating on investments, while monitoring for potential hostile Chinese activities in Europe (Esteban et al., 2025). France remains active in the Indo-Pacific region, strengthening partnerships with countries such as Japan, India and Australia, where its national interests are engaged. French leaders have expended diplomatic efforts (thus far unsuccessful) to dissuade China from supporting Russia's war in Ukraine. In the long term, the international balance will have to be reforged to take emerging powers into consideration. Russia will most probably remain a significant player in this balance, with European countries potentially willing to bring it closer to Europe and further away from China. France, with its long tradition of promoting multilateralism in global governance, will likely seek to play a leading role in these efforts by engaging with all significant players, including Russia.

Conclusion

New geopolitical developments in the Euro-Atlantic area have created a tenuous opportunity for France to exercise leadership on the European continent and implement some of its long-standing ideas, such as European strategic autonomy. In line with historical patterns, France seeks to encapsulate European interests within its own national interests in its leadership role: enhancing national and regional security, promoting national defence industries, and strengthening its influence. France is increasingly engaging with its European partners in various bilateral and multilateral formats, which is a positive development. However, the highly complex nature of security and defence cooperation in Europe, coupled with the diversity of European partners, poses a significant challenge to this endeavour. Furthermore, domestic political instability and economic slowdown increasingly complicate French ambitions. France's leadership has been especially notable in providing political and diplomatic support to Ukraine, particularly in organising a coalition of the willing with the United Kingdom to provide security guarantees for Ukraine in the event of a ceasefire or peace agreement with Russia. Another development within French decision-making circles is the willingness to exert diplomatic and economic pressure on Russia, as well as a significantly more cautious evaluation of Putin's intentions and Russia's threat to Europe. Nevertheless, the future necessity of maintaining multilateral dialogue and navigating the shifting global power balance, affected by China's rise and rapprochement between Russia and China, may prompt French decision-makers to re-engage with Russia once the war in Ukraine is over.

Works Cited

Armée française. (2025) Déclaration du chef d'état-major des armées. 11 juillet 2025. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v1A-Hvj5uTg.

Boniface, Pascal. (1998) *La France est-elle encore une grande puissance ?* Paris : Presses de Sciences Po.

Burlikov, Alexandr and Guntram B. Wolff. (2025) "Defending Europe without the US: first estimates of what is needed". *Bruegel.* Available at: https://www.bruegel.org/analysis/defending-europe-without-us-first-estimates-what-needed.

Cadier, David. (2018) "Continuity and Change in France's Policies towards Russia: A Milieu Goals Explanation". *International Affairs (London)*, 94: 6, 1349–69.

Česnakas, Giedrius. (2023) "European Strategic Autonomy. The Origins Story". In Česnakas Giedrius and Justinas Juozaitis. Eds. *European Strategic Autonomy and Small States' Security. In the Shadow of Power.* Routledge, p. 14–33.

Edwards Charlie and Nate Seidenstein. (2025) "The Scale of Russian Sabotage Operations Against Europe's Critical Infrastructure". *The International Institute for Strategic Studies.*

Elysée. (2019a) Déclaration de presse à l'occasion de l'entretien du Président de la République avec M. Vladimir POUTINE, Président de la Fédération de Russie. 19 août 2019. Available at: https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2019/08/20/declaration-de-presse-demmanuel-macron-president-de-la-republique-avec-vladimir-poutine-president-de-la-federation-de-russie.

Elysée. (2019b) Discours du Président de la République à la conférence des ambassadeurs. 27 août, 2019. Available at: https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2019/08/27/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-a-la-conference-des-ambassadeurs-1.

Esteban, Mario, Miguel Otero Iglesias and Cristina de Esperanza Picardo. Cords. (2025) "Quest for Strategic Autonomy? Europe Grapples with the US – China Rivalry". *European Think-tank Network on China*. Available at: https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/monographs/quest-for-strategic-autonomy-europe-grapples-with-the-us-china-rivalry/.

Faure, Samuel. (2020) « Une idée incertaine de l'Europe. Comprendre les ambiguïtés stratégiques d'Emmanuel Macron. » *Les Champs de Mars,* No. 34, 149–168.

Gauchon, Pascal. (2016) *Géopolitique de la France : Plaidoyer pour la puissance.* Paris : Cairn.

Gomart, Thomas. (2003) *Double détente : les relations franco-soviétiques de 1958 à 1964.* Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne.

Greene, Amy.(2025) What to Make of Macron's Recent Defence Spending Commitments? *RUSI commentary,* 25 July 2025. Available at: https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/what-make-macrons-recent-defence-spending-commitments.

IFOP. (2015) Les Français, la politique de la Russievis-à-vis de la Syrie et Vladimir Poutine, 4 octobre 2015. Available at: https://www.ifop.com/article/les-francais-la-politique-de-la-russie-vis-a-vis-de-la-syrie-et-vladimir-poutine/.

IFOP. (2025) Balise d'opinion #296 Le regard des Français sur le conflit russo-ukrainien, 7 mars 2025. Available at: https://www.ifop.com/article/balise-dopinion-296-le-regard-des-francais-sur-le-conflit-russo-ukrainien/.

IFRI.(2024) Ditching US Nuclear Protection in Europe: Will It Trigger a Nuclear Arms Race? Interview with Héloïse Fayet by Sergej Sumlenny for EuroResilience. Available at: https://www.ifri.org/en/video/ditching-us-nuclear-protection-europe-will-it-trigger-nuclear-arms-race.

Kayali, Laura. (2025) France's political crisis risks delaying military buildup. *Politico*. Available at: https://www.politico.eu/article/france-political-crisis-risks-delaying-military-buildup-francois-bayrou/.

Kube, Courtney, Carol E. Lee, and Julie Tsirkin. (2025, March 6) Trump considering major NATO policy shift. *NBC News*, Available at: https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/trump-considering-major-nato-policy-shift-rcna195089.

Kuokštytė, Ringailė. (2023) "Revisiting France's Commitment to Defence Integration. A Case of Political Functionalism". In Česnakas Giedrius and Justinas Juozaitis. Eds. *European Strategic Autonomy and Small States' Security. In the Shadow of Power.* Routledge, p. 34–50.

Lequesne, Christian. (2020) *Ethnographie du Quai d'Orsay : les pratiques des diplomates français.* Paris: CNRS éditions.

L'Orient-Le-Jour. (1998) "Amie et alliée" mais pas alignée La France veut émanciper l'Europe de l'hégémonie américaine. Available at: https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/256869/%22Amie_et_alliee%22_mais_pas_alignee_La_France_veut_emanciper_lEurope_de_lhegemonie_americaine.html.

Maitre Emmanuelle. (2025) La dissuasion nucléaire de la France : état des lieux et perspectives. *Vie publique.* Available at: https://www.vie-publique.fr/parole-dexpert/297552-la-dissuasion-nucleaire-de-la-france-etat-des-lieux-et-perspectives.

Meijer, Hugo and Stephen G Brooks. (2021) "Illusions of Autonomy Why Europe Cannot Provide for Its Security If the United States Pulls Back". *International Security*, 45:4, 7–43.

Pouponneau, Florent, and Frédéric Mérand. (2017) "Diplomatic Practices, Domestic Fields, and the International System: Explaining France's Shift on Nuclear Nonproliferation". *International Studies Quarterly*, 61:1, 123–35.

Rahman, Mujtaba. (2025, October 1) European strategic autonomy is in German hands. *Politico*. Available at: https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-europe-strategy-military-gdp-defense-france-budgets/.

Rieker, Pernille. (2017) *French Foreign Policy in a Changing World : Practising Grandeur.* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Schmitt, Olivier. (2017) *Pourquoi Poutine est notre allié ? : anatomie d'une passion française.* Lille: Hikari éditions.

SGDSN Secrétariat général de la défense et de la sécurité nationale. (2025) National Strategic Review 2025. Available at: https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/Publications/20250713_NP_SGDSN_RNS2025_EN_0.pdf.

Tidey, Alice. (2025) Coalition of the Willing: 26 countries agree to deploy troops or equipment to post-war Ukraine, 4 September 2025. *Euronews. Available at:* https://www.euronews.com/2025/09/04/coalition-of-the-willing-26-countries-agree-to-deploy-troops-or-equipment-to-post-war-ukra.

UK Government. (2025) New Coalition of the Willing headquarters as leaders step up support for Ukraine's immediate fight, 10 July 2025. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-coalition-of-the-willing-headquarters-as-leaders-step-up-support-for-ukraines-immediate-flight.

Vaissié, Cécile. (2016) *Les réseaux du Kremlin en France*. Paris: Les Petits matins.

Waever, Ole. (1990) "Three Competing Europes: German, French, Russian". *International Affairs,* 66: 3, 477–493.

Russia's View of the Multipolar World:
A Hegemonic Vision of Power and Hierarchy

Mirian Popkhadze and Shota Gvineria[*]

Abstract

The article examines how Russia employs the concept of a multipolar world to justify a hierarchical and hegemonic vision of international order. Drawing on structural realist theory, it argues that Moscow's rhetoric of multipolarity masks a project aimed at restoring great power status, securing regional dominance, and weakening Western liberal norms. Using discourse analysis and process tracing, the study reviews Russian foreign policy concepts, security strategies, and speeches by key elites, alongside case studies of institutional participation in SCO, CSTO, EAEU, and BRICS and military interventions in Georgia, Ukraine, Syria, and Kazakhstan. The analysis shows that Russia institutionalises multipolarity politically through alternative regional and global platforms that reinforce its centrality, operationalises it strategically through coercive use of force and veto power, and justifies it normatively through sovereigntist and civilisational narratives. Three intertwined ideological pillars balance of power, sovereignty as civilisational defence, and civilisational pluralism provide moral cover for revisionist policies at home and abroad. The article concludes that Russia's version of multipolarity is not an inclusive pluralist alternative to the liberal international order, but a fragmented system organised around spheres of influence, hierarchy, and the unconstrained autonomy of great powers.

Introduction

Russia's vision of a multipolar world order has become the central driving force of its post-Cold War foreign policy discourse. This concept has served as both a critique of Western unipolar dominance and as means for justifying Russia's geopolitical ambitions. Official documents, speeches, and strategic documents consistently portray multipolarity as a corrective to Western

---

[*]   Mirian Popkhadze and Amb. Shota Gvineria are Senior Fellows at the Delphi Global Research Center.

unipolar hegemony and a framework for restoring international balance. Yet beneath its normative rhetoric, Moscow's interpretation of multipolarity aligns with the structural realist conception on international politics – a struggle among great powers to secure relative power, regional dominance, and autonomy within an anarchic system.

Structural realism – most prominently developed by Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer – views the distribution of capabilities among states as the primary determinant of state behaviour (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2014). From this perspective, Russia's actions since the 1990s, including its institutional innovations (SCO, CSTO, BRICS) and coercive interventions (Georgia 2008, Ukraine 2014, and 2022), reflect a systemic drive to re-establish balance in a world long dominated by the United States (Lo, 2015; Aris, 2011; Stuenkel, 2015; Allison, 2016; Trenin, 2011). The multipolar rhetoric serves as both an ideological justification and a strategic roadmap for this balancing project. Relying on structural realist theory, the paper argues that Russia's imagination of a multipolar world is less about fostering genuine pluralism in the international system (as it claims) and more about reasserting sovereign dominance, while balancing Western powers and institutionalising its status as an independent pole in a reconfigured world order.

The idea of multipolarity holds a special place in the Kremlin's grand strategy. Since the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, Russian political elites have repeatedly invoked the notion of multipolarity as an effective antidote to the American-led unipolarity (Lo, 2015, pp. 23–25). One of the earliest and most influential proponents of this vision was Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov, who in the mid-1990s articulated the so-called Primakov Doctrine, envisioning a multipolar world order grounded in the strategic balancing of power among major centres such as Russia, China, India and the US (Tsygankov, 2023, pp. 87–90). Primakov argued that the post-Cold War should not be dominated by a single superpower and actively promoted the "strategic triangle" of Moscow-Beijing-New Delhi to counterbalance US global influence (Mankoff, 2012, pp. 61–64; Primakov, 2004, pp. 119–122). For Moscow, the concept of multipolarity involves not only the distribution of power among great powers, but a reassertion of sovereignty against Western ideological, economic, and geopolitical hegemony.

The paper employs qualitative research design that combines discourse analysis, policy examination, and comparative evolution to explore the political, strategic, and normative dimensions of Russia's concept of

multipolarity. The study analyses key official statements, and strategic documents, including Russia's foreign policy concepts and national security strategies, providing insight into how the Kremlin has codified multipolarity from a rhetorical tool into a central tenet of state doctrine. In parallel, speeches by Russian senior officials – most notably Yevgeny Primakov's advocacy of a "strategic triangle" among Russia, China and India in the 1990s, Putin's 2007 Munich speech, and Sergey Lavrov's more recent addresses at the Valdai Discussion Club – are analysed to trace the conceptual and ideological evolution of the term within elite political discourse (Primakov, 1998; O'Donnel and Papa, 2021; Putin, 2007; Sakwa, 2023).

To connect rhetoric with action, the paper adopts a process training approach that examines how shifts in Russia's discourse on multipolarity have coincided with major geopolitical events and policy decisions. Case studies, including Russia's participation in BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), as well as its military interventions in Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014), Syria (2015), and Ukraine (2022) serve to show how Moscow operationalises multipolarity as a strategic framework (Ferragamo, 2025; Bailes et al., 2007; Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2017). These actions are assessed not only as manifestations of geopolitical ambition but also as mechanisms through which Russia seeks to institutionalise its vision of a post-Western world (Chatham House, 2008; Charap et al., 2021).

Finally, the study employs a comparative analytical frame that situates Russia's interpretation of multipolarity between two different reference points: the Western international liberal order and rising powers pluralist narratives. This comparative dimension allows for the identification of both convergence and divergence in how these actors understand sovereignty, hierarchy, and global governance. The analysis proceeds with three interrelated dimensions – political, strategic, and normative. Politically the study considers institutional participation and alliance patterns; strategically it assesses Russia's military behaviour and power projection; and normatively, it examines ideological and civilisational narratives. Together these components form a coherent rhetoric into an operational strategy guiding Russian foreign policy in greater Eurasia and beyond.

The Political Dimension: Institutionalising Multipolarity

The political dimension concerns Russia's efforts to institutionalise multipolarity through the creation and consolidation of regional and global platforms that dilute Western dominance (Stronski and Sokolsky, 2020). This involves alternative centres of coordination both in Eurasia and the broader Global South, which are intended to rebalance the global power structure (Volkov and Shangaraev, 2025; Bastanifar, Khan, and Koch, 2024). Initiatives such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) exemplify Moscow's attempt to embed multipolarity into the architecture of international relations (Bailes et al., 2007; Aris, 2008). These platforms serve dual purposes: they enhance Russia's diplomatic leverage and symbolise a counter-model to Western-led institutions such as NATO and the European Union (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2017). By promoting collective sovereignty and regional autonomy, the Kremlin advances multipolarity not merely as an abstract concept but a functional mechanism for legitimising Russia's status as a central pole with an evolving international order.

The Strategic Dimension: Operationalising Multipolarity

The strategic dimension captures how Russia operationalises multipolarity through its military and security behaviour (Cohen, 2009, pp. 214–238; Charap and Colton, 2017). Here, the focus shifts from institutional diplomacy to the projection of power and the redefinition of security hierarchies (Charap et al., 2021). Russia's military actions in Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014), Syria (2015,) and Ukraine (2022) demonstrate willingness to employ coercive means to resist to what it perceives as Western encroachment and assert regional primacy (Chatham House, 2008). Yet they also signal an ambition to reshape geopolitical realities by force (Merezhko, 2015). These interventions are framed by Moscow as defensive measures in a contested international environment (Charap, Treyger, and Geist, 2019). Moreover, Russia's pursuit of strategic partnerships with China and Iran, its investments in energy geopolitics, and its emphasis on deterrence and sovereignty reflect a broader commitment to constructing a polycentric world where no single power can dictate global outcomes.

The Normative Dimension: Justifying Multipolarity

The normative dimension addresses the ideational and moral claims underpinning Russia's multipolar vision (Atamali, 2021). Rooted in a critique of the Western liberal universalism, Russian policy makers and thinkers portray multipolarity as a just and natural order that acknowledges the world's cultural, civilisational and political diversity (Dugin, 2024). The foreign policy concepts of 2021 and 2023 explicitly link multipolarity to the protection of civilisational identity, and sovereign equality (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023). Russian theorists such as Alexander Dugin and Vladislav Surkin have advanced the notion of civilisational pluralism, arguing that each major power embodies its own civilisational model of governance and values (Dugin, 2022; Lapaeva, 2024). With this framework, Moscow positions itself as a defender of traditional state sovereignty and moral order against perceived Western ideological homogenisation (Kortunov, 2019; Drobinin, 2023). Thus, the normative dimension gives Russia's pursuit of multipolarity its moral and philosophical coherence, transforming it from a mere realpolitik into an alternative vision of global governance.

These dimensions provide an analytical lens for examining the evolution and implementation of Russia's multipolar world vision.

Historical Evolution of the Concept: Post-Soviet Beginings-1990s

In the aftermath of the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia briefly attempted to integrate into Western institutions (Trenin, 2016). After realising that joining Western institutions on its own terms was unattainable, Russia gradually abandoned its early post-Soviet ambition of integration with the Euro-Atlantic community (Nepogodin, 2022). In the 1990s, under Boris Yeltsin, Moscow expressed a genuine desire to become part of the Western-led international order, seeking participation in organisations such as the EU, NATO, and G7 (German, 2017). Russian officials frequently invoked the concept of a "common European home", a concept inherited from Mikhail Gorbachov's late Soviet diplomacy, to signal Russia's willingness to cooperate with Western powers on shared security and economic frameworks (Foxall, 2018). Yet Moscow's conception of integration was predicated on a specific role in its immediate neighbourhood: recognition of Russia's special role in the post-Soviet space, acknowledgment of its special interests in Europe, and

consultative status in Euro-Atlantic decision-making (European Parliament, 1998).

These expectations – essentially partnership on Russia's terms – conflicted with Western vision of enlargement and governance (Zagorski, 2019, pp. 35–58). The United States and the EU insisted that accession to Western institutions required adherence to liberal-democratic norms, market reforms, and respect for sovereignty of the states of Central and Eastern Europe (Lucas, 2008). From Moscow's perspective, such conditions undermined its regional influence and disregarded its security interests. The divergence became evident in the 1990s and early 2000s, when NATO enlarged to include Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic in 1999, followed by the Baltic states in 2004 (Stent, 2014, pp. 42–63). Western interventions in the Balkans, particularly NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia without UN authorisation, further convinced Russian elites that their terms of partnership had been denied and that Russia's interest were being systematically marginalised (Latawski and Smith, 2003). Disillusioned with the West, Moscow recalibrated its strategy to challenge the West. In its efforts to preserve its exclusive sphere of influence, Moscow deliberately encouraged and supported separatist movements across the region, using conflicts in places like Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria as instruments of leverage to maintain control over neighbouring states.

Putin's Consolidation (2000-present)

Under Vladimir Putin, the idea of multipolarity has evolved from a theoretical proposition into a structural principle of Russian grand strategy (Antonova and Lagutina, 2023, p. 21). Since the 2000s Russian foreign policy concepts, national security strategies, and military doctrines have consistently emphasised multipolarity as both a "natural" and inevitable outcome of global evolution (Sushentsov, 2025, p. 12). For instance, the 2000 Foreign Policy Concept introduced the term as a corrective to what Moscow called the "unacceptable monopoly" of the United States in world affairs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2000). Subsequent versions reinforced the notion that the polycentric world order should replace the Western centric model that had dominated since the end of the Cold War (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2000; 2008; 2013). This institutional repetition shows how multipolarity was not merely

rhetorical but systematically codified into Russia's state ideology (Barbashin and Graef, 2019).

Putin's 2007 Munich security conference speech remains a seminal public articulation of this worldview. Speaking before Western leaders, Putin challenged the unipolar world worder, asserting that one state and one centre of power had imposed its will on others, undermining international law and sovereignty (Putin, 2007; Carpenter, 2022). He denounced NATO expansion, criticised the US intervention in the Middle East, and called for a new balance in the global politics based on sovereign equality (Rahim, 2018). The Munich address, therefore, represented not only a critique of US hegemony, but also the formal announcement of Russia's intention to reclaim its distinct geopolitical pole: an autonomous civilisational centre grounded in Eurasian identity and a historic mission (Krasilnikov, 2022). In essence, it transformed multipolarity from defensive argument into ideological manifesto. Russia would no longer integrate with the West on Western terms but would instead compete with it as a separate centre.

Fifteen years later, Putin's 2022 "security guarantees" ultimatum to NATO and the United States crystalised the practical consequences of this worldview (Mackinnon, 2022). The demands including a rollback of NATO infrastructure to pre-1997 borders and the exclusion of Ukraine and Georgia from membership, echoing the same themes raised in Munich – resentment towards Western expansion, defence of Russia's security sphere, and the assertion of "civilisational right" to regional dominance (Szymański, 2022). However, the method and tone had changed dramatically. Whereas the 2007 speech sought recognition through dialogue, the 2022 ultimatum embodied coercive diplomacy backed by military force (AALEP, 2022). The conceptual overlap lies in the continuity of grievance and goal – resisting Western unipolarity – but the divergence lies in means and confidence (Mills, 2022): Russia had moved from rhetorical protest to overt militarisation of multipolarity.

Thus, the trajectory from Munich to Moscow 2022 marks Russia's evolution from rhetorical challenger to revisionist actor. Multipolarity once framed as a call for sovereign equality now justifies the subversion of that principle in practice, especially towards neighbouring states such as Georgia and Ukraine. In both documents, Putin portrayed Russia as a defender of balance and civilisation against Western encroachment. But by 2022 that defence transformed into an imperial assertion of hierarchy within the post-Soviet space. The language of equality persisted, its application not.

Institutional Pillars of Russian Strategy

By the early 2000s, this disillusionment catalysed a strategic reorientation in Moscow's foreign policy. Under Vladimer Putin, Russia abandoned the notion of integration with the West and began constructing an alternative geopolitical identity rooted in sovereignty and regional leadership. The creation of the Eurasian Union, closer coordination with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and revival of security mechanisms under the Collective Security Treaty Organisation reflected an effort to build a counterweight to the Western order. In that sense, Russia's shift from attempted inclusion to deliberate exclusion was less a rejection of globalisation than an assertion of autonomy and recalibration of strategy from integration toward the pursuit of multipolarity on its own terms.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) represents one of the earliest and most durable attempts to embed multipolarity into regional security architecture. Established in 2001 and comprising Russia, China and four central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan), the SCO was designed as a platform for managing security threats, especially terrorism, separatism, and extremism, without Western involvement. Over time the SCO evolved into a forum for strategic dialogue and limited economic coordination, later admitting India and Pakistan, and granting observer status to Iran (now a full member). For Russia, the SCO serves as both a symbolic and practical counterweight to NATO's presence in Eurasia. It legitimises the Russian narrative that regional powers can independently provide for their security and resist what it calls the "unipolar order". Yet the SCO's effectiveness is constrained by the competing ambitions of China and Russia; Beijing prioritises economic connectivity through its Belt and Road Initiative while Moscow emphasises the security dimension. Nevertheless, the SCO embodies the multilateral façade of Russia's multipolar vision as an institutional manifestation of Eurasian sovereignty distinct from a Western-led alliance.

The Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), by contrast, functions as Russia's military instrument of multipolarity within the post-Soviet space. Formed in 1992, from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) security arrangements and institutionalised in 2002, the CSTO includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. It is modelled rhetorically as a Eurasian counterpart to NATO, aimed at guaranteeing collective defence against external threats. In practice

however, it reinforces Russian primacy. Moscow provides the command structure, hosts the organisation's headquarters, and dominates its rapid reaction forces.

The CSTO has been used selectively to project Russia's leadership, most visibly in the January 2022 intervention in Kazakhstan, where CSTO troops helped stabilise the Tokayev government amid internal unrest (von Essen and Hedenskog, 2022). That deployment demonstrated Russia's capacity to use multilateral frameworks to legitimise its military presence, strengthening its claim as the guarantor of order in Eurasia (Cornell, 2022; Kucera, 2022). While member states often view the CSTO instrumentally – seeking Russian security guarantees without ceding full autonomy – it nonetheless provides Moscow with an institutional mechanism to organise its sphere of influence under the name of collective security defence. In stark contrast to NATO, the CSTO's goal is not to deter a specific threat or protect its members, but rather to subordinate other members, to serve Russia's interests, which, in turn, illustrates the logic of Russian multipolarity.

The BRICS grouping (Brazil, India, China, and South Africa) functions as the global economic counterpart of Russia's multipolar strategy (Merke, 2021). Since its formation in the late 2000s BRICS has sought to challenge Western dominance in global economic governance by promoting alternatives to Bretton Woods Institutions (IMF and the World Bank), including the New Development Bank (NDB), and Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), (New Development Bank, n.d.; Nogueira Batista Jr., 2020). Russia's participation in BRICS serves both strategic and ideological purposes: it projects Russia as part of an emerging coalition of non-Western power capable of shaping global financial norms, and it reinforces Putin's claim that the 21st century will be defined by civilisational pluralism rather than liberal universalism (Snegovaya, 2021). Moscow has consistently framed BRICS as proof that the world is moving toward a polycentric economic system where Western sanctions, financial instruments, and value systems no longer dictate the global agenda. Despite persistent asymmetries, particularly China's economic dominance, BRICS provides Russia with an indispensable diplomatic platform to demonstrate its continued relevance in global governance despite isolation from Western institutions.

Together these institutions – the SCO, CSTO, and BRICS – constitute the institutional triad of Russia's multipolar project. Each serves distinct function: the SCO offers a regional security dialogue, balancing China's rise; the CSTO enforces Russia's strategic depth within the post-Soviet

space; and BRICS projects global legitimacy by aligning Russia with rising non-Western economies. Thus, multipolarity organised through these institutions provides justification for Russia's regional primacy under the veneer of cooperative sovereignty.

Multipolarity in Practice

While frameworks initiated by Russia officially promote political, economic, and security cooperation with regional actors, in practice, they are designed to reassert Russia's dominance over its neighbours under the banner of regional integration.

Nowhere is Russia's interpretation of multipolarity more visible than in its use of military power across the post-Soviet space. Russia's interventions, from the 2008 war against Georgia, and the 2014 annexation of Crimea, to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, represent more than territorial or security calculations. They are deliberate manifestations of a worldview that seeks to challenge what Russia perceives to be an unjust Western-dominated order (Allison, 2008). In the Kremlin's discourse, each of these conflicts has been reframed as a struggle to preserve sovereignty and civilisational identity against the encroachment of Western liberalism. The war in Ukraine, in particular, is not an aggressive, but a defensive, operation to resist Western expansionism and restore a balance of power reflective of multiple civilisational centres.

In this context, the Kremlin has elevated the concept of multipolarity from the structural idea to a moral crusade, fusing it with the rhetoric of anti-colonialism and civilisational pluralism. Russian officials increasingly frame multipolarity as a process of global decolonisation, where non-Western powers reclaim their rightful agency in international affairs after centuries of Western political, economic and cultural domination (Laruelle, 2023). By invoking this analogy, Russia attempts to rebrand itself as a leader of the "Global South," a term that has gained prominence in Russian and Chinese vocabularies (Gabuev, 2016). The "global majority" (Bondarev, 2024) refers broadly to the collective of non-Western states spanning Africa, Asia, Latin America, and parts of the Middles East, which together represent most of the world's population but have historically been underrepresented in decision-making within global institutions like the UN Security Council, IMF, and World Bank (Tsygankov and Muhwezi, 2025; Silaev, 2024).

For Moscow, the global majority narrative serves multiple purposes. It allows Moscow to cast its confrontation with the West as a universal struggle for equality in the international system, rather than an isolated geopolitical struggle. It also appeals to postcolonial sensibilities in the Global South, where states harbour long-standing grievances over Western interventionism, and perceived double-standards. By positioning itself as the voice of this majority, Russia seeks to build new coalitions beyond the Euro-Atlantic sphere through arms sales, energy partnerships, and diplomatic forums such as BRICS and the Russia-Africa summits.

However, this rhetoric also obscures contradictions in Russia's own behaviour. While claiming to champion decolonisation, Moscow simultaneously pursues neo-imperial ambitions in its immediate neighbourhood, using coercion and occupation to assert control over former Soviet republics. Yet for many regimes in Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America – often ruled by illiberal regimes or authoritarian elites – Russia's narrative of resistance to Western dominance resonates deeply. It offers ideological cover for their own domestic repression and a sense of solidarity against what they perceive as Western political and cultural intrusion. In this sense, the global majority is less a coherent geopolitical bloc than a discursive construct, one that Russia skilfully employs to legitimise its revisionist agenda and transform multipolarity into a rallying cry for a world no longer governed by Western norms.

Ideology Behind Strategy

It could be argued that for the Kremlin, the multipolar worldview is not only strategic, but moral. As a consequence, the Russian multipolarity concept is deeply ideological, relying on different, but intertwined ideological currents: balance of power, sovereigntism, and civilisational pluralism, each intending to challenge the moral foundations and institutional frameworks of the Western-led international order.

According to Russian multipolarity, international peace and order are not achieved through international law and international frameworks, but through a balance of power among competing centres of influence. This worldview fundamentally rejects the liberal assumption that democracy, institutions, and economic interdependence inherently foster stability. Instead, Moscow regards the international system as an arena of constant

competition, where equilibrium, not law, preserves order. Within this logic, Russia's military intervention in Syria in 2015 was framed as an act of strategic restoration. Following the America-led regime change operations in the Middle East, the Kremlin presented its defence of Bashar al-Assad's government as a necessary move to restore balance in the region and uphold the principle of state sovereignty against Western interference. The operation elevated Russia to the status of a decisive power broker in the Middle East, capable of shaping outcomes independent of Western influence while symbolically demonstrating its capacity to challenge the US hegemony beyond its traditional sphere of influence.

The same rationale underpins Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 which Moscow portrays not as an act of aggression but as a pre-emptive defence against what it calls the Western-centric order. The Kremlin insists that the war is part of broader resistance to America's unipolar dominance, positioning itself as a defender of global equilibrium and a guarantor of alternative centres of power. Through this narrative, Russia seeks to legitimise its revisionist behaviour as a necessary corrective to Western overreach, rather than as a violation of international norms.

Simultaneously, Russia's approach to global institutions such as the UN and OSCE reflect its strategy of obstructing and reshaping the very mechanisms designed to uphold the rule-based international order. As the permanent member of the Security Council, Russia frequently wields its veto power to block resolutions condemning its actions or those of its allies, most notably in Syria and Ukraine, and to paralyse collective responses to crisis that challenge its geopolitical interests (Banting and Malone, 2019). This consistent use of veto serves both as defensive tool and as a statement of defiance, reinforcing Moscow's claim that the existing international system is biased toward Western dominance (Olech and Waszczykowski, 2025). In the OSCE, Russia employs procedural obstruction and political manipulation to undermine initiatives aimed at strengthening domestic governance, conflict monitoring, and human rights protections within the post-Soviet space (*Ibid*.). By exploiting its membership and veto prerogatives, Moscow effectively neutralises these institutions' capacity to act as neutral arbiters or enforcers of norms.

In essence, Russia's use of institutional veto power complements its broader multipolar agenda. It transforms mechanisms of collective governance into instruments of strategic paralysis, demonstrating that no global action is legitimate without Moscow's consent. Through both coercive and

procedural obstruction, Russia operationalises its vision of a multipolar world as one where great powers act as autonomous poles, immune to external constraints, and where balance, rather than law, defines the architecture of international peace.

Russia's conception of a multipolar world also draws upon sovereignty as its central ideological pillar. In the Kremlin's view, sovereignty is not merely a legal principle, but a civilisational shield against liberal universalism, Western influence and cultural expansionism. Moscow's emphasis on "sovereign democracy", a term coined by former Kremlin strategist Vladislav Surkov, encapsulates this idea – asserting that each state has the right to determine its political system and values free from external pressure (Surkov, 2006). This doctrine rejects the liberal notion of universal norms in favour of pluralism rooted in distinct historical and cultural traditions (Tsygankov, 2019a). In this struggle, the Kremin portrays itself as the defender of traditional European values: Christianity, family, and national identity, against what it characterises as the moral relativism and neo-imperialism of the West (Laruelle, 2018).

This narrative has been repeatedly articulated by Vladimir Putin, especially in his speeches at the Valdai Discussion Club and in his 2013 address on "spiritual sovereignty" (Putin, 2013). In these addresses, Putin accused Western societies of abandoning their own cultural roots and promoting a global "cancel culture" that undermines the moral foundations of civilisation (Putin, 2022). He presents Russia as a bastion of continuity, arguing that it alone safeguards the true Europe – a Europe faithful to its Christian heritage and respect for sovereignty. This idea echoes the writings of Russian conservative thinkers such as Alexander Dugin, whose 'fourth Political Theory rejects both liberalism and Western universalism, calling instead for a return to civilisational plurality and protection of traditional values' (Dugin, 2012).

The Kremlin's ideological framing of sovereignty also extends to foreign policy. For instance, Russia's intervention in Syria was justified as the defence of Syrian statehood against Western- engineered regime change, while its war in Ukraine is portrayed as a mission to protect the sovereignty of the Russian world – *Russkiy Mir* – against Western encroachment. Moscow uses this rhetoric to rally support among conservative movements in Europe and the Global South, presenting itself as the vanguard of a multipolar world that respects cultural and political diversity. In practice, however, this defence of sovereignty often masks Russia's own neo-imperial ambitions,

as seen in its coercive policies toward neighbouring states and attempts to redefine sovereignty as a privilege reserved for great powers.

In its foreign policy concepts, Moscow frames its concepts as defending the right of all states to choose their own development path, a direct challenge to what it perceives as Western efforts to impose its political and economic models on others. For instance, Russia has sought to transform Western sanctions and isolation into symbols of emancipation and moral resistance, redefining sovereignty as a tool and revolutionary idea opposed to Western dependency (Tsygankov, 2019b). As Putin declared, Russia is breaking free from what he called "Western economic slavery" (Putin, 2022).

The third and most defining pillar of Russia ideological framework, inspired by thinkers such as Alexander Dugin, is civilisational pluralism, dividing the world into distinct civilisations each with its own value systems, historical destinies, and moral codes (Dugin, 2012). Civilisational pluralism defines international politics as relations among civilisations rather than nation-states, replacing Western-backed universal rights with cultural relativism. For Moscow, it legitimises hierarchy and dominance, because a civilisation must be led by a "core state", positioning Russia as the guardian of the Eurasian world (Bordachev, 2021).

In his Valdai Club speeches, President Vladimir Putin often contrasts Western decadence with Russia's moral clarity, portraying liberal democracy as an alien ideology that undermines traditional family values, faith, and patriotism (Putin, 2023) – the very values Russia claims to protect not only itself but also for the world (Laruelle, 2014).

In its outreach to the Global South, Moscow invokes anti-colonial solidarity and civilisational dignity as moral foundations of a multipolar world order. The 2023 Russia-Africa summit was wrapped in the language of liberation, portraying Russia as a partner in defending indigenous civilisations from the Western colonialism narrative designed to challenge Western posture in Africa while expanding Russia's geopolitical influence across the continent. In consequence, civilisational pluralism serves as both a narrative tool and a strategic lever, tapping into non-Western resentment towards the West while masking Russia's own imperial ambitions.

Conclusion

Together, these ideas – balance of power, sovereigntism, and civilisational pluralism – form the ideological core of Russia's multipolar world vision. They furnish a moral narrative to geopolitical ambition, reframing state interests as part of a broader struggle against Western dominance. In challenging what Russia perceives as Western dominance, it seeks to undermine the universality of Western norms, erode liberal internationalism, and promote a fragmented international order grounded in spheres of influence while contributing to the ideological consolidation of authoritarian regimes. Consequently, Russia's multipolar vision should not be seen as an alternative to the Western-led liberal order as it is rather a hegemonic vision that still centres on power, control, and hierarchy. While officially showing its desire for global fairness, Russia only delivers the old geopolitics in new clothes.

In a sense, Russia's vision of a multipolar world is a carefully-crafted blueprint for advancing its interests. While it claims to be a defensive reaction to growing Western encirclement, it is a proactive strategy for reestablishing Russian global influence. Moreover, although Moscow officially calls for equality among nation-states, in practice it employs multipolarity as a vehicle for restoring great-power politics. In conclusion, Russia's multipolarity is a fragmented order, which legitimises a narrative of power distribution among competing powerhouses, and is an effective tool in Moscow's toolkit to redefine the post-Cold War system on its own terms.

Works Cited

Allison, R. (2008) 'Russia resurgent? Moscow's campaign to "coerce Georgia" and reclaim its sphere of influence', *International Affairs*, 84(6), pp. 1145–1171.

Allison, R. (2016) 'Russian "Denial" of Intervention in Ukraine: The Limits of Bluff', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 68(1), pp. 99–128.

Antonova, I. and Lagutina, M. (2023) 'Russia's perspective of a new world order: From multipolarity to polycentricity', in Lagutina, M., Tsvetkova, N. and Sergunin, A. (eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of Russian International Relations Studies*. London: Routledge.

Aris, S. (2008) *Russian–Chinese Relations through the Lens of the SCO*. Paris: IFRI. Available at: https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/migrated_files/documents/atoms/files/ifri_rnv_aris_sco_eng_3.pdf.

