

# RUSSIAN REALITY CHECK: HOW TO DESTABILISE THE KREMLIN

By Dr STEPHEN G. F. HALL



**CENTRE FOR  
RUSSIA AND  
EURASIA  
STUDIES**

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RUSSIA AND  
EURASIA  
STUDIES

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April 2025

## About the Author

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His book entitled *The Authoritarian International: Tracing how Authoritarian Regimes Learn in the Post-Soviet Space* came out in 2023 with Cambridge University Press. In the past, Stephen taught at the Higher School of Economics - National Research University, St. Petersburg. Stephen speaks English and Russian and is trying to get better at Ukrainian. Follow Stephen on Twitter / X @stephenghall or on his personal website: <https://www.sgfhall.co.uk/>.

## Acknowledgments

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## About Us

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## Foreword by Will Forster, MP

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This report by Dr Stephen G. F. Hall makes us confront an uncomfortable truth: appeasement of Putin has failed and will always fail. The West has been reactive, fragmented, and hesitant.

The result? A full-scale invasion of Ukraine, rolling cyber-attacks on the rest of Europe and persistent attempts to meddle in our elections.

On 23rd April 2025 I was, along with 20 other MPs, banned from Russia. This is yet another example of why we need greater democracy in Europe and to stand up to Putin's regime. Being banned from Russia for so-called "hostile statements and unfounded accusations" is a classic move from Putin: petty, authoritarian, and designed to silence dissenting voices, especially political ones. But I will not be quiet. I will not be intimidated. All the more reason why we should continue to stand up for Ukraine and Europe as a whole, speak out against Russia's illegal invasion, and defend the values of freedom and democracy that Putin fears most.

We cannot look away while Moscow undermines democratic institutions across our continent, nor while the rights of Russians are thwarted. We must support the brave individuals and organisations within Russia who are demanding a different future. One rooted in human rights, the rule of law, and accountability.

Dr Hall's report outlines a strategic roadmap for rocking the foundations of Putin's power through coordinated economic pressure, strategic communications, and a revitalised European security posture. It recognises that soft power, when combined with resolve and clarity of purpose, can be just as destabilising to authoritarian regimes as military might.

At a time when American support for European security is uncertain, this report is a call to action for the UK and its allies. For the sake of our shared security – and the cause of Russian freedom – we must not settle for containment. We must support transformation.

*- Will Forster MP, Member of Parliament for Woking*

## Executive Summary

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- Russia, under Vladimir Putin, poses the most **significant threat** to European security since the Cold War, employing a combination of military aggression, cyberwarfare, political subversion, energy blackmail and economic coercion as part of a comprehensive hybrid warfare strategy.
- The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, repeated nuclear threats, sabotage operations across Europe, and disinformation campaigns highlight the Kremlin's intention to undermine the post-Cold War European order and challenge the West's political cohesion.
- With the return of Donald Trump to the White House and America's drift towards isolationism, Europe **cannot** rely on the transatlantic alliance to guarantee security. This demands an urgent strategic shift to a Europe-centred security framework.
- Appeasement or renewed diplomatic engagement with the Kremlin is counterproductive. Historical patterns show that Russia exploits concessions to gain strategic ground, encouraging further aggression.
- This report calls for a bold and proactive European strategy to **destabilise the Kremlin**, reduce Russia's capacity to project power, and reinforce European unity and resilience.
- Thus, European states must **develop five strategic pillars** to destabilise the Kremlin.
- **Economic Warfare:** Maintain and tighten sanctions, enforce secondary sanctions, and prepare for potential American sanctions rollback; repurpose frozen Russian assets for Ukraine's defence reconstruction; drain Russia's economy of talent by incentivising elite defection and brain drain; cut remaining trade ties and reduce energy dependency on Russia.
- **Support Russian Opposition and Dissent:** Empower Russian exiled opposition with funding, security, and political support; maintain access to YouTube, Telegram, and independent Russian media via VPNs, mirror sites, and circumvention tools; expose elite corruption and promote defections in the regime and security services.
- **Cyber and Covert Operations:** Support sabotage efforts within Russia's territory to disrupt logistics and defence production; deploy cyberattacks against Kremlin-controlled networks, banks, and media; conduct psychological operations to deepen paranoia within Putin's inner circle and highlight regime weaknesses.
- **Challenge Russia's Influence in Europe:** European states need to develop tools to stop Russian election meddling. Elites with previous and current ties to Russia should be called out for them. The EU must change voting rules so Russia-aligned politicians in Hungary and Slovakia are not able to stop EU decision-making.
- **Engaging Russia's Neighbours:** Deepen political, military, and economic ties with countries like Moldova, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Armenia; reduce Moscow's influence in Central Asia through infrastructure investment and trade alternatives; handle discussions of separatist movements inside Russia with caution to avoid strengthening Kremlin narratives.
- **Shaping Global Perceptions:** Challenge Russia's influence in the Global South by offering investment, debt relief, and non-exploitative partnerships; target Russia's operations in Africa and expose Russian manipulation in Latin America and Asia; peel away India and China's strategic cooperation with Russia through targeted diplomacy and trade incentives.

## Introduction

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As Europe faces one of its most severe security crises since the Cold War, the challenge of dealing with an aggressive and revisionist Russia has never been more urgent. With Donald Trump now established in the White House, that urgency has become acute amid the shifting geopolitical landscape. This is a shift that has seen a Trump-led America vote the same way as Russia on Ukraine at the United Nations.<sup>1</sup> The United States, long the backbone of European security, has taken an isolationist stance. The Trump administration is seeking a quick<sup>2</sup> – but not necessarily effective – peace and pressuring Europe to deal with its own security<sup>3</sup> and take a peacekeeping role in Ukraine. That the Kremlin has rejected such a move<sup>4</sup> and will likely continue to do so means that it is likely an isolationist Trump administration will quickly tire of Ukraine and Europe and pull the drawbridge up on the other side of the “big, beautiful ocean.”<sup>5</sup> Consequently, Europe needs to be proactive to counteract Russian destabilisation efforts and ensure long-term security on the continent. As one of two European nuclear powers on the continent and a key player in both NATO and the Joint Expeditionary Force, the United Kingdom can play a crucial role in precipitating a geopolitical shift from an Atlanticist Europe to a Euro-centric geopolitics.

The Kremlin under Vladimir Putin has consistently demonstrated that it is not a *status quo* power but rather an expansionist force seeking to redraw the European security order in its favour. In December 2021, the Kremlin demanded that NATO return to its 1997 borders,<sup>6</sup> and did so again in the meeting between American and Russian delegates in Riyadh in February 2025.<sup>7</sup> Not only has Russia launched the largest war on the European continent since the Second World War through its activities in Ukraine, but it is also engaged in sabotage, assassination attempts and other hybrid war operations across Europe.<sup>8</sup> Russia has recruited people using Telegram to carry out sabotage and vandalism across Europe.<sup>9</sup> Thus, Russia has positioned itself as the primary source of instability in Europe. It is imperative that Europe constructs a coherent and united defence posture against Russian actions.<sup>10</sup> However, it is also imperative that Europe develops a strategy to replicate Russian actions in Russia. Britain can lead this initiative.

This report outlines a comprehensive European strategy to weaken the Putin regime and limit its capacity to wage war, disrupt democracies, threaten European security and possibly

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<sup>1</sup> James Lansdale and Patrick Jackson, “US sides with Russia in UN resolutions on Ukraine”, *BBC News*, 25 February 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c7435pnle0go>.

<sup>2</sup> Jorge Liboreiro, “EU leaders meet to discuss Ukraine’s future as Trump pushes for fast peace deal”, *Euronews*, 6 March 2025, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/03/06/eu-leaders-meet-to-discuss-ukraines-future-as-trump-pushes-for-fast-peace-deal>.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Erlanger, “Trump Wants Europe to Defend Itself. Here’s What it Would Take”, *The New York Times*, 7 March 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/07/world/europe/europe-self-defense-trump.html>.

<sup>4</sup> “After Trump comments, Kremlin reaffirms opposition to European peacekeepers in Ukraine”, *Reuters*, 25 February 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/after-trump-comments-kremlin-reaffirms-stance-against-european-peacekeepers-2025-02-25/>.

<sup>5</sup> See: <https://x.com/MarcWardVideo/status/1893251735252017394>.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Roth, “Russia issues list of demands it says must be met to lower tensions in Europe”, *The Guardian*, 17 December 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/17/russia-issues-list-demands-tensions-europe-ukraine-nato>.

<sup>7</sup> Tim Zadorozhnyy, “Moscow demanded NATO withdrawal from eastern Europe during US-Russia talks, FT reports”, *The Kyiv Independent*, 20 February 2025, <https://kyivindependent.com/moscow-demands-nato-withdrawal-from-eastern-europe-in-us-russia-talks-ft-reports/>.

<sup>8</sup> “Up to 100 ‘suspicious incidents’ in Europe can be attributed to Russia, Czech minister says”, *The Guardian*, 4 December 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/04/up-to-100-suspicious-incidents-in-europe-can-be-attributed-to-russia-czech-minister-says>.