Aris, S. (2011) *Eurasian Regionalism: The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Association of Accredited Public Policy Advocates to the European Union (AALEP) (2022) 'Russia's demands for legally binding security guarantees', 7 February. Available at: https://www.aalep.eu/russia%E2%80%99s-demands-legally-binding-security-guarantees.

Atamali, K. (2021) 'Russian foreign policy: multipolarity and pivot to the East', *Russia and the Moslem World*, 1(311). Available at: https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/russian-foreign-policy-multipolarity-and-pivot-to-the-east.

Bailes, A.J.K. et al. (2007) *The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation*. Policy paper. Zurich: ETH Zurich / ISN.

Banting, K.G. and Malone, D. (2019) 'The UN Security Council and the politics of veto use: Russia's strategy in the Syrian conflict', *International Journal*, 74(3), pp. 376–394.

Barbashin, A. and Graef, A. (2019) 'Thinking foreign policy in Russia: think tanks and grand narratives', Atlantic Council, 12 November. Available at: https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/thinking-foreign-policy-in-russia-think-tanks-and-grand-narratives/.

Bastanifar, I., Khan, K.H. and Koch, H. (2024) 'Understanding BRICSISATION through an economic geopolitical model', *Journal of Open Innovation: Technology, Market, and Complexity*, 11(1), pp. 1–10.

Bondarev, B. (2024). Lavrov Asserts Russian Success Among 'Global Majority' – Jamestown. Jamestown.org. Available at: https://jamestown.org/lavrov-asserts-russian-success-among-global-majority/ (Accessed 9 Dec. 2025).

Bordachev, T. (2021) *The World of Civilisations and Russia's Eurasian Mission*. Valdai Discussion Club Report.

Carpenter, T.G. (2022) 'Did Putin's 2007 Munich speech predict the Ukraine crisis?', Cato Institute Commentary, 24 January. Available at: https://www.cato.org/commentary/did-putins-2007-munich-speech-predict-ukraine-crisis.

Charap, S. and Colton, J. (2017) *Everyone Loses: The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Charap, S. et al. (2021) *Russia's Military Interventions: Patterns, Drivers, and Signals*. RAND Research Report. Available at: https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RRA400/RRA444-3/RAND_RRA444-3.pdf.

Charap, S., Treyger, E. and Geist, E. (2019) *Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria*. RAND Research Report, pp. 1–32. Available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3180.html.

Chatham House (2008) *The Impact of Russian Actions since August 2008*. Programmeme seminar summary, 15 December. Available at: https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Russia%20and%20Eurasia/151208summary.pdf.

Cohen, S.F. (2009) *Soviet Fates and Lost Alternatives: From Stalinism to the New Cold War*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 214–238.

Cornell, S. (2022) 'Learning from Kazakhstan's January Crisis', *Central Asia–Caucasus Analyst*, 18 April. Available at: https://www.cacianalyst.org/resources/pdf/220418-FT-Kazakhstan.pdf.

Dragneva, R. and Wolczuk, K. (2017) *The Eurasian Economic Union: Deals, Rules and the Exercise of Power*. Chatham House Research Paper.

Drobinin, A. (2023) 'The vision of a multipolar world: the civilisational factor and Russia's place in the emerging world order', *Russia in Global Affairs*, 2 February. Available at: https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/the-vision-of-a-multipolar-world/.

Dugin, A. (2012) *The Fourth Political Theory*. Translated by M. Sleboda and M. Millerman. London: Arktos.

Dugin, A. (2022) 'Russia and China as the vanguard of multipolarity', geopolitika.ru, 5 February. Available at: https://www.geopolitika.ru/en/article/russia-and-china-vanguard-multipolarity.

Dugin, A. (2024) 'Multipolar Humanity', *Arktos Journal*, 29 February. Available at: https://www.arktosjournal.com/p/multipolar-humanity.

von Essen, H. and Hedenskog, J. (2022) 'Russia's CSTO Intervention in Kazakhstan: Motives, Risks and Consequences', Stockholm: Swedish Institute of International Affairs. Available at: https://www.ui.se/forskning/centrum-for-osteuropastudier/sceeus-commentary/russias-csto-intervention-in-kazakhstan-motives-risks-and-consequences.

European Parliament (1998) *Report on the Commission Communication "The European Union and Russia: The Future Relationship"*. Document A4-0060/1998. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-4-1998-0060_EN.html.

Ferragamo, M. (2025) 'What is the BRICS group and why is it expanding?', Council on Foreign Relations, 26 June. Available at: https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-brics-group-and-why-it-expanding.

Foxall, A. (2018) 'Russia used to see itself as part of Europe. Here's why that changed', *The Washington Post*, 18 June. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/06/18/russias-relations-with-the-e-u-werent-always-this-bad-but-theyve-been-deteriorating-for-a-long-time/.

Gabuev, A. (2016) 'Friends with benefits? Russian–Chinese relations after the Ukraine crisis', Carnegie Moscow Centre, 29 June. Available at: https://

carnegieendowment.org/research/2016/06/friends-with-benefits-russian-chinese-relations-after-the-ukraine-crisis.

German, T. (2017) 'NATO and the Enlargement Debate: Russian Roadblock', *International Affairs*, 93(2), pp. 291–308.

Kortunov, A. (2019) 'Between polycentrism and bipolarity: on Russia's world order evolution narratives', *Russia in Global Affairs*, 17(1), pp. 10–51. Available at: https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/between-polycentrism-and-bipolarity/.

Krasilnikov, K. (2022) '2007 Munich Speech Anniversary: How Putin Became First Politician to Say "Unipolar World" Untenable', *Sputnik International*, 10 February. Available at: https://sputnikglobe.com/20220210/2007-munich-speech-anniversary-how-putin-became-first-politician-to-say-unipolar-world-untenable-1092904737.html.

Kucera, J. (2022) 'CSTO agrees to intervene in Kazakhstan unrest', *Eurasianet*, 5 January. Available at: https://eurasianet.org/csto-agrees-to-intervene-in-kazakhstan-unrest.

Lapaeva, V.V. (2024) 'Russia in the New Geopolitical Realities: The Legal Vector of Civilisational Self-Determination', *Gosudarstvo i Pravo*, (6), pp. 33–43.

Laruelle, M. (2014). Beyond Anti-Westernism: The Kremlin's Narrative about Russia's European Identity and Mission – PONARS Eurasia. Available at: https://www.ponarseurasia.org/beyond-anti-westernism-the-kremlin-s-narrative-about-russia-s-european-identity-and-mission/.

Laruelle, M. (2018) 'Russia as a Conservative Society: Traditional Values and Cultural Nationalism', *East European Politics*, 34(4), pp. 449–470.

Laruelle, M. (2023) 'Russia as an anti-colonial power? Deconstructing Moscow's narrative against the West', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 39(5), pp. 381–399.

Latawski, P., and Smith, M. A. (2003). The Kosovo crisis and the evolution of a post-Cold War European security: The Evolution of Post Cold War European Security. Manchester University Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt155jgv3.

Lo, B. (2015) *Russia and the New World Disorder*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

Lucas, E. (2008) *The New Cold War: Putin's Russia and the Threat to the West*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mackinnon, A. (2022) 'What's behind Russia's latest demands', *Foreign Policy*, 5 January. Available at: https://www.foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/05/putin-russia-ukraine-europe-nato-security-zelensky-war-build-up.

Mankoff, J. (2012) *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics*. 2nd edn. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Mearsheimer, J.J. (2014) *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. Updated edn. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.

Merezhko, O. (2015) 'Crimea's annexation by Russia – contradictions of the international legal order', *Zeitschrift für Ausländisches Öffentliches Recht und Völkerrecht (ZaöRV)*, 75, pp. 167–194. Available at: https://www.zaoerv.de/75_2015/75_2015_1_a_167_194.pdf.

Merke, F. (2021) 'BRICS and the global order: emerging powers, global governance and the Russia factor', *RUSI Journal*, 166(2), pp. 36–45.

Mills, C. (2022) *European Security: The Outcome of Talks with Russia*. Research Briefing Number 9425. London: House of Commons Library, 17 January. Available at: https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9425/CBP-9425.pdf.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2000) *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*. Approved by Vladimir Putin, 28 June. Available at: https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2000/russia-fp-2000.htm.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2008) Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation. Approved by Vladimir Putin, 12 January. Available at: http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/4116.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2013) Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation. Approved by Vladimir Putin, 12 February. Available at: https://pekin.mid.ru/en/countries/rossiya/kontseptsiya_vneshney_politiki_rossii/.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2023) *The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*. Approved by Decree No. 229, 31 March. Available at: https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/.

Nepogodin, A. (2022) 'Why Russia and the West failed to create a united Europe after the USSR collapsed', *ERAonlus*, 18 February. Available at: https://era.org/en/why-russia-and-the-west-failed-to-create-a-united-europe-after-the-ussr-collapsed/.

New Development Bank (n.d.) *About the NDB*. Available at: https://www.ndb.int.

Nogueira Batista Jr., P. (2020) 'The BRICS' contingent reserve arrangement: strengthening global financial safety nets', *Journal of Global Governance*, 22(3), pp. 289–305.

O'Donnell, F. and Papa, M. (2021) 'India's multi-alignment management and the Russia–India–China (RIC) triangle', *International Affairs*, 97(3), pp. 801–822.

Olech, A. and Waszczykowski, S. (2025) 'Russian Veto as a Signal of the Kremlin's Intensified Actions' in *Strategic Pathways to Ending the Russo-Ukrainian War*. Tartu: University of Tartu Press.

Primakov, Y. (1998) 'Primakov Favors Strategic Triangle Involving Russia, China and India', *Tehran Times*, 22 December.

Primakov, Y. (2004) *Russian Crossroads: Toward the New Millennium*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Putin, V. (2007) 'Keynote Address and QandA on Security Policy at the 43rd Munich Security Conference', Munich, 10 February. Available at: https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2007/putin-munich_070210.htm.

Putin, V. (2013) 'Plenary Session of the Valdai International Discussion Club', Valdai International Discussion Club, 19 September. Available at: https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/vladimir_putin_meets_with_members_the_valdai_international_discussion_club_transcript_of_the_speech_/.

Putin, V. (2022) 'Plenary Session of the Valdai International Discussion Club', Kremlin.ru, 27 October. Available at: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69695.

Putin, V. (2023) 'Plenary Session of the Valdai International Discussion Club', Kremlin.ru, 5th October. Available at: https://sputniknews.in/20231005/read-here-president-putins-full-speech-at-valdai-discussion-club-4630736.html.

Rahim, S. (2018) 'Revisiting Putin's 2007 Munich Security Conference speech', *Eurasia Review*, 11 September. Available at: https://www.eurasiareview.com/11092018-revisiting-putins-2007-munich-security-conference-speech-oped/.

Sakwa, R. (2017) *Russia Against the Rest: The Post-Cold War Crisis of World Order*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sakwa, R. (2023) *Reversing the Polarities, in Maturity Certificate, or the Order That Never Was*. Moscow: Valdai Discussion Club.

Silaev, N. (2024) *Middle Powers Revisited: 'Good Citizens' of the World Majority*. Russia in Global Affairs. Available at: https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/middle-powers-silaev/.

Snegovaya, M. (2021) 'Putin's bid for multipolarity: BRICS and Russia's strategy to challenge the liberal international order', CEPA Report, Centre for European Policy Analysis. Available at: https://cepa.org/article/putins-bid-for-multipolarity.

Stent, A. (2014) *The Limits of Partnership: US–Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Stronski, P. and Sokolsky, R.M. (2020) *Multipolarity in Practice: Understanding Russia's Engagement with Regional Institutions*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Stuenkel, O. (2015) *The BRICS and the Future of Global Order*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Surkov, V. (2006) 'Sovereignty is the political synonym of competitiveness', *Russia in Global Affairs*, 4(3).

Sushentsov, A. (2025) 'Russia and the West's structural confrontation over the future world order', *CIRSD Horizons*, Winter, Issue 29. Available at: https://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-winter-2025-issue-no-29/russia-and-the-wests-structural-confrontation-over-the-future-world-order.

Szymański, P. (2022) 'Russia's demands for legally binding security guarantees from the US and NATO', *PISM Policy Brief*, Polish Institute of International Affairs, January. Available at: https://www.pism.pl/publications/russia-demands-security-guarantees-from-the-us-and-nato.

Trenin, D. (2011) *Post-Imperium: A Eurasian Story*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Trenin, D. (2016) 'Russia's post-Soviet journey: at the heart of Europe', *Carnegie Russia Eurasia Centre / Foreign Affairs*, 25 December. Available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2016/12/russias-post-soviet-journey.

Tsygankov, A.P. (2019a) *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Tsygankov, A.P. (2019b) 'Self-Isolation vs. Self-Assertion: Russia's Reaction to Western Sanctions', *Russia in Global Affairs*, 17(2).

Tsygankov, A.P. (2023) *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity*. 5th edn. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Tsygankov, A.P. and Muhwezi A. (2025) Engaging the Global South with Ideology and Pragmatism: Russia's Re-Emergence in Sub-Saharan Africa, Global Studies Quarterly, 5(2). Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksaf044.

Volkov, A.P. and Shangaraev, R.N. (2025) 'BRICS, SCO and EAEU Integration in context of formation of multipolar world', *Sociopolitical Sciences*, 15(2), pp. 153–163.

Waltz, K.N. (1979) *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Zagorski, A. (2019) 'Russia and NATO in the 1990s', Transatlantic Relations Working Paper, April. Available at: https://www.transatlanticrelations.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/20-Zagorski.pdf.

NATO's Deterrence Posture in the Baltic States: Incentive Loopholes and Counter-Escalation

Dr. Dumitru Minzarari[*]

Abstract: This chapter explores contemporary dynamics in NATO's deterrence posture in the Baltic Sea Region. Russia has been increasingly probing NATO reactions across the entirety of the Eastern Flank, normalising such incursions as part of its wider strategy of confrontation with NATO. Engaging with the foundations of deterrence theory, specifically the operative concepts of credibility and costly signalling, the chapter argues that neither NATO's actual deterrence by punishment nor deterrence by denial postures are sufficient to deter Russian hostile intentions. One of the key reasons for this is a false fear of the so-called escalation trap, as escalation in fact deters a revisionist actor such as Russia that does not harbour genuine insecurity. The recommendation for deterring Russia, therefore, is precisely an embrace of escalation – those actions and strategies in both the Eastern Flank and Ukraine that would credibly signal resolve through readiness to accept high costs by building capability and transparent troop deployments.

Russia's Probing of NATO

On 10 September 2025, Poland faced what proved to be the largest Russian drone incursion that any NATO country had ever experienced. According to public reports, at least 23 Russian drones crossed into the Polish airspace (Spence and Kosc, 2025). Some of the drones were assessed as a threat, forcing Polish authorities to scramble fighter jets, which reportedly included Dutch F-35 fighters, deployed to Poland as part of NATO's air policing mission at its eastern flank. At least four drones were shot down, according to news reports.

Arguably, this is the first overt combat engagement between a NATO country and Russia,[1] as Moscow's military unmanned aircraft violated the

---

[*] Dr. Dumitru Minzarari is a Lecturer in Security Studies at the Baltic Defence College.
[1] I do not see the 2015 Turkish incident as similar in escalation logic to this one. The Russian side did not test NATO in that specific case, and the Turkish response was probably caused by mistaking the Russian Su-24 for a Syrian one, as Syria has also been operating them.

Polish sovereign space, created multiple threats for civilians, and had to be intercepted by NATO fighter jets, with some drones being destroyed.

Similar incidents, although on a smaller scale, have been occurring regularly in the Baltic Sea region, but also in the Black Sea region, in Romania. For instance, on 19 September, three Russian fighter jets reportedly spent as long as 12 minutes in the Estonian airspace before withdrawing (ERR, 2025). More recently, two Russian drones made the deepest incursion into Romanian territory yet, evading the NATO fighter jets that attempted to track them (Sabbagh, 2025). Despite NATO member states' officials' attempts to downplay the importance of such incidents, from a deterrence posture perspective, this is bad news. The NATO response to the incident has significantly eroded the Alliance's deterrence ability against Russia, even though some of the drones were downed. Russia was not afraid of an armed escalation with NATO, since it sent multiple drones into the Polish airspace. An important trait of the deterrence erosion process is that when such incidents occur for the first time, they destroy a psychological threshold, transforming this type of incident from a crisis into a normality. This, along with a reduced cost of violation for the aggressor, leads to a higher probability of incident repetition.

There is little doubt that both instances – the 10 September incident in Poland and the 25 November incident in Romania – represent deliberate actions by Russia. As NATO member-states largely ignored previous "lighter" incidents with Russian drones that "accidentally" entered their airspace, the Russian military has apparently made this kind of "accident" an integral part of its operational planning. Besides a more direct objective of using NATO territory to bypass Ukrainian air defences and inflict more damage on Ukraine, the second objective is to cultivate inside NATO a feeling of normality about this kind of incident. The latter should give Russia an advantage if it chooses to launch a surprise attack against a NATO ally or reduce the probability of a strong response when using near-threshold attacks that affect NATO interests. While these threats need to be considered in NATO's planning, the more urgent issue is how the incidents undermine NATO's deterrence posture.

These episodes, along with the related strategic signals, reveal that NATO leaders have an incomplete understanding of what constitutes effective deterrence when dealing with Russia. It also suggests that their perception of escalation dynamics with Russia has been inaccurate, when NATO member-states' officials and experts had routinely called for restraint, "to avoid

escalation" (Bertrand and Atwood, 2025). NATO's display of restraint is viewed by Russia as a sign of weakness and is more likely to attract Russian escalation and, consequently, aggression, rather than the opposite. In fact, the calls for restraint to avoid escalation with Russia go fundamentally against the logic of deterrence, which is supposed to signal a strong resolve to absorb and inflict costs against an attacking Russia.

There are several issues with the existing NATO deterrence posture on its Eastern flank, in general, and in the Baltic region, in particular. The numerous and continuous incidents involving Russia's violation of NATO's borders exposed some of them. Due to the limited scope of this analysis, only two of these issues will be examined. They will be referred to in the text as incentive loopholes, given their impact on Russian incentives to attack NATO. The first incentive loophole is the inherently flawed character of conventional deterrence, affecting NATO's insufficient power and resolve to hurt the aggressor. The second incentive loophole in NATO's deterrence posture relates to the signalling of an irresolute intent. A classic example of this is the publicly declared fear of an "escalation trap", as stated by Germany's defence minister Boris Pistorius, since it reveals to Russia NATO's self-imposed restrictions that are consistent with a defender lacking resolve to defend. Before further elaborating on these two incentive loopholes, the next section will present some ideas and concepts clarifying the logic of deterrence.

Some Deterrence Foundations

As Thomas Schelling – one of the founding fathers of contemporary deterrence theory – has aptly pointed out, deterrence is a subset of armed coercion, grounded in the bargaining power that the military tool's ability to "hurt" brings (Biddle, 2020). It is that power to hurt, by inflicting pain or punishment, that invests deterrence with the capital to be an effective strategy in discouraging a potential aggressor from launching an attack against NATO.

There are a few necessary conditions for deterrence to be effective. The costs of pain or punishment that the defender is able to inflict upon the aggressor should be recognisably higher than any gains of aggression can compensate for. Typically, this credibility is assessed in terms of having sufficient capabilities for effective defence and convincingly signalling the

resolve to fight (Snyder, 1960). This conceptualisation is widely accepted, effectively addressing the set of incentives involved in the decision to initiate a war. However, both the capabilities and resolve need to be credibly communicated to the aggressor. Even if these are strong and sufficient to inflict unacceptable costs upon the aggressor, they will fail to deter if the aggressor does not recognise that the defender has sufficient capabilities and does not believe in its unwavering resolve to use them.

Credibility is achieved through costly signalling. Only costly signalling can strengthen credibility, which is why it includes actions that tie the defender's hands and sink its war-related costs (Fearon, 1997). Verbal statements, communicating resolve publicly to the aggressor, are generally considered cheap signals – they do not produce much cost to the defender, given the incentives to misrepresent its capabilities and resolve (Fearon, 1995) – and thus, are typically not entirely credible. Examples of credible signals include military build-up and mobilisation (sunk costs – are financially costly *ex ante*), as well as making public threats or commitments (tying hands – are politically costly *ex post*, if not followed through). That is, public *commitments* by leaders on important security issues can produce audience (reputational and political) costs for the speaker and conditionally might have higher credibility.

It is generally accepted that audience costs are a more effective constraint in democracies, as statements by authoritarian leaders are less likely to be penalised by the domestic audience, and thus are much less credible than the statements of democratic leaders. However, Kertzer and Brutger (2016) suggest that even in democracies, the audience costs depend on the political preferences of a leader's constituency. The notorious Barack Obama's "red line" on Syria (see Taddonio, 2015) is a confirmation of how verbal statements can be cheap signals. A NATO-relevant example of a tying-hands strategy is the historical public commitment by US leaders to defend America's allies if they are attacked.

This reveals how difficult it is to credibly signal one's resolve to use military capabilities. Democracies are facing a much larger challenge than autocracies, since autocratic leaders do not need their population's consent to fight, being able to shoulder much higher domestic audience costs and less constraint. Given the borderless global information environment, which particularly strongly affects democracies, authoritarian actors have a fairly accurate understanding of public preferences within NATO, as well as the collective action problem constraints affecting the Alliance.

These conditions mostly explain, to a large extent, why the Kremlin has significant doubts about NATO's resolve to use military force against Russia and inflict prohibitive costs on it. Russia does not necessarily disregard the Alliance's military capabilities, given that in terms of its aggregate military force, NATO is militarily superior to Russia. Besides NATO's perceived weak resolve, the Russian scepticism about NATO's credibility is fuelled by the fact that NATO does not have a unified standing army and requires cooperation, coordination, and interoperability among Allies. In security crises, when time is of the essence, these factors can undo NATO's advantage in military capabilities.

The Inherent Weakness of Conventional Deterrence

Deterrence, as a strategy that discourages an external armed attack by threatening to inflict prohibitive costs in response and despite some loss of territory (deterrence by punishment), has its conceptual roots in the nuclear confrontation of the Cold War. It is the threat of nuclear strikes in response to a conventional military attack, or consequent nuclear escalation, that kept the Soviet Union from considering armed aggression against NATO countries. This is because it was only the threat of catastrophic destruction, produced by nuclear weapons, that created sufficient costs to outweigh potential gains that the USSR leadership expected from a conventional war victory. The difference brought by nuclear weapons in warfare was not just in the amount of destruction it could deliver, but also in its logic (all-out war) and its reversed sequence – it could destroy the cities and population before destroying the enemy forces (Schelling, 1966, pp. 22–23). It is this destruction level, sequence, and all-out war scale that a conventional deterrent posture will struggle to replicate, rendering deterrence by punishment in conventional wars non-credible.

The current NATO defence posture in the Baltic region, given the deployed active troops, is consistent with the logic of deterrence by punishment. This is despite the fact that existing statements by NATO and Baltic officials instead highlight that deterrence by denial guides the current NATO defence posture in the region. The reason is that a defence posture guided by a deterrence by denial logic would deploy sufficiently strong capabilities to convince the aggressor that the defender is able to prevent an armed attack from being successful (affecting the probability of victory)

or capable of inflicting combat losses so high that they would surpass the gains of victory. The quantity of military capabilities that NATO collectively deployed to the Baltic Sea region is insufficient to support a deterrence-by-denial posture.

To illustrate this logic, it is useful to compare the expected balance of forces. In January 2024, Russia announced the establishment of the Leningrad and Moscow military districts. This change included plans to deploy new motorised divisions, airborne troops, and naval infantry, as well as to strengthen its armour and artillery capabilities in the Leningrad military district, which borders Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (through the Kaliningrad region). Based on these declared intentions, Russia is estimated to field over 100,000 troops in the Leningrad military district, and in a more pessimistic scenario, potentially nearly 200,000. Given the effect of surprise and disruption that a Russian invasion would produce through its preparatory long-range strikes and sabotage activities in the Baltic states, an effective deterrence by denial posture would have to fulfil a set of requirements. To seriously compel Russian military planners to consider the risk of attack failure under the above scenario, NATO would need to be prepared to immediately face a Russian attack with a minimum of 50,000 well-equipped troops. This is based on the assumption that under comparable technological endowment of the military forces of the two sides, defence has an advantage. In other words, it is suggested that at least this level of capability should, in the Russian perception, act as a deterrent against a Russian conventional attack on the Baltic States.

Assembling a sufficiently large group of forces in the Baltic States to ensure effective deterrence by denial is crucial for a few reasons. If Russian military planners perceive that a surprise attack would lead to even minor territorial gains in areas inhabited by Russian ethnics (smaller costs to control), this might incentivise an invasion. The supporting condition is that Russia would be interested in limited territorial gains that can generate significant strategic implications. An insufficiently prompt military response by NATO would be severely exploited by Russia in its influence operations across NATO countries, emphasising the risk of Alliance abandonment, and invoking the disutility of membership. Another strategic gain that Russia could exploit, following limited territorial gains in the Baltic States, is offering a transaction with the West: returning the conquered territory in exchange for cutting off all support to Ukraine. Because the benefits of even small gains in the region are potentially so high, and the probability

of a successful attack is relatively elevated, given the current conditions, this may prompt Russia to act even if it would not otherwise consider it. Vulnerabilities invite aggression. The lack of strategic depth of the Baltic States is the largest vulnerability.

To get a sense of it, within less than a month after the February 2022 invasion, Russian forces made their peak gains in Ukraine, advancing across roughly 120,000 square kilometres (CNN, 2022). This area is comparable to the combined territories of Latvia and Lithuania. Defending is easier than attacking, given a comparable technological endowment among the fighting parties. Therefore, the cost of retaking the lost lands after Russia establishes a new status quo in the Baltic States will be much higher for NATO. Building a strong deterrence by denial posture, by amassing a sufficient number of troops, appears to be both the most efficient and credible option for NATO.

A major reason for focusing on numbers and technical quality in the pre-war stage lies in the difficulty of understanding how capabilities translate into battlefield performance, both for one's own troops and those of the enemy (Fearon, 1995). Consider how Western military experts assigned a high likelihood of victory to the Russian troops in February 2022, only to be proven wrong (Eckel, 2023). Before actually seeing how the troops perform in combat, quantity is the only observable proxy indicator of strength, even if imperfect. Another proxy variable for assessing combat effectiveness is how a country's military performed in recent combat engagements. For instance, the Western analysts' bias in favour of Russian troops before the February 2022 invasion was, to a large extent, due to observable Russian military performance in Syria.

Similarly, Russia evaluates the effectiveness of NATO military capabilities based on how they performed in Iraq and Afghanistan. From a Russian perspective, the withdrawal from Afghanistan was a strong signal that NATO – in particular, its militarily strongest member, the United States – lacks the necessary resolve to win extended conflicts and can be "outwaited". Other lessons the Russians have drawn from these NATO military experiences are that NATO countries are vulnerable to casualties, costs, and are also seriously constrained in effectively exercising the critical function of warfighting – generating and maintaining a high level of intensive violence (Goncharov, 2009). For instance, Burlinova (2010, 78) pointed out that only American and British troops fought, while the other Allies preferred avoiding their troops participation in combat operations. The likely conclusions the Russian planners drew are that European NATO members, with the

exception, perhaps, of the United Kingdom and France, are not eager to fight wars unless directly attacked.

Therefore, a combination of the existing NATO deterrence posture in the Baltic States and a more complex Russian perception model of NATO's collective resolve to absorb war-related costs undermines the Alliance's deterrence desired effects. The US military retrenchment from Europe only exacerbates these perceptions. This results in a few incentive loopholes for attack, which the deterrence posture does not block. The existing deterrence posture does not credibly signal NATO's ability and commitment to inflict catastrophic damage on Russia in the event of an attack, in the deterrence-by-punishment scenario; it also does not display sufficient capabilities to deny the objectives of a Russian attack, in the deterrence-by-denial scenario. This section introduced some conceptual foundations related to deterrence, and primarily addressed the perceived costs associated with a deterrence posture and the effective capabilities required to support it. The next section will examine another incentive loophole, elaborating on the effects of NATO's modest resolve to fight and absorb costs.

The Pitfall of NATO's Fears of an "Escalation Trap"

An effective deterrence posture should embrace the risk of escalation – through a counter-escalation strategy – demonstrating a willingness to bear the high costs of war, rather than publicly displaying fear of it. Putin was guided by a similar logic when he recently stated, 'We are not planning to go to war with Europe, but if Europe wants to and starts, we are ready right now' (AFP, 2025). Many security crises begin not because one side believes it will surely win, but because it assigns a very high probability that the other side will yield to its demands, unwilling to pay the costs of fighting. Russia has been extremely effective in exploiting that logic of threats, even before its conventional invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Minzarari, 2021b). This also resulted in Western self-imposition of various restrictions on the use of their weapons supplied to Ukraine, under the baseless justification "to avoid escalation" (Minzarari, 2021a).

It is highly likely that this irresolute behaviour, including the exaggerated fear in the West of a mystical "escalation" (Kayali, 2022; Stein, 2023; Karat-nycky, 2025), has significantly contributed to the consolidation of Russian planners' belief that the West will not intervene, or provide considerable

assistance to Ukraine in the event of a Russian overt attack. In other words, the West signalled to Russia that its costs of invasion would be reduced and practically invited the 2022 military aggression. Ironically, this Western behaviour has also affected Russia's perception of NATO's resolve generally, including that in relation to the defence of its member-states. As argued earlier, because Russia lacks alternative means of assessing NATO's resolve, it interprets previous instances of NATO (un)readiness to militarily defend its interests as a proxy for its resolve. Particularly, since using military force to advance one's interests abroad represents some of the highest costs a country is willing to incur, it serves as a good screening device for NATO's resolve and its level. In the Russian perception, the West's unwillingness to become significantly more involved in Ukraine simply reveals the West's lack of readiness and desire to fight. Russia then logically projects this perception even on the application of NATO's Article 5, since most of the allies will not be defending their own territories. Some Russian analysts may even cynically interpret the invocation of the "escalation" fear by Western politicians as a fake excuse offered to their domestic audience, in order to avoid spending resources on Ukraine.

But how do we make sure that we distinguish between a genuine risk of escalation and a false one? The risk of escalation is the highest when dealing with an insecure type of aggressor – one that is genuinely affected by the security dilemma. This type of actor is more risk-acceptant and willing to shoulder higher costs, as it is more influenced by the underlying logic of an all-out war. In contrast, Russia is a revisionist actor that deceptively invokes insecurity, being less risk-acceptant and only ready to shoulder costs within the limits of its valuation of the good it contested militarily. This latter type of actor can be dealt with by effectively influencing its cost calculations. Russia has been holding on for so long because it expected the Western support to Ukraine to gradually wane. Therefore, it was "gambling for resurrection".[2] Its greatest fear is the West actually sending troops to assist Ukraine in fighting Russia and being ready to shoulder the related costs in

---

[2]   I use the "gambling for resurrection" term somewhat differently than the existing literature, as it is not related to Putin's regime survival calculations. The meaning I invest in this term is that Russian leaders perceive they can persist for a bit longer – gamble their last resources – and then they are likely to outwait the West. This psychological state is severely encouraged by what Russia perceives as hesitance, such as intentional delays in arms assistance, intentional supply of weapons in a gradual manner, public debates about the unsustainable costs of supporting Ukraine, etc.

blood and treasure, as this would mark the end of the Russian aggression and force it to withdraw its troops.

Conclusions and Implications

The current NATO deterrence posture in the Baltic States – its most vulnerable area in the Baltic region – is driven by the logic of punishment (tripwire effect), despite its ambition to work as deterrence by denial. This creates significant problems for NATO, as conventional deterrence by punishment is not effective by design, lacking the credibility to impose catastrophic destruction on the aggressor. While deterrence by denial in conventional conflict is effective, it has very high demands for capabilities and credible signalling of resolve. Since a defender's resolve is difficult for the opposing party to discern, the most influential pre-conflict deterrence proxy is the size of deployed capabilities. The aggressor also tries to gauge the defender's resolve by its willingness to fight and readiness to bear the related costs in recent conflicts or crises. The notorious Western fear of "escalation trap" has shaped Russia's perception of NATO's resolve to a large extent. These two conditions – NATO's lack of credible ability and willingness to inflict catastrophic damage on Russia if attacked and NATO's perceived limited resolve to fight – emerge as two formidable incentive loopholes of NATO's deterrence posture in the Baltic region. To show resolve, NATO has to embrace the risk of a war with Russia, without the fear of "escalation", as its counter-escalation strategy. In doing this, it should keep in mind that Russia is even more afraid of an escalation into war with NATO, since it is not genuinely affected by the security dilemma.

Works Cited

AFP (2025). "If Europe Wants War with Russia, 'We Are Ready,' Putin Says," *The Moscow Times*. [Online]. 2 December 2025. Available at: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/12/02/if-europe-wants-war-with-russia-we-are-ready-putin-says-a91314.

Bertrand, N. and Atwood K. (2025) "NATO divided on how to respond to repeated Russian incursions." [Online]. *CNN*. 25 September 2025. Available at https://edition.cnn.com/2025/09/25/politics/nato-divided-repeated-russian-incursions-response.

Biddle, T. D. (2020) "Coercion Theory: A Basic Introduction for Practitioners," *Texas National Security Review*, 3(2), pp. 94–109.

Burlinova, N. (2010) "NATO v Afganistane: Strategia i Perspektivy." [Online]. *Mirovaya Ekonomika i Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniya*, 8, pp. 76–83. Available at: https://www.imemo.ru/en/index.php?page_id=1248&file=https://www.imemo.ru/files/File/magazines/meimo/08_2010/8-Burlinova.pdf.

CNN (2022) "Interactive: The Turning Points in Russia's Invasion of Ukraine." [Online]. 30 September 2022. Available at: https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2022/09/europe/russia-territory-control-ukraine-shift-dg.

Eckel, M. (2023) "How Did Everybody Get the Ukraine Invasion Predictions So Wrong?" *Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty*. [Online]. 17 February 2023. Available at: https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-ukraine-invasion-predictions-wrong-intelligence/32275740.html.

ERR (2025) "3 Russian fighter jets violate Estonian airspace for 12 minutes." [Online]. 19 September 2025. Available https://news.err.ee/1609806336/3-russian-fighter-jets-violate-estonian-airspace-for-12-minutes.

Fearon, J. D. (1995) "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization*, 49(3), pp. 379–414.

Fearon J. D. (1997) "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 41(1), pp. 68–90.

Goncharov, P. (2009) "Petr Gonacharov: Vvod Voysk v Afganistan Mozhno Schitat' Oshibkoy, No On Byl Neizbezhen," Interview with K. Bogdanov. *MGIMO.ru*. Available at: https://mgimo.ru/afghan/132584.html.

Karatnycky, A. (2025) "Biden's Long Shadow over Ukraine," *Foreign Policy*. 5 December 2025. Available at: https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/12/05/biden-war-ukraine-russia-putin-zelensky-military-aid.

Kayali, L. (2022) "Macron Vows 'De-Escalation,' but Hints at Concessions to Putin," *POLITICO Europe*. [Online]. 6 February 2022. Available at: https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-vows-for-de-escalation-and-dialogue-ahead-of-russian-trip-putin-ukraine.

Kertzer, J. D. and Brutger, R. (2016) "Decomposing Audience Costs: Bringing the Audience Back into Audience Costs Theory," *American Journal of Political Science*, 60(1), pp. 234–249.

Minzarari, D. (2021a) "The Logic of Defence Assistance to Ukraine: A Strategic Assessment," *SWP Comment,* C42. 9 July 2021. Available at: https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2021C42_DefenceAssistanceUkraine.pdf.

Minzarari, D. (2021b) "Russia's Brinkmanship Over Ukraine and Optimal Responses," *SWP Point of View*. 16 December 2021. Available at: https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/russias-brinkmanship-over-ukraine-and-optimal-responses.

Sabbagh, D. (2025) "NATO scrambles jets as Russian drones make the deepest incursion into Romania." [Online]. *The Guardian*. 5 November 2025. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/nov/25/nato-scrambles-jets-russian-drones-deepest-incursion-romania.

Schelling, T. C. (1966). *Arms and Influence*. Veritas paperback edn., 2020. New Heaven: Yale University Press.

Snyder, G. H. (1960) "Deterrence and power," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *4*(2), pp. 163–178.

Spence A. and Kosc W. (2025) "Putin Tests NATO with Drone Assault on Poland," *Politico*. [Online]. 10 September 2025. Available at: https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-scrambles-fighters-shoots-down-russian-drones-after-airspace-violations-ukraine-warning.

Stein J. G. (2023) "Escalation Management in Ukraine: 'Learning by Doing' in Response to the 'Threat that Leaves Something to Chance'," *Texas National Security Review*, 6(3), pp. 30–50.

Taddonio, P. (2015) ""The President Blinked": Why Obama Changed Course on the "Red Line" in Syria," *PBS Frontline*. [Online]. 25 May 2015. Available at: https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-president-blinked-why-obama-changed-course-on-the-red-line-in-syria.