<sup>9</sup> “‘Gosudarstvennyy terrorizm’. Rossiya verbuet diversantov po vsei Evrope” [“‘State terrorism’. Russia Recruits Saboteurs across Europe”], *The Moscow Times*, 13 March 2025, <https://www.moscowtimes.ru/2025/03/13/gosudarstvennii-terrorizm-rossiya-verbuet-diversantov-po-vsei-evrope-a157916>.

<sup>10</sup> Jan Macháček, “Dry Your Tears: Europe Must Fight Alone”, *CEPA*, 25 February 2025, <https://cepa.org/article/dry-your-tears-europe-must-fight-alone/>.

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precipitate the future-Russia project.<sup>11</sup> While engaging diplomatically with Russia may seem attractive to some policymakers, the Kremlin has consistently broken peace deals in the past. Recent history shows that appeasement or efforts to reset relations only expand Moscow's aggression.<sup>12</sup> Appeasing Russia would set a terrible precedent that 'might makes right' and would confirm the Kremlin's perception that the West – and Europe particularly – is weak.<sup>13</sup> Europe must abandon any illusions of restoring a stable relationship with Putin's Russia and instead focus on leveraging its economic, military, and political power to contain and ultimately destabilise the Kremlin.

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<sup>11</sup> Dr Stephen G F Hall, "Getting A Foot In The Door: Creating A Future Russia Now", Henry Jackson Society, 8 November 2023, <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/HJS-Getting-a-Foot-in-the-Door-%E2%80%93-Creating-a-Future-Russia-Now-Report-web.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Kateryna Hodunova, "Russia's history of violating ceasefire agreements in Ukraine", *Kyiv Independent*, 7 March 2025, <https://kyivindependent.com/neglecting-security-guarantees-trump-fast-tracking-efforts-to-persuade-ukraine-to-ceasefire-with-russia/>.

<sup>13</sup> Dr Stephen G F Hall, "Russia thinks the West is weak – Europe must make a stand, now", *The Hill*, 28 February 2025, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/5167833-european-security-russia-nato/>.

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## Hybrid Warfare as the Kremlin's Primary Strategy

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Russia has long relied on hybrid warfare tactics to pursue its strategic objectives, exploiting the blurred lines between conventional warfare, economic coercion, political subversion, and cyber operations.<sup>14</sup> Unlike traditional military confrontations, hybrid warfare allows Russia to undermine European states from within while maintaining plausible deniability. There are several key components of Moscow's hybrid strategy: military aggression, cyberwarfare, economic coercion and political subversion.

The Kremlin began testing the West's resolve with the Russo-Georgia war and the recognition of the independence of sovereign Georgian territory in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The map of Europe was redrawn by Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the creation of *de facto* states in the Donbas. Yet Western countries failed to act decisively, preferring to continue with business as usual – in part for fear of escalation.

However, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was a watershed moment in European security, with Western states finally acting after Russian encroachment on Ukraine saw Kyiv in the crosshairs. The war exposed Russia's readiness to use overwhelming force, indiscriminate bombardment, and war crimes to achieve its geopolitical objectives. The siege of Mariupol, the mass executions in Bucha, and missile strikes on civilian infrastructure are all indicative of Moscow's willingness to wage total war when necessary.<sup>15</sup>

Yet Russia's military aggression extends beyond Ukraine. NATO's eastern flank remains under constant threat, with Russian forces engaging in provocative manoeuvres that test Western resolve.<sup>16</sup> In the Baltic region, Russian military aircraft have frequently violated NATO airspace, forcing interceptions by NATO jets.<sup>17</sup> As early as 2009, the Kremlin was running war games that involved firing a nuclear weapon at Warsaw.<sup>18</sup> This continued with Operation Grom 2019, when the Kremlin signalled clearly its nuclear capacity and targeted European capitals.<sup>19</sup> Such pressure continued after Russia's invasion of Ukraine with claims that a dirty bomb may be used,<sup>20</sup> and in 2024, the Russian military ran nuclear preparedness operations.<sup>21</sup> Up to June 2024, the Kremlin had threatened use of nuclear weapons against the West 77 times from the start of the war and this trend of nuclear blackmail goes back to 1999 under Boris Yeltsin.<sup>22</sup> The Kremlin has a long history of using psychological manipulation to coerce the West into doing what Moscow wants.<sup>23</sup> By leveraging the threat of nuclear conflict, the Kremlin seeks to

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<sup>14</sup> András Rácz, "Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine: Breaking the Enemy's Ability to Resist", FIIA Report 43.

<sup>15</sup> Oleksandr V Danylyuk, "Russian Total War in Ukraine: Challenges and Opportunities", RUSI, 21 October 2022, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russian-total-war-ukraine-challenges-and-opportunities>.

<sup>16</sup> Aurélie Pignet and Nikolaus J Kurmayer, "The real reason Russia wants to leave the Baltics in the dark", Euractiv, 14 January 2025, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/the-real-reason-russia-wants-to-leave-the-baltics-in-the-dark/>.

<sup>17</sup> Jasper Hufschmidt Morse, "Russia's 'Catch Me If You Can' over the Baltic Sea", Australian Institute of International Affairs, 26 April 2024, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/russias-catch-me-if-you-can-over-the-baltic-sea/>.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew Day, 2009, "Russia 'simulates' nuclear attack on Poland", *The Telegraph*, 1 November 2009, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/poland/6480227/Russia-simulates-nuclear-attack-on-Poland.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Pavel K Baev, "The Grom-2019 Exercise Illuminated the Risks of Nuclear Renaissance in Russian Strategic Culture", George C Marshall European Centre for Security Studies Report 43.

<sup>20</sup> Lachlan MacKenzie, "Six Days in October: Russia's Dirty Bomb Signaling and the Return of Nuclear Crises", CSIS, 3 September 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/six-days-october-russias-dirty-bomb-signaling-and-return-nuclear-crises>.

<sup>21</sup> Oman Al Yahyai, "Vladimir Putin oversees large-scale nuclear response drills as tensions with NATO run high", *Euronews*, 29 October 2024, <https://www.euronews.com/2024/10/29/vladimir-putin-oversees-large-scale-nuclear-response-drills-as-tensions-with-nato-run-high>.

<sup>22</sup> Yev Kopyika, "A Timeline of Russia's Nuclear Threats Against the West", *United24*, 27 June 2024, <https://united24media.com/war-in-ukraine/a-timeline-of-russias-nuclear-threats-against-the-west-947>.

<sup>23</sup> Rafael Loss, "Moscow's mind games: Ambiguity around Russia's nukes aims to rattle Europe", European Council on Foreign Relations, 20 January 2025, <https://ecfr.eu/article/moscows-mind-games-ambiguity-around-russias-nukes-aims-to-rattle-europe/>.

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create strategic paralysis within NATO, forcing Western decision-makers to calculate the risks of direct confrontation.

Alongside these activities, Russia has significantly expanded its military capacity in Kaliningrad<sup>24</sup> and placed nuclear weapons in Belarus.<sup>25</sup> Close Russian ally Belarus, in 2024, conducted military exercises on the borders of Poland and Lithuania,<sup>26</sup> and the Russians and Belarusians have developed plans to take the Suwałki Gap,<sup>27</sup> thereby cutting off the Baltics and initiating both an attack on NATO countries and the potential of activating Article 5. Such moves heighten the risk of a future confrontation along NATO's borders, particularly as Belarus grows increasingly dependent on Russia's security apparatus, and increase the countries' two military and political ties.<sup>28</sup> The Kremlin's long-term objective likely involves using Belarus as a staging ground for future military provocations in Europe, mirroring the role Belarus played in facilitating Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine.<sup>29</sup>

Beyond conventional military threats, Russia has weaponised cyberwarfare as a tool of disruption and coercion, demonstrating its capabilities to attack critical infrastructure<sup>30</sup> and manipulate social media.<sup>31</sup> Various Russian intelligence services from the GRU to the FSB have created cyber units. Such groups have carried out cyberattacks targeting European governments,<sup>32</sup> financial institutions,<sup>33</sup> and critical infrastructure.<sup>34</sup> Such attacks are designed to undermine public confidence in democratic institutions, sow societal divisions, and disrupt essential services.

One of the most alarming aspects of Russian cyber aggression is the ability to cripple national infrastructure. In 2015,<sup>35</sup> 2016<sup>36</sup> and 2017,<sup>37</sup> Russian hackers shut down sections of Ukraine's

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<sup>24</sup> Sergey Sukhankin, "Russia's Kaliningrad Oblast is a dagger aimed at the heart of Europe. But Canada can help blunt the threat: Sergey Sukhankin for Inside Policy", The MacDonald Laurier Institute, 16 July 2024, <https://macdonaldlaurier.ca/russias-kaliningrad-oblast-is-a-dagger-aimed-at-the-heart-of-europe-but-canada-can-help-blunt-the-threat-sergey-sukhankin-for-inside-policy/>.

<sup>25</sup> Jack Detsch and Robbie Gramer, "Russia's Nuclear Weapons Are Now in Belarus", *Foreign Policy*, 14 March 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/03/14/russia-nuclear-weapons-belarus-putin/>.

<sup>26</sup> "Belarus conducts military drills near Ukraine, EU border", *DW*, 4 February 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/belarus-conducts-military-drills-near-ukraine-eu-border/a-68716108>.