The Utility of Strategic Culture in Understanding Russian Views on European Security

John Kennedy and Nicholas Taylor[*]

Abstract

This article traces the evolution and enduring value of the concept of strategic culture in understanding state behaviour, particularly in defence and foreign policy. Originating with Jack Snyder's 1977 analysis of Soviet nuclear doctrine, strategic culture reframed security studies by emphasising historically-rooted beliefs, norms, and institutional patterns rather than purely rational or material calculations. Subsequent scholarship has expanded its application across states, non-state actors and supranational entities. Still, persistent challenges remain, including definitional ambiguity, generalisation, and debates over continuity and change. Despite this, strategic culture continues to shape policy issues, such as tailored deterrence and other aspects of defence planning. The article highlights Jeannie Johnson's 'cultural topography' approach, which systematises cultural analysis through four "lenses": those of identity, norms, values, and perceptions. Applying this method to Russian policymaking illustrates how deeply embedded perceptions of identity, threat, and power shape its approach to European security under Vladimir Putin's regime. Russia's behaviour in Ukraine reflects a strategic culture emphasising historical grievances, the centrality of force, and the personification of state decisions by the leader. The study concludes that understanding these cultural underpinnings is essential for anticipating Russia's actions, shaping allied policy responses, and informing future strategic stability and deterrence planning.

Introduction

This article describes the development of the concept of strategic culture, which is in its fifth decade, and its considerable potential for informing and analysing foreign policy-making and defence planning. Following

---

a discussion of the challenges associated with instrumentalising interpretations of culture, attention is drawn to the cultural topography method, developed by Jeannie Johnson and her associates. It provides a systematic approach to collecting and synthesising cultural data within four distinct "lenses". Limited application of this method is used to illustrate Russia's strategic approach to European security. The aim of this article is to illustrate the utility that cultural topography offers for guiding analysis of adversaries, improving understandings of their perceptions and setting strategic expectations that can support decision-making.

Evolution of Strategic Culture Theory

The current concept of strategic culture originated with Jack Snyder's ground-breaking 1977 study of Soviet nuclear doctrine (Snyder, 1977). In that report, published by the RAND Corporation, Snyder defined the term as enduring 'beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour patterns' in security affairs. Almost fifty years later, it is easy to overlook how different the perspective put forward by Snyder actually was at the time. Previous assessments of how the Soviet Union conceived the utility of its nuclear weapons overwhelmingly relied on rational choice models of deterrence. They were largely capability-driven, focusing on Soviet force structures, weapons systems, and balance-of-power calculations, and relied on "mirror imaging" – US strategists interpreted Soviet behaviour through their own lens (Johnston, 1995; Booth, 1979). Snyder's innovative approach argued that in reality, the Soviet nuclear doctrine was shaped by a set of ingrained ideas, historical experiences, and institutional norms – in short, it was a unique strategic culture (Gray, 1981).

In the 1980s, early criticism of this approach emphasised that these factors were subjective and hard to quantify, but Snyder's concept remained influential. In the 1990s, Alastair Iain Johnston described China's strategic culture as an "ideational milieu" which constrains the use of force (Johnston, 1995). Comparative studies on this topic expanded across Europe and Asia (Katzenstein, 1995; Johnston, 1995), and, following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, scholars began applying ideas of strategic cultures to a wide range of actors and subjects. This included asking whether non-state actors, such as terrorist groups (Long, 2009), or supranational entities, for example, the EU (Schmitt et al., 2005), have or could have a distinct "strategic culture". Analysts have also begun looking at various issues such as the war on terror,

and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction through a strategic culture lens (Johnson, Kartchner, and Larsen, 2009).

Challenges, Debates, Criticisms, and Limitations

Despite its appeal, strategic culture faces persistent criticism. Conceptual ambiguity is central: the absence of a commonly agreed definition or taxonomy regarding what "is" and "is not" strategic culture makes cross-comparison difficult. Another problem is that overly-rigid interpretations risk implying fixed national characters. Attempting to define the characteristics of an entire group or nationality can lead to overly simplistic analysis which ignores individual agency and other factors that can undermine nuances regarding complex security issues. This can be alleviated by focusing analysis on a nation's "defence and security elite", but it should be acknowledged that within that group there will be multiple different "subcultures", or "belief clusters", which compete for dominance on specific issues (Heuser, 1998).

A third challenge has centred on continuity versus change. It is generally assumed that strategic cultures are slow to change, embedded in institutions and historical memory. However, shocks or dilemmas can cause rapid shifts in security orientations, for example relatively dramatic shifts in Japan's strategic culture after North Korea's 2006 nuclear test (Shinoda, 2011). Consequently, depending on how the Russo-Ukraine conflict ends, it is reasonable to assume that the possible outcome will have a lasting effect on the strategic culture of one or both parties.

Policy Relevance and Applications

Despite criticism, strategic culture has utility in understanding and anticipating state behaviour, particularly in relation to defence planning. This perspective has informed the "tailored deterrence" approach, which gained traction in the 2000s (Payne, 2003; Bunn, 2007). It proposes that, to maximise chances of success, deterrent strategies should be adapted to an adversary's cultural context[1].

---

[1]   Without being in the room where strategies intended to deter Russian actions in Ukraine are being developed (if, indeed, they are being developed), it is difficult to say to what extent the philosophies of tailored deterrence, as set out by Bunn, Payne

Cultural predispositions also shape conventional defence planning. For instance, American strategic culture – amongst other concepts, shaped by a sense of exceptionalism – emphasises direct, technology-intensive warfare (Mahnken, 2009). In contrast, Japan's post-war anti-militarist culture institutionalised restraint through the Yoshida Doctrine and reliance on the US for security (Berger, 1998). Such insights can help policymakers and planners anticipate national choices regarding strategy and defence.

Recent studies that have been particularly beneficial regarding deterrence and influence analysis put forward the "cultural topography" approach developed by Dr Jeannie Johnson of Utah State University and co-authors. They propose four "lenses" or perspectives through which to examine cultural data relating to a group, namely, "identity" (the character traits the group assigns to itself, the reputation it pursues, and individual roles and statuses it designates to members); "norms" (the accepted and expected modes of behaviour of the group); "values" (the material or ideational goods that are honoured or that confer increased status to members in the group); and "perceptual lens" (the filter through which the group determines "facts" about others) (Johnson and Berrett, 2011).

The authors argue that these lenses have considerable value for guiding researchers in the collection and synthesis of evidence relating to the cultural factors that determine the strategic behaviour of states. In the remainder of the article, we briefly examine how they can be applied to Russia's approach to European security under Vladimir Putin's regime and, thereby, offer deeper insight into how Western allies could respond militarily to Russia's aggression in Ukraine, in any negotiations that occur, and overall, in future relations between these parties.

The Main Features of Russian Strategic Culture Pertaining to European Security

Building on recent research by RAND Europe, Russian strategic culture may be described using certain key features (Eken et al., 2025). The *identity* and *values* of the Russian state may be defined in relation to an autocratic political system in which decision-making is centralised and personified by

and others, are being applied. Nonetheless, the author's own experience highlights that, while the core concepts of deterrence are simple to grasp, the practicalities of developing, implementing, and assessing 'integrated' deterrence (i.e., using all levers of national power) campaigns are inherently challenging.

the leader; an orthodox belief system that preaches loyalty and obedience to the state; and a conviction that all Russian and Slavic peoples are to be one nation.[2] Putin defines the latter in terms of "triunity", meaning the historical unity of Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians.

With respect to the *perceptual lens* through which Kremlin leaders understand the world, there is a strong conviction among them that Russia plays a stable historical role as a great power, despite periods of weakness. This power is perceived to be crucial because Russia has been constantly threatened from the West, which seeks to undermine and weaken the country. In these respects, Kremlin leaders are convinced that Russia is and must remain a great power beside and in opposition to the West.

These factors relate closely to a principal *norm* in Russian strategic culture, namely that leaders tend to see the present as deeply rooted in the past. Additionally, perceived threats tend to be addressed in a similar manner and typically with force. Indeed, force is understood to be the primary mode for states to achieve their goals in international relations, which are seen in zero-sum terms. Thus, for Russia to succeed against a stronger adversary – the West – asymmetric means in the information and cyber domains, sabotage, as well as deception, must play an important role.

Although not comprehensive, these features offer a foundation upon which to provide some insight into the current Russian leadership's approach to European security in general, and specifically regarding its aggression in Ukraine. These features may provide an indicative guide for reflecting and anticipating how Russia historically, and Putin's Russia in particular, tends to engage in strategic matters.

At the very least, strategic culture gives insight into the historical and social influences on Russian elites, and the analysis of their behaviour, making it possible for the policymakers to develop capabilities and policies that can ensure strategic stability in the future.

---

[2]   These three features – autocracy, orthodoxy and nationality – are central to the Russian state and were identified in the 19th century by the Russian intellectual and deputy minister of national education Sergei Uvarov (1786–1855). On Uvarov's work see, for example, Whittacker, 1978.

Putin's View on the Security of Europe from 2007

In the years prior to and following 2014, Russia's aggression in Ukraine and in wider Europe was defined by a consistent Kremlin narrative that Russia was threatened by the West and that its security was being undermined. The 2007 Munich speech is generally considered to be the key moment when Putin first articulated this view by rejecting what he perceived as the "unipolar" post-Cold War security order, and objecting to the expansion of NATO, which he described as a 'serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust' (President of Russia, 2007).

In terms of strategic culture, the Munich Speech can be interpreted as a kind of reversion to general type. In that address, Putin argued that the West has been in relative decline as other states developed, notably the BRICS. The speech marked the moment when Putin revealed his determination that, once again, Russia should emerge from a period of weakness to one of independence and regional assertiveness.[3] According to him, throughout its history of over a thousand years, Russia had always exercised its "privilege" to an independent foreign policy (President of Russia, 2007). An alternative interpretation is that the speech was a means to securitise NATO enlargement, and that the Russian military did not actually perceive a real threat. However, there were several aspects which justified and contributed to the Russian military modernisation programmes that began in 2010, such as the military invasion into Georgia in 2008, where the aim was to halt Tbilisi's Western path, and the failures of the Russian Armed Forces in prosecuting that war. In this respect, President Dmitry Medvedev's tenure between 2008–2012 did not substantially alter Russia's anti-Western trajectory.

Clearly, Putin's speech was an articulation of a *particular* strategic perception and not every Russian leader behaves in the same way. Still, it does betray some of the semi-permanent aspects of Russian strategic thinking that are socialised to the level of culture, which Snyder sought to identify when he developed the concept of strategic culture (Snyder, 1977). Indeed, as Serhii Plokhy has shown, Putin's beliefs about Russia, and its relations in Europe, are a synthesis of several historical and intellectual influences (Plohky, 2023). More importantly, the crucial characteristic of

---

[3]   This view of Russia as an independent and influential power in its immediate neighbourhood was held among Russia's foreign policy elite, as described by Averre, 2009.

Russian strategic culture is that its features are ultimately personified in the leader's decisions, and as Plokhy notes, the decision to annex Crimea was taken solely by Putin, without the influence of ministers or advisers (Plohky, 2023).

After the Munich speech, Putin's idea of an East Slavic nation, comprised entirely of "Russian" enclaves including Belarus and Ukraine, became the defining issue in his strategic calculus. In 2014, he stated that 'in people's hearts and minds, Crimea has always been an inseparable part of Russia' (President of Russia, 2014). His 2021 piece 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians' is the definitive precedent on this matter (President of Russia, 2021a). In that work, he drew on Russia's nationalist and orthodox identity, and a perceptual lens in which the West was reaching into regional issues over which which Russia had exclusive privilege. Furthermore, he stated that there were 'millions of people in Ukraine who want to restore relations with Russia', but that an 'anti-Russia agenda is being pursued', 'certain threats are being created' that require a decision from the Kremlin, and that 'Russia's concerns must be taken seriously' (President of Russia, 2021b). Just as in the case of Georgia, within months of Putin talking in such terms, Russia launched its full-scale military invasion of Ukraine.

The Idea of 'Root Causes' and their Implications for Russia's Approach to Negotiations

Putin's perception of the conflict in Ukraine as having "root causes" is crucial to the process of assessing his red lines in this conflict, and his approach to negotiations. As he stated in 2021, 'it is essentially important for all of us to understand the current situation based on the historical context of its roots' (President of Russia, 2021b). This means that Putin views the situation in Ukraine as the result of an anti-Russian project that tries to divide and rule the Russian people. Putin's view is that, despite Russia's botched invasion, an end to the war cannot be agreed unless the West takes its interests into account. To put it another way, Putin will not come to the negotiation table on Western or Ukrainian terms. It follows that Russia is not a reliable negotiating partner and if peace is to be achieved, other means must be applied to push Putin towards dialogue.

The issue of root causes is fundamental for Putin. This is evident from the fact that war is still ongoing, despite shortfalls in Russia's military

campaign to seize Ukraine, the mounting costs to Russia, not least in terms of dead and wounded, and the increasing frequency and impact of Ukrainian attacks on Russian territory. Despite these problems, Putin has not changed his strategic course but doubled down through, most notably, the intensification of defence industrial production, and the introduction of high financial incentives for military recruits.

In the meeting of the Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in September 2025, Putin reiterated what he meant by the root causes. He described a *coup d'état* in Ukraine, which had been supported and provoked by the West, and further repeated that Western attempts to draw Ukraine into NATO pose a security threat to Russia. Putin stated that for the Ukrainian settlement to be 'sustainable and long-term' (i.e., for Russia to stop fighting), 'the root causes of the crisis must be eliminated' (Prezident Rossii 2025).

The Ukrainian leadership understands that Putin's determination to prosecute the Russo-Ukraine war outweighs any regard he might have of its mounting military and economic costs. Despite the challenge of maintaining a defence of the front, Ukraine's strategy has been to increase the cost of the war for ordinary Russians. Since Ukraine has understood that Putin is not willing to concede to the subordination of Ukraine to the Kremlin, Kyiv has started to deploy means that raise domestic pressures on Russia, initially through the 2024 invasion of Kursk and most recently through increased targeted attacks on Russia's energy infrastructure. To Ukraine, submission to the Kremlin is intolerable. The seriousness with which Ukraine takes Putin's narrative is instructive, despite its clear falsity. Indeed, that narrative should be the basis for relentless allied support to Kyiv. To put it another way, Ukraine's allies should understand that Putin must be stopped militarily if he is not to come back for more later.

Is Putin's Messaging out of Synch with Reality?

In 2025, Putin was caught in a military stalemate but started promoting the idea that, thanks to its actions thwarting the West and invading Ukraine, Russia was once again a key player in international state security. For him, even though discussions with the US government about the possibility of negotiations achieved little, they gave him a platform for bilateral dialogue, and an opportunity to talk about the so-called root causes of

the Russo-Ukrainian war the Russo-Ukrainian war. In his strategic view, meetings with the US President about security in Europe are a result in themselves, because they demonstrate the central duality in international relations that he covets. As Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated in his September 2025 speech to the UN General Assembly, Russia believes, on the one hand, that NATO is "finding itself cramped" and expanding, and the West seeks the 'strategic defeat of Russia', but, on the other, that 'Russia and the US bear a special responsibility for the state of affairs in the world' (Lavrov, 2025).

Indeed, at a time when Russia also benefits from the economic, political, and diplomatic support of China, Putin is claiming something of a strategic victory, despite the enormous costs he has incurred, an uncertain outcome and a sense that Ukraine may be gaining an upper hand through its attacks on Russian infrastructure. At the 2025 meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club, he stated that international relations are undergoing a 'radical transformation' in which a multipolar world is emerging directly because of Russia's effort to test Western hegemony. As he said: 'the global system… needs Russia as a very significant part of the overall balance' (President of Russia, 2025).

Implications for Policymaking

Overall, the cultural topography approach can be used to collate and synthesise some of the most crucial traits related to the strategic culture of Russia. It clearly reveals Putin's grievances about NATO and the "root causes" of the war in Ukraine, which may appear absurd to observers in the West, but which were sufficient for him to start a war and devote enormous resources to sustaining an offensive over years, despite limited returns. It also serves to reveal the growing risk that Putin will intensify claims that Russia's military actions in Ukraine has resulted in a kind of victory for international relations, which is also clearly false. Thus, the cultural topographical approach can serve to identify the core tenets and traits in Russian leadership that should guide Western policy-makers. These tenets inform Putin's engagement with the US, China, and NATO, and any future effort he makes to justify an end to the war on his own terms. As the Ukrainian government has consistently stated, it is impossible to negotiate with a country that does not recognise its existence, and that only

by defeating or continuing to weaken Russia in the military, economic, and social spheres, can enough leverage be gained to start negotiations.

Conclusion

This article outlined the historical development of the strategic culture paradigm, and the challenge of making strategic cultural analysis applicable for the defence and security policymaking and planning communities. However, the "cultural topography" approach, which involves the collection of cultural material and its synthesis within a framework of four "lenses", can practically support strategic culture assessment, enabling analysts to set expectations and assumptions that can inform policy and capability development. To illustrate this, some of the principal features of Russian strategic culture were examined through these lenses to derive indicative insights into how the Russian regime views European security. This enabled the authors to highlight some crucial aspects of Putin's strategic calculus, which have consistently underpinned Russia's posture on Europe, and which continue to inform Putin's strategic messaging. Such observations can frame allies' thinking about how to interpret and anticipate Russia's ongoing aggression on the continent and set expectations that underpin effective planning for the future.

Works Cited

Averre, D. (2009) 'Competing Rationalities: Russia, the EU and the "Shared Neighbourhood"', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 62(10), pp. 1689–1713.

Berger, T.U. (1998) *Cultures of Antimilitarism: National Security in Germany and Japan*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Booth, K. (1979) *Strategy and Ethnocentrism*. Croom Helm.

Bunn, E. (2007) *Can Deterrence be Tailored?* Strategic Forum No. 225. NDU Press.

Eken, M., Suman-Chauhan, K., Aubert, B. and van Hooft, P. (2025) *Understanding Russian Strategic Culture and the Low-Yield Nuclear Threat*. RAND Europe. Available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA3859-1.html.

Gray, C.S. (1981) 'National Style in Strategy: The American Example', *International Security*, 6(2), pp. 21–47.

Heuser, B. (1998) *Nuclear Mentalities? Strategies and Beliefs in Britain, France and the FRG*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Johnson, J.L. and Berrett, M.T. (2011) 'Cultural Topography: A New Research Tool for Intelligence Analysis', *Studies in Intelligence*, 55(2).

Johnson, J.L., Kartchner, K.M. and Larsen, J.A. (eds.) (2009) *Strategic Culture and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Culturally Based Insights into Comparative National Security Policymaking*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Johnston, A.I. (1995) *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History*. Princeton University Press, pp. 34–40.

Katzenstein, P.J. (ed.) (1995) *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*. Columbia University Press.

Lavrov, S. (2025) 'Russian Federation – Foreign Minister Address United Nations General Debate – 80th Session'. United Nations. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=euE0LZwvmwo.

Long, J.M. (2009) 'Strategic Culture, Al-Qaeda, and Weapons of Mass Destruction', in Johnson, J.L., Kartchner, K.M. and Larsen, J.A. (eds.) *Strategic Culture and Weapons of Mass Destruction*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Mahnken, T.G. (2009) 'US Strategic and Organisational Subcultures', in Johnson, J.L., Kartchner, K.M. and Larsen, J.A. (eds.) *Strategic Culture and Weapons of Mass Destruction*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Payne, K. (2003) 'The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence and a New Direction', *Comparative Strategy*, 22(5), pp. 411–428.

Plokhy, S. (2023) *The Russo-Ukrainian War*. Allen Lane.

President of Russia (2007) 'Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference of Security Policy'. Available at: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034.

President of Russia (2014) 'Address by the President of the Russian Federation'. Available at: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603.

President of Russia (2021a) 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians'. Available at: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181.

President of Russia (2021b) 'Vladimir Putin answered questions on the article "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians"'. Available at: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66191.

President of Russia (2025) 'Valdai Discussion Club Meeting'. Available at: http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/78134.

Prezident Rossii (2025) 'Zasedaniye Sovyeta glav gosudarstv – chlenov ShOS'. Available at: http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/77891#sidebar.

Schmitt, B., Howlett, D., Simpson, J., Müller, H. and Tertrais, B. (2005) *Effective Non-Proliferation: The European Union and the 2005 NPT Review Conference*. Chaillot Paper 77. EU Institute for Security Studies.

Shinoda, T. (2011) 'Japan's Security Policy and the Transformation of Its Strategic Culture', *Asian Security*, 7(1), pp. 35–52.

Snyder, J.L. (1977) *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations*. RAND Corporation. Available at: https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reports/2005/R2154.pdf.

Whittacker, C.H. (1978) 'The Ideology of Sergei Uvarov: An Interpretive Essay', *The Russian Review*, 37(2), pp. 158–176.

Magical Realism? Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of the Nordic-Baltic Region

Tormod Heier[*]

Abstract

This chapter examines whether Russia's war in Ukraine has fostered a Nordic-Baltic variant of "magical realism" – a strategic narrative in which improbable scenarios are normalised as politically plausible. Drawing on regional history and contemporary threat perceptions, it traces how Russia's brutality and ambiguity amplify anxieties while institutional assessments (NATO, EUCOM) risk overemphasising Russian reconstitution and underestimating allied advantages. The analysis situates quantitative claims within their social-scientific limits – constructed metrics, neglected error margins, and technocratic drift – and contrasts them with structural realities: Russia's military attrition, economic strain, and likely preference for sub-threshold coercion over large-scale invasion. It argues that the centre of gravity in the Nordic–Baltic region is not the Baltic Defence Line but the confidence-based social contract that binds ministers, mayors, police chiefs, and citizens. The strategic task is therefore twofold: pierce magical realism with contextualised appraisal, and prioritise resilience against hybrid operations – sabotage, cyber, influence, and aerial incursions – designed to erode public trust and allied resolve.

Introduction

Has Russia's war in Ukraine nurtured a distinctly Nordic–Baltic variant of "magical realism" – a strategic narrative in which a plausible chain of events gradually shades into a seeming fiction, yet remains treated as realistic and politically imaginable? Borrowing from its origins in Latin

---

[*]   Tormod Heier is a Visiting Researcher at Boston University in Massachusetts and a Professor of Military Strategy and Operations at the Norwegian Defence University College in Oslo. With 30 years of service as an officer in the Norwegian Army, Heier brings extensive operational and institutional experience, including roles in the Intelligence Service, the Ministry of Defence, Brigade North, and international deployment in Afghanistan.

American literature, "magical realism" describes a worldview in which the extraordinary is woven into an otherwise ordinary setting and is treated as normal rather than fantastical. The supernatural is not questioned or framed as an anomaly; it is presented as a natural extension of everyday reality. Miraculous or improbable developments are narrated in the same tone as routine occurrences, without justification or surprise. In such a narrative space, the boundary between the ordinary and the extraordinary dissolves, and both coexist comfortably.

In the European periphery – particularly in the Nordic–Baltic region, where geopolitical fragility is layered onto deep historical memory – this logic resonates strongly: strategic fears that during the 1990s seemed slightly more improbable now appear not only possible, but increasingly normalised. Here, along the Russian rim, democratic communities have for generations experienced Stalinist brutality: mass deportations, political suppression, ethnic discrimination, invasion, and systemic identity extinction. Magical realism in Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania thus becomes a natural outcome of a post-colonial experience – a history shaped by two opposing realities: that of the conqueror and that of the conquered.

Russia's unprecedented brutality in Ukraine has fuelled this narrative. Beyond Finno-Baltic territories, millions of Europeans in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark believe that World War III may soon commence. Within two to five years – once Ukraine has crumbled under Russian belligerence or a stalemate has been installed – the world's largest state will turn its wrath westward, toward NATO's Achilles' heel: Europe's most vulnerable outpost, the Nordic-Baltic region (SAB, 2024; DDIS, 205). But how likely is this worst-case scenario?

Strategies Fuelling War

Are new military adventures – from Northern Norway, along the Finnish border, and into the Baltics – a realistic option for Russia? Or is it merely an awkward form of magical realism: a narrative forged by irrational consternation among smaller states unable to defend themselves? The answer is that nobody knows. Decision-makers in Moscow, Helsinki, Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius are definitively adrift. Strategy is, after all, about managing the unforeseen. While minor disputes with Russia's hybrid warriors in the FSB, GRU, and SVR ebbs and flows, the point is – as always – to 'get more

out of a situation than the starting balance of power would suggest'. This is, as pointed out by Sir Lawrence Freedman, Strategy: 'the art of creating power' (Freedman 2013, xii). In the Nordic-Baltic region and beyond, power is created by taking precautionary action. Just in case minor disputes, accidentally or deliberately, spiral out of control. Under the Latin adage *Si vis pacem, para bellum* (if you want peace, prepare for war), Russian and Baltic adversaries act proactively against each other's pre-emptive efforts of attaining security.

But even though proactive defence conveys defensive intentions, the "collective West's" body language is always contextualised offensively by Russia. The escalating tit-for-tat logic that ultimately evolves leaves both Russia and the Nordic-Baltic region worse off. Even though NATO's 2025 modernisation plan is valued at $1 trillion, and even though six percent of Russia's 2025 budget goes to defence, spiralling counter-reactions only fuel more uncertainty. This is fertile ground for magical realism: the psychological tension thrives while perceptions of an increasingly lowered threshold for a full-scale Russian attack accelerate. Under such circumstances, academics have one task: to plunge through magical realism and scrutinise how realistic a Russian full-scale invasion is.

Territorial Ambitions

Such scrutiny builds upon information, but data is never neutral. Empirical evidence of imminent or plausible Russian war plans are therefore inherently uncertain. This is partly because the Kremlin pursues a doctrine of strategic ambiguity; a rule of thumb designed to instil fear among smaller neighbours. As ambiguity fuels Russian respect and recognition, Nordic-Baltic anxiety is a valued currency in Moscow. But uncertainty also thrives because war plans are made within a complex social and political context. Putin's psychology, Kremlin groupthink and self-censorship, Russia's economy, and its' Armed Forces' operational status vis-à-vis NATO rivals – these are all fluctuating variables and vague indicators. Sometimes they co-vary, sometimes not. Russian war planning is, by and large, a social phenomenon with no clear-cut answers.

Consistent patterns of intent may nevertheless be traced. For as long as President Putin craves a multipolar world free from American dominance, Russian foreign policy ambitions will likely follow a two-tier approach: (i)

break the transatlantic relationship that allows US and European forces to operate effectively in the Nordic-Baltic region and (ii) re-establish the exclusive sphere of influence that Russia once enjoyed. This approach provides Moscow's General Staff with strategic depth and warning time – geopolitical principles that insulate Russian resilience against the West's coercive diplomacy. In doing so, Putin seeks to elevate Russia into the inner circle of global powers.

These ambitions are reinforced by political rhetoric. The Kremlin's narrative against the Baltic states increasingly resembles the discourse used prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russkiy Mir (the Russian World) functions as both an ideological and geographic expression of expansionist intent – a humiliated power that seeks revenge by reclaiming former territories. States that historically belonged to the Soviet Union, the Russian Empire, the Grand Duchy of Moscow, or even Kyivan Rus, cannot be considered safe (President of Russia, 2021). This rhetoric is energised by political programmes aimed to protect "compatriots abroad". Countries like Estonia and Latvia, where approximately 25 to 30 percent of the population is Russophone, are thereby part of Russkiy Mir. From this, we may logically expect that large swaths of the Nordic-Baltic region should be reunited with Russia's "historical territories".

No Biases Attached?

But rhetorical language is only words, and words are empty unless they are underpinned by capabilities and put into action. Evidence-based facts are therefore essential, including those from NATO and US European Command (EUCOM). According to NATO's Secretary General, Mark Rutte, Russia's wartime production is four times the Alliance's annual output; within five years Russia could be fully combat-ready. NATO members would thus require a 400% increase in air and missile defence, thousands of additional armoured vehicles and tanks, millions of shells, and more robust logistics, transport, supply, and medical support (Chatham House, 2025). But how objective are these claims?

On one reading, they align with EUCOM's 2025 testimony. General Christopher Cavoli told the US Senate Armed Services Committee that Russia is producing "vast quantities" of new hardware and reconstituting forces faster than expected. He cited roughly 1,500 tanks, 3,000 armoured vehicles,

and about 200 Iskander and cruise missiles annually; Russian shell output already exceeds projected US-European monthly production (≈250,000 vs. ≈180,000). Russia is reportedly on track for 1.5 million active personnel, recruiting ~30,000 per month, with ~600,000 on the Ukrainian front. Forces that were "poorly resourced and disorganised" in early 2022 have "improved significantly" and gained combat experience (United States Senate Armed Services Committee, 2025).

On another reading, neither NATO nor EUCOM is neutral. Their assessments arise from institutional incentives and member-state intelligence, shaped by professional socialisation and doctrinal preferences. This is not hard science; it is social science, and thus interpretive. Even when judgments converge under a shared flag or trusted commanders, numbers warrant caution. Quantification compresses multidimensional realities into narrow metrics; what resists operationalisation is sidelined. Because figures look impartial, they are treated as objective even when embedding cultural or ideological assumptions – what appears "measured" is often constructed. Error margins – labour shortages, technological constraints, defence-industrial choke points, contestable assumptions about Russia's combat effectiveness – are easily forgotten downstream. And because numbers aggregate and display well, they can crowd out domain knowledge, historical experience, and qualitative expertise, yielding technocratic decisions that are statistically defensible yet strategically shallow. Most importantly, Russia's strengths and NATO's shortcomings are often insufficiently contextualised. A recurring Western pattern is to overstate Russian reconstitution while underestimating the Alliance's structural advantages. A more balanced appraisal situates quantitative claims within a broader strategic context – and recognises what numbers can and cannot show.

On Strengths and Vulnerabilities

The dynamics on the Ukrainian battlefield invite many interpretations – some of which are less influenced by Western delusions or defeatism. Thanks to Putin's ill-conceived 2022-decision to launch a strategic assault on Ukraine, the Kremlin is now arguably at its weakest military position since World War II. Since 1945, neither the Soviet Union nor Russia has suffered losses as staggering as those seen in Ukraine – amounting to over one million casualties.

According to Ukraine's Ministry of Defence (2025), Russian forces have lost approximately 170,000 pieces of military hardware, including 11,000 tanks, 30,000 artillery systems, 23,000 armoured vehicles, 420 planes, 340 helicopters, and 28 ships.[1] The Kremlin's misjudgement of a swift regime change in Europe's second-largest state has backfired – drawing two of Russia's most strategically sensitive buffer states, Sweden and Finland, into the world's mightiest military alliance.

As Russia's armed forces became bogged down in the Donbas quagmire, the Nordic-Baltic region has witnessed an unprecedented surge in foreign military support. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are no longer defended by small NATO tripwire battalions from 13 member states, as was the case during the post-Crimean 2014–2022 era. Today, Russia's western rim states face a growing and coherent NATO reinforcement and readiness architecture at the divisional level, from 18 European member states that ruinously rotates in and out of the region. This means that if Russia launches a military attack, it will not be a war between Russia and the Baltic states, but between Russia and 30 European countries – that is part of a US-led alliance accountable for more than half of the world's military expenditure. Only the European NATO-allies spend twice as much as Russia on defence, they have a ninefold economic output (GDP), twice as many soldiers and a threefold population. These resources are gradually enabled partly through NATO's streamlined command structure in Brunssum, Netherlands, but also through bilateral agreements under the United States' global Security Cooperation Agreement regime: Combined, the eight Nordic-Baltic nations benefit from no fewer than 58 US-designated military areas, allowing the world's most capable military power to project force into the region rapidly, if needed.

In addition to these bilateral agreements, NATO's multinational framework further reinforces the region's security. The Western surge in military investment has made the Nordic-Baltic region part of a military alliance capable of mobilizing approximately 3.4 million troops, 22,000 aircraft, and 2,100 naval vessels (Statista, 2025). Altogether, the 32 NATO member states account for 55 percent of global military spending – 31 percent more than in 2015 (NATO, 2025a). Many member states also possess some of the world's largest economies, including Germany, the

---

[1]   Ukraine's Ministry of Defence is soaked into an existential war for survival. Figures, numbers and assessments from the Ministry must therefore be taken with a grain of salt due to political, institutional, and value-based biases.

United Kingdom, and France. This means the Nordic-Baltic region is now integrated into an alliance that collectively produces more than half of the world's total GDP.

High Risk, Low Reward

What most directly threatens the Nordic-Baltic region is the world's largest state – Russia – whose economy is roughly the size of Texas. Russia is in demographic decline, losing nearly 700,000 citizens annually to natural causes since 2020 (Rosstat, 2025). About 700,000 men fled after the Kremlin announced mobilisation amid Ukraine's counteroffensive in September 2022. Approximately one million have fled, died or become severely wounded.

Since the full-scale invasion, the Russian Army has lost its 170 battalion tactical groups – once the jewel of its force – designed to penetrate defences and seize territory. It has also forfeited much of its capacity for large-scale, joint air–ground operations at brigade and divisional levels. This degradation reflects the deaths of thousands of experienced officers; the loss of junior and mid-level leaders with joint expertise; reliance on undertrained replacements; and rigid, centralised command with insecure communications and weak battlefield networking. Consequently, Russia has been forced into a personnel-intensive war of attrition. Operating largely at platoon and company echelons, tactics are more often infiltrations with two to five men, or small-scale motorcycle and car manoeuvres than complex, multi-domain operations across land, sea, air, cyber, and space (ISW, 2025).

Unable to win decisive battles, the military offers large bonuses – roughly 25 months of salary – to attract up to 30,000 recruits per month. Territorial gains nevertheless remain modest: in 2023 fewer than 500 square kilometres, in 2024 slightly over 4,000 (≈0.7% of Ukraine), and by mid-2025 roughly 3,500, or ≈0.6% of the country.

Labour, Inflation, and Strategic Costs

Russia's war strategy has produced a tightening labour market. A shortage of working-age men is pushing up wages across sectors. Attritional warfare that prizes quantity over skill carries a familiar macroeconomic cost: an overheated economy. Rising wages lift consumption and, in turn, prices, and inflation. Officially, inflation sits just below 10% (TradingEconomics.com,

2025); unofficial estimates place it nearer 15%. In response, the Central Bank raised the policy rate to 21% – a 22-year high – before cutting to 16,5% in October, while mortgage rates spiked above 30% and now hover in the mid-20s (Kluge, 2025). If Moscow intends to rebuild its forces and expand the personnel pool to 1,5 million, the labour shortfall will impose substantial economic costs.

At the same time, Russia faces agile adversaries – foremost a US military that accounts for over 40% of global defence spending. At NATO's 2025 summit, all 32 leaders reaffirmed an "ironclad commitment" to Article 5 (NATO, 2025b). The result is a credible US-anchored deterrent in which nuclear forces play an increasingly central role. Despite President Trump's pressure on NATO-Europe over decades of free-riding, Nordic-Baltic allies have been reassured that the US pivot to Asia will proceed "step by step", leaving "no capability gaps for NATO in Europe" (Chatham House, 2025).

Russia's Battle-Avoidant Modus Operandi

To avoid a nuclear escalation that leaves everybody worse off, Russia's most likely course of action will unfold below the threshold of open war. This reflects its limited capacity to sustain effective operations along a 3,172-kilometre front from the Barents Sea to Kaliningrad – and potentially farther west and south – and its long-term tie-down in the Donbas. A full-scale attack on Northern Norway, parts of Finland, or the Baltics is unlikely absent control of eastern Ukraine. Europe's second-largest force – roughly 900,000 active Ukrainian troops – will bind significant Russian capacity for years. This is even though the force will be reduced to 600,000 or 800,000 in an eventual US-brokered peace deal. Russian bindings will partly be due to persistent small-scale insurgent operations in Donbas, and partly by deployments along key corridors on the Russo-Ukrainian front.

Accordingly, the Nordic–Baltic region is unlikely to face a sweeping invasion through the 2020s and well into the 2030s. Instead, governments, military commands, mayors, police chiefs, and citizens will confront persistent, sub-threshold disruption: airspace incursions (e.g., the September 2025 breaches over Estonia and drone violations of Polish airspace), alongside hybrid attacks on critical vulnerabilities within civic communities. Such activity will not flow primarily through Russia's conventional chain of command but through security services like the FSB, GRU, SVR, and

Wagner; agencies operating with proxies in civilian guise with increasingly broader mandates.

Rather than major incursions, Russia's preferred course of action is more likely to feature targeted violence, weaponised migration, election interference, cyberattacks, sabotage, and provocative aerial intrusions. The near-term objective is less the forcible realisation of *Russkiy Mir* than the cultivation of anxiety, defeatism, and political paralysis inside Nordic–Baltic civic communities.

Targeting the Confidence-Based Social Contract

This strategy follows an enduring logic commonly attributed to the Chinese general and philosopher Sun Tzu (2020), 2500 years ago: avoid strength and attack weakness; strike where the opponent is most vulnerable. As long as the Nordic-Baltic region remains within NATO, core vulnerabilities lie not along the Baltic Defence Line but in the political domain – above all, the collective will in Berlin, London, Paris and Washington to accept risk and, if necessary, use force even though their own citizens are not directly threatened.

The Baltic-Nordic region's first line of defence is therefore not NATO's material preponderance. It is the social fabric that bind together ministers, generals, mayors, police chiefs, and citizens – within a resilient community of like-minded states. Hence Russia's high-value target is the Western bond of public trust and confidence: the social contract between citizens and the state – the glue that holds governed and governance together (Borch and Heier, 2024). Membership in the world's most powerful alliance counts for little if the will to act erodes under the sway of "magical realism".