<sup>27</sup> Łukasz Zalesiński, "The Suwałki Gap in the Game", *Polska Zbrojnia*, 17 July 2024, <https://www.polska-zbrojna.pl/home/articleshow/42085>.

<sup>28</sup> Dara Massicot, Michelle Grisé, Kotryna Juknevičiute, Marta Keep, Casey Mahoney, Krystyna Marcinek, Yuliya Shokh and Mark Stalczyński, "Cooperation and Dependence in Belarus-Russia Relations", *RAND*, 20 June 2024, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA2061-3.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA2061-3.html).

<sup>29</sup> Becky Sullivan, "Why Belarus is so involved in Russia's invasion of Ukraine", *NPR*, 11 March 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/11/1085548867/belarus-ukraine-russia-invasion-lukashenko-putin>.

<sup>30</sup> Ellen Nakashima, "Russia has developed a cyberweapon that can disrupt power grids, according to research", *The Washington Post*, 12 June 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/russia-has-developed-a-cyber-weapon-that-can-disrupt-power-grids-according-to-new-research/2017/06/11/b91b773e-4eed-11e7-91eb-9611861a988f\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/russia-has-developed-a-cyber-weapon-that-can-disrupt-power-grids-according-to-new-research/2017/06/11/b91b773e-4eed-11e7-91eb-9611861a988f_story.html).

<sup>31</sup> Hannes Grasseger and Mikael Krogerus, "Fake news and botnets: how Russia weaponised the web", *The Guardian*, 2 December 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/dec/02/fake-news-botnets-how-russia-weaponised-the-web-cyber-attack-estonia>.

<sup>32</sup> Gordon Corera, "Russia hacking: 'FSB in years-long cyber attacks on UK,' says government", *BBC News*, 7 December 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-67647548>.

<sup>33</sup> Gareth Corfield, "European Investment Bank hit by cyber attack after Russian hackers vow to bring down financial system", *The Telegraph*, 19 June 2023, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2023/06/19/european-investment-bank-cyber-attack-russian-hackers/>.

<sup>34</sup> Helmi Pillai, "Protecting Europe's Critical Infrastructure from Russian Hybrid Threats", Centre for European Reform, 25 April 2023, <https://www.cer.eu/publications/archive/policy-brief/2023/protecting-europes-critical-infrastructure-russian-hybrid>.

<sup>35</sup> "Russian state-connected hacker group Sandworm takes offline Ukraine's energy grid", German Marshall Fund, 23 December 2015, <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/incident/russian-state-connected-hacker-group-sandworm-takes-offline-ukraines-energy-grid/>.

<sup>36</sup> Kim Zetter, "Inside the Cunning, Unprecedented Hack of Ukraine's Power Grid", *Wired*, 3 March 2016, <https://www.wired.com/2016/03/inside-cunning-unprecedented-hack-ukraines-power-grid/>.

<sup>37</sup> Christian Borys, "The day a mysterious cyber-attack crippled Ukraine", *BBC*, 4 July 2017, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/future/article/20170704-the-day-a-mysterious-cyber-attack-crippled-ukraine>.

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power grid, leaving thousands without electricity. This was an early warning of Moscow's capability to wage cyber-enabled hybrid warfare. In 2022, Kremlin-linked hackers targeted satellite communications systems,<sup>38</sup> disrupting Ukrainian military operations at the onset of the full-scale invasion.

Further afield from Ukraine, Western states have experienced the long arm of Russian hacking. While there have been attacks on governments, financial institutions, and critical infrastructure, prominent Russian-linked attacks have focused on elections and political crises. In 2017, Russian-linked hackers targeted France's presidential election,<sup>39</sup> leaking documents from Emmanuel Macron's campaign to influence voter perception. During the 2016 US presidential election, Russian disinformation efforts – linked to the Internet Research Agency – spread conspiracy theories and false narratives to amplify political polarisation.<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile, the Leave campaign in the Brexit referendum had direct contact with the Russian ambassador and with former Kremlin advisors.<sup>41</sup> Of course, we do not contend that the Kremlin directly affected the results of these elections and referenda, but it certainly tried.

In recent years, European financial institutions have also been targeted, with Russian cyber units carrying out distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks on airports, banks, and government structures in the UK,<sup>42</sup> Germany,<sup>43</sup> and Denmark.<sup>44</sup> These are not isolated incidents. Even before Russia's launch of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, so-called 'unfriendly' countries were attacked from Estonia in 2007<sup>45</sup> to the Netherlands in 2018.<sup>46</sup> Such cyberattacks serve a dual purpose. First, they cause economic disruption. Second, such attacks signal to Western governments that Moscow has the capacity to inflict widespread financial and structural instability if provoked.

Perhaps most concerning is Russia's investment in disinformation networks designed to manipulate public opinion within NATO countries. This is done in several ways. First, the Kremlin tries to change the narrative using Kremlin-financed media like Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik and get Western publics to question their own governments more.<sup>47</sup> Second, the Kremlin uses a vast troll and bot army on social media to try and run influence campaigns, influence the debate, sow misinformation and manipulate public opinion.<sup>48</sup> While Russian influence in Western media may not be effective,<sup>49</sup> the effort the Kremlin is undertaking to impact

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<sup>38</sup> Gordon Corera, "Russia hacked Ukrainian satellite communications, officials believe", *BBC News*, 25 March 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-60796079>.

<sup>39</sup> Laura Daniels, "How Russia hacked the French election", *Politico*, 23 April 2017, <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-election-2017-russia-hacked-cyberattacks/>.

<sup>40</sup> Abigail Adams, "Here's What We Know So Far About Russia's 2016 Meddling", *Time*, 18 April 2019, <https://time.com/5565991/russia-influence-2016-election/>.

<sup>41</sup> "Russian influence in political campaigns", Parliament UK, 29 July 2018, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcomeds/363/36308.htm>.

<sup>42</sup> Alex Scroxton, "DDoS attacks on UK financial sector surged during Ukraine war", *Computer Weekly*, 14 September 2022, <https://www.computerweekly.com/news/252524889/DDoS-attacks-on-UK-financial-sector-surged-during-Ukraine-war>.

<sup>43</sup> "German Government, Airports, Banks Hit with Killnet DDoS Attacks", *Dark Reading*, 26 January 2023, <https://www.darkreading.com/ics-ot-security/german-government-airports-banks-hit-killnet-ddos-attacks>.

<sup>44</sup> Akshaya Asokan, "Danish Banks Are Targets of Pro-Russian DDoS Hacking Group", *Bank Info Security* 10 January 2023, <https://www.bankinfosecurity.com/danish-banks-targets-pro-russian-ddos-hacking-group-a-20902>.

<sup>45</sup> Damien McGuinness, "How a cyber attack transformed Estonia", *BBC News*, 27 April 2017, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/39655415>.

<sup>46</sup> Pierluigi Paganini, "Three Dutch Banks and Tax Agency Under DDoS Attacks...Is It A Russian Job", *Security Affairs*, 30 January 2018, <https://securityaffairs.com/68428/hacking/dutch-banks-ddos.html>.

<sup>47</sup> Robert Elliott, "How Russia spreads disinformation via RT is more nuanced than we realise", *The Guardian*, 26 July 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jul/26/russia-disinformation-rt-nuanced-online-ofcom-fine>.

<sup>48</sup> Keir Giles, "Putin's troll factories", Chatham House, 11 March 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2015-08/putins-troll-factories>.

<sup>49</sup> Joe Stafford, "Russia's covert propaganda network is largely ineffective, new study finds", The University of Manchester, 13 December 2024, <https://www.manchester.ac.uk/about/news/russias-covert-propaganda-network-is-largely-ineffective/>.

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Western media is worrying even if it is unsuccessful. The Russian authorities try to spread false narratives that undermine trust in the institutions of European democracies, create scepticism about NATO's purpose – for instance claiming that NATO expansion provoked Russia into war – and encourage divisions on sensitive issues by amplifying far-right and far-left rhetoric on immigration, vaccines, and civil unrest. By controlling the information battlefield, Russia ensures that its hybrid warfare strategy is not only physical but also psychological, eroding Western cohesion from within.

Furthermore, the Kremlin seeks to destabilise Western democracies from within by supporting extremist political movements,<sup>50</sup> discrediting mainstream institutions, and fuelling domestic polarisation.<sup>51</sup> The Kremlin's intelligence services actively fund pro-Kremlin politicians, amplify radical voices, and encourage separatist sentiments within NATO member states.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, Russia meddled in the 2014 Scottish referendum running an influence campaign<sup>53</sup> and in the run-up to the 2017 Catalonia independence referendum Catalan separatist politicians visited Moscow and sought advice on how to run a successful independence campaign.<sup>54</sup>

Russia has built closer economic partnerships and military ties with toxic states, such as Iran<sup>55</sup> and North Korea,<sup>56</sup> and economic cooperation with Venezuela<sup>57</sup> – all to circumvent Western sanctions. These relationships allow Moscow to maintain access to military technology, evade financial restrictions, and form an anti-Western economic bloc that challenges Western dominance in global markets.

One of the most blatant examples of Russian political subversion is its covert funding of far-right and far-left parties in Europe.<sup>58</sup> In France, Italy, Germany and Austria, Kremlin-linked financial networks have provided support to populist leaders<sup>59</sup> who advocate for reducing NATO's role in European security.