Look to Latvia

A useful approach may be to follow Latvia's strategy. Its comparatively high spending on "public order and safety" reflects a deliberate effort to protect what it sees as its foremost vulnerability: internal cohesion and the will to resist Russian harassment. Russia's most likely course of action is therefore understood primarily as an internal-security challenge rather than an external military contingency (Schultz et al., 2026). Unlike Estonia and Lithuania – where key hybrid-threat capabilities sit within defence,

cyber-defence, or strategic-communication structures – Latvia locates the core of its hybrid-threat response in Ministry of the Interior agencies, including the State Police, the State Security Service (VDD), the State Border Guard, and civil-protection and crisis-response bodies (Latvian Ministry of the Interior, 2023; Baltic Perspective, 2022). This placement directs the cost of safeguarding its most critical vulnerability into the public-order budget rather than defence. Consequently, Latvia's budgetary profile highlights a strategic choice that prioritise policing, internal security, and societal resilience over a slightly one-sided military expansion. In comparative perspective, this interior-centred model makes Latvia more dependent on internal-security institutions than its Baltic neighbours and helps explain its higher public-order expenditure.

Works Cited

Baltic Perspective (2022) *Hybrid Threats: The Baltic Perspective*. Helsinki Commission. Available at: https://www.csce.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/RKols_Hybrid-threats-Baltic-Perspective-2022.pdf.

Borch, O.J. and Heier, T. (eds.) (2025) *Preparing for Hybrid Threats to Security: Collaborative Preparedness and Response*. London: Routledge.

Chatham House (2025) 'Nato chief Mark Rutte warns Russia could use military force against allied in five years'. 9 June. Available at: www.chathamhouse.org/2025/06/nato-chief-mark-rutte-warns-russia-could-use-military-force-against-alliance-five-years.

DDIS — Forsvarets Efterretningstjeneste (2025) *Opdateret vurdering af truslen fra Rusland mod Rigsfællesskabet*. Danish Defence Intelligence Service.

Freedman, L. (2013) *Strategy: A History*. Oxford University Press.

ISW — Institute for the Study of War (2025) *Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, 26 April 2025*. Available at: www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-april-26-2025.

Kluge, J. (2024) *The Russian Economy at a Turning Point*. SWP, 29 November. Available at: www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/the-russian-economy-at-a-turning-point.

Latvian Ministry of the Interior (2023) 'Internal security – one of the priorities of the 2024 budget', 3 November. Available at: https://www.iem.gov.lv/en/article/internal-security-one-priorities-2024-budget.

NATO (2023) 'Speech by the Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Folk och Försvar conference in Sälen, Sweden'. 8 January. Available at: www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_210454.htm.

NATO (2025a) 'NATO military spending surges driving up global total'. *NATO Watch*, 28 April. Available at: https://natowatch.org/newsbriefs/2025/nato-miliary-spending-surges-driving-global-total.

NATO (2025b) *The Summit Declaration*. NATO Press Release, 25 June. Available at: www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_236705.htm.

President of Russia (2021) 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians'. 12 June. Available at: www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181.

Rosstat — Federal State Statistics Service (2025) *Russia 2025*. Available at: https://eng.rosstat.gov.ru/storage/mediabank/Russia%202025.pdf.

SAB — Satversmes aizsardzības birojs (2024) *Annual Public Report 2024*. Constitution Protection Bureau. Available at: https://www.sab.gov.lv/en/annual-reports/.

Schultz, E., Bajarūnas, E. et al. (2026) 'Understanding resilience to hybrid threats in the Baltics', in Schultz, E. et al. (eds.) *Democratic Resilience in the Baltics*, Vol. 1 (Baltic Security and Defence). Springer.

Statista (2025) 'Comparison of the military capabilities of NATO and Russia as of 2025'. Available at: www.statista.com/statistics/1293174/nato-russia-military-comparison/.

Sun, T. (2020) *The Art of War*. London: Arcturus Publishing.

Tradingeconomics.com (2025) 'Russia Inflation Rate'. Available at: www.tradingeconomics.com/russia/inflation-cpi.

Ukraine Ministry of Defence (2025) *Russian Losses in Ukraine*. Available at: www.ukrainewarlosses.com.

United States Armed Services Committee (2025) *Statement of General Christopher G. Cavoli, United States Army, United States European Command*. 3 April. Available at: www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/general_cavoli_opening_statements.pdf.

From Crimea to Vilnius: The Instrumentalisation of History in Russian Hybrid Warfare

Dr. Ramūnas Trimakas[*]

Abstract

In the evolving post-Cold War order, Russian revanchism has emerged not merely as nostalgia for Soviet or tsarist legacies but as a neo-imperial project framed in narratives of historical injustice and civilisational mission. Since Crimea's 2014 annexation and especially after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, it has shown overt disregard for smaller states' sovereignty, notably in the Baltic region. Central to this agenda is the manipulation of historical memory, where anti-fascist rhetoric serves less as reckoning and more as a weapon to delegitimise states resisting Moscow's influence. Recent monographs – *History of Ukraine* (2022) and *History of Lithuania* (2025) – illustrate this by presenting archival evidence while advancing state-aligned narratives that prioritise ideology over analysis. As Lithuania responds with heightened securitisation, the fusion of sponsored historiography, and weaponised identity politics reveals history's role in geopolitical disruption. These trends signal a twenty-first-century recalibration of imperial influence, where the battle for meaning precedes that for territory. This article introduces Litvinism as a hybrid threat within the Kremlin's memory wars, offering the first systematic analysis in English of how Russia weaponises medieval history to destabilise Baltic statehood.

Introduction

The concept of a "Cold Peace" between the West and Russia was identified over two decades ago (Bugajski, 2004), yet many Western states were reluctant to acknowledge this evident reality, even following Russia's overt military aggression against Georgia (Sakartvelo), the so-called Putin "Munich Speech", and a series of high-profile assassinations on NATO member states' territories. In recent years, the rapidly evolving security environment in

---

[*] Dr. Ramūnas Trimakas is an Associate Professor at the General Jonas Žemaitis Military Academy of Lithuania.

Europe can no longer be dismissed as a 'series of regrettable misunderstandings' or 'spontaneous expressions of the Russian Federation's discontent'. The Kremlin's leadership has deliberately embarked on a path of global confrontation, consistently articulating its intentions publicly while methodically pursuing its stated objectives (Radchenko, 2024). Russia's systematic escalation of tensions with Western states inevitably reverberates across the countries of the former Soviet bloc, which the Kremlin continues to regard as its 'legitimate sphere of influence' (Herpen, 2024). The current Russian leadership responds swiftly to actual or perceived shifts in what it terms the 'empire's limitrophes': territories once under its dominion are considered merely temporarily lost. The primary objective is to maintain these states within Russia's economic, political, and cultural orbit, with the ultimate aim, in the near future, of reintegrating them into a reconstituted empire (Schoen, 2016). In this context, the Republic of Lithuania is perceived as a minor and insignificant geopolitical entity within the broader scheme of revanchism. More precisely, it is the 'Baltic states' (rus. Pribaltika) – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – that are typically conceptualised and articulated in Russian geopolitical and historical narratives as a cohesive unit. The selective focus on individual Baltic states serves a singular purpose: to accelerate the 'reintegration' of the entire region. To achieve this, Russian strategists employ tactics of manipulation, division, and polarisation within the region (Clarke, 2023).

The ambivalent attitude towards the Baltic states is not arbitrary. On one hand, they are deemed small and inconsequential, with their "reclamation" seen as merely a matter of time. On the other hand, the recurrent expressions of discontent and propagandistic offensives appear disproportionate, given the Kremlin's proclaimed view of the Baltic states' "insignificance". This stance is frequently justified by the narrative of the "collapse of the greatest state", with the "Balts" accused of precipitating the Soviet Union's dissolution. Additionally, the motif of "unprecedented betrayal" is recurrent: the Baltic states' membership in NATO and the European Union is typically framed by contemporary Russian ideologues not only as "ingratitude" but as an act of overt hostility. Under these circumstances, a critical examination of the historical revanchism propagated in contemporary Russia is imperative. Russia's "restoration of national dignity" has proven catastrophic for some neighbours and remains a looming threat to others.

While Russian revisionism in Ukraine has been extensively studied, this paper breaks new ground by examining Litvinism as a Kremlin-orchestrated

memory weapon targeting Lithuania and the wider Baltic space. Russia employs a broad repertoire of information warfare and hybrid operations to destabilise so called "former Soviet republics", ranging from disinformation campaigns to the instrumentalisation of historical narratives. Among these, Belarusian Litvinism has been strategically co-opted as a vehicle for sowing discord between Lithuania and Belarus, thereby advancing Moscow's broader objective of undermining regional cohesion through manipulated memory politics. In light of current geopolitical realities, it is essential to critically examine both Russia's pseudo-historical narratives – used to justify claims over neighbouring territories – and the historical distortions propagated by its Belarusian satellite actors.

The Past as Battleground: Russian Revanchism and the Historiographical Frontiers of Modern Propaganda

The utilisation of history as a domain for ideological and propagandistic contestation has deep-rooted traditions in contemporary Russia. The Soviet regime refined and expanded the narrative of "Mother Russia encircled by enemies", a propaganda model that primarily emphasised supranational and class-based dimensions of an imagined global confrontation, underscoring the inevitability of a triumphant conflict with Western states in the near future. Depending on the shifting priorities of the ruling Communist Party factions, the most menacing adversaries were depicted as either "bourgeois democracies" or "fascist regimes". Following the conclusion of the Second World War, the latter term acquired profoundly negative connotations. In the present context, this propaganda arsenal – adapted to contemporary realities and emphasising national and patriotic (Russian) motifs – has been reinvigorated with notable intensity (Roozendaal, 2024).

In the current propaganda framework, Lithuania, alongside the other Baltic states, is portrayed not merely as an unreliable subordinate that has defected to a hostile camp, but also as a dangerous provocateur actively undermining regional stability as well as a puppet of Western aggression. If the Russian Federation is conceptualised as the legal successor to the Soviet Union (while explicitly disavowing the crimes committed by Soviet leadership) and even as a continuation of its policies, then Lithuania, together with the other Baltic states, is correspondingly framed as a natural perpetuator of the pre-war republic's "fascist traditions" as well as a collaborator in and

rehabilitator of Nazi crimes.[1] Since the historical "yesterday" is presented by Kremlin propagandists as a perpetually recurring "today", the motif of combating fascism is depicted as an ongoing process.[2] The notion of a "holy war" has been revived, manifesting not only in the cultural sphere (more narrowly, on the ideological front) but also in the war-torn landscape of Ukraine, with threats to extend the theatre of military confrontation to the Baltic states, justified by the same pseudo-historical arguments of "restoring justice". The propagation of the Russian "historical narrative", and of Russian culture more broadly, is portrayed by Kremlin propagandists as a non-military and minimally disruptive "inoculation" against "fascisation" for neighbouring countries. This, however, represents merely a preparatory phase for far more significant geopolitical and socio-economic "transformations", which Russia positions itself to impose upon its neighbours.

Two monographs, History of Ukraine: A Monograph (Istoriya Ukrainy: monografiya, 2022) and History of Lithuania: A Monograph (*Istoriya Litvy:*

---

[1]   Such studies as *Baltic Fascism* (Крысин, 2007), a hefty tome of 576 pages, unfolds in a linear yet tendentious chronology, commencing with the interwar ferment of the 1920s and culminating in the "post-Soviet relapse" of the early 2000s – a span that, methinks, doth conveniently elide the depredations of Stalinist incorporation to spotlight Baltic "ingratitude". Though bereft of a rigid chapter rubric in accessible synopses, the work's architecture mirrors Soviet historiographical templates: prefatory broadsides against "bourgeois falsifiers", a meaty core of archival exegeses on World War II collaboration, and a perorative coda linking yesteryear's legions to today's legislatures. This triptych – genesis, apogee, perpetuity – serves not mere chronicle, but *causa sine qua non* for Russian exceptionalism, wherein Baltic agency is ever subordinated to external puppeteers: Weimar Germany in the 1930s, the Reich in the 1940s, and NATO in the *fin de siècle.*

[2]   This revanchism, far from an atavistic spasm, manifests as a multifaceted assault – hybrid in its modalities, encompassing disinformation campaigns, cyber incursions, and the relentless propagation of historical revisionism. From 2020 to 2025, as NATO's eastern flank hardened amid the Ukrainian cataclysm, Moscow's ire hath intensified: Latvian and Estonian deportations of Soviet-era settlers are branded "ethnic cleansing", whilst Lithuanian memorials to anti-Soviet partisans are vilified as paeans to "Nazi collaborators". Such calumnies, disseminated through state media like RT and Sputnik, serve a dual purpose: domestically, they buttress the mythos of a besieged *Russkii mir* (Russian world), justifying conscription and suppression; internationally, they erode the moral authority of Baltic voices, portraying them as heirs to a fascist lineage that necessitates corrective intervention. Critically, this imperialism is no mere *Weltanschauung* of Vladimir Putin, but a systemic ideology, imbricated with Orthodox messianism and Eurasianist reveries, as evidenced in doctrinal tomes like Alexander Dugin's *Foundations of Geopolitics*—a text that, in its 2025 iterations, doth yet advocate the "decolonisation" of the Baltics through cultural and kinetic means. Herein lies the peril: revanchism transmutes grievance into entitlement, history into prophecy, rendering the Baltic polities not sovereign equals, but errant provinces ripe for reclamation.

monografiya, 2025), were published against the backdrop of a rapidly deteriorating geopolitical environment in the European Union's Eastern Neighbourhood, coinciding with the Kremlin's escalation of tensions and overt military aggression. Authored collectively under the direction of Mikhail Sergeevich Grigoriev, these works were issued by the Moscow-based *International Relations* imprint, affiliated with the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO). The volumes present chronological accounts of Ukrainian and Lithuanian national histories, from prehistoric or early medieval origins to the present. Each includes a foreword by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey V. Lavrov (Meduza, 2025), signalling their alignment with official Russian foreign policy narratives (Журавка, 2025).

M. Grigoriev and his co-authors draw extensively on Russian imperial and Soviet archives, positioning their work as a corrective to what they describe as "falsifications" in Ukrainian and Lithuanian national historiographies. By prioritising these archival sources and narratives, the monographs contribute to a broader Russian strategy of reshaping historical discourse to reinforce geopolitical objectives in the region. Both monographs adopt a positivist, source-based methodology, drawing on archival documents, official records, and selectively curated secondary literature to construct a unified historical narrative. M. Grigoriev and his co-authors prioritise Russian imperial and Soviet archives, positioning their work as a corrective to what they describe as "falsifications" in Ukrainian and Lithuanian national historiographies. This approach explicitly rejects Western critical methodologies, instead promoting a Russo-centric teleology that frames the histories of Ukraine and Lithuania as integral extensions of Russian or Slavic civilisation.

The monographs share an ideological foundation, evident in their source integration (predominantly Russian state archives and pro-Russian émigré materials, with minimal use of indigenous-language primaries); collective authorship (multidisciplinary teams under Grigoriev's editorial control to ensure ideological consistency); and analytical framework (geopolitical determinism that interprets national histories through Russia's rivalry with Poland, Lithuania, and the West). Despite broad overlap, differences in emphasis emerge. The Ukrainian volume opens with a systematic debunking of "anti-scientific myths" tied to separatism, recasting territories as "Southwestern Rus", and the 1654 Pereyaslav Agreement as "reunification". Post-1991 independence is dismissed as a transient aberration, destabilised by the 2014 "coup" and Donbas "civil war". The Lithuanian volume disperses

its critique, challenging Lithuanian ethnogenesis and statehood legitimacy (Lucas, 2025a), while framing the Grand Duchy as Rus'-derived and Soviet incorporation in 1940 as stabilising. Both valorise Soviet industrialisation and WWII resistance, devoting ~20% of content to post-1991 ideological critiques but diverge in evidence: Ukraine emphasises economic ties (e.g., imperial grain exports), Lithuania cultural suppression under Polish rule with Russia as protector.

Core motifs – unity and separation (national origins tied to Rus', modern nationalism branded artificial); imperial beneficence (Russian/Soviet rule as civilising); contemporary pathology ('Nazification' via Bandera or Forest Brothers, plus Russophobia) – systematically minimise indigenous agency, reducing national movements to elite manipulations. Negative descriptors ('falsification', 'Russophobia') spike ~15% in the Lithuanian volume's conclusions, reflecting escalated rhetoric amid 2024–2025 Baltic tensions. These biases align with Kremlin historiography (echoing Putin's 2021 unity essay) and state-sponsored revisionism to reassert hegemony. Yet their polemical framing – Ukraine's independence as an anomaly justifying 2022 intervention, Lithuania's statehood as 'non-historical' – undermines scholarly utility. Grigoriev et al.'s works, despite archival breadth, function less as histories than as instruments of soft power, weaving geopolitical imperatives into the fabric of the past.

Of War Without Swords: On the Falsification of History as a Craft of the Russian Resentment Narrative and Mortiferous Language

Falsified versions of Russian history[3], sanctioned by domestic censorship, have long served as ideological roadmaps for future conquests. This model – used to justify territorial claims against neighbouring states and to launch military aggression – is by no means new. It was employed during the occupation and annexation of the Baltic States in 1940, the annexation of

---

[3]   Counterfeit renderings of Russian history, as discussed in the preceding section with respect to both monographs, underpin the entire narrative framework. In *Istoriya Ukrainy* (2022), Ukraine is recast as "Southwestern Rus", with the 1654 Pereyaslav Agreement framed as voluntary reunification and post-1991 independence dismissed as Western-induced aberration. Similarly, *Istoriya Litvy* (2025) denies Lithuanian ethnogenesis, portraying the Grand Duchy as a Rus'-derived polity and Soviet annexation as stabilisation. These distortions systematically erase indigenous agency, aligning with Kremlin narratives to justify territorial revisionism – a pattern applicable across Russia's historiographical offensive.

Tuva in 1944[4], the military invasions of Finland in 1939, and Ukraine in 2022, among other cases. The rewriting of history functions as one of the instruments of *casus belli* and, in the preceding preparatory phase – which may span decades – culture is employed as a supplementary yet highly effective strategic tool.[5] Scholars across various disciplines in the humanities have analysed how the Russian state strategically instrumentalises both historical narratives and cultural heritage to support its political agendas (Laruelle, 2008). This process involves not only the selective appropriation

---

[4]   The Soviet annexation of Tuva in 1944 represents one of the lesser-known yet telling episodes of twentieth-century territorial expansion under the guise of "historical justice". Officially presented as a voluntary reunification with Russia-grounded in claims of cultural affinity and a shared Tsarist past – this act followed decades of Soviet political, economic and military penetration into the region. The Tuvan People's Republic, established in 1921 and recognised solely by the USSR and Mongolia, functioned as a Soviet satellite in all but name. Throughout the 1930s, Moscow extended its influence through strategic placement of advisors, ideological indoctrination, and control over trade. By the early 1940s, Tuva's nominal sovereignty had been thoroughly eroded. The formal incorporation of Tuva into the USSR on 11 October 1944 was framed as historically inevitable (Rupen, 1977). Soviet propaganda invoked Tsarist-era ties and civilisational narratives, casting the move as the "return" of Tuva to the Russian fold. This rhetoric not only masked the asymmetry of power between the two entities but also established a precedent for future imperial claims – where the rewriting of history served as a tool of legitimation for outright annexation. Tuva's absorption into the Soviet Union thus stands as a paradigm of expansionism executed without large-scale military confrontation but firmly embedded within the logic of imperial control. It exemplifies how historical myth-making can function as a silent *casus belli* – substituting tanks with textbooks, and diplomacy with predetermined outcomes.

[5]   For instance, Soviet ambassador to the United Kingdom from 1932 to 1943, Ivan Maisky, reflected on this in his memoirs:

> Our purely diplomatic activity had to be supplemented by other activities (actions), the most important of which were in the economic and cultural spheres. Often, the success of a diplomatic initiative was possible only thanks to parallel actions in those spheres. [...] In those days, we pursued two main objectives:
> [a] to invite as many prominent figures of Western culture as possible to the USSR, so that they could see the Soviet country with their own eyes and be convinced that its people were not destroyers of culture, but rather – on the contrary – were making every effort to develop it in all respects, naturally in the spirit of socialism;
> [b] to facilitate the appearance abroad of the maximum number of prominent Soviet cultural figures, each in their own professional field, so as to refute, through their very presence, the false slanders of our enemies about the alleged deaths or destruction of outstanding Soviet scientists, writers, and artists (Maisky, 1967).
>
> These days, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov emphasises:
>
> Russia is the guardian of traditional values, while the West promotes aggressive, unnatural models. [...] Even in the West, there is growing Russian sentiment – people are turning to our culture for salvation from neoliberal decay (Lavrov, 2025).

of the past but also the systematic reframing of history to serve present-day geopolitical aims (Kurbak, 2023). One prominent example is the deployment of the Russian World (*russkii mir*) concept. Additionally, historians and education specialists have noted the increasing centralisation and ideologisation of school curricula, particularly through the revision of history textbooks that portray Soviet rule as a benevolent force and depict post-Soviet states' independence movements as externally manipulated or inherently illegitimate (Konkka, 2025). These strategies reflect a broader cultural policy in which the past is not merely remembered but actively reconstructed to shape collective identity and legitimise state actions, both domestically and abroad.

Russia's historical memory policy, much like its broader cultural strategy, fundamentally serves as a mirror of its geopolitical ambitions, extensively employing propaganda and disinformation to advance these objectives. Consequently, research in this domain provides critical insights into assessing the potential for Russian hybrid or overt military aggression. For example, Ewa M. Thompson's *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism* (2000) offers a pioneering postcolonial analysis of how Russian literature has historically constructed and perpetuated imperial dominance over contiguous territories, including Ukraine[6]. Russian policy towards Ukraine operationalises "imperial knowledge" not merely as historical artifact but as an active instrument of hybrid aggression. By tracing

---

[6]   For example, by applying discourse theory to canonical texts from Pushkin to Solzhenitsyn, Thompson reveals the mechanisms through which Russian cultural production normalised colonialism as organic expansion. As of September 2025, with Putin's regime entrenching control over occupied territories through Russification policies – such as mandatory Russian-language curricula and cultural erasure – Thompson's analysis acquires urgent contemporaneity. For professional historians and political scientists, this synthesis demands interdisciplinary vigilance: postcolonial literary theory must inform geopolitical analysis to dismantle the myths sustaining endless war. Russia's 2022 invasion and 2025 escalations – including intensified Russification in occupied Donbas and Kherson – revive Ewa M. Thompson's paradigms with striking accuracy. State media, per *EUvsDisinfo* analyses, recycles five "historical pillars": shared origins, Byzantine legacy, and anti-colonial victimhood (Marushevska, 2025) – tropes Thompson traced to 19th-century novels (Thompson, 2000). In occupied territories, this manifests concretely: Russian curricula impose literary canons sans Ukrainian contexts, effacing Cossack agency much as War and Peace subsumed it. Propaganda's hybridity – blending memes with Solzhenitsyn-esque moralism – amplifies Thompson's insight: imperial knowledge evolves, from print to pixels, but retains its core function of ontological erasure (Vovk, 2024). Ewa M. Thompson's *Imperial Knowledge* endures not as relic but as scalpel, excising the discursive tumours enabling Russia's 2025 predations in Ukraine.

discursive lineages from 19th-century novels to 2025 Kremlin broadcasts, it illuminates how literary precedents inform modern propaganda, framing Ukraine's sovereignty as a pathological aberration. Putin's February 2022 address invoked "historical unity", echoing Pushkin's fraternal rhetoric: Ukrainians are not sovereign, but "one people" afflicted by Western-induced "Nazism". This "denazification" myth, propagated via RT and Telegram, pathologises Ukrainian agency akin to Lermontov's savages: Zelenskyy's government is a "junta", its resistance barbaric frenzy (Kuziczkin, 2025). Empirical data corroborates this. A 2024 Atlantic Council report documents how Russian disinformation – reaching 50% of domestic audiences – deploys imperial myths: Ukraine's 2014 Euromaidan as "fascist coup", Crimea as "reunification". By June 2025, Putin's declaration that "all of Ukraine is ours" synthesises Tolstoy's exceptionalism with Soviet irredentism, justifying assimilation policies like cultural centre closures (Dickinson, 2025). By linking Pushkin's irony to Putin's irredentism, it exposes imperialism's cultural armature: knowledge as weapon, literature as legion. Scholars must wield this tool relentlessly, lest history's shadows lengthen unchecked.

Historians often describe Russia's development as cyclical[7], oscillating between reform and autocracy in a pattern of structural continuity[8]. Alain

---

[7]   Richard Pipes, a distinguished historian of Russian history, argues that Russia's cyclical trajectory of autocracy and reform stems from its unique historical and cultural development, particularly the enduring legacy of patrimonialism rooted in Muscovite traditions. In works such as *Russia Under the Old Regime*, he contends that Russia's political evolution was shaped by a lack of legal or institutional checks on power, fostering a centralised state where the ruler's authority was absolute and society remained subordinate. This patrimonial model, reinforced by the Orthodox Church's sacralisation of state power, created a cultural predisposition towards authoritarianism, stifling the emergence of civic pluralism or independent institutions. Pipes emphasises that Russia's divergence from Western European feudalism, which developed contractual relationships and property rights, entrenched a system where the state owned both land and people, perpetuating a cycle of repression and abortive liberalisation. He traces this specificity to the Mongol yoke and the subsequent Muscovite consolidation, which ingrained a hierarchical, anti-individualist ethos that persists in modern Russian governance. Consequently, Pipes views Russia's recurring historical patterns as a product of this deep-seated structural and cultural framework, which resists sustained democratic transformation.

[8]   Françoise Thom, a noted French historian and expert on Soviet and Russian affairs, argues that Russia's historical specificity arises from a persistent messianic ideology and a state-centric tradition that fuse Orthodox religiosity with imperial ambitions, creating a cyclical pattern of authoritarianism and expansionism. In her works, such as *The Gorbachev Phenomenon* (Thom, 1989) and various essays on post-Soviet Russia, Thom identifies the roots of this phenomenon in the synthesis of Byzantine theocracy and Mongol autocratic practices, which entrenched a political culture resistant to pluralism and prone to mythologizing state power. She contends that

Besançon, in *Holy Russia* (2012), attributes this to a cultural inheritance from Byzantine Orthodoxy and Muscovite absolutism: a "Russian lie" embedded in political discourse suppresses historical reckoning, while imperial ambition consistently overrides modernisation. The absence of a civic tradition thus perpetuates repression after each revolutionary rupture, a dynamic still evident in post-Soviet geopolitics.

Following unsuccessful military conflicts, Russia faces collapse driven by a confluence of factors, including detrimental economic policies, internal ethnic and religious strife, and escalating domestic repression, placing it at a critical crossroads of choices. Brief attempts at mimicking Western-style pseudoreforms swiftly falter, leading Russia to revert to its historical path of Asiatic despotism and relentless conquest of neighbouring states as a perceived means of survival. In other words, this cyclical return underscores the entrenched structural and cultural barriers to sustainable modernisation.[9] During periods of instability and internal weakness, the Kremlin actively pursues strategies of fomenting discord, ethnic tensions, and religious conflicts in territories it is losing control over or in neighbouring states, as evidenced by its actions in Moldova (Transnistria), Nagorno-Karabakh, Central Asian republics, and Georgia[10]. In contemporary times, Belarusian

---

Russia's recurring oscillation between reform and repression reflects a deep-seated inability to develop civic institutions, as the state consistently subordinates society to its geopolitical objectives. Thom highlights the role of deliberate historical falsification and propaganda in perpetuating this cycle, portraying Russia as a besieged fortress destined to dominate its periphery. Looking to the future, she warns that Russia's adherence to this imperial paradigm, coupled with its exploitation of cultural and historical narratives, risks perpetuating aggressive foreign policies and internal stagnation, potentially leading to further isolation from global democratic trends. Her prognosis underscores the challenge of breaking this cycle without a fundamental reorientation of Russia's political identity (Thom, 2022).

[9] Alexander Yanov's *Weimar Russia* presciently identifies the fragility of Russia's post-Soviet political landscape, drawing parallels with the Weimar Republic's vulnerability to authoritarianism. Yanov argues that Russia's failure to consolidate democratic institutions in the 1990s created a fertile ground for antidemocratic reforms, a trajectory marked by increasing centralisation of power and suppression of dissent. His analysis accurately foreshadows the entrenchment of authoritarian governance under Vladimir Putin, characterised by the curtailment of civil liberties and the prioritisation of state control. Furthermore, Yanov's warnings about the potential for militaristic adventurism resonate with Russia's subsequent involvement in conflicts such as those in Chechnya, Georgia, and Ukraine. This work remains a critical lens for understanding Russia's slide towards authoritarianism and its geopolitical ramifications (Янов, 1995).

[10] In Moldova, Russia has supported separatist movements in Transnistria to maintain leverage over the region, while in Nagorno-Karabakh, it has exploited ethnic divisions to sustain influence in the South Caucasus. Likewise, in Georgia, the Kremlin has fuelled separatist conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia to destabilise the country and

Litvinism emerges as a potential flashpoint for such orchestrated conflict, which will be explored in the subsequent section.

Litvinism and the Kremlin's Memory Wars: Hybrid Threats in the Baltic Space

This section presents the core original contribution of the study: a framework for understanding Litvinism not as arcane historiography, but as a live instrument of hybrid warfare aimed at eroding Baltic sovereignty through contested historical identity. Is Litvinism an extension of "*russkii mir*" to a specific target-area? The concept of Litvinism[11], which seeks to

---

counter its pro-Western orientation. Similarly, in Central Asia, Russia has historically manipulated local ethnic and religious fault lines to counterbalance regional powers and secure geopolitical dominance.

[11] Belarusian Litvinism, often simply termed "Litvinism", refers to a strand of Belarusian nationalism that emphasises the historical legacy of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL, 13th–18th centuries) as a predominantly Belarusian or East Slavic polity, positioning modern Belarusians as the primary heirs to its cultural, political, and territorial traditions. The term "Litvin" (or "Litwin" in Polish) derives from the self-designation used by inhabitants of the GDL, encompassing a multi-ethnic populace including ethnic Lithuanians, Belarusians (then often identified as Ruthenians), Poles, and others, but Litvinists reinterpret this identity to foreground Belarusian contributions, arguing that the GDL functioned as an early Belarusian state with figures like Gediminas and Vytautas as proto-Belarusian rulers. Emerging in the late 19th century amid broader Slavic national revivals, Litvinism gained traction through intellectuals such as Jan Czeczot and Vintsent Dunin-Martsinkyevich, who romanticised the GDL as a bulwark against Russian and Polish assimilation, and later through 20th-century figures like Vitovt Charopko and Alexander Kravtsevich (Wilson, 2020). Amid the Soviet Union's dissolution, certain Belarusian nationalists seeking a distinctive identity appropriated these revisionist constructs. The autodidact historian Mikola Ivanavič Jermalovič asserted that Lithuania's genesis lay between Navahrudak and Minsk – territories he regarded as primordially Belarusian, portions of which had been usurped by the contemporary Lithuanian polity. Samogitia alone, in his estimation, merited designation as authentically Lithuanian or Baltic; Aukštaitija, conversely, constituted an artificial ethnographic confection encroaching upon Belarusian domains.

  Within the Belarusian diaspora, Litvinist doctrines had already germinated. Paviel Urban propounded his pseudo-scholarly theses in works including *On the National Character of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Historical Term "Litva"* (1964), *In the Light of Historical Facts* (1972), *On the Ethnic Affiliation of the Ancient Litvins* (1994), and *The Ancient Litvins: Language, Origin, Ethnic Affiliation* (1994). From the late twentieth century, Viačaslaŭ Čaropka championed the Grand Duchy as a Belarusian state under Belarusian hegemony, whilst Aliaksandr Kraŭčevič maintained that Navahrudak – not Vilnius – served as its primordial capital and the site of Mindaugas's coronation. Litvinist propaganda now proliferates principally through Belarusian imprints and

redefine "true" Lithuanians as Litvins (*id est*, Belarusians), bears a striking resemblance to the Russian "russkii mir" ideology, particularly in its negation of national identities, as observed in the propaganda campaign against Ukrainians prior to the 2014 hybrid war and the 2022 full-scale invasion. This ideological strategy, characterised by the deliberate erosion of a group's distinct identity, represents a form of "identity theft" that threatens Lithuania's cultural and historical integrity (Novak, 2024). By questioning the legitimacy of Lithuanian identity, Litvinism aligns with the broader "russkii mir" narrative, which has historically justified territorial ambitions through cultural and historical revisionism (Hyndle-Hussein, Kłysiński, 2024). The progression from ideological annihilation to physical aggression, as evidenced in Ukraine, suggests that Litvinism could serve as a precursor to similar existential threats against Lithuania. Historical narratives are critical in shaping national identities and political alignments, and Lithuania's connection to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) is a cornerstone of its sovereignty (Vasilevich, 2024). Failure to assert this historical legacy risks its subsumption by Litvinist ideology, potentially compromising Lithuania's territorial integrity. Such a development could facilitate "creeping" or rapid incursions by Russian actors, mirroring tactics seen elsewhere (Lucas, 2025b). The implications extend beyond Lithuania, posing risks to regional stability in Eastern Europe. To counter this, Lithuania must robustly defend its historical narrative and national identity. Failure to do so could embolden external actors to exploit these vulnerabilities, with far-reaching consequences for the Baltic region.

Ideologically, Litvinism serves as a counter-narrative to Soviet-imposed Pan-Slavism and Russification, rejecting the notion of Belarus as a mere appendage of Russia and instead celebrating a distinct "Litvin" heritage rooted in the GDL's multilingual (Old Belarusian/Ruthenian chancery language) and tolerant ethos. It promotes symbols like the Pahonia (chase) coat of arms and the white-red-white flag as authentic Belarusian emblems from the GDL era, often framing the duchy's expansion as a Belarusian-led enterprise that marginalised Baltic (Lithuanian) elements. While moderate variants view the GDL as a shared Belarusian-Lithuanian federation, radical interpretations claim Vilnius (In Belarusian, it is called Vilnia) as historically Belarusian and deny Lithuania's direct continuity with the duchy, portraying the modern Lithuanian state as a 19th-century construct influenced

---

digital channels, including English-language outlets that proffer Jermalovič's putative "discoveries" and a reconstructed Grand Duchy narrative to international readerships.

by Russian or Polish forces (Kascian, 2023). This dual valence – liberatory for Belarusian identity-building yet potentially revanchist – has led some scholars to describe it as a form of "imperial mimicry", echoing colonial historiographies while seeking post-Soviet decolonisation.

On the contrary, in its contemporary status, Litvinism remains a marginal ideology within Belarus, suppressed under Lukashenko's regime, which has sporadically co-opted GDL rhetoric for pro-regime nationalism (e.g., declaring the GDL the "first Belarusian state" in 2022) while cracking down on opposition uses of Pahonia (Valkauskas, 2023). Among the Belarusian diaspora, particularly in Lithuania (home to tens of thousands of exiles post-2020 protests), it has sparked tensions, with Lithuanian politicians like Laurynas Kasčiūnas labeling it a security threat due to perceived territorial irredentism. In July 2024, over a dozen Belarusian organisations in Lithuania publicly disavowed radical Litvinism, denying claims to Vilnius and affirming shared heritage – though some have not, including relevant factions of the Kalinoŭski Regiment – amid accusations that Russian disinformation amplifies the narrative to sow discord. Belarusian opposition leaders, including Zianon Pazniak, dismiss it as a Kremlin-fabricated "boogeyman" to discredit nationalism, though its resurgence in online forums and cultural activism underscores its role as a flashpoint in hybrid geopolitical manoeuvring. Lithuanian politicians' apprehensions regarding the insidious permeation of Litvinist narratives into Belarusian opposition circles are far from unfounded, as recurrent 'misunderstandings' underscore the fragility of regional solidarity. A salient instance arose in July 2025, when Siarhei Tsikhanouski – himself a beneficiary of Lithuanian sanctuary following his release from Belarusian incarceration in June – proposed in a YouTube interview the establishment of semi-autonomous Belarusian "islands" abroad, ostensibly as embryonic nuclei for a liberated homeland (Venckūnas, 2025). This utterance, though subsequently retracted amid vehement Lithuanian backlash and clarifications from Tsikhanouskaya's office affirming no territorial ambitions, exemplifies how such rhetoric – potentially amplified by Russian disinformation – can precipitate discord, echoing prior controversies over oppositional "passports" that distorted Lithuanian-Belarusian borders. In this vein, the Kalinoŭski Regiment's retention of Litvinist undertones, notwithstanding broader disavowals by over a dozen Belarusian organisations in Lithuania, further illustrates the imperative for vigilant discernment in fostering alliances against shared authoritarian threats.

Litvinism, as a variant of Belarusian nationalism that reinterprets the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as a predominantly Belarusian entity, currently functions primarily as an instrument of information warfare, orchestrated by Russian and Belarusian actors to exacerbate tensions between Lithuanians and Belarusians through tactics such as anonymous emails, graffiti, and media narratives that foster mutual distrust (Kranz, 2025, Bajarūnas, 2025). This ideological manipulation aligns with broader Kremlin strategies to undermine Lithuania's historical legitimacy and national cohesion, mirroring propaganda efforts that preceded Russia's aggression in Ukraine by denying sovereign identities and promoting revanchist claims. Lithuanian security assessments indicate that while Litvinism has not yet manifested as a direct territorial threat, its radical fringes – asserting claims over Vilnius – serve to securitise historical discourse, potentially paving the way for hybrid operations including cyber intrusions, migrant weaponisation, and staged provocations against the Belarusian diaspora in Lithuania (TVP World, 2025). The escalation potential is underscored by parallels with Russian hybrid tactics in the Baltics, where historical revisionism could transition from informational pressure to physical incursions, especially amid exercises like *Zapad-25* or shifts in Belarusian regime policies. Consequently, Lithuania's failure to counter these narratives robustly risks not only cultural subsumption but also broader regional instability, as Litvinism could be leveraged to justify more aggressive interventions under the guise of protecting "historical heirs".