Additionally, while it is unclear to what extent Russia interfered in the Brexit referendum, the Conservative government's failure to investigate possible Kremlin interference, followed by its decision to bury the report,<sup>60</sup> points to likely Russian involvement in the referendum that the government preferred to ignore for fear it would taint the 'joy' of Brexit. Helping the Brexit campaign to get a majority victory would weaken Britain as the country looked inward and became increasingly disunited. Such a result would also weaken the EU, which would push a poor deal on the UK to stop further splintering.

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<sup>50</sup> Paul N Hodos, 2023, "Playing to Extremes: Russia's Choices to Support Western Political Extremists and Paramilitary Groups", *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence*, 36(3): 847-869.

<sup>51</sup> Robert E Hamilton, 2019, "Russia's Attempts to Undermine Democracy in the West: Effect and Causes", *Orbis*, 63(3): 334-348.

<sup>52</sup> Mark Galeotti, 2016, "Putin's Hydra: Inside Russia's Intelligence Services", European Council on Foreign Relations Policy Brief.

<sup>53</sup> "Russia meddled in Scottish vote, unclear on Brexit: UK parliament", *Al Jazeera*, 21 July 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/7/21/russia-meddled-in-scottish-vote-unclear-on-brexit-uk-parliament>.

<sup>54</sup> Michael Schwartz and José Bautista, "Married Kremlin Spies, a Shadowy Mission to Moscow and Unrest in Catalonia", *The New York Times*, 3 September 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/03/world/europe/spain-catalonia-russia.html>.

<sup>55</sup> "Understanding the Growing Collaboration Between Russia and Iran", Center for Strategic and International Studies, 12 June 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/understanding-growing-collaboration-between-russia-and-iran>.

<sup>56</sup> Edward Howell, "North Korea and Russia's dangerous partnership", Chatham House, 4 December 2024, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/12/north-korea-and-russias-dangerous-partnership/revival-north-korea-russia-relationship>.

<sup>57</sup> "Russia, Venezuela to boost cooperation in energy, including nuclear", *France 24*, 20 February 2024, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20240220-russia-venezuela-to-boost-cooperation-in-energy-including-nuclear>.

<sup>58</sup> Alina Polyakova, Marlene Laruelle, Stefan Meister and Neil Barnett, "The Kremlin's Trojan Horses", *Atlantic Council*, 15 November 2016, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/kremlin-trojan-horses/>.

<sup>59</sup> Holger Roonemaa, Martin Laine and Michael Weiss, "Exclusive: Russia Backs Europe's Far-Right", *New Lines Magazine*, 24 March 2022, <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/exclusive-russia-backs-europes-far-right/>.

<sup>60</sup> Dan Sabbagh, Luke Harding, Andrew Roth, "Russia report reveals UK government failed to investigate Kremlin interference", *The Guardian*, 21 July 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/21/russia-report-reveals-uk-government-failed-to-address-kremlin-interference-scottish-referendum-brexit>.

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In the Balkans, Russia played on divisions in Bosnia, supporting the Bosnian Serbs to limit the likelihood of Bosnia integrating with the West.<sup>61</sup> Russia has used its networks across the Balkans to increase support for Slavic groups and pro-Russian politicians who can hamper the relationship of the Balkan states with the West.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, Russia has cultivated close ties with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who has adopted rhetoric that aligns with Russian narratives<sup>63</sup> and frequently opposed EU sanctions on Moscow<sup>64</sup> – forcing the EU to ignore Hungarian objections when passing resolutions.<sup>65</sup>

Another pro-Russian politician who has criticised the EU and Ukraine – and, like Orbán, has met Putin<sup>66</sup> – is Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico, who is aligning Slovakia with Russia.<sup>67</sup> Fico has called for Russia to receive security guarantees,<sup>68</sup> and since meeting with Putin in 2024, Fico’s social media posts have received an “unnatural increase in interactions”<sup>69</sup> from accounts showing inauthenticity. Thus, it is likely that the Kremlin is promoting Fico’s posts to as wide an audience as possible in Europe to highlight Russia’s non-isolation, but especially to play on any divides in the European electorate. By spreading disinformation, funding radical elements, and manipulating domestic debates, Russia erodes European unity and weakens the West’s ability to present a coordinated front against aggression.

Despite being under extensive Western sanctions, the Kremlin continues to wield economic leverage as a geopolitical tool, particularly through its control over energy supplies, natural resources, and global trade routes. One of Moscow’s most effective tactics has been weaponizing its gas and oil exports to punish European states for supporting Ukraine. In 2022, Russia deliberately cut off natural gas supplies to Germany and other European nations, forcing a continent-wide energy crisis that led to skyrocketing electricity prices and industrial slowdowns. The idea was that European states would pressure Kyiv to sign a peace agreement benefiting Russia because they relied too much on Russian gas and would not diversify. However, Europe did diversify, resulting in an own goal for Russia.<sup>70</sup> By manipulating energy flows, Russia sought to exert economic pain on Europe, pressure Western governments into softening their stance on Ukraine, and fuel domestic political divisions over energy policy.

Similarly, Russia has leveraged its control over global agricultural exports to create economic instability in the developing world. By blocking Ukrainian grain shipments in the Black Sea,<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Dimitar Bechev, “Between the EU and Moscow: How Russia Exploits Divisions in Bosnia”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 27 June 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/06/bosnia-between-russia-eu?lang=en>.

<sup>62</sup> James McBride, “Russia’s Influence in the Balkans”, Council on Foreign Relations, 21 November 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/russias-influence-balkans>.

<sup>63</sup> Leon Tóth, “To Quote Lies Is Lying. How Hungary’s Government Amplifies Russian Disinformation on Ukraine”, *Vox Ukraine*, 26 May 2023, <https://voxukraine.org/en/to-quote-lies-is-lying-how-hungary-s-government-amplifies-russian-disinformation-on-ukraine>.

<sup>64</sup> “Hungary’s Orban threatens to block EU sanctions on Russia”, *DW*, 24 January 2025, <https://www.dw.com/en/hungarys-orban-threatens-to-block-eu-sanctions-on-russia/a-71404115>.

<sup>65</sup> Gabriel Gavin, “Europe’s new unanimity: Orbán doesn’t need to agree”, *Politico*, 20 March 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-new-unanimity-viktor-orban-hungary-ukraine-diplomats-summit/>.

<sup>66</sup> Thomas Mackintosh, “Slovak PM meets Putin in unannounced Moscow visit”, *BBC News*, 22 December 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/czOrn85v5kjo>.

<sup>67</sup> Kieran Guilbert, “Slovakia at ‘critical crossroads’ as months of protest threaten pro-Moscow Fico”, *Euronews*, 21 March 2025, <https://www.euronews.com/2025/03/21/slovakia-at-critical-crossroads-as-months-of-protest-threaten-pro-moscow-fico>.

<sup>68</sup> Albin Sybera, “Fico calls for security guarantees for Russia on Kremlin propaganda channel”, *bne IntelliNews*, 31 October 2024, <https://www.intellinews.com/fico-calls-for-security-guarantees-for-russia-on-kremlin-propaganda-channel-351005/>.

<sup>69</sup> Karolína Kiripolská, Matej Kyjovský and Petra Pavlovičová, “Putin’s MAGIC: Robert Fico’s Posts Go Viral After Kremlin Visit”, *VSQUARE*, 23 January 2025, <https://vsquare.org/vladimir-putin-robert-fico-kremlin-visit-moscow-social-media-viral-posts-inauthentic-accounts/>.

<sup>70</sup> Szymon Kardaś, “Own goal: How Russia’s gas war has backfired”, European Council on Foreign Relations, 27 July 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/article/own-goal-how-russias-gas-war-has-backfired/>.

<sup>71</sup> Caitlin Welsh, Joseph Glauber and Emma Dodd, “Why Is Russia Blocking Ukraine’s Food Exports”, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 15 September 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/why-russia-blocking-ukraines-food-exports>.

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Moscow triggered food shortages in Africa and the Middle East, pressuring European nations to either negotiate with Russia or face increased migration flows from famine-stricken regions.

## The Risk of Future Russian Aggression

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Since the beginning of 2025, the Russian offensive has visibly slowed due to manpower and equipment shortages.<sup>72</sup> If managed well, with manpower issues sorted and Western states supporting Ukraine, then Ukraine can stabilise the front.<sup>73</sup> Rumours that the front is about to collapse have been exaggerated. While Ukraine may have left all but a sliver of the territory it held in Kursk,<sup>74</sup> Russia has not been able to capitalise, and Ukrainian forces have reappeared in Russia's Belgorod region.<sup>75</sup> Of course, the elephant in the room is what Donald Trump will do, but European governments must do their utmost to support Ukraine. Trump may be labouring under the delusion that he can get Putin to agree to a peace deal,<sup>76</sup> but the reality is simple: Putin wants Ukraine's capitulation<sup>77</sup> and has been consistently clear on this.

Consequently, it is probable that Russia will escalate its attacks in Ukraine, possibly through renewed offensives or increased strikes on civilian infrastructure. The Kremlin will also plausibly target NATO's eastern flank, particularly the Baltic states, testing NATO's credibility and response time. If the Russian authorities take this path, then it is likely that Russia will conduct destabilisation efforts in Finland, which has recently joined NATO, potentially through cyberattacks or energy blackmail. In the short term, it is expected that the Kremlin will concentrate on Ukraine. Before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it was unlikely that Russia would attack NATO, and it remains unlikely to do so directly with Russian tanks racing to Tallinn, Riga or Vilnius. Yet having seen how NATO governments west of Warsaw fell for Kremlin blackmail over nuclear threats, failed to react effectively when the Kremlin claimed it was protecting Russian speakers, and now with the possibility of an American withdrawal from NATO or non-American support,<sup>78</sup> it is currently plausible that Russia will test the water. Potentially, little green men – as in Crimea in 2014 – may appear in Estonia's Narva County, with Putin stating that they are there to protect Russian speakers and that any action against them will lead to a full-metal Russian response. This would destroy NATO. Thus, it is imperative that Europe plan for the real possibility that if the Kremlin wins in Ukraine, it will do something similar elsewhere.

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<sup>72</sup> Eric Ciaramella, Michael Kofman, Aaron D Miller, Alexander Prokopenko and Andrew S Weiss, "The uncertainty Surrounding Russia's War in Ukraine, Three Years In", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 27 February 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2025/02/russia-ukraine-war-us-support-peace-deal?lang=en>.

<sup>73</sup> Michael Kofman's Bluesky post can be found here: <https://bsky.app/profile/michaelkofman.bsky.social/post/3lkv7v5cez42s>.

<sup>74</sup> Shaun Walker, "Ukraine's retreat from Kursk appears to mark end of audacious operation", *The Guardian*, 14 March 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/mar/14/ukraine-kursk-retreat-russia-incursion-peace-negotiations>.

<sup>75</sup> Ellie Cook, "Russia's Ukraine offensive Stalls Amid Belgorod Counter", *Newsweek*, 23 March 2025, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-ukraine-belgorod-kursk-2049259>.

<sup>76</sup> "Trump is naïve, delusional – and being played by Putin", *Independent*, 19 March 2025, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/editorials/trump-putin-call-ceasefire-russia-ukraine-b2718112.html>.

<sup>77</sup> "The Guardian view on Trump and Ukraine: Putin has shown he does not want peace", *The Guardian*, 21 March 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/mar/21/the-guardian-view-on-trump-and-ukraine-putin-has-shown-he-does-not-want-peace>.

<sup>78</sup> Alexander Bolton, "Trump on collision course with GOP defense hawks over NATO", *The Hill*, 21 March 2025, <https://thehill.com/homenews/senate/5206388-trump-nato-restructure/>.

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## The Consequences of European Inaction

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Failure to proactively counter Russia's destabilisation tactics will only embolden the Kremlin and invite further conflict. The Kremlin relies on signals, and European governments need to send a strong signal that they have the capacity to react if necessary. Although Russia signed a ceasefire with Georgia on 16th August 2008 and claimed full withdrawal on 22nd August, it retained checkpoints in Georgian territory. It was only the arrival of the USS McFaul at Batumi that pushed the Russian army to give up these checkpoints and retreat to the agreed demarcation line.<sup>79</sup> Conversely, the withdrawal of American, British, Canadian, and Lithuanian trainers from Ukraine just before the Russian invasion, while understandable in terms of media reaction to military deaths, sent a signal to the Kremlin that Western governments would not react – other than through strong words – to a Russian invasion of Ukraine.

This was one of many signals that the Kremlin had reasoned highlighted that Western governments were weak. Moscow had watched the West fail to react to Russian actions in Georgia in 2008 and in Crimea and Donbas in 2014. It also saw the embarrassing American withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, and as a result, it was confident that there would be limited Western reaction to a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. With the Trump administration seemingly working to destroy alliances left, right and centre, the Kremlin does not have to lift a finger to achieve its aim of weakening the West. Thus, it is imperative for European states to come together and show a strong signal of unity. Failure to do so will precipitate further Russian actions to subvert security in Europe.

If Europe does not take the lead in countering Russia now, several negative consequences are likely. First, Ukraine could be forced into an unfavourable settlement, leaving large parts of its territory under Russian occupation and setting a dangerous precedent for future land grabs. Second, NATO could face an internal crisis, as some member states push for conciliation while others demand stronger deterrence measures. Third, European democracies could become increasingly vulnerable to Russian interference, weakening institutions and undermining public trust in governance.

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<sup>79</sup> "U.S. Navy warship arrives in Georgia with aid", *NBC News*, 24 August 2008, <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna26375258>.

## Why Europe Must Act

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This report argues that Europe must reject any return to détente with Russia and instead pursue an aggressive, multi-pronged strategy to weaken and destabilise the Kremlin. There has been a contention that the West should negotiate a new security architecture that accommodates Russia,<sup>80</sup> as this will placate Russia and lead to peace.<sup>81</sup> Yet this is the wrong strategy. Yes, negotiations should happen. This will likely be a process of fight-and-talk, with Europe supporting Ukraine militarily in the fighting to be in the best position to talk from strength. However, accommodating Russia with new security architecture will send a message to the Kremlin and other autocracies that the West is weak and that ‘might-makes-right’. Nor is it certain that this would placate the Kremlin. Rather, having been given the green light and received a seat at the top table of global players after instigating war crimes, the Kremlin would likely to continue and push a new narrative of victimisation, with the rhetoric of NATO expansion having been in Kremlin discourse.<sup>82</sup>

The long-term security of the continent depends on ensuring that Putin’s Russia is not only contained but also structurally weakened to the point where it can no longer project power beyond its borders. Therefore, several things must happen. First, Europe must increase economic pressure through expanded sanctions, asset seizures, and financial warfare. Second, European governments must support the Russian opposition by amplifying anti-Kremlin narratives and empowering dissidents. Third, Europe needs to expand cyber and intelligence operations to undermine Moscow’s capacity to wage hybrid warfare. Fourth, Europe should strengthen ties with Russia’s neighbours to further isolate the Kremlin. Finally, European governments must engage with the Global South to erode Russia’s influence in emerging markets. This report will lay out a detailed strategy for European governments to implement these measures, ensuring that the Kremlin remains under relentless pressure while support for Ukraine remains unwavering. Europe stands at a critical juncture. It can either rise to the challenge and take decisive action against the primary destabilising force in the region, or it can continue to delay, risking a far greater crisis in the future.

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<sup>80</sup> Matthew Blackburn and Patricia Marins, “Europe’s Fighting Talk is no Substitute for Hard Power”, *The National Interest*, 19 March 2025, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/europes-fighting-talk-is-no-substitute-for-hard-power>.

<sup>81</sup> Alexander Clackson, “Integrating Russia into the Western security framework is key to long-term stability”, *The Hill*, 20 February 2025, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/5153709-russia-western-security-dialogue/>.

<sup>82</sup> Dr Stephen G F Hall, “Russia thinks the West is weak – Europe must make a stand, now”, *The Hill*, 28 February 2025, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/5167833-european-security-russia-nato/>.

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## Five Key Strategies to Destabilise Russia

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### 1. Economic Warfare: Squeezing the Kremlin's Resources

A core pillar of any strategy to weaken Russia must centre on economic warfare – targeting the financial arteries that sustain the Kremlin's war machine. Russia has spent years insulating its economy from Western pressure, stockpiling reserves and diversifying trade partnerships. The Russian economy is doing better<sup>83</sup> than the more alarmist predictions of economic meltdown forecast.<sup>84</sup> However, its economy is overheating with rising inflation and labour shortages, with sanctions – which always take time to be effective – starting to bite.<sup>85</sup> While the Russian economy – and the pressures on it – are dependent on one man who will only change course in Ukraine if the benefits of better relations with America outweigh the benefit of war,<sup>86</sup> the economy is now militarised with the civilian sector moribund. Thus, it is imperative to keep capital markets closed to Russia, provide opportunities for Russians to leave Russia – thereby precipitating the ongoing brain drain<sup>87</sup> – and increase sanctions on technology reaching Russia and its production of natural resources, with secondary sanctions implemented.<sup>88</sup> With Trump potentially considering lifting sanctions in the future,<sup>89</sup> European governments would see a reduction in sanctions' effectiveness. Yet the wrong solution would be to lift sanctions as well. The right combination of sanctions enforcement, asset seizures, and financial disruption can still disrupt Russia's economic resilience and send a signal of European resolve.

One of the most potent tools available to European nations is the seizure and repurposing of Russian state assets held in Western financial institutions. There are questions on the legality of using seized assets and Europe – where most of the Russian assets are frozen – would lose a key negotiating hold over Russia if the assets were used.<sup>90</sup> Yet if at negotiations Russia did make concessions to get the assets back then European states would be left to foot the reconstruction bill for Ukraine.<sup>91</sup> It is possible that the Kremlin may accept the loss of these assets and allow them to be used to rebuild Ukraine, but this is unlikely at the time of writing in April 2025. Furthermore, times have changed, with America possibly withdrawing both the security umbrella from Europe and interest in the continent. Increasingly, it is unlikely that the Trump administration would help finance Ukraine's reconstruction. While the frozen Russian assets will not cover even half of Ukraine's rebuild destruction, they would go some way to doing so.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, when it comes to questions of legality, Western governments have given

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<sup>83</sup> Richard Connolly, "Russia's Wartime Economy isn't as Weak as it Looks", RUSI, 22 January 2025, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russias-wartime-economy-isnt-weak-it-looks>.