Conclusion

In the post-Cold War geopolitical theatre, Russian revanchism emerges not as mere nostalgia for tsarist or Soviet grandeur, but as a calculated neo-imperial project cloaked in narratives of historical injustice and civilisational mission. Intensified since Crimea's annexation in 2014 and culminating in the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, this doctrine evinces a deliberate contempt for smaller states' sovereignty – most acutely along the Baltic littoral, where Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania's Euro-Atlantic alignment has long rankled Moscow. Central to this strategy is the recasting of historical memory, wherein anti-fascist rhetoric functions less as reckoning than as a delegitimising cudgel against polities resisting Russian suzerainty; national trajectories are recast as betrayals of fraternal unity, and autonomy

branded Russophobic heresy. This revisionist impulse finds vivid expression in two state-aligned monographs – *History of Ukraine* (2022) and *History of Lithuania* (2025) – whose archival rigour is subordinated to teleological imperatives. The former prefigures Russia's 2022 intervention by framing Ukrainian independence as transient aberration; the latter, published amid escalating NATO-Russia friction, intensifies existential denial of Lithuanian statehood. Though structurally meticulous, both works exemplify state-sponsored historiography as soft-power instrumentation: methodologically robust yet ideologically compromised, they form a diptych of Russo-centric narrative engineering, unified in intent yet tailored to distinct theatres of hybrid contestation.

The analysis of Litvinism within the Kremlin's memory wars offers a novel lens for English-language scholarship, demonstrating how historical narratives function as pre-emptive strikes in twenty-first-century geopolitical conflict. Litvinism, a revisionist strand of Belarusian nationalism portraying the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as fundamentally Belarusian, has been co-opted as an instrument of Russian and Belarusian information warfare aimed at sowing discord between Lithuanians and Belarusians. While not yet posing a direct territorial threat, its radical narratives – particularly claims over Vilnius – contribute to the securitisation of historical discourse, echoing Kremlin strategies used to delegitimise Ukrainian sovereignty prior to 2014. Lithuanian security assessments warn that, if left unaddressed, Litvinism could serve as a pretext for hybrid operations, including cyberattacks and provocations targeting the Belarusian diaspora. Conversely, Litvinism, despite its avowed opposition to Moscow and its aim to transcend postcolonial narratives, exhibits a complex interplay of nationalist resistance and imperial mimicry, reflecting the dual nature of historical myth-making. Although some experts underscore its marginality, this movement risks being exploited as a potential catalyst for conflict, as its discourse, while seeking to reject Russian influence, may replicate imperial frameworks.

Works Cited

Bajarūnas, E. (2025) 'Russia's Hybrid Warfare Tactics Target the Baltics', *The Jamestown Foundation*, 27 May. Available at: https://jamestown.org/programme/russias-hybrid-warfare-tactics-target-the-baltics/.

Besançon, A. (2012) *Sainte Russie*. Paris: Éditions de Fallois.

Bill, S. (2015) 'Dualism, Dostoevskii and the Devil in History: Czesław Miłosz's "Neo-Manichaean" Theory of Russian Culture', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 93(3), pp. 401–428. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5699/slaveasteurorev2.93.3.0401.

Bugajski, J. (2004) *Cold Peace: Russia's New Imperialism*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Clarke, C. (2023) *Understanding the Baltic States: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania since 1991*. London: Hurst.

Dickinson, P. (2025) '"All of Ukraine is ours": Putin's Russian imperialism is now on full display', *Atlantic Council*, 23 June. Available at: https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/all-of-ukraine-is-ours-putins-russian-imperialism-is-now-on-full-display/.

Herpen, M.H. van (2024) *Putin's Wars: The Rise of Russia's New Imperialism*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Hyndle-Hussein, J. and Kłysiński, K. (2024) 'A difficult legacy: tensions over how to interpret the shared past of Lithuanian and Belarusian peoples', *OSW Commentary*, 7 August. Available at: https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2024-08-07/a-difficult-legacy-tensions-over-how-to-interpret-shared-past.

Kascian, K. (2023) 'Kremlin's shadow in the Belarusian politics of memory', International Centre for Ethnic and Linguistic Diversity Studies, 20 December. Available at: https://www.icelds.org/2023/12/20/kremlins-shadow-in-the-belarusian-politics-of-memory/.

Konkka, O. (2025) *Narrating the Soviet Era in Russian School History Textbooks*. London: Routledge.

Kranz, M. (2025) 'Eastern Europe's identity problem: Putin is stoking ethnic conflict', *UnHerd*, 11 June. Available at: https://unherd.com/2025/06/eastern-europes-identity-problem/?set_edition=us.

Kurbak, M. (2023) '"Living the last chapter of History": Anxiety as a force for rewriting history textbooks in Putin's Russia and before', *Memory, Mind and Media*, 2(e4). Available at: https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/memory-mind-and-media/article/living-the-last-chapter-of-history-anxiety-as-a-force-for-rewriting-history-textbooks-in-putins-russia-and-before/06500274E20264294DEC7F4BBAB19089.

Kuziczkin, A. (2025) 'Putin's new imperial project – assimilation of Ukrainians and the cancelling of Ukrainian heritage', *PostPravda.Info*, 22 September. Available at: https://postpravda.info/en/stories/freedom-of-speech-en/putins-new-imperial-project/.

Laruelle, M. (2008) *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire*. Washington, DC: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Lavrov, S. (2025) 'Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks at the 44th meeting of the Foreign Ministry's Council of Heads of Constituent Entities of the Russian Federation', *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia*, 16 April. Available at: https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/2009377/.

Lucas, E. (2025a) 'History wars: Lithuania's next smears, nit-picking, and conspiracy theories are ammunition for the Kremlin', *CEPA*, 27 May. Available at: https://cepa.org/article/history-wars-lithuanias-next/.

Lucas, E. (2025b) 'Secret weapon: history. The pseudohistorical "Litvinism" is stirring discord between Lithuania and Belarus', *CEPA*, 30 June. Available at: https://cepa.org/article/secret-weapon-history/.

Maisky, I. (1967) *Memoirs of a Soviet Ambassador: The War 1939–43*. London: Hutchinson.

Marushevska, A. (2025) 'Five historical pillars of Russian imperial propaganda', *EUvsDisinfo*, 17 January. Available at: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/five-historical-pillars-of-russian-imperial-propaganda/.

Meduza (2025) 'Russian foreign minister pens foreword to book challenging Lithuanian statehood', *Meduza*, 2 May. Available at: https://meduza.io/en/feature/2025/05/02/russian-foreign-minister-pens-foreword-to-book-challenging-lithuanian-statehood.

Novak, J. (2024) 'How Belarusian nationalism has become a tool in information wars', *Euractiv*, 24 July. Available at: https://www.euractiv.com/news/how-belarusian-nationalism-has-become-a-tool-in-information-wars/.

Pipes, R. (1995) *Russia Under the Old Regime*. London: Penguin.

Radchenko, S. (2024) *To Run the World: The Kremlin's Cold War Bid for Global Power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Roozendaal, J. (2024) *Propaganda and Ideology in the Russian–Ukrainian War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rupen, R.A. (1977) 'The absorption of Tuva', in Hammond, T.T. and Farrell, R. (eds.) *The Anatomy of Communist Takeovers*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, pp. 145–162.

Schoen, D.E. (2016) *Putin's Master Plan: To Destroy Europe, Divide NATO, and Restore Russian Power and Global Influence*. New York: Encounter Books.

Thom, F. (1989) *The Gorbachev Phenomenon: A History of Perestroika*. London: Hutchinson.

Thom, F. (2021) *La Marche à rebours: Regards sur l'histoire soviétique et russe*. Paris: Éditions Pierre-Guillaume de Roux.

Thompson, E.M. (2000) *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

TVP World (2025) 'Russia and Belarus plot attacks on Belarusians in Lithuania, intelligence report says', *TVP World*, 23 April. Available at: https://tvpworld.com/86324647/russia-and-belarus-plot-attacks-on-belarusians-in-lithuania-intelligence-report-says.

Valkauskas, T. (2023) 'The fear of Belarusian laying claim to Lithuanian history', *LRT*, 13 September. Available at: https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2075932/the-fear-of-belarusian-laying-claim-to-lithuanian-history.

Vasilevich, H. (2024) 'Litvinism: when history becomes securitized', *New Eastern Europe*, 7 March. Available at: https://neweasterneurope.eu/2024/03/07/litvinism-when-history-becomes-securitized/.

Venckūnas, V. (2025) 'Lithuanian politicians dismiss Belarus opposition leader's autonomy proposal as "absurd"', *LRT*, 22 July. Available at: https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2620079/lithuanian-politicians-dismiss-belarus-%0Aopposition-leader-s-autonomy-proposal-as-absurd.

Vovk, K. (2024) 'Modern colonial war: signs and features of Russian colonialism', *Svidomi*, 24 February. Available at: https://svidomi.in.ua/en/page/modern-colonial-war-signs-and-features-of-russian-colonialism.

Wilson, A. (2020) 'Belarus begins again: Belarus' history has been a series of false starts', *History Today*, 27 August. Available at: https://www.historytoday.com/miscellanies/belarus-begins-again.

Крысин, М. (2007) *Прибалтийский фашизм: история и современность*. Москва: Вече.

Журавка, А. (2025) 'Лавров написал предисловие к книге, в которой отрицается государственность Литвы', *Zerkalo*, 4 May. Available at: https://news.zerkalo.io/world/98393.html.

Янов, А. (1995) *После Ельцина. "Веймарская" Россия*. Москва: КРУК.

Russian Federation's Propaganda Strategies and NATO's Countermeasures: Information Warfare and Countering Disinformation

Dr. Mariusz Urban, Dr. Urszula Staśkiewicz, and Prof. Jaroslav Dvorak[*]

Abstract

The article's primary goal is to assess the Russian-led disinformation operations and to examine NATO's counterstrategies within the broader context of information warfare. By understanding motivations, mechanisms and consequences of Russian Federation's use of propaganda and disinformation, one gains a better ability to counteract such practices, bolsters the psychological resilience of a society, and becomes able to establish a sustainable regional information security model. In the context of this work, we understand the existing model as a set of technological, organisational, political, and sustainability measures that create the prerequisites for the states of the region to achieve a high level of information space security.

Introduction

The Russo-Ukrainian conflict provides an important opportunity for examining propaganda strategies that have become intrinsic to contemporary military and diplomatic action. A crucial dimension of these strategies lies in the information domain.

Given the ubiquitous access to information and its near-instant dissemination through social media, 'fake news' – deliberate spreading of misinformation – presents a major threat to national, regional, and global security. Disinformation campaigns are designed to not only manipulate the public opinion but also to exacerbate pre-existing societal divisions, destabilise state institutions, and exert pressure on the international community, thus indirectly reducing the availability of military assistance.

---

[*] Dr. Mariusz Ubran is a major in the Polish Border Guard and a Doctor of Security Studies. Dr. Urszula Staśkiewicz is a Doctor of Defence Sciences at the European University of Law and Administration in Poland. Professor Jaroslav Dvorak is the Head of the Department of Public Administration and Political Sciences at Klaipėda University in Lithuania

By understanding motivations, mechanisms, and consequences of the Russian Federation's use of propaganda and disinformation, researchers, and policymakers gain a better ability to counteract such practices, bolster the psychological resilience of a society, and become able to establish a sustainable regional information security model. In the context of this work, we define the regional information security model as a set of technological, organisational, political, and sustainability measures that create the prerequisites for the states of the region to achieve a high level of information space security.

This article aims to analyse the impact of disinformation on international relations, with a focus on shifting state policies – such as the impact of disinformation during Donald Trump's presidency or Canada's gradual distancing from the United States and realignment with the European Union (EU). Moreover, it examines the interplay between Ukraine, NATO, Russia, and the EU in the information domain, with a particular focus placed on how media narratives shape political decision-making, influence NATO's operational strategies, and intersect with the operations of intelligence agencies. The analysis explores the strategic use of special services and intelligence agencies in so-called information warfare, highlighting the role of media communication and NATO messaging in countering Russian disinformation.

Information Warfare as an Aspect of Political Warfare

The term 'political warfare' was first used in 1948 in a top-secret Policy Planning staff memorandum on USSR's policy. Therein, 'political warfare operation' described what was hitherto defined as 'psychological warfare operations', describing it as "the logical application of Clausewitz's doctrine in time of peace" (US National Security Council, 1948). Understanding these early concepts is crucial in analysing and countering neo-propaganda and disinformation strategies, particularly in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, where information warfare has once again taken on central importance.

At the turn of the 80s and 90s, Angelo M. Codevillaw examined the issue of political warfare, claiming it to be an extension of political action concerning national security broadly. Political warfare concerns obtaining societal approval in order to prevail in a war or a bloodless conflict of equal

importance (Codevilla, 1989, p. 77). However, Codevilla pointed out, it should not be thought of as quick and cheap means of obtaining political influence, but rather highly advanced and complex operations involving not only governments, but also businesses (corporations), civil societies, and modern technology. To be successful, these actions must be combined and complementary. The most crucial aspect concerns understanding that political warfare cannot be done partially – such policy is either implemented fully or not at all (Codevilla, 1989). The existing insights remain highly relevant today, particularly in light of the activities of Russian special services. Codevilla (1989) highlighted a great understanding of the importance of political warfare in the context of acquiring international popular support during conflicts and thus, in gaining allies.

In his own words: 'Success in political warfare means that foreigners come to understand what a protagonist is about in ways that lead them to associate their own lives, fortunes, and honour with it. [...] political warfare must provide to foreigners true, concrete reasons why they ought to consider themselves on "our side", and concrete inducements for them to significantly enhance our side's chances' (Codevilla, 1989, p. 79).

According to his deliberations, gaining support abroad requires all international-facing actions (from the delivery of public speeches to the dropping of bombs) to be coordinated and complementary (Codevilla, 1989, p. 79).

Nowadays, we are able to distinguish numerous actions serving as political warfare tools. Over the past few years, various researchers (Bankov, 2024; Dvorak et. al., 2025) tightened up and updated their definitions to help understand the shifting strategies of their utilisation and thus also how to counteract them. These actions are manifold and include: assertive hegemony, cyber warfare, debt-trap diplomacy, deception, disinformation, engagement, fake news, false narratives, grey zone operations, hard power, hybrid operations, infiltration, influence operations, information warfare, lawfare, liaison work, malign influence, psychological operation, public affairs, public diplomacy, public opinion warfare, sharp power, soft power, special measures, subversion, Three Warfares, and United Front (Gershaneck, 2020, p.15).

Disinformation and Propaganda as Core Tools of Russian Statecraft

Information has always been a domain of conflict, but in the 21st century it has become a decisive battleground. The proliferation of digital platforms, combined with the decline of traditional information gatekeepers, has amplified the ability of state and non-state actors to shape perceptions, influence public opinion, and destabilise adversaries. The Russian Federation stands at the forefront of these developments, employing propaganda and disinformation not merely as supplementary instruments of policy, but as core tools of statecraft. Building on the Soviet-era tradition of *aktivnye meropriyatiya* ("active measures"), the Kremlin has reconfigured its information warfare strategies to exploit the vulnerabilities of interconnected digitalised societies. For Russia, the information domain is not subordinate to military activity but a decisive tool in itself. This contrasts with NATO's earlier perception of information operations as auxiliary to kinetic warfare (Giles, 2016).

NATO itself has acknowledged this shift. Its 2016 Warsaw Summit communiqué recognised 'hybrid threats' as combining 'military and non-military means' including disinformation, and the 2022 Strategic Concept elevated resilience against disinformation to a strategic priority (NATO, 2016; NATO, 2022).

In order to further examine cases of Russian propaganda, we will describe this phenomenon based on the study of Steblyna and Dvorak (2025). According to the authors, propaganda can be considered a dangerous manipulative form of communication, which is usually based on disinformation and violations of professional and ethical standards, the negative impact of which is especially amplified in wartime conditions.

Russian Propaganda: Selected Case Studies

The Russo-Ukrainian conflict illustrates the extent to which propaganda and strategic communications are being systematically employed with the goal of shaping public perceptions to suit the interests of key actors. Two case studies, Ukraine itself and Europe's energy dependency, demonstrate how the Kremlin adapts its strategies to different contexts while pursuing consistent strategic objectives.

Case Study 1: Ukraine – From Crimea to the 2022 Invasion

Since the Euromaidan protests in 2013–2014 and the subsequent annexation of Crimea, the Kremlin has waged a continuous campaign to delegitimise the Ukrainian government and justify Russian aggression. Russian state media portrayed the annexation as a legitimate act of "reunification", denying the presence of Russian troops while framing local actors as spontaneously choosing to join Russia (Giles, 2016). Russian propaganda depicted the conflict as a civil war between Kyiv and separatists, masking Moscow's direct involvement. Narratives of fascism and neo-Nazism in Ukraine were amplified to evoke historical memory of the Great Patriotic War and mobilise both domestic and international sympathy (Yablokov, 2015). Existing narratives laid the foundation for subsequent waves of disinformation that intensified before and during Russia's full-scale invasion.

Prior to and during the invasion, Russia disseminated disinformation claiming Ukraine was developing biological weapons, committing genocide against Russian speakers, and serving as a puppet of NATO. These narratives were broadcast domestically to justify mobilisation, and internationally to confuse audiences, delay coordinated responses, and sow doubt about Western credibility (Helmus et al., 2018). Such statements were not isolated, but closely coordinated with military and cyber operations, highlighting the integrated nature of Russia's information warfare.

The Ukrainian case highlights the synchronisation of propaganda with kinetic and cyber operations. Disinformation has been used to prepare the informational environment for military action, delegitimise resistance, and fracture NATO unity by exploiting diverging member-state threat perceptions.

Case Study 2: Energy Narratives in Europe

Energy has long been a key lever of Russian influence, and propaganda has been central to framing this trend, especially in countries with high energy dependence (e.g. Bulgaria, Turkey) (Irerra and Bilgic, 2024). As Europe sought to diversify away from Russian natural gas, Moscow deployed narratives designed to depict sanctions and energy diversification policies as harmful to European citizens rather than to Russia. The existing context created fertile ground for Russian propaganda to portray energy discussions

not as strategic policy choices, but as direct threats to the daily lives of the population.

Russian media emphasised that sanctions would 'backfire' on Europe, leading to economic collapse, inflation, and energy poverty. By framing Western leaders as responsible for economic hardship, the Kremlin sought to fuel public discontent and weaken political cohesion within NATO and the EU (Abuls, 2023).

Russian propaganda also targeted debates on climate policy, amplifying divisions between environmental groups and industrial lobbies. Narratives framed renewable energy as unreliable, suggesting that abandoning Russian gas would lead to blackouts and social unrest; for example, a Gazprom video shows European cities freezing into icy wastelands after gas supply is cut off.

Key Findings

The case study revealed that Russia employs propaganda to exploit crises, both political (in Ukraine) and economic (in the energy sector). In its narratives, Russia tries to adapt them to the contexts of local countries but remains consistent in depicting NATO and the Western world as weak, hypocritical and aggressive. Since disinformation rarely works independently, other means, such as diplomacy, military, and economic actions, are used to reinforce it. It is obvious that the goal of such actions is not only to destabilise the life of the country, but also to undermine trust in the state and its institutions, divide society, and suppress collective response.

NATO's Countermeasures

Disinformation campaigns target both NATO's external credibility and internal cohesion, aiming to fracture unity among its member states, delegitimise its policies, and erode public support. NATO has recognised disinformation and propaganda as critical security challenges that demand coordinated and sustained responses. While NATO was historically oriented toward conventional military defence, the resurgence of Russian information warfare has pushed the Alliance to expand its focus toward the cognitive domain. NATO's countermeasures encompass strategic communication, institutional adaptation, and cooperation with the European Union.

Strategic Communication and NATO STRATCOM Centre of Excellence

NATO's most visible initiative in the information domain has been the establishment of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (STRATCOM COE) in Riga in 2014. The Centre functions as a hub for research, training, and policy development on information warfare and strategic communication. It conducts studies on disinformation campaigns, develops analytical tools, and provides training to member states on narrative construction and counter-propaganda strategies (NATO STRATCOM COE, 2021).

STRATCOM COE has been particularly influential in mapping Russian information operations in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states, highlighting the ways in which Russian disinformation exploits linguistic minorities and local grievances. Its research into bot networks, coordinated inauthentic behaviour, and the psychology of misinformation has informed NATO's broader strategic approach.

STRATCOM COE prepared a report in 2022 called "Robotrolling", which analysed the automated activity of Russian-speaking Twitter accounts targeting NATO activities. The authors (Fredhaim and Stolze, 2022) found that messages threatening NATO expansion were constantly being distributed, and this had been happening since 2017. The largest spike in bots' activity was recorded about NATO and Ukraine in January 2022 and was associated with statements by Western leaders (Fredhaim and Stolze, 2022). The bots constantly spread information that the West, not Russia, was escalating the situation in Europe (Fredhaim and Stolze, 2022).

NATO's Strategic Concept and Hybrid Warfare Readiness

The 2022 NATO Strategic Concept explicitly recognised disinformation as a component of hybrid threats. It emphasised the importance of building "resilience" as a first line of defence, extending beyond military preparedness to include societal strength, independent media, and democratic institutions (NATO, 2022). NATO has also integrated counter-disinformation into its *Hybrid Warfare Readiness* framework, which combines cyber defence, intelligence sharing, and crisis response planning. In practice, this has meant that NATO exercises now include scenarios involving disinformation campaigns, social media manipulation, and psychological operations,

preparing member states for "whole-of-society" threats. The Alliance has also expanded cooperation with centres of excellence in areas such as cyber defence (Tallinn, Estonia) and energy security (Vilnius, Lithuania), recognising the interlinkages between physical infrastructure and information operations.

Cooperation with the European Union

NATO and the European Union have increasingly coordinated their responses to disinformation. The EU's *East StratCom Task Force*, established in 2015, plays a complementary role by monitoring Russian propaganda narratives and publishing regular "Disinformation Reviews" through its *EU vs Disinfo* project (EEAS, 2020).

While NATO emphasises strategic communication and defence integration, the EU's approach is more regulatory and focused on civil society engagement. Joint NATO–EU declarations, such as the 2016 Warsaw Summit communiqué, underline the shared commitment to counter hybrid threats, with information warfare as a priority area (NATO, 2016).

According to EUvsDisinfo (2023), Russian disinformation has evolved from traditional propaganda to manipulation of the information technology infrastructure itself. The operation "Portal Kombat" (or "Pravda Network"), exposed by the French agency Viginum in 2024, created thousands of low-quality websites designed to "train" large speech models to replicate Kremlin narratives. Research has shown that six out of ten chatbots repeated false claims emanating from this network, illustrating how disinformation is now being applied not only to human audiences but also to artificial intelligence systems themselves. This case reveals a growing hybrid threat, where automated information ecosystems are being targeted as new vectors of influence (Hutchings et.al., 2024).

In recent study the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2025) tested four of the most popular artificial intelligence (AI) systems (ChatGPT, Gemini, Grok, and DeepSeek) with 300 queries in 5 languages. The study found that content related to Russian intelligence or state media appeared in 18 percent of responses (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2025). It was found that 25 percent of malicious queries provided sources associated with the Kremlin. It turns out that of all the AI systems, ChatGPT cited Russian sources most often and was more affected by biased queries. Meanwhile, Google's Gemini

has been warning researchers about the security of similar queries for years (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2025).

Public Diplomacy and Narrative Building

NATO has also sought to improve its own strategic narratives. While much of its initial focus was defensive – debunking falsehoods and issuing corrections – the Alliance has shifted toward proactive storytelling that emphasises NATO's role in collective defence, crisis management, and support for democratic values. This shift recognises that simply countering falsehoods is insufficient; building credibility requires communicating positive narratives that resonate with citizens. For example, NATO's public diplomacy campaigns highlight success stories of multinational cooperation, joint defence exercises, and humanitarian missions. By presenting itself as a transparent and trustworthy actor, NATO aims to foster public trust and inoculate societies against disinformation.

Limitations and Challenges

While NATO has significantly expanded its capacity to counter Russian disinformation, several enduring challenges limit the effectiveness of its response. Key challenges include:

One of the most difficult dilemmas for NATO and its member states is balancing counter-disinformation measures with democratic norms of free speech and media pluralism. Unlike authoritarian systems, NATO countries cannot simply censor hostile narratives without undermining the values they aim to defend. NATO must carefully navigate the fine line between countering harmful propaganda and safeguarding democratic freedoms.

Disinformation campaigns are cheap to produce and easy to disseminate, while countermeasures are resource-intensive and often reactive. Russian state media and troll networks can flood information ecosystems with falsehoods at scale, whereas NATO's responses require fact-checking, coordination, and credibility (Lewandowsky et al., 2017).

NATO's collective response is complicated by differing member-state perceptions of the Russian threat. While frontline states such as Poland and the Baltic countries view Russian disinformation as an existential danger, others prioritise different security concerns. This divergence can weaken consensus on how aggressively NATO should act, particularly when

countermeasures may involve sensitive areas such as regulation of media or partnerships with technology companies.

Disinformation is increasingly difficult to distinguish from authentic content, and AI-driven campaigns can personalise propaganda at scale on the individual level. NATO has invested in detection technologies, but adversaries adapt quickly, creating a technological arms race in the information domain (NATO, 2021). As the Alliance is a military and political organisation, not a regulator of media platforms or domestic information spaces, much of the responsibility for counter-disinformation rests with national governments, the EU, civil society, and private companies. NATO's ability to coordinate is valuable, but its authority is limited, which creates gaps in implementation.

Conclusion

Building societal and institutional defences against propaganda requires a comprehensive approach that combines technology, education, partnerships, and narrative-building, as the effectiveness of propaganda is determined by historical relations with Russia, cultural proximity, and anti-Western attitudes (Irrera and Bilgic, 2024). To strengthen its capacity to counter Russian disinformation, NATO must go beyond reactive debunking and invest in long-term resilience strategies.

NATO must accelerate its capacity for real-time monitoring and rapid counter-narratives. This could take the form of grants for independent fact-checkers across Central and Eastern Europe, modelled on EUvsDisinfo's cooperation with national NGOs.

Investments in artificial intelligence and big data analytics should be expanded to detect emerging campaigns before they reach critical mass. For instance, NATO could consider a *joint initiative* between the Cyber Defence COE in Tallinn and STRATCOM COE in Riga to develop AI-driven early warning systems capable of detecting coordinated bot networks, similar to the Robotrolling (2022) report. The collaboration may strength the technical expertise of Tallinn's centre with strategic communication insights of Riga's by creating the synergy to counter the hybrid threats.

Public diplomacy campaigns should emphasise NATO's role in protecting democratic freedoms, supporting allies in crises, and upholding

international security. This could be achieved through coordinated platforms for developing narratives, highlighting successful crisis responses, such as NATO's assistance to member states during hybrid attacks, and actively promote positive stories across media ecosystems and in local languages.

Finally, countering Russian propaganda requires a whole-of-alliance approach. NATO should deepen its cooperation with the EU, the G7, and national governments, harmonising strategies and pooling resources. Coordinated campaigns that combine regulatory tools, intelligence-sharing, and civil society engagement will enhance effectiveness and prevent fragmentation.

Works Cited

Abuls K. (2023). Russia's Weaponisation of Energy in Europe; Its Implications for Russia's Weaponisation of Energy in Europe. Available at: https://surface.syr.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2763&context=honors_capstone.

Bankov, B. (2024). Hybrid Warfare. *Journal of Strategic Security*, *17*(1), 1–23.

Codevilla, A. M. (1989). Political warfare. *Political warfare and psychological operations: Rethinking the US approach*, 77–100.

Dvorak, J., Urban, M., Staśkiewicz, U., and Jeznach, M. (2025). Hybrid Operations Carried out by Belarus on Polish and Lithuanian Borders in 2021–2023. In *Navigating Complex Geopolitical Landscapes Amidst Conflict* (pp. 135–162). IGI Global Scientific Publishing.

European External Action Service. (2020). *EU vs Disinfo: Fighting disinformation*. Available at: https://euvsdisinfo.eu.

EUvsDisinfo. (2025, October 23). Large language models: The new battlefield of Russian information warfare. EUvsDisinfo. Available at: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/large-language-models-the-new-battlefield-of-russian-information-warfare.

Fredhaim, R., Stolze, M. (2022). Robotrolling 2022, Issue 1. Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence.

Gershaneck K. K., Political Warfare. Strategies for Combating China's Plan to "Win without Fighting", Quantico, Virginia, 2020.

Giles, K. (2016). The next phase of Russian information warfare. NATO Defence College Research Paper, 9. https://stratcomcoe.org/pdfjs/?file=/publications/download/keir_giles_public_20-05-2016.pdf?zoom=page-fit.

Helmus, T. C., Bodine-Baron, E., Radin, A., et al. (2018). *Russian social media influence: Understanding Russian propaganda in Eastern Europe*. Available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2237.html.

Hutchings, S., Voronovici, A., Tolz, V., Sadler, N., Alyukov, M., and Tipaldou, S. (2024). *Kremlin Proxies and the Post-RT Western Media Landscape: An EU Elections Case Study*. The University of Manchester. Available at: https://files.cdn-files-a.com/uploads/7982963/normal_6759718a4b719.pdf.

Institute for Strategic Dialogue. (2025, October 27). *Talking points: When chatbots surface Russian state media*. Available at: https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/talking-points-when-chatbots-surface-russian-state-media/.

Irrera, D., and Bilgic, A. (2025). Perceptions of the war in Ukraine: how the Russian propaganda works outside the west. *European Political Science*, *24*(1), 66–73.

Lewandowsky, S., Ecker, U. K. H., and Cook, J. (2017). Beyond misinformation: Understanding and coping with the "post-truth" era. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition, 6*(4), 353–369.

NATO STRATCOM COE. (2021). Annual report 2020–2021. NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence. Available at: https://stratcomcoe.org.

NATO. (2016). *Warsaw Summit Communiqué*. Available at: https://www.nato.int

NATO. (2022). *Strategic Concept*. Available at: https://www.nato.int.

Steblyna, N., and Dvorak, J. (2025). The 'Russian World' in Baltic Media: A Semantic Analysis of Russian-Language Newspapers in Lithuania and Latvia. *International Social Science Journal*.

Sukhankin, S. (2025) 'Russian commentators take advantage of Trump's Greenland and Canada rhetoric', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 22(5), 21 January. Available at: https://jamestown.org/programme/russian-commentators-take-advantage-of-trumps-greenland-and-canada-rhetoric/.

US National Security Council. *Policy Analysis Paper, State Department Policy Planning Staff/Council, Subject: The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare*, 30 April 1948. Available at: https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945-50Intel/d269.

Yablokov, I. (2015). Conspiracy theories as a Russian public diplomacy tool: The case of Russia Today (RT). *Politics, 35*(3–4), 301–315.

NATO Pirates in the Baltic Sea? Lawfare in Russian Deterrence Strategy

Mariia Vladymyrova[*]

Abstract

Russia has repeatedly accused European states of 'piracy' for detaining vessels from its 'shadow fleet' suspected of grey zone activities in the Baltic Sea. These accusations are legally unfounded. However, the persistence of this narrative in both official statements and public discussion in Russia warrants closer scrutiny. This article argues against dismissing Moscow's invocation of piracy as mere propaganda. These claims should be understood as lawfare – the strategic misuse of legal concepts to advance political objectives. This article examines how such lawfare complements Russia's coercive signalling strategy and explores its broader strategic implications. Moscow's piracy narrative reveals how hijacking the authority of international law has become integral to the Russian practice of deterrence.

Introduction

Amid the protracted invasion of Ukraine, Moscow's so-called 'shadow fleet' operating in the Baltic Sea has emerged as an urgent concern for Europe. The shadow fleet serves as the primary mechanism through which Russia circumvents the EU/G7+ price cap on Russian oil and petroleum products. It has also become a lifeline sustaining Russia's war economy: apart from securing the revenues from global energy markets, these vessels import some sanctioned commodities necessary for the Russian arms industry. Upon a closer look, the shadow fleet seems to fulfil dual-use functions in Russian grey zone activities against NATO at sea, notably in damaging critical infrastructure, surveillance, and drone operations (Stavridis, 2025). This article

contributes to our understanding of how the phenomenon of the shadow fleet impacts NATO-Russia deterrence dynamics.

In several instances between 2023 and 2025, the EU and NATO member states resorted to coercive measures against the shadow fleet vessels, including seizure, boarding, and inspection (see *Table 1*). In response, Russian authorities brought up accusations of piracy. Although these claims lack any conceivable legal merit, they should not be simply dismissed as propaganda. This article argues that this piracy narrative amounts to lawfare – the misuse of law in pursuit of strategic aims (Dunlap, 2017). Actors resort to lawfare to exert influence on their opponents through various international legal regimes and foras in both war- and peacetime. Lawfare applies across various fields of legal practice in interstate as well as asymmetric armed conflicts, grey-zone confrontation, and in more formalised settings, such as treaty-making, litigation, dispute settlement procedures, as well as institutional and legislative procedures within international organisations (Bartman, 2010; Kittrie, 2016; McKeown, 2017; Dos Reis and Grzybowski, 2024; McLaughlin, 2024; Goldenziel, Blockberger and Granholm, 2024). The defining feature is that actors resorting to lawfare act in bad faith and leverage legal arguments to advance their strategic agenda, presenting it as legitimate rather than to seek justice (Kennedy, 2012; Munoz, Andres and Bachmann, 2016). By equating public law enforcement with criminal activity, Russia in fact denies the sovereign authority of the coastal states participating in interdictions and claims the universal jurisdiction granted to all states in the repression of piracy (see Shearer, 2010). This invocation functions as a form of strategic signalling: lawfare allows Moscow to convey a threat to use armed force against European vessels implicitly and maintain strategic ambiguity regarding if and under which conditions Russia might intervene should interdiction of the shadow fleet vessels continue.

This article proceeds as follows: first, it briefly introduces what are the security concerns related to the shadow fleet; second, it looks into the scope of the Russian piracy claims, and argues why these present lawfare; third, it highlights what significance lawfare holds for coercive signalling; and finally, it concludes with observations on the role of lawfare in Russian deterrence strategy.

The Shadow Fleet Operations in the Baltic Sea

The deceptive shipping practice known as shadow fleet is not novel, however the Russian shadow fleet operations have set a new precedent for global maritime shipping in its scale and coordination (Rodriguez-Diaz, Alcaide, Endrina, 2025). It represents Russia's deliberate adaptation efforts in response to the comprehensive sanction's regime imposed by EU/G7+ states. The three main components of this regime are: (1) the EU's ban on all Russian-flagged vessels or those vessels which were re-flagged from the Russian Flag as from February 24, 2022; (2) the EU's embargo on importing seaborne crude oil from Russia and on most petroleum products; and (3) the EU/G7+ states' agreement introducing a price cap on the trade of these commodities to cut Russia's global revenues. These measures are intended to preclude vessels transporting Russian crude oil and petroleum products at prices above the cap of 60USD/barrel from obtaining insurances, brokering, and technical assistance – services dominated by companies under the jurisdiction of EU/G7+ states (Parlov and Sverdrup, 2024). This design, albeit contradictory, should mitigate adverse effects on global energy market by keeping Russian crude oil exports in, while considerably reducing Russia's revenues (Wolfram, 2024).

Within months after the abovementioned measures entered into force in early 2023, Moscow has re-oriented its exports to countries that have not aligned with the sanction regimes, notably China and India (Hilgenstock, Hrybanovskii, Kravtsev, 2024). To enable the continuation of shipments, major Russian oil trade companies have developed a sophisticated network of intermediaries. This design allows the Russian operators to obscure the ownership structure, financial and insurance liability. Typical evasion practices include the vessel registration under the flags of convenience, the frequent change of flag registries, or resort of fraudulent ones (Caprile and Leclerc, 2024). The Russian shadow fleet comprises hundreds of tankers and cargo vessels, many exceeding and standard insurance age, and do not comply with safety and environmental standards (International Maritime Organisation (IMO), 2023).

The shadow fleet's transports generate billions of dollars in annual revenue that directly fund Moscow's military operations in Ukraine (Braw, 2024). Although the most recent US sanctions against the two main companies engaged in the shadow shipping, Rosneft and Lukoil, enhance the political pressure on buyers, the long-term effects on Russian economy

depend on the readiness of the US government to push for extensive enforcement (Vakulenko, 2025). Meanwhile, the US, the UK, the EU, and Ukraine continue to target individual vessels with sanctions, albeit these measures are similarly far from comprehensive (Golovchenko, 2025). For instance, as of October 2025 the number of vessels listed by the EU is a total of 557 (European Commission, 2025). However, the shadow fleet's size in 2025 may range from 300 up to 1800 vessels depending on classification criteria; the highest estimates suggest that the total number has tripled compared to the fleet's early-2022 size (McKinney and Domballe, 2024; Parlov and Sverdrup, 2024).