<sup>84</sup> Rebecca Robinson, "Russian economy meltdown with 'transparent companies facing bankruptcy' as 'costs skyrocket'", *Express*, 3 March 2025, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/2021667/russian-economy-transport-bankruptcies>.

<sup>85</sup> Mark Temnycky, "Is 2025 the year that Russia's economy finally freezes up under sanctions", *Atlantic Council*, 8 January 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/is-2025-the-year-that-russias-economy-finally-freezes-up-under-sanctions/>.

<sup>86</sup> Julian Cooper, "Russia's economy is stagnating – but that won't force it to end the war", *The Conversation*, 10 March 2025, <https://theconversation.com/russias-economy-is-stagnating-but-that-wont-force-it-to-end-the-war-251296>.

<sup>87</sup> Richard Portes, "Russia's brain drain has become its economy's biggest problem", London Business School, 2 September 2024, <https://www.london.edu/news/brain-drain-destroying-russian-future>.

<sup>88</sup> Alexander Kolyandr, "Addicted to War: Undermining Russia's Economy", CEPA, 5 February 2025, <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/addicted-to-war-undermining-russias-economy/>.

<sup>89</sup> Gabriel Gavin, "Trump will make – or break – Europe's Russia sanctions", *Politico*, 17 March 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-europe-russia-moscow-goods-energy-oil-latvia/>.

<sup>90</sup> Creon Butler, "Confiscating sanctioned Russian state assets should be the last resort", Chatham House, 1 May 2024, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/05/confiscating-sanctioned-russian-state-assets-should-be-last-resort>.

<sup>91</sup> "Exclusive: Russia could concede \$300 billion in frozen assets as part of Ukraine war settlement, sources say", *Reuters*, 21 February 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-could-concede-300-bln-frozen-assets-part-ukraine-war-settlement-sources-2025-02-21/>.

<sup>92</sup> Joseph Stiglitz and Andrew Kosenko, "Europe's powerful tool against Russia? Seizing its frozen assets", *The Guardian*, 6 March 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2025/mar/06/europes-powerful-tool-against-russia-seizing-its-frozen-assets>.

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Ukraine the interest from Russia's frozen assets. As the interest legally belongs to Russia, this raises questions as to how giving Ukraine the interest is legal, but giving the assets themselves is not.<sup>93</sup> By legally repurposing these funds, Europe can both weaken Moscow's economic stability and provide Kyiv with the resources necessary to resist and rebuild.

Additionally, targeting oligarch wealth – assets linked to Kremlin loyalists – would increase internal pressure on Putin, especially if their financial networks in London, Paris, and Zurich were further dismantled. Encouraging capital flight from Russia would further exacerbate economic instability. This would, ironically, play into a long tradition of the Russian elite sending their ill-gotten gains abroad and keeping their assets out of reach of the state.<sup>94</sup> The European Union and the UK should create relocation incentives for Russian business elites, skilled workers, and technology specialists willing to abandon Putin's system.<sup>95</sup> The UK government could increase the number of High Potential Individual (HPI) and student visas for Russians to bring in more skilled workers and potential future skilled workers, benefitting the British economy to the detriment of Russia.<sup>96</sup> Such actions would drain Russia of its most talented professionals while fostering a pro-Western Russian exile community that could play a role in future political change.

Finally, cutting off remaining economic ties between Europe and Russia is essential. Though the EU has significantly reduced its reliance on Russian gas, some European states like Hungary<sup>97</sup> and Slovakia<sup>98</sup> still rely on Russian gas, and others are still buying Russian resources on the sly.<sup>99</sup> Europe remains reliant on Russian metals,<sup>100</sup> and a fifth of the continent's nuclear reactors depend on Russian nuclear fuel.<sup>101</sup>

However, there are other sources for the natural resources that Europe gets from Russia. Central Asia remains rich in hydrocarbon reserves, and while its main Europe-facing infrastructure still goes through Russia,<sup>102</sup> the Middle Corridor connecting Central Asia to Europe via the Caucasus and Turkey has seen increased traffic since the invasion.<sup>103</sup> Although this will take time, and Europe will likely be dependent on American liquified natural gas for the short

<sup>93</sup> James Nixey, "Confiscation of immobilized Russian state assets is moral and vital", Chatham House, 1 May 2024, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/05/confiscation-immobilized-russian-state-assets-moral-and-vital>.

<sup>94</sup> Aleksandr Kolyandr, "Troitsa Adama Smita. Chto ne tak s zapadnymi sanktsiyami protiv Rossii [Adam Smith's Trinity. What's wrong with Western sanctions against Russia]", *Carnegie Politika*, 4 April 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/92115>.

<sup>95</sup> Dr Stephen G F Hall, "Getting A Foot In The Door: Creating A Future Russia Now", Henry Jackson Society, 8 November 2023, <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/HJS-Getting-a-Foot-in-the-Door-%E2%80%93-Creating-a-Future-Russia-Now-Report-web.pdf>.

<sup>96</sup> Dr Stephen G F Hall, "Getting A Foot In The Door: Creating A Future Russia Now", Henry Jackson Society, 8 November 2023, <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/HJS-Getting-a-Foot-in-the-Door-%E2%80%93-Creating-a-Future-Russia-Now-Report-web.pdf>; Dr Stephen G F Hall, "Linking Forces: Western Support For The Russian Diaspora", Henry Jackson Society, 15 July 2024, <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/HJS-Western-Support-for-the-Russian-Diaspora-Report-web.pdf>.

<sup>97</sup> Edit Inotai, "Hungary Turns Itself Into Hub For Russian Gas", *Reporting Democracy*, 11 December 2024, <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/12/11/hungary-turns-itself-into-hub-for-russian-gas/>.

<sup>98</sup> "Slovakia Now Receiving Russian Gas via Turkey After Ukraine Halted Flows", *The Moscow Times*, 6 February 2025, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/02/06/slovakia-now-receiving-russian-gas-via-turkey-after-ukraine-halted-flows-a87890>.

<sup>99</sup> Ajit Niranjani, "EU spends more on Russian oil and gas than financial aid to Ukraine – report", *The Guardian*, 24 February 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/feb/24/eu-spends-more-russian-oil-gas-than-financial-aid-ukraine-report>.

<sup>100</sup> Pascal Hansens, Sigrid Melchior, Maxence Peigné and Harald Schumann, "Russia: Europe imports €13 billion of 'critical' metals in sanctions in blindspot", *Investigate Europe*, 24 October 2023, <https://www.investigate-europe.eu/posts/russia-sanctions-europe-critical-raw-materials-imports>.

<sup>101</sup> Fatima Sadouki, "EU still dependent on Russian nuclear fuel – expert", World Nuclear Industry Status Report, 6 February 2025, <https://www.worldnuclearreport.org/EU-still-dependent-on-Russian-nuclear-fuel-expert>.

<sup>102</sup> Aliya Tskhay, "Why Central Asia will not be the answer to Europe's energy needs", *IPS*, 21 March 2023, <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/economy-and-ecology/why-central-asia-will-not-contribute-to-europes-energy-needs-6590/>.

<sup>103</sup> Syed Raiyan Amir, "Growing Importance of Central Asia to Europe", *Modern Diplomacy*, 22 April 2024, <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2024/04/22/growing-importance-of-central-asia-to-europe/>.

term,<sup>104</sup> the growth of trade with Central Asia will reduce dependency on Russia to little in the medium term and increasingly pull the Central Asian states away from Moscow's influence and the Kremlin's leverage.

In January 2025, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Sweden called for a reduction in the price cap on Russian oil, currently set at \$60 per barrel.<sup>105</sup> A month later, twelve European countries urged the G7 to tighten sanctions on Russia by further curbing its energy revenues and closing loopholes that enable the Kremlin to circumvent existing measures using a shadow fleet. These calls reflect growing frustration with the limited efficacy of sanctions imposed to date. Given that energy exports account for approximately two thirds of Russia's total exports and provide around one-third of its federal budget revenue, reducing this income stream is essential to weakening the regime's financial base and undermining its capacity to sustain its war effort against Ukraine.

Yet despite the scope and scale of Western sanctions, the Russian economy has proven more resilient than anticipated. This resilience can be attributed to two main factors. First, Russia has increasingly relied on third countries – particularly India, China, and Turkey – to maintain demand for its oil. These states have not only continued to purchase Russian crude in large volumes but have also facilitated the re-export of Russian energy at higher margins. For example, following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian oil shipments to India increased sixteen-fold. These transactions provide Moscow with critical revenue streams while bypassing sanctions imposed by Western states.

Second, Russia has dramatically expanded its so-called 'shadow fleet' – a fleet of older oil tankers registered in offshore jurisdictions and operating outside the oversight of Western regulatory and insurance systems. By the end of 2024, this shadow fleet was responsible for transporting approximately 80% of Russia's seaborne oil exports. Its growth has enabled Moscow to continue global energy shipments while avoiding scrutiny, insurance restrictions, and price caps imposed by the EU, G7, and allied partners.

To address these challenges and limit Russia's ability to fund its military aggression, several key measures must be adopted:

First, sanctions enforcement against the shadow fleet must be substantially improved. This means increasing scrutiny not only at the point of oil loading in Russian ports but also along the full logistical chain to the end consumer. Greater pressure must be applied to shipping companies that operate within or benefit from these networks. Governments should invest in identifying the true owners of vessels, many of whom hide behind complex offshore structures, and take legal and financial measures to sanction them directly. Simultaneously, insurance companies – particularly those based in Europe – must be prohibited from underwriting vessels engaged in transporting Russian oil in violation of the price cap.

Second, the application of secondary sanctions must be expanded and more rigorously enforced. These should target not only Russian companies but also foreign financial institutions, logistics firms, and shipping service providers that knowingly facilitate sanctions evasion. Authorities should focus on the ports and terminals in countries like India and Turkey that serve as major nodes in this network. Applying pressure at these critical junctures would significantly raise the cost and risk of continuing to trade in Russian oil.

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<sup>104</sup> Edward Donnelly, "LNG fever: European firms sign mega-contracts as US shale gas imports boom", *Investigate Europe*, 9 January 2023, <https://www.investigate-europe.eu/posts/lng-fever-mega-contracts-shale-gas-imports-us>.

<sup>105</sup> "Six EU countries call for lowering of G7 price cap on Russian oil", *Reuters*, 13 January 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/six-eu-countries-call-lowering-g7-price-cap-russian-oil-2025-01-13/>.

Third, the oil price cap itself must be revised downward and paired with stronger compliance mechanisms. The current limit of \$60 per barrel, introduced in 2022, has become increasingly ineffective. As global oil prices have risen, Russia has been able to secure revenues well above this threshold through under-the-radar transactions. In the first half of 2024 alone, Russian revenues from oil and gas increased by 41%, demonstrating that the Kremlin has not only adapted to sanctions but is actively profiting from the gaps in enforcement. Reducing the price ceiling and improving verification procedures would significantly curtail these excess profits.

Finally, Russia's access to international financial systems must be further restricted. While several Russian banks have been disconnected from SWIFT and sanctioned by the EU and US, loopholes remain. Payments for energy transactions – particularly those denominated in euros and dollars – should be blocked more comprehensively. Doing so would complicate Russia's ability to receive payment from foreign buyers and further isolate it from global financial markets. In parallel, financial restrictions should also be used to curtail Moscow's access to high-value imports, particularly those critical to military production or dual-use technology.

Together, these steps would represent a decisive escalation in the West's economic pressure on Russia. By closing existing loopholes, increasing enforcement, and tightening the price cap, European governments can strike at the heart of the Kremlin's financial resilience. Importantly, these measures would also demonstrate sustained transatlantic and intra-European resolve – something the Kremlin has repeatedly sought to undermine. Without such an approach, Russia will continue to adapt and exploit grey zones in the current sanctions' architecture, using its oil revenues to fund aggression abroad and repression at home.

## *2. Supporting the Russian Opposition & Internal Dissent*

Destabilising the Kremlin is not merely a matter of economic pressure and military resistance; it also requires an internal unravelling of Putin's authority. For over two decades, Putin has built an extensive system of political repression, media control, and elite loyalty that has shielded him from significant domestic opposition. However, this system is not impervious to fractures, and if Europe strategically supports opposition voices, alternative narratives, and internal dissent, it can erode the Kremlin's grip from within. The battle for Russia's future will not be won solely on the battlefield in Ukraine, but also in the minds of Russians – both the disillusioned elite and the general public struggling under an increasingly oppressive regime.

The first step in this strategy is to ensure that Russian dissidents and opposition leaders have the means to continue their work. While it may seem unlikely in the short-term the Putin regime is finite. Whether he is removed by an elite faction, a revolution on the streets or the grim reaper visiting the Kremlin change will come to Russia. Western governments must be ready for when that day happens and need to work with the Russian opposition-in-exile to plan for this day.<sup>106</sup> Many of Putin's most vocal critics have been forced into exile, operating with limited resources and restricted platforms to communicate with their fellow Russians. Journalists, human-rights activists, political figures, and exiled former officials form a crucial counterweight to Kremlin propaganda, but they need institutional and financial support to remain effective.

European governments should expand programmes that offer political asylum and legal protections for Russian dissidents, ensuring that they are not targeted by Russian intelligence operations abroad, as seen in cases like the poisoning murder of Alexander Litvinenko<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Dr Stephen G F Hall, "Getting A Foot In The Door: Creating A Future Russia Now", Henry Jackson Society, 8 November 2023, <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/HJS-Getting-a-Foot-in-the-Door-%E2%80%93-Creating-a-Future-Russia-Now-Report-web.pdf>.

<sup>107</sup> Luke Harding, "Alexander Litvinenko: the man who solved his own murder", *The Guardian*, 19 January 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/19/alexander-litvinenko-the-man-who-solved-his-own-murder>.

and attempt on Sergei Skripal<sup>108</sup> in the UK or the assassination of Zelimkhan Khangoshvili in Berlin.<sup>109</sup> Beyond protection, European states should increase financial assistance to opposition networks, directing funding through independent NGOs and charitable foundations to maintain the neutrality and legitimacy of these movements.<sup>110</sup> By doing so, Europe can enable these groups to build independent Russian-language media platforms, organise opposition campaigns, and keep lines of communication open to those still inside Russia.<sup>111</sup>

Furthermore, Europe should encourage the formation of a coordinated Russian opposition-in-exile movement.<sup>112</sup> Historically, opposition efforts have been fragmented and due to the difficulty of existing in exile, opposition groups lack a link to the electorate in Russia and thus a democratic legitimacy to speak on behalf of Russians.<sup>113</sup> Similarly, the opposition-in-exile has at times been more focused on vilifying one another than uniting against Putin.<sup>114</sup> Yet several of the groups in the opposition-in-exile groups have united, with only the Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK – Russian acronym) operating alone.<sup>115</sup> While the opposition-in-exile lacks legitimacy in Russia, elections to a council-in-exile<sup>116</sup> voted on by the Russian diaspora would bestow legitimacy on these groups. A unified opposition-in-exile with a clear alternative vision for a post-Putin Russia would provide disillusioned Russians with a compelling alternative to Kremlin rule. This bloc could develop a policy roadmap for post-war reconciliation, economic recovery, and democratic reforms, countering the Kremlin’s narrative that the only alternatives to Putin are chaos and Western exploitation.

Controlling information is one of Putin’s greatest weapons in maintaining his grip on power. State-controlled media such as RT, Channel One, and Sputnik dictate the Russian narrative, suppressing alternative viewpoints and branding dissenters as foreign agents or traitors. To counter this, Europe must expand access to independent Russian-language media and support efforts to penetrate Russia’s tightly controlled information space. The difficulty is not that European governments do not have the resources to do so, but it is probable that the audience that would watch, read and listen to Western and Western-supported media would be the people who would already do so. Yet even if this is the case it is crucial to let them know that they are not alone and that European governments still think about a better future-Russia. In these dark days it is critical that opposition-minded Russians do not lose hope and feel abandoned.

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<sup>108</sup> Luke Harding, “‘A chain of stupidity’: the Skripal case and the decline of Russia’s spy agencies”, *The Guardian*, 23 June 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/23/skripal-salisbury-poisoning-decline-of-russia-spy-agencies-gru>.

<sup>109</sup> “Germany accuses Russia of Berlin park assassination”, *BBC News*, 18 June 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-53091298>.

<sup>110</sup> Dr Stephen G F Hall, “Linking Forces: Western Support For The Russian Diaspora”, Henry Jackson Society, 15 July 2024, <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/HJS-Western-Support-for-the-Russian-Diaspora-Report-web.pdf>.

<sup>111</sup> Dr Stephen G F Hall, “Getting A Foot In The Door: Creating A Future Russia Now”, Henry Jackson Society, 8 November 2023, <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/HJS-Getting-a-Foot-in-the-Door-%E2%80%93-Creating-a-Future-Russia-Now-Report-web.pdf>.

<sup>112</sup> Dr Stephen G F Hall, “Linking Forces: Western Support For The Russian Diaspora”, Henry Jackson Society, 15 July 2024, <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/HJS-Western-Support-for-the-Russian-Diaspora-Report-web.pdf>.

<sup>113</sup> Matthew Blackburn and Ekaterina V Klimenko, “The Exiled Anti-Putin Opposition and the Question of Democratic Representation”, Wilson Center, 14 January 2025, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/exiled-anti-putin-opposition-and-question-democratic-representation>.

<sup>114</sup> Ekaterina V Klimenko, “The Power of Memory: Thinking of Alexei Navalny’s Political Legacy”, Wilson Center, 21 February 2025, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/power-memory-thinking-alexei-navalnys-political-legacy>.

<sup>115</sup> Dr Stephen G F Hall, “Linking Forces: Western Support For The Russian Diaspora”, Henry Jackson Society, 15 July 2024, <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/HJS-Western-Support-for-the-Russian-Diaspora-Report-web.pdf>.

<sup>116</sup> Dr Stephen G F Hall, “Getting A Foot In The Door: Creating A Future Russia Now”, Henry Jackson Society, 8 November 2023, <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/HJS-Getting-a-Foot-in-the-Door-%E2%80%93-Creating-a-Future-Russia-Now-Report-web.pdf>.