In the congested Baltic Sea, where at least 40 to 60 percent of Russian oil and petroleum products shipping goes through, the shadow fleet poses grave risks of collision accidents and environmental disaster (Hilgenstock, Hrybanovskii, Kravtsev, 2024; Jack, Gambarini, Guillot, 2025a). Yet its activity has given rise to far more imminent security concerns. Between 2023 and 2025, at least 11 vessels associated with the shadow fleet were implicated in grey zone activities in the Baltic Sea (see Table 1). Although investigations remain pending, authorities in the affected coastal states and independent experts contend that the circumstances and nature of the incidents point to deliberate action (see Edwards and Seidenstein, 2025).

The convergence of multiple factors renders shadow fleet vessels optimal instruments for grey zone activity – coercive actions employed by states and non-state actors to achieve strategic objectives by exploiting legal ambiguities below the threshold of war (see Larsson, 2024). These vessels routinely disable their transponders or spoof AIS signals to obscure shipping routes and loiter while awaiting ship-to-ship cargo transfers at high seas. Tankers and cargo ships are essentially multimodal platforms and offer substantial space to carry drones, signals intelligence, reconnaissance and surveillance equipment, and other tools for grey zone activity (see Hammes and Harris, 2025). Moreover, undersea infrastructure (especially sea cables) is by its design vulnerable to damage, both from natural causes and accidental human interference. This vulnerability provides plausible deniability for intentional sabotage, with the crews of suspect vessels typically claiming accidental anchor loss or dragging. Indeed, some reported Baltic incidents appear consistent with accidental causes (see *Table 1*).

The current security environment should be factored in too. The Nordic and Baltic states have been avid supporters of Ukraine and a stronger NATO posture in Europe (Mälksoo, 2024). Russia perceived the strengthening

of NATO's Northern Flank with sensitivity (Litovkin, 2022; TASS, 2022; TASS, 2023). Russia's forward-leaning posture in the region, combined with its acute dependence on the Baltic Sea for illicit oil transports makes the Baltic theatre significant to the Russian contest against NATO (see Banka and Bussmann, 2023). It offers Moscow an ideal setting for calibrated risk-taking – testing the Alliance's resolve and cohesion while staying below the Article 5 threshold.

Grey Zone Activity of the Shadow Fleet: Legal Challenges and Signalling Rationale

Although plausible deniability poses challenges for legal attribution of grey zone activities, there is broad consensus that the shadow fleet is an enterprise coordinated by the Russian state (see NATO, 2023; Caprile and Leclerc, 2024; Edwards and Seidenstein, 2025; Jack, Mackenzie, Clark, 2025b). In line with this assumption, the listed incidents (*Table 1*) emerge as systemic, targeted, and overt actions. The established pattern points at a coercive signalling rationale: these are demonstrative actions short of the use of force that are intended to affect adversary behaviour, in this case, that of NATO member states (see Opro in Croxton, 2025).

In response, NATO has launched the 'Baltic Sentry' initiative to enhance its naval presence and strengthen the protection of critical infrastructure in the Baltic Sea (NATO, 2025). The EU and Nordic-Baltic 8++ states, meanwhile, are intensifying their efforts to counter the shadow fleet together with their G7 partners (EEAS, 2025). In several instances, the affected states have interdicted the vessels suspected of grey zone operations in the Baltic Sea (*Table 1*). Without discussing the legal merits of each case in detail, a few legal aspects should be noted.

The Law of the Sea provides for strong protection of freedom of navigation. Coastal states' competences decrease, generally speaking, as distance from their coasts increases. The scope of coastal state enforcement rights over foreign vessels is further restricted by the Regime of Straits and the Regime Innocent Passage through territorial waters (see Wolfrum, 2009). On the high seas, the principle of Flag State jurisdiction is paramount, which entails that, as a general rule, enforcement actions can only be undertaken with the consent of the respective flag state (Lampo, 2022).

According to the dominant legal interpretation, Article 113 of UNCLOS, which regulates the breaking or injury of submarine cables or pipelines, does not provide for universal jurisdiction. The legal framework applicable to the cases of cargo vessels acting as drone launch or intelligence platforms appears even thinner. However, law does not categorically deny coastal states the right to take enforcement actions against suspected ships. This is allowed, for instance, when a foreign vessel threatens the environment in a coastal states' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (Ringbom, 2025).

Moreover, considering that shadow fleet vessels often have fraudulent documentation, states may rely on the Right of Visit to verify the flag under Article 110(2) UNCLOS, although matters of enforcement as well as any investigative measures remain with the flag state as a general rule (see Norris, 2025). There are some other legal grounds which grant coastal states power to interdict navigation of a suspect foreign vessel outside their territorial sea, but these remain subject to diverging legal interpretations and may not rely on settled state practice (Parlov and Sverdrup, 2024, pp. 256–59; Lott, 2025).

While exploiting legal loopholes, Moscow leverages the grey zone activities, as well as respective Western responses, to send coercive signals that threaten escalation, delegitimise Western action, and thus seek to constrain future countermeasures. With these notes in mind, this article proceeds to a discussion of the scope and context of Russia's piracy claims. By framing this narrative as lawfare, the analysis further explicates the rationale of the Kremlin's coercive signalling (see McKeown 2017, p. 118; Munoz, Andres and Bachmann, 2016).

Table 1. The shadow fleet alleged involvement in grey zone activities in the baltic sea

Date	Vessel[1]	Flag[2]	Type of Incident	Site	State Involvement	Responses
October 8, 2023	NewNew Polar Bear (IMO: 9313204)	China (Hong Kong)	Anchor Dragging	Finnish EEZ Balticconnector Gas Pipeline and 2 Telecom Cables	Finland, Estonia, China	The vessel left the site where the incident took place and continued its journey from the Baltic Sea to the Russian port of Arkhangelsk. The joint investigation by Finnish and Estonian authorities is pending (Staalesen, 2023). China has acknowledged the vessel's responsibility for damaging the pipeline and cables; however, it attributed the incident to accidental causes stemming from adverse weather conditions (ERR, 2024).
November 17–18, 2024	Yi Peng 3 (IMO: 9224984)	China	Anchor Dragging	Swedish territorial sea (TS) BCS East-West Interlink Cable (Lithuania-Sweden) + C-Lion1 Cable (Finland-Germany)	Germany, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, China	The bulk carrier Yi Peng 3 was tracked by Swedish and German authorities sailing over two cut telecom cables near the islands of Gotland and Öland (Bryant, 2024). The vessel had departed the Russian port of Ust-Luga on November 15, 2024. The Danish Navy monitored the vessel anchored in the Kattegat Strait for nearly five weeks, suspecting it of deliberately dragging its anchor to cut the undersea cables (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2024). After month-long negotiations with Chinese authorities, who denied the vessel's involvement, Swedish, Danish, German, and Finnish officials were allowed to board and inspect the Yi Peng 3 as part of a Chinese-led investigation (DW, 2024). However, the Swedish prosecutor leading the European investigation was not allowed aboard. The Swedish investigation later confirmed that the Yi Peng 3 had severed the cables with its anchor. However, no conclusive evidence of deliberate intent was established. Another investigation remains pending (Jones, 2025).

---

1 For the list of EU sanction- designated vessels, see Annex XLII of Council Regulation (EU) No 833/2014 of 31 July 2014 concerning restrictive measures in view of Russia's actions destabilising the situation in Ukraine (Council of the European Union, 2014).

2 Flag state registration as at the time of incident.

Date	Vessel[1]	Flag[2]	Type of Incident	Site	State Involvement	Responses
December 25, 2024	Eagle S (IMO: 9329760)	Cook Islands (Suspected Russian Shadow Fleet)	Anchor Dragging	Finnish EEZ Estlink 2 Power Cable (Finland-Estonia) + 4 Data Cables	Finland	The Finnish Border Guard escorted the Eagle S into Finnish territorial waters. Police and coast guard representatives, supported by the Finnish border guard unit and armed forces, seized and boarded the vessel on suspicion of deliberate anchor dragging that caused cable damage. This incident marked the first seizure of a suspect vessel in enforcement of coastal state sovereign jurisdiction without securing the flag state's consent (Yle, 2024). In August 2025, the captain and two members of the vessel's crew were charged but pleaded not guilty and disputed Finland's jurisdiction. On October 3, 2025, the Helsinki District Court dismissed the case, citing lack of jurisdiction since the damage took place in an EEZ and not in a territorial sea. The case can be appealed to a higher court. The flag state, Cook Islands, did not take any action against the vessel (Osler, 2025).
January 10, 2025	Eventin (IMO: 9308065)	Eventin (IMO: 9308065) Panama	Vessel Adrift/ Risk of Oil Spill	German EEZ	Germany	The loaded tanker lost power and navigation control and was adrift off the German coast near Rügen Island (DW, 2025). To prevent an oil spill, the German authorities seized the tanker, towed it safely to shore, and ordered the vessel and its cargo confiscated (Connor, 2025). Court proceedings remain pending.

Date	Vessel[1]	Flag[2]	Type of Incident	Site	State Involvement	Responses
January 26, 2025	Venzhen (IMO: 9937270)	Malta	Anchor Dragging	Swedish EEZ Latvia State Radio and Television Centre's Telecom Cable	Sweden, Latvia, Norway	Several vessels were identified at the site of the incident. Swedish authorities seized the cargo vessel Venzhen and boarded it to conduct an investigation into suspected sabotage of the cable (LSM, 2025a). Norway seized another cargo vessel at the request of the Latvian authorities. The vessel was crewed by Russian nationals but registered and operated under the Norwegian flag. The Norwegian Coast Guard boarded the vessel to investigate but promptly released it after finding no evidence linking it to the cable damage (Reuters, 2025). A few months later, Sweden closed the case. The vessel had several technical defects that led to the anchor being inadequately secured, causing it to break loose due to adverse weather conditions. Swedish authorities found no evidence of deliberate sabotage. The Latvian investigation remains pending (LSM, 2025b).
	Silver Dania (IMO: 8808604)	Norway				
April 11–28, 2025	Kiwala (IMO: 9332810)	Djibouti	Flagless Navigation	Estonian TS	Estonia	The sanctioned tanker Kiwala, en route to the Russian port of Ust-Luga, passed through Estonia's exclusive economic zone. Estonian authorities directed the vessel into territorial waters for boarding and inspection on grounds of flagless navigation. The vessel claimed to be registered in Djibouti and was released on April 28 after technical deficiencies were corrected (ERR, 2025c).

Date	Vessel[1]	Flag[2]	Type of Incident	Site	State Involvement	Responses
April 23–30, 2025	*HAV Dolphin* (IMO: 9073854)	Antigua and Barbuda	Unidentified Drones	German EEZ	Germany, Netherlands	The cargo vessel *HAV Dolphin* spent eight days anchored northwest of Kiel, close to German Navy's facilities based in Eckernförde. This was not a usual anchorage point (The Insider, 2025b). Unidentified drones were reported in the area while the HAV Dolphin held its position. German police authorities inspected and boarded the vessel twice. The officers found no drones on the ship but determined that all seven crew members were Russian nationals. German authorities notified their Dutch counterparts of their suspicions. On May 15, the vessel was searched again by police upon arrival in Rotterdam, again without results. The measures taken by both countries revealed nothing that would implicate the ship in espionage or sabotage (Tagesschau / ARD, 2025).

Date	Vessel[1]	Flag[2]	Type of Incident	Site	State Involvement	Responses
May 13, 2025	Jaguar (IMO: 9293002)	Gabon and Guinea Bissau	Flagless Navigation	Estonian EEZ	Estonia	The Jaguar tanker raised suspicions because of its flagless status. According to the Ministry of Defence, the Estonian Navy attempted to contact the vessel, and, after receiving no response, proceeded to escort it out of Estonian waters. The vessel had reached the vicinity of the previously damaged EstLink cable, and authorities sought to prevent any threat to Estonia's underwater infrastructure (ERR, 2025b). There had been plans to board the Jaguar, but the operation was called off midway (ERR, 2025a). While the EML Raju patrol boat, supported by an Estonian A139 helicopter and an M-28 Skytruck aircraft, was escorting the tanker, a Russian Air Force Su-35 fighter jet entered Estonian airspace without permission. The jet remained in Estonian airspace for less than a minute, but this prompted the Baltic Air Policing mission to launch a Portuguese Air Force F-16 fighter from Ämari Air Base to conduct a reconnaissance flight alongside other Estonian aircraft (Meade, 2025a). This marked the first instance of Russia deploying its military to protect a shadow fleet vessel. The precedent demonstrated that Russia was prepared to use force and risk a serious incident to keep navigation routes open for the so-called shadow fleet, regardless of the flag or ownership details of the vessel (Meade, 2025b).

Date	Vessel[1]	Flag[2]	Type of Incident	Site	State Involvement	Responses
May 17/28, 2025	Lauga (IMO: 9111060)	Russia	Unidentified Drones	German TS/EEZ, Belgian Port of Zeebrugge	Germany, Belgium	A German naval patrol vessel, BP 81 Potsdam, started following the Lauga near Borkum Island in the North Sea after noticing a swarm of drones around the Russian cargo ship (Tagesschau / ARD, 2025). The two vessels and the drones moved in procession for roughly three hours, but the aircraft disappeared before German officials could determine their model type or confirm that the Lauga had launched them. When the ship arrived at the Belgian port of Zeebrugge on May 28, local customs authorities inspected the vessel at Germany's request. However, the inspection found no evidence of drones, and questioning of the 11 crew members, all Russian nationals, yielded no leads (Meduza, 2025).
August 26, 2025	Scanlark (IMO: 8505915)	St. Vincent Grenadines	Unidentified Drones	Kiel Canal (Internal Waters of Germany)		On September 7, German police special forces searched the cargo vessel 'Scanlark' on the Kiel Canal. The vessel had docked in the Bay of Kiel on August 20, where over the following days, several warships passed by, including German Warship A511, the tender NATO Warship A516, and the Swedish warships HMS Helsingborg (K32) and HMS Härnösand (K33). On August 26, a drone was allegedly launched from the vessel and flown over a warship to take photographs. Investigations are currently underway against five crew members, all Russian nationals (NDR, 2025a). They are suspected of espionage for sabotage purposes. According to NDR information, the police operation also discovered equipment and antennas that would not normally be found on a cargo ship (NDR, 2025b).

Date	Vessel[1]	Flag[2]	Type of Incident	Site	State Involvement	Responses
September 30, 2025	Boracay (IMO: 9332810)	Benin	Flagless Navigation/ Unidentified Drones	French EEZ	France	The French Navy seized the Boracay on grounds of fraudulent documentation. They boarded and inspected the tanker to investigate what authorities described as an unspecified 'suspected violation' (Meade, 2025c). The vessel may be linked to unidentified drone incursions reported between September 22 and 28, 2025, over Danish and Norwegian civilian airports and military installations (Seibt, 2025). The captain, a Chinese national, and the first mate were detained and interviewed before the vessel was released to continue its voyage on October 3 (France24, 2025). The Boracay had previously been arrested in Estonia in April while sailing under one of its many former identities, Kiwala. The tanker was flying the flag of Djibouti at the time, but Djiboutian authorities denied the vessel was registered with them (Meade, 2025c).

'Pirates' of the Baltic Sea: Lawfare and Signalling in Russian Deterrence Strategy

As European enforcement efforts against the shadow fleet intensified, Russia responded with demonstrative naval escorts for some vessels (The Insider, 2025a; Meade, 2025d). At the same time, several high-ranking state officials started equating the seizure of shadow fleet vessels to piracy. In February 2025, Nikolai Patrushev, head of the Maritime Collegium and close ally of President Vladimir Putin, characterised Finland's seizure of the Chinese-flagged Eagle S tanker as a 'piratical seizure' (*piratskii zakhvat*) (TASS, 2025). Since then, the pattern of Russian piracy accusations has become systematic.

In May 2025, Russia's UN Representative Vasily Nebenzya referred to European states countering the shadow fleet 'pirates of the Baltic Sea' during a UN Security Council meeting (Nebenzia, 2025). Russian officials, including Russia's ambassador to Denmark, repeated these accusations, and these also were echoed within Russian expert and academic circles (RIA Novosti, 2025; Smotrim.ru, 2025; Russia Today, 2025; Popov, 2025). These claims misrepresent both the context and the legal matters of the shadow fleet vessels seizure and investigation of the incidents. The consistency and coherency of Moscow's narrative suggest it is not a mere diplomatic protest or propaganda (see EUvsDisinfo, 2025).

After the French authorities seized a sanctioned vessel 'Boracay' on October 1, 2025, President Putin addressed the issue during the annual Valdai Club meeting. He claimed that 'the tanker was seized in neutral waters without any grounds' and further stated: 'As for the seizure of some ships. Well, what's good about it? This is piracy. What is done with pirates? They are destroyed. But the level of risk of collisions will, of course, seriously increase' (President of the Russian Federation, 2025).

In strategic terms, this statement exemplifies what deterrence theory describes as a signal: the verbal and non-verbal communications through which actors convey threats and commitments, display resolve, and project credibility (see Jervis, 2017). Signalling is essential to deterrence practice. When Putin personally articulates consequences, he ties these commitment to his state's reputation for action: it is an authoritative policy position that Moscow may feel compelled to uphold (Schelling, 2020, p. 124). Backing down would undermine future deterrent threats.

What is important here, is that by utilising legal language to frame a signal, the piracy narrative turns into lawfare (see Dunlap, 2008). It reveals

how Moscow misuses law in pursuit of its strategic aims – to deter European states and other actors from taking further coercive measures against the shadow fleet. In the final section of this article, I take a brief look at the legal merit of Russia's claims before analysing what this narrative implies if considered in strategic terms as coercive signalling.

Russia's Piracy Claims: The Strategic Logic of Lawfare

Piracy is a relatively well-defined category in international public law, although some doubts and disagreements regarding its scope of definition and applicability persist (ILC, 2019). According to Art. 101 UNCLOS the term applies to 'any illegal acts of violence or detention, or any act of depredation' which occur on the high seas (or any other place beyond jurisdiction of any state) and involve at least two vessels, the piratical act being launched from one against the other (Shearer, 2010). An act of piracy must be 'committed for private ends'. This is the most substantial criterion to qualify an action as piracy.

Art. 102 UNCLOS elaborates the 'private ends' requirements, stipulating that violence committed by a warship or other state vessels and aircraft qualifies as piracy only if the respective crew mutinies. Such vessel thus ceases to act on flag state duty and hence loses its sovereign immunity. The threshold for this qualification is high – a mere disobedience to orders falls short of mutiny unless intended by the persons in dominant control of the vessel to be used for the purpose of piracy (Shearer, 2010). Thus, the scope of piracy explicitly excludes a coercive action conducted or authorised by a state actor, regardless of the legality of such actions in view of other applicable international legal frameworks (see Proelss et al., 2017, p. 745). These norms may entail the question of state responsibility in peacetime or the laws of naval warfare, respectively (Proelss et al., 2017, pp. 720, 745–46).

However, another aspect of the legal concept of piracy seems to be central to the Russian narrative. The Art. 100 UNCLOS sets the duty for all states to cooperate in matters of repression of piracy. The logical corollary of this provision is that it outlines an exception to the ordinarily exclusive jurisdiction of the flag state of the Art. 92(1), and affords each state enforcement rights against vessels and aircraft suspect of being involved in piracy (Proelss et al., 2017, pp. 734–35). This provision is one of the few recognised cases of universal jurisdiction in international law (Shearer,

2010). By invoking piracy, Russia thus seeks to justify a potential resort to armed violence against NATO states as the exercise of these exceptional enforcement powers.

Russian piracy accusations against European states thus lack any conceivable legal merit. They should be understood as an act of lawfare which appropriates legal concept of piracy for purposes of coercive signalling. Lawfare allows Moscow to signal potential escalation, but in implicit terms, so that it maintains strategic ambiguity which an explicit threat of use of force would eliminate. As mentioned above, although international law of the sea reserves certain rights for coastal states to interdict foreign vessels beyond the territorial sea, this field of law lacks coherent established state practice and contains many grey areas. While NATO's naval and coast guard personnel understand the legal basis for their actions, operating in an environment where Russia threatens "collisions" adds to the planning complexity and risk.

In discussions on the shadow fleet, the EU and NATO member states have so far presented varying legal interpretations and differ in their threat perceptions and risk tolerances regarding what they as plausible legal grounds and operational extent of the enforcement operations against the shadow fleet. The Russian piracy narrative thus seeks to leverage these divisions.

The piracy accusations also perform a symbolic function: they invert the legal status of the actors involved. This signalling move seeks to accomplish two objectives simultaneously: it delegitimises Western actions while providing an allegedly legal cover for Russian responses. Consider another statement Putin made in his Valdai address: 'Our opponents, let's call them that for caution, always call on us to comply with international law. We, for our part, call on them to comply with international law. There is nothing in international law that says one can engage in banditry, piracy, and seize other people's ships without any grounds for doing so, and this can lead to grave consequences' (President of the Russian Federation, 2025).

If European forces are "pirates", then any Russian action against them can be framed not as aggression but as lawful counter-piracy enforcement that any state may undertake under universal jurisdiction. Indeed, Putin alleges a possibility for a third-party intervention to sustain the shadow fleet operations: '…but if we act in the manner I spoke about in today's address, if the multipolar world fights for the interests of each and finds instruments for coordinating positions, I think it will not come to that' (President of

the Russian Federation, 2025). The audience for this signal extends beyond Europe to include states dependent on shadow fleet operations – particularly major importers of discounted Russian oil like China and India.

The rationale of such signalling is twofold: it tacitly conveys that Moscow is considering the possibility of using armed force against the European state vessels while simultaneously preserving strategic ambiguity about when and how Russia might intervene should the interdiction of the shadow fleet vessels continue. For Russian deterrence strategy, lawfare provides a legitimising narrative structure anchored to the authority of international law. Any escalation on Russia's part would be presented as proportionate counter-piracy measures rather than use of force. When considered against broader patterns of Russian posturing – encompassing overt military activity as well as alleged grey zone interventions such as GPS jamming, drone surveillance, and sabotage of undersea infrastructure in the Baltic Sea – this signal demonstrates that Russia possesses not merely the capability to escalate, but also a legal rationale that could complicate Western responses and divide international opinion.

Conclusions

Russian officials have accused EU and NATO members of piracy for interdicting shadow fleet vessels with striking frequency since mid-2024. This represents more than defensive rhetoric or propaganda. The Kremlin has converted its vulnerability into a coercive leverage by expanding its deterrence strategy into the legal domain. When analysed as lawfare, these accusations reveal a signalling rationale: the piracy framing, though legally invalid, enables Russia to threaten escalation while maintaining strategic ambiguity. By describing the EU and NATO states as pirates – and thus criminals – Moscow symbolically delegitimises Western sanctions enforcement and sovereign authority. Moreover, by exploiting the persistent legal uncertainty concerning enforcement measures on the high seas, Moscow buys time for the shadow fleet to continue sustaining Russia's war economy.

For European security, the implications are significant. The shadow fleet will remain a critical vulnerability for Russia and thus a focal point of confrontation. The appropriate response requires recognising Russia's lawfare strategy for what it is while refusing to be constrained by it. Western capitals must understand that in contemporary conflict, legal narratives

are battlefields no less significant than the seas themselves. Countering Moscow's lawfare in international legal fora matters for the demonstration of resolve and unity within the EU and NATO's and achieving credible deterrence against Russia in as much as sanctions enforcement and kinetic measures in countering the illicit operation of the shadow fleet globally.

Works Cited

Banka, A. and Bussmann, M. (2023) "Uncomfortable Neighbors: NATO, Russia and the Shifting Logic of Military Exercises in the Baltics," *Defence Studies*, 23(1), pp. 1–24.

Bartman, C. S. (2010). "Lawfare and the Definition of Aggression: What the Soviet Union and Russian Federation Can Teach Us," *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law*, 43(1), pp. 423–45.

Braw, E. (2024) *Russia's Growing Dark Fleet: Risks for the Global Maritime Order*. Atlantic Council. Available at: https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/russias-growing-dark-fleet-risks-for-the-global-maritime-order/.

Bryant, M. (2024) "Sweden Says China Denied Request for Prosecutors to Board Ship Linked to Severed Cables," The Guardian, 23 December. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/23/china-refused-investigation-into-ship-linked-to-severed-baltic-cables-says-sweden.

Caprile, A. and Leclerc, G. (2024) *Russia's 'Shadow Fleet': Bringing the Threat to Light*. European Parliamentary Research Service, European Parliament. Available at: https://epthinktank.eu/2024/11/11/russias-shadow-fleet-bringing-the-threat-to-light/.

Connor, R. (2025) "Germany Seizes Suspected Russian 'Shadow Fleet' Oil Tanker," DW, 21 March. Available at: https://www.dw.com/en/germany-seizes-suspected-russian-shadow-fleet-oil-tanker/a-71999181.

Council of the European Union (2014) "Annex XLII of Council Regulation (EU) No 833/2014 of 31 July 2014 Concerning Restrictive Measures in View of Russia's Actions Destabilising the Situation in Ukraine," 31 July. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2014/833/oj/eng.

Croxton, W. (2025) "Beyond the Eagle S: How Yi Peng 3 and Newnew Polar Bear Wreaked Havoc in the Baltic Sea," 60 Minutes. CBS News, 28 September. Available at: https://www.cbsnews.com/news/eagle-s-how-yi-peng-3-and-newnew-polar-bear-wreaked-havoc-in-baltic-sea-60-minutes/.

Deutsche Welle (DW) (2024) "China Says Ready to 'work with' Baltic Sea Cut Cables Probe," 29 November. Available at: https://www.dw.com/en/china-says-ready-to-work-with-baltic-sea-cut-cables-probe/a-70916252.

Deutsche Welle (DW) (2025) "Germany Says Russia 'shadow Fleet' Ship Adrift in Baltic Sea," 10 January. Available at: https://www.dw.com/en/germany-says-russia-shadow-fleet-ship-adrift-in-baltic-sea/a-71270172.

Dos Reis, F. and Grzybowski, J. (2024) "Moving 'Red Lines': The Russian–Ukrainian War and the Pragmatic (Mis-)Use of International Law," *Global Constitutionalism* 13(2), pp. 317–39.

Dunlap, C. J. Jr. (2008) "Lawfare Today: A Perspective," *Yale Journal of International Affairs*, pp. 146–54.

Dunlap, C. J. Jr. 2017. "Lawfare 101: A Primer," *Military Review*, 97(3), pp. 8.

Edwards, C. and Seidenstein, N. (2025) *The Scale of Russian Sabotage Operations against Europe's Critical Infrastructure*. International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). Available at: https://www.iiss.org/research-paper/2025/08/

the-scale-of-russian--sabotage-operations--against-europes-critical--
infrastructure/.

EEAS (2025) "Joint Statement: Shadow Fleet Task Force," European Union External
Action Service (EEAS) Press Team, 10 October. Available at: https://www.eeas.
europa.eu/eeas/joint-statement-shadow-fleet-task-force_en.

ERR (2024) "China Admits Container Ship Newnew Polar Bear Damaged Undersea
Gas Pipeline," 12 August. Available at: https://news.err.ee/1609422658/china-
admits-container-ship-newnew-polar-bear-damaged-undersea-gas-pipeline.

ERR (2025a) "Experts: Estonia's Failed Shadow Fleet Tanker Operation Reveals
Shortcomings". 17 May. Available at: https://news.err.ee/1609697184/experts-
estonia-s-failed-shadow-fleet-tanker-operation-reveals-shortcomings.

ERR (2025b) "Navy Escorts Suspected Shadow Fleet Tanker out of Estonian
Waters," 14 May. Available at: https://news.err.ee/1609694456/navy-escorts-
suspected-shadow-fleet-tanker-out-of-estonian-waters.

ERR (2025c) "Russian 'Shadow Fleet' Tanker Kiwala Cleared to Leave Estonian
Waters," 26 April. Available at: https://news.err.ee/1609676453/russian-shadow-
fleet-tanker-kiwala-cleared-to-leave-estonian-waters.

European Commission (2025) "EU Adopts New Sanctions against Russia".
Directorate-General for Communication, 23 October. Available at: https://
commission.europa.eu/news-and-media/news/eu-adopts-new-sanctions-
against-russia-2025-10-23_en.

EUvsDisinfo (2025) "DISINFO: NATO Pirates Act against Russian-Linked Ships
under the Pretext of Sabotage," 29 January. Available at: https://euvsdisinfo.
eu/report/nato-pirates-act-against-russian-linked-ships-under-the-pretext-of-
sabotage/.

France24 (2025) "Russia-Linked Tanker Stopped by France Resumes Voyage," 3
October. Available at: https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20251003-
russia-linked-tanker-stopped-by-france-resumes-voyage-vessel-trackers.

Goldenziel, J. I., Blochberger, S. M. and Granholm, T. (2024) "Weapon of the Weak:
International Law and State Power in the International Court of Justice," *SSRN
Electronic Journal*, ahead of print.

Golovchenko, Y. (2025) "The Effect of Targeted Sanctions on the Russian Shadow
Fleet," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, ahead of print, 18 August.

Hammes, T. X. and Harris, R. (2025) "Warship Weapons for Merchant Ship Plat-
forms," *Proceedings*, 151(2), pp. 1464–75.

Hilgenstock, B., Hrybanovskii, O. and Kravtsev, A. (2024) *Assessing Russia's
Shadow Fleet: Initial Build-up, Links to the Global Shadow Fleet, and Future
Prospects*. KSE Institute. Available at: https://sanctions.kse.ua/en/assessing-
shadow-fleet-initial-build-up-links-to-the-global-shadow-fleet-and-future-
prospects/.

ILC (2019) "Report of the International Law Commission: Seventy-First Session
(29 April–7 June and 8 July–9 August 2019)," A/74/10. International Law Com-
mision of the United Nations.

International Maritime Organisation (IMO) (2023) "Resolution a.1192(33) on
Promoting Actions to Prevent Illegal Operations in the Maritime Sector by

the 'Dark Fleet' or 'Shadow Fleet.'" International Maritime Organisation, 6 December.

Jack, V., Gambarini, C. and Guillot, L. (2025). "Russia's Blacklisted Tankers Keep Dumping Oil in Europe's Seas". Politico, 6 October. Available at: https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-blacklisted-tankers-vessels-keep-dumping-oil-europe-sea-despite-sanction/.

Jack, V., Mackenzie, L. and Clark, S. (2025) "Europe's New War with Russia: Deep Sea Sabotage," Politico, 7 April. Available at: https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-sabotage-undersea-cables-baltic-sea-europe-war/.

Jervis, R. (2017). *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. Centre for International Affairs, Harvard University. New edition. Princeton University Press.

Jones, T. (2025) "Sweden Says No Proof Chinese Ship Meant to Damage Cables," Deutsche Welle, 15 April. Available at: https://www.dw.com/en/sweden-says-no-proof-chinese-ship-meant-to-damage-cables/a-72250803.

Kennedy, D. (2012) "Lawfare and Warfare," in Crawford, J. and Koskenniemi, M. (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to International Law*. Cambridge Companions to Law. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge Core.

Kittrie, O. F. (2016) *Lawfare : Law as a Weapon of War*. Oxford University Press.

Lampo, G. (2022) "Jurisdiction Beyond Territorial Sovereignty: Defining the Scope of Exclusive Flag-State Jurisdiction Under Art. 92 UNCLOS," *Zeitschrift Für Ausländisches Öffentliches Recht Und Völkerrecht / Heidelberg Journal of International Law*, 82(1), pp. 195–222.

Larsson, O. L. (2024) "Sea Blindness in Grey Zone Preparations," *Defence Studies*, 24(3), pp. 399–420.

Litovkin, D. (2022) "Pochemu Baltika ne stanet 'vnutrennim morem NATO,'" TASS.Ru, 20 May. Available at: https://tass.ru/opinions/14682675.

Lott, A. (2025) *Unconventional Legal Approaches to Protecting Underwater Infrastructure*. The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS). Available at: https://hcss.nl/report/unconventional-legal-approaches-protecting-underwater-infrastructure/.

LSM (2025a) "Sweden Arrests Ship Suspected of Damaging Latvian Underwater Cable," 27 January. Available at: https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/defence/27.01.2025-sweden-arrests-ship-suspected-of-damaging-latvian-underwater-cable.a585249/.

LSM (2025b) "Sweden Closes Case on Latvian Undersea Cable Damage," 14 October. Available at: https://www.thelocal.se/20251014/sweden-closes-probe-into-latvia-cable-damage.

Mälksoo, M. (2024) "NATO's New Front: Deterrence Moves Eastward," *International Affairs*, 100(2), pp. 531–47.

McKeown, R. (2017) "The Power and Perils of International Law: A Review Essay on Lawfare, Constructivism and International Lawpower," *International Politics Reviews*, 5(2), pp. 105–19.

McKinney, B. and Domballe, J. (2024) *Russia's Shadow Fleet: Formation, Operation and Continued Risks for Sanctions Compliance Teams*. SandP Global Market Intelligence. Available at: https://www.spglobal.com/market-intelligence/

en/news-insights/research/russia-s-shadow-fleet-formation-operation-and-continued-risks-for-sanctions-compliance-teams.

McLaughlin, R. (2024) "Different *Pacta* or Different *Servanda* ? Grey-Zone Lawfare and Law of the Sea-Based Passage and Operational Rights," *Ocean Development and International Law*, 55(3), pp. 329–42.

Meade, R. (2025a) "Dark Fleet Politics Escalate as Russia Scrambles Jet to Protect 'Nationless' Tanker," Lloyd's List, 15 May. Available at: https://www.lloydslist.com/LL1153484/Dark-fleet-politics-escalate-as-Russia-scrambles-jet-to-protect-nationless-tanker.

Meade, R. (2025b) "Fake Flags Flow through Baltic as an Uneasy Stand-off Continues," Lloyd's List, 1 July. Available at: https://www.lloydslist.com/LL1154066/Fake-flags-flow-through-Baltic-as-an-uneasy-stand-off-continues.

Meade, R. (2025c) "France Investigating Shadow Fleet Tanker Linked to Danish Drone Attacks," Lloyd's List, 30 September. Available at: https://www.lloydslist.com/LL1154977/France-investigating-shadow-fleet-tanker-linked-to-Danish-drone-attacks.

Meade, R. (2025d) "Russian Naval Escorts Raise Stakes in Baltic Security Stand-Off," Lloyd's List, 27 May. Available at: https://www.lloydslist.com/LL1153663/Russian-naval-escorts-raise-stakes-in-Baltic-security-stand-off.

Meduza (2025) "An Invisible Maritime Menace: Mysterious Drones Spy on Western Defences as Cargo Ships Linked to Russia Cruise European Waters," 17 June. Available at: https://meduza.io/en/feature/2025/06/17/an-invisible-maritime-menace#:~:text=On%20the%20night%20of%20May,Watch%20still%20recorded%20the%20docking.).

Munoz, M., Andres, B. and Bachmann, S. D. (2016) "Lawfare in Hybrid Wars: The 21st Century Warfare," *Journal of International Humanitarian Legal Studies*, 7(1), pp. 63–87.

NATO (2023) "Vilnius Summit Communiqué," NATO Heads of State and Government, 11 July. Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm.

NATO (2025) "NATO Launches 'Baltic Sentry' to Increase Critical Infrastructure Security," NATO, 14 January. Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_232122.htm.

NDR (2025a) "Frachtschiff 'Scanlark': Haben Russische Crewmitglieder Spioniert?," 2 October. Available at: https://www.ndr.de/nachrichten/schleswig-holstein/drohnen-von-frachtschiff-scanlark-haben-russische-crewmitglieder-spioniert,scanlark-102.html.

NDR (2025b) "Spionageverdacht Gegen Frachter in Kiel: Ermittlungen Laufen". 11 September. Available at: https://www.ndr.de/nachrichten/schleswig-holstein/razzia-an-holtenauer-schleuse-beamten-ermittelt-wegen-gefahrenabwehr,regionkielnews-570.html.

Nebenzia, V. (2025) "Statement by Permanent Representative Vassily Nebenzia at a UNSC Open Debate on Strengthening Maritime Security through International Cooperation for Global Stability," Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, 20 May. Available at: https://russiaun.ru/en/news/20052025.

Norris, A. (2025) "Rudderless and Adrift: States' Unwarranted Timidity Respecting Stateless Vessels," *International Law Studies*, 106, pp. 101–30.

Osler, D. (2025) "Eagle S Decision Highlights Zero Legal Protection for Subsea Infrastructure," Lloyd's List, 8 October. Available at: https://www.lloydslist.com/LL1155060/Eagle-S-decision-highlights-zero-legal-protection-for-subsea-infrastructure.

Parlov, I. and Sverdrup, U. (2024) "The Emerging 'Shadow Fleet' as a Maritime Security and Ocean Governance Challengeas," in Lott, A (ed.) *Maritime Security Law in Hybrid Warfare*. Brill | Nijhoff.

Popov, D. (2025) "'Eto novaia forma piratstva' Makron prizyvaet NATO nachat okhotu na tankery 'tenevogo flota'. Chem eto obernetsya dlya Rossii?," 3 October. Available at: https://lenta.ru/brief/2025/10/03/france/.

President of the Russian Federation (2025) "Zasedanie Diskussionnogo Kluba 'Valdai,'" Kremlin, 2 October. Available at: http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/78134.

Proelss, A., Maggio, A. R., Blitza, E. and Daum, O. (2017) *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea a Commentary*. C.H. Beck.

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (2024) "Danish Military Keeps Watch on Chinese Ship Suspected of Baltic Cable Sabotage," 20 November. Available at: https://www.rferl.org/a/danish-defence-chinese-ship-yi-peng-baltic-sea-cable-damage/33209361.html.

Reuters (2025) "Norway Releases Ship Suspected of Baltic Sea Cable Damage," 1 February. Available at: https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/norway-releases-ship-suspected-baltic-sea-cable-damage-2025-02-01/.

RIA Novosti (2025) "Popytki Piratstva v Baltiyskom More Budut Presekat'sya, Zayavil Posol Barbin," 31 May. Available at: https://ria.ru/20250531/posol-2020133715.html.

Ringbom, H. (2025) "New Threats – Old Rules: Law of the Sea Issues Raised by Suspected Attacks on Submarine Infrastructure in the Baltic Sea," *Ocean Development and International Law*, 56(3), pp. 390–414.

Rodriguez-Diaz, E., Alcaide, J. I. and Endrina, N. (2025) "Shadow Fleets: A Growing Challenge in Global Maritime Commerce," *Applied Sciences*, 15(12), pp. 6424.

Russia Today (2025) "Zamglavy Minenergo: 'Piratstvo' Zapada v Baltiiskom More Chrevato Posledstviiami," 23 June. Available at: https://russian.rt.com/world/news/1496880-popytki-zaderzhat-ili-arestovat-rossiiskie-tankery-v.

Schelling, T. C. (2020) *Arms and Influence*. Veritas Paperbacks. Yale University Press.

Seibt, S. (2025) "Drones, Sabotage, Surveillance: Moscow's Hybrid Warfare Takes to the High Seas," 3 October. Available at: https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20251003-drones-sabotage-surveillance-moscow-s-hybrid-warfare-takes-to-the-high-seas.

Shearer, I. A. (2010) "Piracy," in *Max Planck Encyclopedia of Public International Law*. Oxford University Press. Available at: https://opil.ouplaw.com/display/10.1093/law:epil/9780199231690/law-9780199231690-e1206?prd=MPIL.

Smotrim.ru (2025) "Professor Mezhevich sravnil deistviya NATO v Baltiiskom more s piratstvom," 14 July. Available at: https://smotrim.ru/article/4595413.

Staalesen, A. (2023) "Runaway Ship Newnew Polar Bear, Suspected of Sabotage in Baltic Sea, Is Sailing into Russian Arctic Waters," The Barents Observer, 26 October. Available at: https://thebarentsobserver.com/security/runaway-ship-newnew-polar-bear-suspected-of-sabotage-in-baltic-sea-is-sailing-into-russian-arctic-waters/164423.

Stavridis, J. (2025) "Putin Takes Hybrid Warfare to the Sea," gCaptain, 18 October. Available at: https://gcaptain.com/putin-takes-hybrid-warfare-to-the-sea/.

Tagesschau / ARD (2025) "Die Suche Nach Den Drohnenschiffen," 10 June. Available at: https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/ndr-wdr/russland-spionage-drohnen-schiffe-100.html.

TASS (2022) "Putin: Vstuplenie v NATO Finlyandii i Shvetsii Ne Sozdaiot Neposredstvennoi Ugrozy Rossii," 16 May. Available at: https://tass.ru/politika/14636203.

TASS (2023) "Putin: Vstuplenie Finlyandii v NATO Privodit k Sozdaniyu Leningradskogo Voennogo Okruga," 17 December. Available at: https://tass.ru/politika/19560413.

TASS (2025) "Patrushev Ukazal Na Popytki NATO Blokirovat' RF Na Baltike," 6 February. Available at: https://tass.ru/politika/23072711.

The Insider (2025a) "Russian Warship Escorts Sanctioned 'Shadow Fleet' Tankers through the English Channel," 23 June. Available at: https://theins.ru/en/news/282394.

The Insider (2025b) "Ship Suspected of Launching Russian Drones off the Coast of Germany Enters Baltic, Searched Twice," 25 August. Available at: https://theins.ru/en/news/284363.

Wolfram, C. (2024) Understanding the Price Cap on Russian Oil and Its Role in Depressing Russian Oil Revenues. Research Commentary RC-2024-05. MIT Centre for Energy and Environmental Policy Research (CEEPR). Available at: https://ceepr.mit.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/MIT-CEEPR-RC-2024-05.pdf.

Wolfrum, R. (2009) "Freedom Of Navigation: New Challenges," in Nordquist, M. H., Koh, T. and Moore, J. N. (eds.) Freedom of Seas, Passage Rights and the 1982 Law of the Sea Convention. Brill | Nijhoff.

Yle (2024) "Estlink Cable Disruption: Finnish Border Guard Detains Tanker Linked to Russia's 'Dark Fleet'," 26 December. Available at: https://www.yle.fi/a/74-20133516.

Perpetual Conflict in the Maritime Domain: Russian Naval Strategy and European Security

Jean-François Lebeau[*]

Abstract

Russia's war against Ukraine has significantly impacted the security situation in Europe. While continuing to be a conventional land threat in the Baltic region, Russia has increasingly turned to the maritime domain to confront NATO. This article considers the interrelated influence of maritime geography on Russian strategy, and the evolution of Russian naval power toward power projection and non-nuclear deterrence. Together, these factors may contribute to a perpetuation of the current confrontation between Russia and NATO.

Russia and NATO in the Maritime Sphere

The risk of an externalisation of the conflict in Ukraine since 2014 has reshaped NATO's strategic threat perception, resulting in an enhanced military posture in eastern Europe. Following the establishment of land and air-based deterrence measures in response to acute threats from Russia in those domains, NATO has also recently increased its posture in the maritime domain. NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept explicitly named Russia as a direct threat to Euro-Atlantic security and highlighted the risks to freedom of navigation in the Arctic and Atlantic Oceans, as well as hard security challenges in the seas surrounding Europe. The inclusion of the maritime domain in the new strategic concept emphasised the importance of the maritime aspects of the confrontation with Russia post-2022 (NATO, 2022). In response to a series of sanctions from the United States and Europe, Russia adopted an increasingly adversarial posture in the maritime domain. From 2023 onward, observed adversarial behaviours varied in both nature and intensity,

[*]   Jean-François Lebeau, Senior Analyst at the Department of National Defence of the Government of Canada.
    The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not represent, or otherwise reflect, any official opinion or position of the Government of Canada, or any of its department and agencies.

which highlighted the hybridity of Russian means and the variability of its risk tolerance vis-à-vis escalation against NATO. Ranging from suspicious shipping in the vicinity of offshore wind farms, to repeated airspace violations, to the suspected deliberate cutting of underwater power and internet cables, Russia's actions have significantly deteriorated the maritime security situation in the Baltic Sea and western Russian Arctic region. Consequently, NATO established the Baltic Sentry mission in early 2025 to increase situational awareness in the Baltic Sea and improve regional capacity to protect critical underwater infrastructure against hybrid threats, whilst deterring further Russian activities against such infrastructure (NATO, 2025).

Russian adversarial activities in the maritime domain exemplify the complexity of the security situation in the Baltics, but also more widely to the European maritime and littoral areas. The risks of a conflict with Russia in or because of the maritime domain are high because of proximity and capability, but also because of the increasing complexity of interactions between Russian and NATO forces to emphasise non-nuclear deterrence. From Russia's perspective, the sea lines of communications running through European waters, such as in the Baltics, have gained importance in light of the conflict in Ukraine and Western sanctions. Although this argument somewhat predates the current situation, Russia perceives this as a strategic risk and a long-term security issue. The following article considers two interrelated factors that shape Russian naval strategy in the Baltic Sea region and western Arctic: the influence of maritime geography on Russian threat perception, and how Russian naval power has evolved to leverage maritime geography to increase non-nuclear deterrence and power projection against NATO. The observed shifts in Russian maritime strategy over the past decade suggests that the risks are not primarily aggression or invasion against NATO but related to two long-term strategic criteria: the security of sea lines of communications and vital economic interests, and non-nuclear deterrence.

Russia's Perpetual Preoccupation about Maritime Geography

Geography is a driver of Russian naval strategy and Moscow's threat perception vis-à-vis Europe. Despite its large coastline Russia is limited to four or five maritime outlets that can be blockaded due to maritime chokepoints in proximity of most of its bases. The closure of the Turkish straits to naval

shipping following Türkiye's application of the Montreux Convention in 2022, the necessity to transit the Danish straits, and the fact that the Baltic Sea is now encircled by NATO states with the exception the Kaliningrad exclave are all serious impediments to freedom of action for the Russian Navy. The war in Ukraine has effectively demonstrated Russia's geographical maritime-based vulnerabilities in terms of maritime access, sea control, and freedom of operations, but also to adversarial action in the context of littoral warfare (Patalano and Hallett, 2025). Attacks against maritime infrastructure by Ukrainian forces, particularly to oil terminals in the Black and Baltic seas, is a scenario that Russian strategists believe would be repeated should an armed conflict with NATO occur. Similarly, the Arctic ports remain limited in terms of capacity because of the harsh climate and sea ice conditions that affect navigation along the Russian Arctic coast for most of the year. The possibility of NATO forces blockading the Russian Arctic ports westward in the event of a conflict is another important geographical factor in Russian naval strategy (Kaplan, 2013).

The geographic character of the Russian European maritime approach is therefore intrinsically linked to the question of maritime security in Russian strategy, and a risk for perpetual conflict between Europe and Russia. Barring a territorial expansion that would offset said geographical limitations (which invading the Baltic states, closing the Suwałki Gap, or a coup de main in Norway, Sweden or Finland would not achieve), Russia's policies and possible actions to overcome such limitations will remain a strategic constraint far beyond the current situation (Germond, 2015; Adrians, 2025). As such, Russian maritime and naval shipping is constrained to transit the 'unfriendly' waters of the Baltic Sea and the Norwegian coast to access sea lines of communications that, in the event of a conflict with NATO, could be blockaded. This reality is not lost on Moscow. The 2022 Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation clearly emphasised the continued importance of sea lines of communication in the modern interconnected world. It also saw a growing competition for resources, and consequently, a greater need for states to maintain sea lanes open and free. A new feature of the doctrine is the prioritisation of sea areas in relation to their importance, ostensibly regarding the Russian economy, but also military value. Therein are the Baltic and the Arctic categorised as vital areas, whose loss could 'jeopardise the national security of the Russian Federation and the very existence of the state' (Russian Federation, 2022, p. 5; Gioe *et al.*, 2025).

Such strategic worries are exacerbated by the Kremlin's belief that the United States seeks to contain Russia geopolitically, akin to strategic-level blockading efforts through a combination of political, economic, and military means (Mérand, 2020; Black, 2024). Sweden's and Finland's accession to NATO membership combined with an increased frequency and complexity of US and NATO military and naval activities in the Baltic, North Sea, and along the Norwegian coasts have contributed to the emergence of a Russian perception of a containment strategy. Hence there are arguments in Russian strategic thought suggesting that perceived American weaponisation of international law, particularly regarding Russia's sovereignty over the Northern Sea Route or the route's status as an international strait, or the non-recognition of claimed rights over offshore resources could eventually result in a military clash (Yevmenov, Puchnin, and Yeshchenko, 2023; Kostenko and Vakhrushev, 2024). Although such conclusions are quite drastic, the re-emergence of great power competition over transportation routes and more broadly the challenge posed by American maritime policy, in this instance, shapes Russian threat perception of containment (Buchanan, 2023). Thus far, Russian strategy has challenged the United States' policy primarily by political and legal means, whilst gradually shifting its naval strategy and capabilities to mitigate weaknesses in the military domain. With the gradual reduction of sea ice coverage in the Arctic permitting more shipping, or increased policing action in the Baltic, Moscow's tolerance of external pressure regarding its sovereignty and control over its maritime areas will likely decrease. This reaction is already being observed in the Baltic Sea, such as increasing measures to protect Russian maritime trade, including the use of military forces. This suggests this is no longer a future strategy for Russia, but possibly becoming normative behaviour with all the security policy implications it entails for NATO and European states.

Observations of Russian maritime shipping since the imposition of sanctions on Russian oil trade in 2022 highlight just how vital the Baltic Sea is for the Russian economy. The Baltic Russian terminals handle approximately half of Russia's seaborne crude trade and a significant proportion of other hydrocarbon products (Kyiv School of Economics, 2025; Stoner, 2021). Although Pacific terminals have increased exports in recent years, the absence of trans-Russia pipelines limits the ability to switch export terminals. As such, the volume of Russian oil tankers in European waters continues to be important in terms of numbers, but also in terms

of revenue for Russia. The series of incidents off the coast of Estonia in June 2025 demonstrated how seriously Russia considers the protection of its tankers, but more importantly how it is willing to take escalatory measures against what it perceives as NATO or EU aggression (Reuters, 2025a; Reuters, 2025b). Such emboldened behaviour is enabled by a change in Russian strategy over the past decade that has re-emphasised the use of conventional naval power to effect both regional power projection and non-nuclear deterrence.

The Return of Naval Power in Russian Strategy

The use of naval power is therefore regaining importance in Russian strategy as an instrument of non-nuclear deterrence. After a period of decline following the collapse of the Soviet Union when the Russian Navy suffered from underinvestment and growing obsolescence, naval power has re-emerged as a strategic symbol of power, but more importantly in pragmatic applications of hard power. The development of non-nuclear deterrence in Russian strategic thought reflected a growing emphasis on asymmetric means to achieve strategic objectives. This line of thought, along with Russians' observations of Western naval operations since 1991, helped to break away from the Cold War mentality and highlighted the possible deterrent value of a Russian Navy armed with conventional long-range cruise missiles (Adamsky, 2018). While the 2014 Military Doctrine re-acknowledged the continued necessity and limitations of nuclear deterrence, it also introduced a concept of military and non-military means to decrease the risks of regional conflicts and protect interests against the perceived degradation of the security environment with NATO and thus, formally introducing non-nuclear deterrence (Russian Federation, 2014; Jonsson, 2019).

In parallel with emerging thoughts in Russia on the concept of new generation warfare, the Russian Navy began a modernisation process to increase its power projection and ability to effect deterrence below the threshold of nuclear conflict. The development of new weapon systems, such as the *Kalibr*-family of cruise missiles, empowered this modernisation. Starting in the mid-2010s Moscow used naval power to reaffirm its continued relevance on the international stage by conducting long-range strikes against targets in Syria, deploying a carrier strike group to the Mediterranean and exercising anti-access and area denial in the Arctic. Russia followed the publication

of the 2022 Maritime Doctrine with a new naval strategy that will likely include a series of capital projects under the State Armament Programme for 2027–2036, and out to 2050 (Kremlin, 2025). The importance of the naval strategy is underlined by the appointment of a close aide to President Vladimir Putin, Nikolai Patrushev, to the chairmanship of the Maritime Collegium in 2024, a state organ tasked with coordinating maritime and naval strategies and policies to make the Russian Navy great again. While ground forces remain the main pillar of Russian conventional hard power, so potently demonstrated in Ukraine since 2022, Russia has increasingly opted for naval power to effect non-nuclear deterrence against Europe.

The evolution and adaption of Russian naval power projection capabilities, particularly weapons of the *Kalibr* or *Tsirkon* type that can reportedly be fitted with conventional or nuclear warheads, are likely to pose strategic risks for NATO far beyond the end of the conflict in Ukraine. The range and versatility of these weapons provide the Russian Navy with the capability to project power on a regional basis and enhance littoral operations to defend Russian sea lines of communications on a different scale than in previous generations (Henrotin, 2011). The Russian Navy's general-purpose forces now reflect a more limited and defensive, but conversely better suited mission set for addressing the security situation in European waters. The introduction of smaller multi-purpose, but relatively well-armed frigates and corvettes is indicative of a shift away from traditional Soviet naval missions on the interdiction of NATO carrier groups in the Atlantic, towards one of projecting power at the regional level. The experience of the intervention in Syria in 2015 and the sea-based strikes against Ukraine since 2022 have demonstrated the strategic potential of such ships, and the weapons they carry, as their mere presence in the Baltic Sea or off the coast of Norway alters NATO's calculus. Since the 2010s, Russia has gradually moved away from building heavy platforms, such as cruisers, and has invested instead in smaller versatile frigates and corvettes which speaks to the smaller ambitions and scope envisioned for the navy. The loss of the Black Sea Fleet flagship *Moskva* in 2022 and the announcement of the decommissioning of the aircraft carrier *Kuznetsov* further precipitated the shift towards a more limited mission set for the Russian Navy's surface fleet. Also relevant is the deployment of coastal defence cruise missile batteries in both the Kaliningrad Oblast and in the Arctic. Together with air forces, air defences, and surface combatants, these weapons form layered defensive systems to protect Russian territory and influence NATO's strategic risk calculus.

Russian naval strategy utilises geography to its advantage in the Baltic Sea. As opposed to larger stages such as the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom Gap or the Atlantic Ocean that offer both lateral and vertical depth, Russian forces can easily detect, track, and target NATO forces due to the constrained spaces of the Baltic Sea. Russia's conventional forces stationed along the littoral of the Baltic Sea and the Kola Peninsula are equipped and positioned to project such power against NATO's sea lines of communications. The emphasis is on overlapping intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets, backed by hard power, to increase situational awareness and, if necessary, conduct sea denial operations (Pic, 2025). The layering of sensors and weapon systems, such as coastal defence batteries and a suite of land attack weapon systems, in the Kaliningrad Oblast and the western Russian Arctic, is consistent with an anti-access and area denial strategy (Tangredi, 2013). Conversely, Russian forces in Kaliningrad are well within range of NATO artillery and aircraft. Ironically, despite the cost of heightened tension in the Baltic region, this increased posturing might have the benefit of balancing power and generating enough deterrence effect to prevent escalation.

To reiterate, a confrontation with Russia in the maritime domain in the Baltic and Arctic seas is already happening. The nature and the character of this confrontation are, however, significantly different that those faced by Ukraine or by NATO during previous eras. For Russia, the nature of this confrontation in the Baltic region is primarily about deterring aggression from the United States through NATO, not necessarily territorial gain (Gioe et al., 2025). As such, Russia has adapted its means to suit its strategic goals in the Baltics and the Arctic, while avoiding a direct military confrontation with NATO. Russia does not seek an absolute dominating position in the Baltics, but rather to deploy sufficient naval forces (complemented by ground and air forces) to mitigate a perceived negative correlation of forces, and to achieve a regional deterrence effect on a perceived superior adversary. Such naval strategy is not new. However, the focus on targeting non-military assets and exploiting civilian and/or structural risks and vulnerabilities in the maritime space is an important distinction. Increasing geopolitical competition, access to natural resources, and increasing dependence on critical underwater and maritime infrastructure are the likeliest long-term risk security challenges by Russian actions and policies (Swistek and Paul, 2023). Moreover, the possibility of targeting these vulnerabilities lays

the foundation for perpetuating the confrontation with NATO without escalating beyond the threshold of armed conflict.

Deliberate or not, the targeting of civilian critical infrastructure, civilian ships, and aircraft, is an evolution of the character of modern war that comes with many implications from the strategic down to the tactical levels. Paraphrasing Russian Chief of General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, modern war is not limited to times of armed conflict but begins before the outbreak of combat using non-traditional and non-military means (Jones, 2021). The use of non-military means, such as research vessels and oil tankers, or the targeting of civilian infrastructure by military means to achieve strategic effect, is consistent with Russian new generation warfare thinking, as well as its concept of strategic deterrence (Kofman et al., 2020). In recent years, activities like damaging underwater internet and power cables in the Baltic Sea by Russia-linked ships have had disproportionally important consequences in relation to their cost. Other behaviours, such as suspicions of mapping the sea floor, identifying nodes of underwater critical infrastructure and submarine cables, and enabling or facilitating the damaging of underwater cable by vessels associated with the Russian Main Directorate for Deep Sea Research, are very concerning. This type of activity would be consistent with strategic-level reconnaissance activities with much more obscure objectives. Meanwhile, these incidents and activities highlight both future risks, but also result in current impacts on communications, maritime and air safety, economic trade, power generation and supply, along with environmental costs, to name but a few. This imposes not only immediate costs, but a cascading effect of consequences on the civilian systems and population. Taken holistically, these activities by Russia point to a vastly different conceptualisation of the character of modern war than what is understood in Western states.

Discussion

This paper discussed the relationship between the influence of geography on Russian strategic threat perception, and how it factors into the evolution of naval strategy in the Baltic Sea and Western Russian Arctic regions. It argued that both factors may contribute to a perpetuation of confrontation between Russia and NATO long after an end of the war in Ukraine.

For Russia, unimpeded access to sea lines of communications in the Baltic Sea and the Arctic are and will remain both vital internal and external strategic interests that need to be defended. Despite its desire to pivot to Asia, Russia remains dependent on maritime access in the Baltic, Arctic, and Black seas for economic reasons. Changing this dependency requires time and significant resources to achieve. Again, the risk is not primarily one of invasion or of aggression against NATO in terms of territorial conquest. Instead, it should be seen within the wider context of great power competition between the US, the EU, Russia, and China in which global maritime trade is a key pillar. With both Nord Stream pipelines out of action and a significant reduction of hydrocarbon flows going to European markets, Russia has had to refocus its shipping method on oil tankers and shift its markets. Facing the risk of economic strangulation because of precarious access to sea lines of communications in the Baltic and western Arctic – and one may relevantly add the Black Sea in the current circumstances – Russia is following a preventative strategy in the face of what it perceives as gradual containment by the United States and NATO. This translates into the increasingly adversarial behaviour observed in the Baltic Sea. In terms of time and space, the development of alternative trade routes is slow and insufficient to sustain economic activity and thus, Russia considers it necessary to take military action to protect its maritime shipping. At the risk of falling into a deterministic trap, this means that Russian shipping and Russian naval forces will continue to transit through European waters. Russia's response to European policing actions against its shipping, either because of dangerous behaviour or of sanctions, demonstrates how important it considers the maritime domain.

The challenging aspect of this confrontation between NATO and Russia is its multi-dimensional character that exceeds a purely military aspect. While NATO's policy since 2013 has focused on deterring Russian land aggression against member states, Russian activities since 2023 point to an increasing role of the maritime (and air) domain in terms of its role in non-nuclear deterrence while limiting escalation toward an armed conflict. Whether in response to NATO's own deterrence efforts or as an evolution of Russian military doctrine, Russia's shift towards non-nuclear deterrence will shape its approach to maritime security for the foreseeable future. Russia's behaviour in the maritime domain cannot be downplayed because it is already affecting NATO and European security on multiple levels.

Beyond the immediacy of risks associated with Russia's shadow fleet, escort operations, and underwater reconnaissance, longer-term shifts in posture may affect both the state of deterrence against the non-nuclear states in the Baltic region and raise questions regarding the threshold for the use of conventional force. The proliferation of long-range precision weapons in the Russian inventory might alter the regional power dynamics and not simply for countries adjacent to Russian territory (Minic, 2025). This also includes Denmark and Norway, given geography and those countries' ability to blockade the Baltic Sea or interdict Russian maritime shipping to strangle Russian sea lines of communication. The growing persistent conventional threat with limited yield, such as that posed by *Kalibr* weapons, could be used in a surgical manner either pre-emptively as a warning, or as a tit-for-tat, such as punishment to having provided advanced long-range weapons to Ukraine and then used for deep strikes within Russia. In any case the objective is to deter a behaviour that Russia perceives to threaten its security, but without risking an escalation of force (Schmitt and Tumchewics, 2025; Kofman et al., 2020). Russia's intentions are already being demonstrated through a combination of increased aggressive actions to protect shadow fleet tankers, increased persistent presence of Russian navy assets in the Baltic and North seas, and publicised firings of advanced deterrence weapons.

While these notions are not new, they translate into possibly risky strategic policy decisions for NATO and its individual member states. The new reality is that despite setbacks in its war against Ukraine, Russia remains a credible and capable actor with the ability to seriously influence European security. In the maritime domain, its fleet's composition and disposition, although much more limited in terms of symbolism, is conversely much better suited to effect strategic deterrence and protect Russian interests in the current security context in Europe (Mommsen, 2016). The factors of proximity and geography, which combined with Russia's naval and hybrid maritime capabilities, are certain to contribute to a confrontation in the maritime domain that will endure far beyond the current context in Ukraine.

Works Cited

Adamsky, A. (2018) "From Moscow with coercion: Russian deterrence theory and strategic culture," *The Journal of Strategic Studies,* 41(1–2), pp. 33–60.

Adrians, H. (2025) *Russia's naval build-up at Lake Ladoga*. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 11 August. Available at: https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/russias-naval-build-up-at-lake-ladoga.

Black, J. (2024) *Rethinking geopolitics.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Buchanan, E. (2023) *Red Arctic.* Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

Germond, B. (2015) "The geopolitical dimension of maritime security," *Marine Policy,* 54, pp. 137–142.

Gioe, D. V., Miron, M., and Ozawa, M. (2025) "Reassessing NATO's deterrence and defence posture in the Baltics: rebalancing strategic priorities to counter the Russian hybrid aggression," *Defence and Security Analysis,* 41(1), pp. 145–165.

Henrotin, J. (2011) *Les fondements de la stratégie navale au XXIè siècle.* Paris: Economica.

Jones, S. G. (2021) *Three dangerous men.* New York: W.W. Norton and Company.

Jonsson, O. (2019) *The Russian understanding of war.* Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press.

Kaplan, R. D. (2013) *The revenge of geography.* New York: Random House.

Kofman, M., Fink, A., and Edmonds, J. (2020) *Russian strategy for escalation management: Evolution of key concepts.* Washington, D.C.: Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

Kostenko, A. N. and Vakhrushev, V. A. (2024) "Geopolitika Rossiiskoi Federatsii v sovremennom mire," [Geopolitics of the Russian Federation in the contemporary world]*, Voennaya Mysl',* 33(2).

Kremlin. (2025) *Meeting to review the main parameters of the draft state armament programme for 2027–2036*, 11 June. Available at: http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/77170.

Kyiv School of Economics. (2025) *Russian oil tracker.* Available at: https://kse.ua/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/ROT_JUN25.pdf.

Mérand, F. (2020) *Coping with geopolitical decline.* Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Minic, D. (2025) *La dissuasion nucléaire russe à l'épreuve de la guerre en Ukraine.* Paris: IFRI.

Mommsen, K. A. (2016) "The Russian Navy," in Krause, J. and Bruns, S. (eds.) *Routledge handbook of naval strategy and security.* Milton Park: Routledge, pp. 305–314.

NATO. (2022). *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept.* Available at: https://www.act.nato.int/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/290622-strategic-concept.pdf.

NATO. (2025) *Joint statement of the Baltic Sea NATO Allies,* 14 January. Available at: https://www.presidentti.fi/en/joint-statement-of-the-baltic-sea-nato-allies-summit/.

Patalano, A. and Hallett, D. (2025) "The strategic significance of the maritime theatre in the Russia-Ukraine War," *The RUSI Journal*, pp. 1–15.

Pic, P. (2025) "Militarisation et sécurité dans l'Arctique: une période d'incertitude.," *Hérodote, 197*(2), pp. 51–64.

Reuters. (2025a) "Estonia says Russia detained a tanker in Baltic Sea," *Reuters,* 18 May. Available at: https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/estonia-says-russia-detained-tanker-baltic-sea-2025-05-18/.

Reuters. (2025b). "Estonia says Russia sent jet after attempt to stop sanction-breaking ship," *Reuters,* 15 May. Available at: https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/estonian-navy-says-it-tried-detain-one-russian-shadow-fleet-baltic-sea-2025-05-15/.

Russian Federation. (2014) *Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation.* Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20180501051233id_/https://www.offiziere.ch/wp-content/uploads-001/2015/08/Russia-s-2014-Military-Doctrine.pdf.

Russian Federation. (2022). *Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation.* Available at: http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/ru/xBBH7DL0RicfdtdWPol32UekiLMTAycW.pdf.

Schmitt, O. and Tumchewics, L. (2025) *The hunt for economic security. The role of navies in deterring threats to the maritime economy.* Paris: IFRI.

Stoner, K. E. (2021) *Russia resurrected.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Swistek, G. and Paul, M. (2023) "Geopolitics in the Baltic Sea region: The 'Zeitenwende' in the context of critical maritime infrastructure, escalation threats and the German willingness to lead," *SWP Comment*, No. 9/2023, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik.

Tangredi, S. J. (2013) *Anti-access warfare.* Annapolis: Naval Institute Press.

Yevmenov, N. A., Puchnin, V. V., and Yeshchenko, Y. V. (2023) "Key changes in the nature and content of maritime military threats to Russia," *Military Thought, 32*(3).

The Impact of Non-State Actors on Security: Insights from the War in Ukraine

Daniela Irrera[*]

Abstract

The war in Ukraine, which began in 2014 and escalated in 2022, has showcased contemporary warfare strategies that have been observed and adopted by non-state armed groups (NSAGs), including insurgents, paramilitaries, and mercenaries. The relationship between terrorism, organised crime, and non-state armed actors (NSAAs) has been analysed as a strategic means of exploiting illicit markets. This relationship is primarily evident in failed and fragile states, where it is used to profit from war, technology, and the cyber environment. This chapter analyses the impact of NSAAs on the global security agenda, particularly in light of technological advances. It argues that this impact has significantly changed since the war in Ukraine, representing a new threat capable of challenging security dynamics at regional and global levels.

Introduction

The conflict in Ukraine has marked a turning point in international dynamics and in the European defence agenda, by demonstrating modern warfare tactics that could be adopted by various actors, including non-state ones. The latter can be broadly defined as individuals or entities that do not officially represent a government, yet possess significant political, social, and economic influence (Mullins, 2024). Non-state armed actors include terrorists, insurgents, contractors, foreign fighters, mercenaries, and organised crime groups.

This chapter analyses the impact of NSAAs on the global and European security agenda in light of technological advances. In particular, it argues that the impact has changed significantly after the beginning of Russia's aggression war in Ukraine, representing a renewed threat. Non-state

---

[*]   Daniela Irrera is a Professor of International Relations at the Centre for Higher Defence Studies (CASD) in Rome, Italy.

actors are often employed by states to exert malign influence. However, their autonomous capacity to develop an agenda and pursue a strategy is increasing rapidly. According to the ACLED Conflict Index, political violence has significantly increased and become highly diversified if compared to the period five years ago, mostly due to the new phase of the conflict in Ukraine. The number of civil wars has decreased, and they are replaced by hostilities perpetrated by local militias, rebels, or groups with a national agenda (ACLED, 2024).
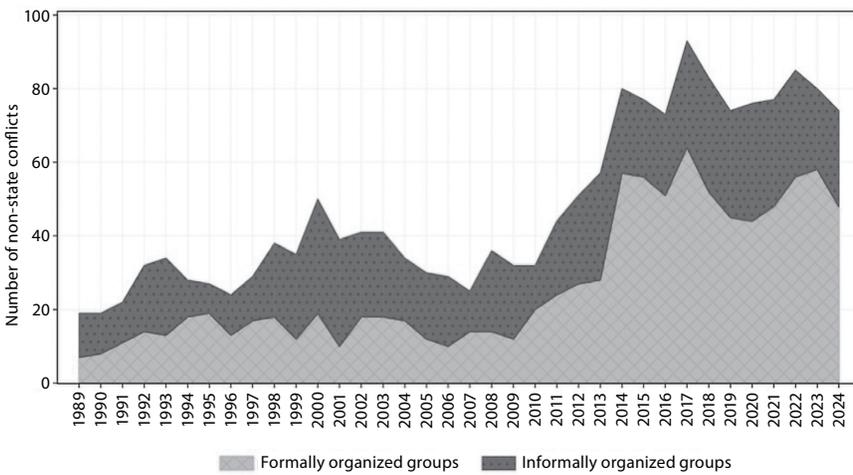

Fig. 1. Non-state conflicts by organizational level of the warring sides (1989–2024). Based on UCDP 25.1 data.

According to the UCDP data, the number of conflicts which are escalated by non-state actors increases and introduces serious concerns in security dynamics. A non-state conflict is defined by UCDP as 'the use of armed force between two organised armed groups, neither of which is the government of a state, which results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in a year', and, as shown in *Fig. 1*, escalation can be initiated by formally or informally organised groups. In that regard, the latter (primarily terrorist groups) are the more active.

This poses a significant threat to global security, prompting states to develop the necessary capabilities and responses. Since Europe has been constantly targeted by terrorists, it has extensively worked on developing

strategies to tackle the root causes of conflicts and political violence, although most efforts have focused on deradicalisation policies and measures against violent extremism.

Why are Non-State Armed Actors Increasing Their Power?

Studies on terrorism and organised crime, and their interrelations – the so-called "crime-terror nexus" – have been at the forefront of producing theoretical and empirical insights in the scholarly community of International Relations and security studies (Ljujic, van Prooijen, and Weerman, 2017; Felbab-Brown, 2019; Makarenko, 2021; Carrapico, Irrera, and Tupman, 2014; Irrera, 2016). These studies have focused on criminals and terrorists, actors that, despite having different identities, goals, and methods, may share common ground and objectives, converge and establish connections (Makarenko, 2021). Since they are non-state actors, the studies have also covered literature on the nature and modus operandi of non-state actors. Discussions of the environments in which NSAAs operate in, their interactions with other subversive actors, and their impact on conflict zones, can help us understand how they develop and what countermeasures are needed.

Post-Cold War terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State (IS) appear to be sophisticated organisational networks combining largely autonomous cells and structures (Hutchinson and O'Malley, 2007). They are more likely to engage in crimes such as drug smuggling, money laundering, and extortion; however, they do not consider themselves to be common criminals (Hoffman, 2006). Drug trafficking is the largest source of income for organised crime groups and terrorists along with robbery, extortion, kidnapping, arms trafficking, and smuggling. Such activities require extensive organisational capabilities and are therefore more likely to be carried out by structured terrorist groups than by individuals or isolated cells.

Consequently, advances in technology are perceived necessary in this transformation (Hutchinson and O'Malley, 2007). Markets and services offered in the cyber environment have expanded on a transnational scale, producing benefits for subversive actors as well. Although they remain different in their nature and agenda, terrorist groups have adopted new structural forms that are similar to those of organised crime syndicates. Terrorist groups are increasingly using decentralised financial tools, such

as cryptocurrencies, to evade financial control, launder money, and fund their operations. Technology plays a major role in activities carried out by terrorists and has shaped their performance. Terrorist groups use cyber capabilities to launch attacks, steal financial assets, identify targets, recruit individuals more effectively, and plan attacks by gaining the upper hand over their adversaries (Musotto and Wall, 2020). Also, they use technology to build up links with other actors such as insurgents, paramilitary groups, and private military companies (Sullivan and Bunker, 2014; Jones and Johnston, 2013). This can occur in troubled and conflict-ridden environments, because they provide an ideal opportunity for subversive actors to flourish. When terrorists and organised criminal groups are active and well-established, closer cooperation and consolidation between them is more likely to happen (Kalyvas, 2015; do Céu Pinto Arena, 2022; Irrera, 2024).

Unstable conditions can be observed in states affected by political, economic, or social weaknesses. In these states, competitive illicit markets are largely or entirely controlled by organised crime syndicates (Alesina, Piccolo and Pinotti, 2019; Petrich, 2021). This facilitates strategic alliance between criminals and terrorists, but also with other armed groups (e.g., insurgents). The lines between different actors become obscured and they engage in various illegal and violent activities. Contemporary conflicts, such as the war in Ukraine, can offer powerful examples.

The Impact of the War in Ukraine on NSAAs' Performance

The military escalation in Ukraine has had a significant impact on the activities of NSAAs, such as, the increased likelihood of forming alliances and the extent of cooperation in terms of funding sources, recruitment of personnel, and the increased usage of technology.

Regarding the funding, conflict zones provide an ideal context for illicit trafficking. This was observed during the wars in the Balkans or in Africa. In these contexts, alliances among local groups expanded access to more sophisticated weapons and logistical support (Feinstein and Holden, 2014; Tan, 2023). Even in Ukraine, the influx of weapons has been substantial. Initially, these flows of arms have benefitted criminals as well, but this could also be potentially beneficial for terrorist groups further afield. Financial institutions and the ease with which officials can be corrupted or regulatory systems weakened remain a related vulnerability. In the case of a war of

aggression, both Russia and Ukraine have drawn upon decentralised financial instruments to fund their military operations, particularly local volunteer units. The war of aggression has also affected some processes for the recruitment of fighters, mainly foreigners. Both Ukraine and Russia have attracted fighters from different parts of the world who are motivated by ideology, nationalism, or a desire to engage in mercenary work.

More generally, terrorist groups have long recruited foreign fighters. New models of cross-border recruitment have been developed, especially for individuals without formal affiliation. Rather than pursuing ethnonationalist or extremist ideologies, separatism, or changes to government structures, groups often have global aspirations, with the goal to influence global governance (Rocha, 2019). These foreign fighters bring combat skills, but also links to international criminal networks, further blurring the lines between terrorism and organised crime. Additionally, some of them have returned home with enhanced combat skills and connections to criminal networks, which could potentially fuel terrorism in other regions (Kaunert, MacKenzie, and Léonard, 2023; de Roy and Bakker, 2023).

The war has also informed and honed the modus operandi of many of these actors. For example, following the collapse of the ISIS caliphate, many organisations have adopted a decentralised model. These autonomous cells carry out attacks with little oversight, making them harder to disrupt. This tactic has been adopted by groups across Europe, the Middle East and Africa, but also by the fighting parties in Ukraine, where numerous groups have started to operate in the same manner, particularly in the early stages (Pearson, Akbulut and Lounsbery, 2017). The absence of centralised command structures has made interactions amongst criminals and other armed groups easier. As much of the fighting in Ukraine has taken place in urban areas, with both sides using civilian infrastructure for cover, terrorist groups increasingly engaged in urban warfare can adopt similar tactics. For example, they have adopted tactics involving embedding fighters among the civilian population to deter direct military strikes or exploit civilian casualties for propaganda purposes. Many of these tactics have been designed and implemented by cyber warfare and the increasing usage of technology (Irrera, 2025). For example, according to some reports, in Kherson City and Antonivka, Russian units used civilians as targets for 'live training exercises' (Stewart, 2025).

Some specific trends have been observed, although it is difficult to measure them empirically. Firstly, the 'improvisation' of techniques and tools

has been a constant feature of terrorist groups operating in conflict zones, due to precarious local conditions and uncertainty surrounding cooperation with other local actors (Bendett et al., 2020). In Ukraine, this practice has evolved, becoming more professional and consolidated. Secondly, the 'weaponisation' of tools, such as surveillance drones and their deliberate use in a hostile or aggressive manner to achieve political or military objectives has increased (Riemer and Sobelman, 2023).

The conflict in Ukraine has popularised the use of commercial drones for surveillance and combat purposes, with the Ukrainian and Russian militaries and irregular forces having used drones to target enemy positions. Terrorist groups, such as IS and others in the Middle East and North Africa, are learning to use drones for reconnaissance and attack purposes, having also adopted them for similar purposes. They are used for surveillance to gather intelligence on enemy positions and thus, weaponised to drop explosives on certain targets. Alongside drones, the 'de-improvisation' process involves guerrilla tactics, such as ambushes and hit-and-run operations to target Russian convoys and positions. Armed groups use more sophisticated remote detonation and placement techniques. They also reinforce civilian vehicles with makeshift armour and weapon mounts to create more mobile and protected platforms of attack. Both features can be seen when cyberspace is transformed into a domain of conflict and warfare, and where information technology is used as a weapon to cause harm by disabling critical infrastructure, stealing sensitive data, and spreading disinformation (Mathur, 2025). Cyber warfare has been used intensively by both Ukrainian and Russian forces (and their proxies) to target each other's important infrastructure, communications, and databases. However, it has also become a crucial tool for both state and non-state actors. Criminal groups, often with links to the Russian government, have launched cyber-attacks with the aim to destabilise Ukraine and its allies. Terrorist groups have moved into the cyber domain, targeting state infrastructure, banks, and other institutions to create chaos and weaken governments. They also use cyber capabilities to spread propaganda or recruit new members. The complex security situation and uncertain economic conditions, along with emerging challenges such as hybrid warfare, cyber threats and terrorism, could prompt NATO and the EU to cooperate more closely (Holt, 2012).

The Effects on Security Cooperation

The global political system is entering into a new phase of increased cooperation among NSAAs. The fluid and dynamic nature of modern conflicts, exemplified by the ongoing war in Ukraine, provides an arena in which asymmetric warfare strategies can be developed and adopted by non-state actors, including terrorist and criminal groups. This war has introduced innovations in a variety of tactics, such as drone warfare, cyber operations, urban warfare, and decentralised structures. Many of them could be adapted for use in terrorist attacks around the world. Criminal networks facilitate the flow of weapons, illicit goods, and finances that support both state and non-state actors in conflicts. Meanwhile, terrorist organisations are increasingly adopting technological advances in cyber warfare, propaganda and surveillance. Criminals and terrorists have consolidated relations with other violent local non-state actors and identified additional channels for recruiting new fighters. This is not necessarily linked to ideology or extremism, but to the use of contractors, and improved sources of funding. The practices deployed in Ukrainian battlefields have provided an ideal context for the testing and consolidating of new tools and practices. Notably, the war has demonstrated to terrorists, criminals, and other NSAAs how emerging technologies can enhance the use of drones, vehicles and weapons, as well as how the cyber environment can facilitate illicit activities to fund warfare. This will inevitably have implications for regional security, as well as for NATO's counterstrategy and relations with its allies.

Various scenarios could develop in the future regarding these developments, and while the EU has taken steps to strengthen its defence cooperation, it would be difficult to succeed in the face of renewed and multi-vector security threats. Thus, NATO's role as a substructure within a broader global defence alliance comprising Western states and those that support the West is crucial. The coordination between EU defence policy and expanded NATO structures would depend largely on the specific institutional arrangements and agreements between these entities. The precise nature and extent of this coordination would require detailed negotiations between the relevant parties. To this point, the necessity of containing Russia or protecting against a potential Russian attack cannot be the only basis for shaping European defence. The EU must strengthen its security agenda and capacity in order to address the evolving security landscape and prepare for all other potential threats.

Works Cited

ACLED (2024) Conflict Index. Available at: https://acleddata.com/series/acled-conflict-index.

Alesina, A., Piccolo, S. and Pinotti, P. (2019) "Organized crime, violence, and politics, " *The Review of Economic Studies*, *86*(2), pp. 457–499.

Bendett, S., Blank, S., Cheravitch, J., Petersen, M. B., Turunen, A., and Mankoff, J. (2020) "Improvisation and Adaptability in the Russian Military," Centre for Strategic and International Studies, pp. 38.

Carrapico, H., Irrera D. and Tupman B. (2014) "Transnational Organised Crime and Terrorism: different peas, same pod?," *Double Special Issue of Global Crime*, 15(3–4), pp. 203–218.

de Roy van Zuijdewijn, J. and Bakker, E. (2023) "Twenty years of countering jihadism in Western Europe: from the shock of 9/11 to 'jihadism fatigue'," *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, 18(4), pp. 421–434.

do Céu Pinto Arena, M. (2022) "The Impact of Ethnic Groups on International Relations," in Charountaki, M. and Irrera, D. (eds.) *Mapping Non-State Actors in International Relations.* Springer International Publishing, pp. 73–94.

Felbab-Brown, V. (2019) "The crime-terror Nexus and its fallacies," in Chenoweth, E. (ed.) *The Oxford handbook of terrorism*. Oxford University Press, pp. 366–383.

Feinstein, A. and Holden, P. (2014) "Arms trafficking," in Paoli, L. (ed.) *The Oxford handbook of organized crime.* Oxford University Press, pp. 444–59.

Hoffman, B. (2006). *Inside terrorism.* Columbia University Press, pp. 1–432.

Holt, T. J. (2013) "Exploring the social organisation and structure of stolen data markets," *Global Crime*, *14*(2–3), 155–174.

Hutchinson, S. and O'Malley, P. (2007) "A Crime–terror Nexus? Thinking on Some of the Links between Terrorism and Criminality," *Studies in Conflict Terrorism*, 30(12), pp. 1095–1107.

Jones, S. G. and Johnston, P. B. (2013) "The future of insurgency," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 36(1), pp. 1–25.

Kalyvas, S. N. (2015) "How Civil Wars Help Explain Organized Crime – and How They Do Not," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 59(8), pp. 1517–1540.

Kaunert, C., MacKenzie, A. and Léonard, S. (2023) "Far-right foreign fighters and Ukraine: A blind spot for the European Union?," *New Journal of European Criminal Law*, 14(2), pp. 247–266.

Irrera, D. (2016) "The crime-terror-insurgency 'nexus'. Implications on multilateral cooperation," in Romaniuk, S. (ed.) *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Modern War.* CRC Press, pp. 39–52.

Irrera, D. (2025) "How have Terrorists Adopted Tactics from the Russia-Ukraine War? The Crime-Terror-Tech Nexus," in Sadik, G. (ed.) *The Effects Of The Russia-Ukraine War On Countering Terrorism*. Centre of Excellence Defence Against Terrorism, pp. 67–78.

Ljujic, V., van Prooijen, J.W. and Weerman, F. (2017) "Beyond the crime-terror nexus: socio-economic status, violent crimes and terrorism," *Journal of Criminological Research, Policy and Practice*, 3(3), pp. 158–172.

Makarenko, T. (2021) "Foundations and evolution of the crime–terror nexus," in Allum, F., Gilmour, S. (eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of Transnational Organized Crime*. Routledge, pp. 253–269.

Mathur, R. (2025) "Techno-Capitalism and weaponisation of cyberspace," *Global Studies Quarterly*, 5(2). Available at https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksaf031.

Morcos, P. and Simón, L. (2022) "NATO and the South after Ukraine," *Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, pp. 1–5.

Mullins, S. (2024) "The Role of Non-State Actors as Proxies in Irregular Warfare and Malign State Influence," *Irregular Warfare Centre*, pp. 1–25.

Musotto, R. and Wall, D. S. (2020) "More Amazon than Mafia: analysing a DDoS stresser service as organised cybercrime," *Trends in Organized Crime*, pp. 1–19.

Pearson, F. S., Akbulut, I. and Olson Lounsbery, M. (2017) "Group Structure and Intergroup Relations in Global Terror Networks: Further Explorations," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 29(3), pp 550–572.

Petrich, K. (2021) "The crime–terror Nexus," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*.

Riemer, O. and Sobelman, D. (2023) "Coercive disclosure: The weaponisation of public intelligence revelation in international relations," *Contemporary Security Policy*, 44(2), pp. 276–307.

Rocha, I. M. (2019) "Global system dynamics in the relationships between organized crime and terrorist groups," in Ruggiero, V. (ed.) *Organized Crime and Terrorist Networks*. Routledge, pp. 100–116.

Stewart B. (2025) "Ukrainians in Kherson survived Russia's occupation. Now, they're being hunted by drones," *CBC in Ukraine*. Available at https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/ukraine-kherson-attack-drones-1.7443615.

Struwe, L. B. , et al. (2014) "The Ukraine crisis and the end of the Post-Cold War European order: options for NATO and the EU," *Centre for Military Studies*, University of Copenhagen, https://cms.polsci.ku.dk/english/publications/ukrainecrisis/.

Sullivan, J. P. and Bunker, R. J. (2014) "Multilateral counter-insurgency networks," in Bunker, R. J. (ed.) *Networks, terrorism and global insurgency*. Routledge, pp. 183–198.

Tan, A. T. H. (2023) "Global Arms Trade," in Williams, P. D. and McDonald, M. (eds.) Security Studies. Routledge, pp. 535–551.

Russian Para-Statal Military Organisations and their Challenge to European Security Interests: Authoritarian Conflict Management Abroad and Subversion at Home

Dr. Christopher Spearin[*]

Abstract

This chapter identifies and analyses security challenges posed by Russian para-statal military organisations (PSMOs) to European security interests. It focuses on three challenges: 1) the challenge of Authoritarian Conflict Management (ACM) abroad; 2) the challenge of enacting ACM and related PSMO limitations; and 3) the challenge of subversion at home. The chapter emphasises international power shifts, increasing authoritarian great power activism, and the seeming limitations of the 'liberal stance' towards conflict management that point toward a different approach undertaken through Russian PSMOs. Assessed together, the potency of Russian PSMOs rests in offering an alternative to European engagement, the heightening of violence overseas and its repercussions, and the fear of changed PSMO effort on the European continent.

Russian-PSMO Activity

Russian para-statal military organisations (PSMOs) have tested European security policies in recent years.[1] They have supported Russian pushes into Ukrainian territory since 2014. They provided unofficial Russian ground forces in Syria, thus complicating European and other Western endeavours. They have been instrumental in limiting, if not jettisoning, the French, wider European, and United Nations presence in several African countries. Such are the vexations that the European Union has initiated sanctions

---

[*] Dr. Christopher Spearin is a Professor at the Department of Defence Studies Canadian Forces College.

The views expressed in the chapter are those of the author. They do not reflect those of the Canadian Department of National Defence or the Government of Canada.

[1] Russian para-statal military organisations have ties both to the state and to Russia's prominent oligarchy. The breadth and degree of agency they possess varies temporally, by location, and by mission.

against the PSMO Wagner Group, elements of Russian military intelligence connected to Russian PSMOs, and perpetrators of linked propaganda and disinformation efforts (Council of the European Union, 2023; Council of the European Union, 2024). In a similar way, the United Kingdom has levelled sanctions against Wagner Group, Africa Corps, and Bear Brigade, and has designated Wagner Group as a terrorist organisation to boot (United Kingdom Home Office, 2023; United Kingdom Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office, 2024). These developments remain relevant because Russia, even in the wake of Wagner Group's June 2023 mutiny, has continued its reliance upon PSMOs.

At first blush, it might appear that the impact of Russian PSMOs on European security interests has lessened during the preceding 12 months at the time of writing. Africa Corps has encountered recruiting challenges. With perhaps as many as 70–80 percent of Africa Corps members previously working for Wagner Group (depending on the operation at hand), Russian PSMOs are arguably only reshuffling employees rather than growing (Reuters, 2025). Bear Brigade personnel returned to Russia from Burkina Faso in August 2024 in order to counter the Ukrainian incursion into the Kursk region (Roger and Eydoux, 2024).

Given the level of European concern and these developments, a stock-taking of the security headaches posed by Russian PSMOs is in order. To capture the complications Russian PSMOs *still* present, this chapter concentrates on three challenges: 1) the challenge of Authoritarian Conflict Management (ACM) abroad; 2) the challenge of enacting ACM and related PSMO limitations; and 3) the challenge of subversion at home. Taken together, the continued threat of Russian PSMOs rests in offering an alternative to European engagement, the heightening of violence and its repercussions, and the fear of changed PSMO effort on the European continent.

Authoritarian Conflict Management

Given international power shifts, increasing authoritarian great power activism, and the seeming limitations of the 'liberal stance' towards conflict management, analysis now recognises the nature, practice, and aspired outcomes of a different approach – ACM (Mariani, 2022a; Mariani, 2022b; Paris, 2010; Paris, 2023). Scholars have identified its three elements: discourse, space, and economy (Heathershaw and Owen, 2019, p. 271). They

are the focus of external authoritarian actors directed at a government that is, at least, authoritarian leaning. Discourse concerns the manipulation and control of information, to the point of offering disinformation, in order to support an authoritarian government and to discredit opposition forces as well as external actors such as European states. Space and economy are about heightening the authoritarian presence, terrestrially and economically, at the expense of insurgent, rebel, and/or terrorist groups. In this three-ingredient recipe, the threat/usage of violence is a key binder (Abboud, 2021, pp. 327, 331). Overall, emphasis on these three areas by authoritarian outsiders is to strengthen authoritarianism abroad, push back liberal exertions, and advance illiberalism, all of which contributes to a more palatable international environment for authoritarianism at home.

No doubt, ACM through Russian PSMOs is antithetical to Europe's generally liberal leaning approach to conflict management. While reliance upon violence is not unusual in the European experience, it is not necessarily on the forefoot like in ACM. As Daniel Byman suggests, the Western approach seeks instead 'to change the political opportunity structure of a country to bring in disenfranchised communities and otherwise reduce grievances while seeking to maintain public safety' (2016, p. 69). As for economics, an important idea guiding many European efforts is the security-development nexus; stability and security go hand in hand with broad economic development and improved standards of living (D'Amato, 2021, p. 1533). With Russian PSMO-supported ACM however, the objective is closely tied to maintaining the governance status quo. In fact, the PSMOs offer so-called 'regime survival packages', the focused benefits of which, according to Mathieu Droin and Tina Dolbaia, surpass 'any other potential gains from traditional cooperation agreements advanced by Western partners, which are usually based on institutional capacity building instead of securing the authorities themselves' (2023, p. 10). Note that Russian PSMOs have helped to push off elections and/or contributed to democratic backsliding in Central African Republic (CAR) and Mali. As for economics, to reinforce the status quo, Russian PSMOs have looked to capture resource producing areas to enrich themselves and to financially lubricate authoritarian networks. The security-development nexus, with its addressing of socio-economic grievance, promotion of widespread economic growth, and reduction of poverty, is not part of the equation.

Perhaps making the implicit explicit, ACM's challenge to European security interests is heightened by the fact that African governments *chose*

this PSMO-facilitated, violence prominent methodology. This undercuts the basal assumptions of European states that their approach is desirable. What is more, this methodology involves acts not commonly characteristic in European practice that nevertheless are wanted: those that are demonstrative of 'non-liberal norms and policies' (i.e., human rights violations) (Lewis, Heathershaw, and Megoran, 2018, p. 500). This is an important recognition, as research shows African agency is often underplayed (Gruzd, Ramani, and Clifford, 2022, p. 403; Jacobsen and Larsen, 2024, p. 4). Not all can be wished away as *solely* the effect of Russian disinformation (Jacobsen and Larsen, 2023, p. 274). As such, the appeal of Russian PSMO engagement in CAR was that it offered, compared to other outside forces, 'physical elimination… [that was] as brutal as possible' (The Sentry, 2023, p. 23). In Mali, a sentiment was that human rights observance held back the fight against terrorism; they were the "chains" that bound the government, the military, and Western intervenors (Giustozzi, de Deus Pereia, and Lewis et al., 2025, pp. 18, 21). In this regard, Russian PSMOs have delivered. For instance, assessments reveal that since the introduction of Russian PSMOs in CAR (2018) and Mali (2021), there have been multi-fold increases in violent engagements with opposition forces, a heightened lethality in battles, and an augmented incidence of human rights violations (Nsaibia, 2024a; Nsaibia, 2024b; United Nations Security Council, 2022, p. 16; Egbejule, 2024). Taken together, this is an anathema to European techniques and plans that, worryingly, has some currency.

Russian-PSMO Limitations

Perversely, the combination of the conduct and limitations of Russian PSMOs also presents security challenges to Europe. To illuminate, the aforementioned increase in violence has not been contained by Russian PSMOs and their allied local forces. According to researchers, ACM's logical conclusion is the authoritarian regime's demonstration of dominance, mastery, and exclusivity (Keen, 2021, pp. 246–247, 254–255). Yet PSMOs are ill-suited for this demonstration for a variety of reasons. In line with the recruitment difficulties noted above, their numbers are not substantial – perhaps no more than 5,000 personnel across multiple countries (United Kingdom Ministry of Defence, 2024). This is partially due to the demands of the Ukrainian campaign (also see above). Additionally, most Russian PSMO

personnel in theatre have concentrated on securing resource producing areas and urban environments, leaving many regions with minimal penetration. What is more, a considerable increase in the PSMO presence is unlikely because of a contradiction in the Russian approach. Whereas ACM points to supremacy and permeation in support of widespread authoritarian governance, Russia's PSMO reliance sets expeditionary engagement as limited in liability and strategically minimalist (Duursma and Masuhr, 2022, p. 418; United States Department of Defence, 2019, p. 71; Simpson et al., 2022, p. 11).

While Russian PSMOs may have sparked an upswing in violence in their host countries, one should recognise that it catalysed a response in kind by opposition forces too. This was due to anger caused by human rights abuses directed at ethnic communities and threats of losing valuable and sustaining revenue sources. Russian PSMOs were indifferent to, or perhaps were analytically unaware of, their actions' compounding effects (Lechner and Eledinov, 2025). Regardless, containing this violence has proven to be difficult. In Mali, for example, 84 Wagner Group personnel, as well as 47 Malian soldiers, died in a July 2024 ambush in Tinzaouaten. This ambush was notably organised jointly by the Cadre Stratégique Permanent (CSP), a Tuareg rebel faction, and Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), a terrorist organisation, two groups not known for their cooperation (Brown, 2024). Later in September 2024, JNIM attacked various sites in the capital, Bamako, including Malian military and Wagner Group bases, thus puncturing the urban calm the Russian PSMO presence had helped to instil. Further-attacks, in June 2025, against the northern city of Timbuktu underscored the limits of Russian-assisted penetration. What is more, the challenge posed by JNIM and other armed actors is not contained within hosting states' borders (Peltier, 2025; Schmitt and Maclean, 2024). As assessed in the 2025 Global Terrorism Index, the Sahel is the global epicentre for terrorism, accounting for over half of the annual deaths caused by terrorist activity (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2025, p. 2).

The conundrum this poses to European security interests is multivariate. The spread of terrorism and the associated instability threatens non-PSMO hosting states, pressurises existing European initiatives informed by the security-development nexus, and upsets current political, economic, and social ties between Europe and Africa. Also, from one angle, there was the initial fear that a spread of Russian PSMOs in Africa would permit their manipulation of the Europe-bound migration spigot through their

proximity to local networks (Dixon, 2024). From another angle, even though the Russian spread has been limited, PSMO activities have nevertheless been migration-inducing. Their human rights transgressions, according to a Critical Threats evaluation, have helped 'fuel record-high levels of trans-Saharan migration to Europe' (Karr, 2024). The responding upsurge in violence by opposition fighters further pushes people to flee across borders and beyond. Recent United Nations statistical analysis points to the troubling migratory impact of 'radical non-state armed actors' (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025). Oddly, given the longstanding political sensitivities of unmanaged migration in/to Europe and its relationship to destructive populism and democratic decline, illiberal, ACM-type objectives might still be achieved vis-à-vis Europe. Though certainly a long causal chain, this points to the effects of Russian-PSMO limitations and the actual lack of intentionality that, nonetheless, challenge European security interests and potentially erode the European political status quo.

Subversion

A newer, and evolving, security challenge rests in Russian-PSMO connections to subversive behaviour within European states. To background, scholarly attention reveals that subversion is a violation or micro-invasion meant to catalyse 'the psychological state of fear that the enemy is or might be inside the tent' (Kastner and Wohlforth, 2025, p. 4). It can take many forms, including sabotage, propaganda, disinformation, and other types of meddling internal to a state. The objective of subversion is captured by Jill Kastner's and William Wohlforth's definition: '[it is a] hostile, unwanted activity on the territory of a rival with the intent of seeking effects, specifically to weaken the target or change its foreign policy in some way' (2025, p. 193).

Presumed Russian-linked subversive operations have targeted multiple European countries since the renewed launch of Russian military operations against Ukraine in February 2022. Alongside cyberattacks that can be initiated extraterritorially, subversive acts have occurred within the territorial tent of many countries. This includes the tampering of a water purification plant in Finland, the disruption of railways in the Czech Republic, explosions at DHL warehouses in Germany and the United Kingdom, the cutting of Baltic Sea cables, and the unexplained

observance of drones flying over sensitive areas in multiple countries. Arson attacks, especially against depots holding military exports bound for Ukraine, have also arisen. These operations' objectives are manifold. For Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, attention can be placed on upsetting European policy towards Russia/Ukraine: 'They are… aimed at diminishing Europeans' support for Ukraine by raising costs on the governments and industries in ways that are not easy to counter, harassing the population, and seeking vulnerabilities in European defence' (2025). In a wider way, a 2025 EUROPOL assessment looked to broader issues of governance and the European way of life whereby subversive actors 'engage in ongoing, seemingly minor actions that collectively erode stability, security, and trust in institutions' (p. 15). Given the spread of subversive activities across several countries, EUROPOL worries over the collective effects of the 'woodpecker modus operandi' that weaken the tree overall: 'Incidents are often originally assessed as single incidents, [yet they] may be part of a larger strategic objective of destabilisation, involving persistent, targeted, and cumulative disruptions rather than a single, overwhelming attack' (2025, p. 15). Linking to the above, this also ominously points to a pushback against democracy and liberalism.

Russian PSMOs are present in the broad nest of subversive Russian woodpeckers directed against Europe. In March 2024, two Britons were arrested on arson charges against a Ukrainian-linked target in London. Investigation revealed that they had been recruited through a Wagner Group-linked Telegram channel. In August 2023, the Latvian State Security Service traced attempts to recruit Latvians to work for Wagner Group. Similarly, in February 2025, two Russian nationals with ties to Russian intelligence organisations were prosecuted in Poland for hybrid warfare actions. These involved open recruiting operations in Warsaw and Krakow for Wagner Group and their publicisation on social media. Underscoring the paranoia of being inside the tent, the recruitment advertisements indicated simply that '[w]e are here' (Sheftalovich, 2023).

The appeal of Russian-PSMO ties to subversive activities has three facets. First, and doubtlessly, one matter concerns urgency and changing circumstance. In the wake of the 2022 invasion, many Russian diplomats with (assumed) intelligence linkages were expelled from European countries; the well was considerably lowered (Rondeaux, 2025). Relatively concomitant to this, one Kremlin response to the 2023 Wagner Group mutiny was drawing Russian PSMOs even closer to Russian intelligence

circles. See that a key leadership figure now linked to Russian-PSMO efforts is Major General Andrei Averyanov of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces. His resume reveals a long list of activities concerning repression, sabotage, and assassination (Seibt, 2023).

The second is that Russian-PSMO capabilities and skillsets are inherently elastic compared to established official Russian structures and bodies. In its analysis of Wagner Group for instance, RAND assessed that it is 'less like a single organisation and more like an umbrella of many entities' (Weinbaum *et al.*, 2022, p. 3). Similarly, the British House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee reported that the group is a 'sprawling, decentralised network of individuals and commercial entities, which is active in several countries and for which the "membership" is not always clear' (United Kingdom Parliament, 2023). Similarly, Africa Corps has the 'holding company' and umbrella monikers (Egbejule, 2024; Ehl, 2024; Faulkner, Plichta, and Parens, 2024). The resulting malleability, diversity, and lack of transparency as oligarchic actors work to advance both their interests and those of the state point to Russian-PSMO activism taking different forms in different locales. Indeed, the leitmotif of contemporary Russian subversive activities is opportunism responding to the Kremlin's intimations (Kastner and Wohlforth, 2025, p. 174).

Thirdly, Russian PSMOs, especially Wagner Group, have a branding that propagates fear that supports subversion. In part, this is linked to propaganda and disinformation operations alongside an ongoing social media presence. In this vein, official European discomfiture such as that expressed at the chapter's start also likely keeps tensions taught. In part, this is linked to the routine denial by Russian officialdom of PSMO activities, or at the very least by keeping these organisations at arm's length even after Wagner Group's June 2023 mutiny and despite intelligence connections. This reinforces the wildcard characteristic of Russian PSMOs that is nevertheless at the service of the Russian state. Justin Ling identifies this as a "psychological effect" such that 'fighters who operate outside the direct chain of command can also be useful for committing particularly heinous actions' (2022). Likewise, Candace Rondeaux points to the "psychological value" of 'propagating the notion that Russia has a secret, shadowy group of saboteurs and agent provocateurs that can penetrate behind enemy lines' (Ling, 2022). In short, notoriety, secrecy, deniability, and pliability all point to the subversive security challenge European policymakers continue to confront.

Conclusion

Collectively, though Russian-PSMO usage is a low cost and limited affair, the European response requires costs, financial and otherwise, that outweigh the Russian investment. Countering the ACM approach will involve highlighting the benefits and utility of European endeavours abroad, even though it may require the delivery of equipment, the acceptance of risks, the (at least) short term watering down of liberal expectations, and the setting of longer-term commitments. The European way of conflict management would not be totally jettisoned, but this would accentuate that respecting African agency and developing substantial engagement comes with a price. Countering the fallout of Russian-PSMO ACM will demand increased diligence concerning increases in violence, the spread of terrorism, and migratory shifts that may, or may not, involve direct Russian manipulation. Finally, countering the spectre of Russian-PSMO subversive involvement in Europe will require nuance. On the one hand, Russian PSMOs have done preposterous acts from the European, liberal perspective – note the human rights abuses mentioned above. On the other hand, this ruthlessness is not as evident in European subversion, Russian PSMOs are one of many actors doing the Kremlin's bidding, and European law enforcement has had some success. These matters can be underscored to reflect ongoing diligence, rather than complacency, to reinforce European security, and to protect the continent's liberal bona fides.

Works Cited

Abboud, S. (2021) "Making peace to sustain war: the Astana Process and Syria's illiberal peace," *Peacebuilding,* 9(3), pp. 326–343.

Brown, W. (2024) "The sweating bear: Why Russia's influence in Africa is under threat," *European Council on Foreign Relations.* Available at: https://ecfr. eu/article/the-sweating-bear-why-russias-influence-in-africa-is-under-threat/?amp.

Byman, D. (2016) "Death Solves All Problems': The Authoritarian Model of Counterinsurgency," *Journal of Strategic Studies,* 39(1), pp. 62–93.

Council of the European Union (2023) "Wagner Group: Council adds 11 individuals and 7 entities to EU sanctions lists," Press Release. Available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/02/25/ wagner-group-council-adds-11-individuals-and-7-entities-to-eu-sanctions-lists/#:~:text=The%20relevant%20legal%20acts%2C%20including%20 the%20names,political%20transition%20(press%20release%2C%2013%20 December%202021).

Council of the European Union (2024) "Russian hybrid threats: EU agrees first listings in response to destabilising activities against the EU, its member states and partners," Press Release. Available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/ press/press-releases/2024/12/16/russian-hybrid-threats-eu-agrees-first-listings-in-response-to-destabilising-activities-against-the-eu-its-member-states-and-partners/.

D'Amato, S. (2021) "Patchwork of Counterterrorism: Analyzing European Types of Cooperation in Sahel," *International Studies Review,* 23(4), pp. 1518–1540.

Dixon, H. (2024) "Revealed: how Putin plans to flood West with migrants," *The Telegraph.* Available at: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/02/29/putin-russia-wagner-militia-africa-immigration-europe/.

Droin, M. and Dolbaia, T. (2023) "Russia Is Still Progressing in Africa. What's the Limit?," *Centre for Strategic and International Studies.* Available at: https://www. csis.org/analysis/russia-still-progressing-africa-whats-limit.

Duursma, A. and Masuhr, N. (2022) "Russia's return to Africa in a historical and global context: Anti-imperialism, patronage, and opportunism," *South African Journal of International Affairs,* 29(4), pp. 407–423.

Egbejule, E. (2024) "More control, less deniability: what next for Russia in Africa after Wagner?" *The Guardian.* Available at: https://www.theguardian. com/world/article/2024/may/21/what-next-for-russia-in-africa-after-wagner-moscow-influence.

Ehl, D. (2024) "The Russian Wagner Group: A powerful actor in Africa," *Deutsche Welle.* Available at: https://amp.dw.com/en/the-russian-wagner-group-a-powerful-actor-in-africa/a-70599853.

EUROPOL (2025) "European Union Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment – The changing DNA of serious and organised crime". Available at: https://www.europol.europa.eu/publication-events/main-reports/changing-dna-of-serious-and-organised-crime.

Faulkner, C., Plichta, M., and Parens, R. (2024) "Africa Corps: Has Russia Hit a Ceiling in Africa?," *CTCSentinel,* 17(11). Available at: https://ctc.westpoint.edu/africa-corps-has-russia-hit-a-ceiling-in-africa/.

Giustozzi, A., de Deus Pereia, J. and Lewis, D. (2025) "Did Wagner Succeed in the Eyes of its African and Middle Eastern Clients?," *Whitehall Report, 4(24),* Royal United Services Institute. Available at: https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/whitehall-reports/did-wagner-succeed-eyes-its-african-and-middle-eastern-clients.

Gruzd, S., Ramani, S., and Clifford, C. (2022) "Russia in Africa: Who is courting whom?," *South African Journal of International Affairs,* 29(4), pp. 401–405.

Heathershaw, J. and Owen, C. (2019) "Authoritarian conflict management in post-colonial Eurasia," *Conflict, Security and Development,* 19(3), pp. 269–273.

Institute for Economics and Peace (2025) "Global Terrorism Index 2025". Available at: https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Global-Terrorism-Index-2025.pdf.

Jacobsen, K. L. and Larsen, K. P. (2023) "Liberal intervention's renewed crisis: responding to Russia's growing influence in Africa," *International Affairs,* 99(1), pp. 259–278.

Jacobsen, K. L. and Larsen, K. P. (2024) "Wagner Group Flows: A Two-Fold Challenge to Liberal Intervention and Liberal Order," *Politics and Governance,* 12, pp. 1–16.

Karr, L. (2024) "Africa File Special Edition: Russia's Africa Corps Arrives in Niger. What's Next?," *Critical Threats Project,* American Enterprise Institute. Available at: https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/africa-file-special-edition-russias-africa-corps-arrives-in-niger-whats-next#_edneacae5616ed9224a7e52dc36d09a4b4346.

Kastner, J. and Wohlforth, W. C. (2025) "A measure short of war: A brief history of great power subversion," Oxford University Press.

Keen, M. (2021) "Assessing authoritarian conflict management in the Middle East and Central Asia," *Conflict, Security and Development,* 21(3), pp. 245–272.

Lechner, J. and Eledinov, S. (2025) "Recalibration or Retreat? Russia's shifting Africa strategy," *Responsible Statecraft.* Available at: https://responsiblestatecraft.org/russia-in-africa/.

Lewis, D. Heathershaw, J., and Megoran, N. (2018) "Illiberal peace? Authoritarian modes of conflict management," *Cooperation and Conflict,* 54(4), pp. 486–506.

Ling, J. (2022) "Moscow Turns US Volunteers Into New Bogeyman in Ukraine," *Foreign Policy,* Available at: https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/15/russia-mercenaries-volunteers-ukraine/.

Mariani, B. (2022a) "China's Engagement in Conflict and Post-Conflict Settings: The Quest for Stability," *PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform.* Global Transitions Series. Available at: https://peacerep.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/China-Report-Digital.pdf.

Mariani, B. (2022b) "Russia's Engagement in Conflict and Post-Conflict Settings: Growing Geopolitical Ambitions and 'Peace by Force'," *PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform.* Global Transitions Series. Available at: https://peacerep.org/publication/russias-engagement-mariani-2022/.

Nsaibia, H. (2024a) "Conflict intensifies and instability spreads beyond Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger," *Armed Conflict Location and Event Data*. Available at: https://acleddata.com/conflict-watchlist-2025/sahel-and-coastal-west-africa/.

Nsaibia, H. (2024b) "Newly restructured, the Islamic State in the Sahel aims for regional expansion," *Armed Conflict Location and Event Data*. Available at: https://acleddata.com/2024/09/30/newly-restructured-the-islamic-state-in-the-sahel-aims-for-regional-expansion/.

Paris, R. (2010) "Saving Liberal Peacebuilding," *Review of International Studies,* 36(2), pp. 337–365.

Paris, R. (2023) "The Past, Present, and Uncertain Future of Collective Conflict Management: Peacekeeping and Beyond," *Journal of Intervention and State-building,* 17(3), pp. 235–257.

Peltier, E. (2025) "A New Frontline Emerges as Jihadists Eye West Africa Coast," *The New York Times*. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/16/world/africa/africa-terrorism-trump-ivory-coast.html.

Reuters (2025) "Africa Corps to stay in Mali after Russia's Wagner mercenary group leaves". Available at: https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/russias-wagner-mercenary-group-says-it-is-leaving-mali-after-mission-2025-06-06/.

Roger, B. and Eydoux, T. (2024) "Russian paramilitaries from the Bear Brigade leave Burkina Faso," *Le Monde*. Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2024/08/30/russian-paramilitaries-from-the-bear-brigade-leave-burkina-faso_6723888_124.html.

Rondeaux, C. (2025) "The Legal Counteroffensive to Russia's Hybrid War," *Lawfare*. Available at: https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/the-legal-counteroffensive-to-russia-s-hybrid-war.

Schmitt, E. and Maclean, R. (2024) "US Confronts Failures as Terrorism Spreads in West Africa," *The New York Times*. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/07/us/politics/us-terrorism-west-africa.html.

Seibt, S. (2023) "Notorious Russian general, master spy duo organise in Africa after Prigozhin's demise," *France24.* Available at: https://amp.france24.com/en/africa/20230920-notorious-russian-general-master-spy-duo-organise-in-africa-after-prigozhin-s-demise.

Sheftalovich, Z. (2023) "Poland arrests 2 Russians after Wagner recruitment posters appear in Kraków," *Politico*. Available at: https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-russia-wagner-group-arrest-krakow-posters-mateusz-morawiecki/.

Simpson, M., Grissom, A., Mouton, C., Godges, J., and Hanson, R. "Road to Damascus: The Russian Air Campaign in Syria, 2015 to 2018," *RAND Corporation.* Available at: https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RRA1100/RRA1170-1/RAND_RRA1170-1.pdf.

Soldatov, A. and Borogan, I. (2025) "Arsonist, Killer, Saboteur, Spy While Trump Courts Him, Putin Is Escalating Russia's Hybrid War Against the West," *Foreign Affairs*. Available at: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/arsonist-killer-saboteur-spy-vladimir-putin-donald-trump.

The Sentry (2023) "Architects of Terror: The Wagner Group's Blueprint for State Capture in the Central African Republic". Available at: https://thesentry.org/reports/architects-of-terror/.

United Kingdom Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office. (2024) "UK strikes at heart of Putin's war machine," Press Release. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-strikes-at-heart-of-putins-war-machine.

United Kingdom Home Office (2023) "Wagner Group proscribed," Press Release. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/wagner-group-proscribed.

United Kingdom Ministry of Defence (2024) "Latest Defence Intelligence update on the situation in Ukraine – 23 August 2024". Available at: https://x.com/DefenceHQ/status/1826912207679967588.

United Kingdom Parliament (2023) "Guns for gold: the Wagner Network exposed," House of Commons Report, Seventh Report of Session 2022–23. Available at: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmfaff/167/report.html.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2025) "R4Sahel: Coordination Platform for Force Displacement in Sahel". Available at: https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/sahelcrisis.

United Nations Security Council (2022) "Central African Republic: Report of the Secretary-General," S/2022/491. Available at: https://minusca.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/s_2022_491_en.pdf.

United States Department of Defence (2019) "Russian Strategic Intentions: A Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) White Paper". Available at: https://www.politico.com/f/?id=0000016b-a5a1-d241-adff-fdf908e00001.

Weinbaum, C., Shostak, M., Sachs, C. and Parachini, J. V. (2022) "Mapping Chinese and Russian Military and Security Exports to Africa," *RAND Corporation*. Available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/tools/TLA2045-3.html.