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Independent media outlets such as the BBC Russian Service, Meduza, Dozhd (TV Rain), and Novaya Gazeta Europe continue to provide Russian audiences with alternative perspectives despite government bans and crackdowns. However, their reach remains limited due to extensive internet censorship, VPN restrictions, and government firewalls. Expanding the distribution of these outlets through satellite broadcasting, encrypted messaging platforms, and proxy networks would allow more Russians to access independent news. Telegram and YouTube remain vital platforms for circumventing Russian censorship. The Kremlin will likely try to block YouTube eventually and has slowed it down.

Yet so far, it is popular non-political videos that have often been slowed down – allowing more people to view politics videos that play normally. Meanwhile, the Russia-made alternatives, VK and RuTube, are at best unready to compete, and the Kremlin is averse to giving Russians something to be dissatisfied about.<sup>117</sup> The loss of YouTube would anger many, particularly if there is no alternative.

European governments must invest in ensuring both Telegram and, particularly YouTube, channels remain accessible to Russian audiences. European governments can fund the development and distribution of VPNs, proxy services, Tor bridges, and decentralised browsing tools like Psiphon or Snowflake specifically tailored for Russian users. These tools allow users to bypass state firewalls and access blocked content, including YouTube. Other tactics would be, first, to invest in tools with low bandwidth use and mobile compatibility, as many Russians access content via smartphones.

Secondly, European governments should fund mirror sites and adaptive streaming that can host YouTube content in accessible formats outside of Russia's control. Similarly, European governments could partner with YouTube and Telegram creators producing independent Russian-language content to ensure their content is cross-posted to decentralised platforms like PeerTube and LBRY/Odysee or self-hosted websites. European governments could also provide technical and financial support to help these creators maintain operations even in exile – for example, translations, subtitles, and archiving. Much like Cold War-era samizdat or USB drops in North Korea,<sup>118</sup> governments can pre-emptively distribute “digital resilience kits” inside Russia – USBs, SD cards, or mobile apps containing circumvention tools, preloaded independent content, and instructions on how to access external platforms. Such actions could be done through diaspora networks, humanitarian channels, or even targeted digital advertising.

While Telegram is Russian-founded, it is harder for Russian authorities to block it due to its decentralised structure and popularity. European governments can thus help independent Russian media and civil society maintain secure, high-quality Telegram channels; provide training in operational security and avoiding algorithmic suppression; and encourage Telegram to resist state pressure and keep channels open, while simultaneously offering legal and infrastructural support abroad. European governments must support the archiving of key YouTube channels like Navalny Live, Dozhd and Khodorkovsky.Live and make their content downloadable in formats that can be redistributed – via torrenting, mesh networks, file-sharing apps, or via peer-to-peer networks like IPFS. If YouTube is blocked, radio and satellite remain resilient tools. Content from YouTube channels can be adapted for shortwave radio, which is harder to jam, or can be broadcast via satellite TV from neighbouring countries like Latvia, Estonia, and Finland.

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<sup>117</sup> Svetlana Reiter and Valeria Pozychanyuk, “Libo idite v VK, libo zanimaites' chem-nibud' drugim. V 2024 godu Kreml' prakticheski zablokiroval YouTube v Rossii. My vyyasnili, kto i kak prinimal eto reshenie [Either got to VK or do something else. In 2024, the Kremlin practically blocked YouTube in Russia. We found out who made this decision and how]”, *Meduza*, 24 December 2024, <https://meduza.io/feature/2024/12/24/libo-idite-v-vk-libo-zanimaytes-chem-nibud-drugim>.

<sup>118</sup> See: <https://flashdrivesforfreedom.org/>.

With the Trump administration having silenced Voice of America<sup>119</sup> and cut funding for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL),<sup>120</sup> it is crucial that European governments invest in these structures. The Czech government has vowed to support RFE/RL,<sup>121</sup> which has a budget of about £108 million per annum,<sup>122</sup> a snip compared with the £1.3 billion BBC budget.<sup>123</sup> Consequently, if European governments were to pool resources the added cost would be minimal. The loss of RFE/RL would give autocrats globally respite<sup>124</sup> from an organisation that has helped in the promotion of liberty, democracy, and human rights. Therefore, it is crucial that European governments step-up and fund this service which can be another weapon in the European arsenal against the Kremlin.

As for content, the messaging strategy of independent media should focus on themes that historically weaken public confidence in Putin. First, the focus should be on corruption within the Kremlin, exposing the personal enrichment of Putin's inner circle while ordinary Russians face economic hardship. Second, the media must concentrate on military failures in Ukraine, highlighting battlefield defeats, high casualty rates, and the mistreatment of Russian conscripts. Third, focus should be on the deteriorating living conditions inside Russia, showing how Western sanctions and economic mismanagement have led to rising poverty, failing infrastructure, and declining quality of life. Delivering these messages effectively will require a multi-layered approach, combining investigative journalism with targeted information campaigns designed to shift public perception. The Kremlin's ability to control narratives is not absolute; Russians have proven receptive to independent news when it reaches them, as demonstrated by the viral impact of Alexei Navalny's anti-corruption investigations<sup>125</sup> before his imprisonment.

One of the greatest vulnerabilities of the Putin regime is the deep-seated corruption within it. Unlike Soviet-era officials, today's Kremlin is not ideologically driven but motivated primarily by personal wealth and power. Many have stashed billions of dollars in offshore accounts, European real estate, luxury yachts, and secret investment portfolios.<sup>126</sup> This directly contradicts the Kremlin's nationalist rhetoric of standing against the West and that the West is out to destroy Russia with its proxy Ukrainian army.<sup>127</sup> Revealing these financial secrets would erode public trust in the Russian leadership and intensify divisions within the ruling class. Leaked documents exposing the hidden wealth of Putin's close allies – including figures like Sergei Chemezov, Igor Sechin, and Sergey Lavrov – would demonstrate the vast hypocrisy of those who claim to defend Russian sovereignty while secretly hoarding assets abroad. European intelligence agencies, working alongside investigative journalists, should systematically release evidence of illicit transactions, luxury properties in European capitals, and offshore accounts linked to Kremlin insiders. These revelations would serve a dual purpose. First, they would

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<sup>119</sup> Sean Collins and Gabrielle Berbey, "The silencing of Voice of America", *Vox*, 19 March 2025, <https://www.vox.com/today-explained-newsletter/404897/trump-doge-voa-usagm-voice-america-first-fake-news>.

<sup>120</sup> "Trump cuts off funding for pro-democracy media outlets VOA and RFERL", *Euronews*, 16 March 2025, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/03/16/trump-cuts-off-funding-for-pro-democracy-media-outlets-voa-and-rferl>.

<sup>121</sup> Raphael Minder, "Czech Republic to rescue Radio Free Europe after Donald Trump funding cuts", *Financial Times*, 22 March 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/10a30487-95fc-4a3b-8902-d47a64e86916>.

<sup>122</sup> Dalibor Rohac, "Why the EU must save Radio Free Europe", *The Spectator*, 17 March 2025, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/its-now-up-to-the-eu-to-save-radio-free-europe/>.

<sup>123</sup> "Funding through the TV licence", *BBC*, <https://www.bbc.com/aboutthebbc/governance/licencefee>.

<sup>124</sup> Muhammad Tahir, "Trump's decision to cut Radio Free Europe comes at a great cost to democracy", *MSNBC*, 24 March 2025, <https://www.msnbc.com/opinion/msnbc-opinion/trump-voice-of-america-radio-free-europe-rcna197367>.

<sup>125</sup> Miriam Berger, "How Navalny combined protests and anti-corruption campaigns to take on the Kremlin", *The Washington Post*, 22 August 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/08/22/how-navalny-combined-protests-anti-corruption-campaigns-take-kremlin/>.

<sup>126</sup> Faith Hillis, "Seize the Oligarchs Wealth", *The Atlantic*, 26 February 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/02/russia-sanctions-punish-rich-oligarchs/622933/>.

<sup>127</sup> Eva Hartog, "How Vladimir Putin sells his war against the 'West'", *Politico*, 21 February 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/siege-stalingrad-battle-bucha-vladimir-putin-russia-war-against-west/>.

stoke resentment among ordinary Russians struggling with rising costs and economic hardship, reinforcing the perception that their suffering is due to the greed of a corrupt ruling elite. Second, they would create paranoia among the Kremlin's inner circle, as officials begin to suspect that their colleagues are leaking sensitive financial details to Western governments or opposition activists. This kind of elite distrust is crucial in accelerating fractures within the regime.

Perhaps the most direct way to destabilise Putin's hold on power is to convince high-ranking Russian officials, military officers, and intelligence personnel to defect. Europe's intelligence agencies should prioritise efforts to cultivate relationships with disillusioned figures within Russia's security apparatus, offering financial incentives, relocation opportunities, and personal security guarantees in exchange for cooperation. There is already precedent for such defections. Since the war began one prominent diplomat and businessman<sup>128</sup> has defected, and Anatoly Chubais publicly left the Kremlin.<sup>129</sup> There are likely others, considering reports that there have been defections in the military<sup>130</sup> and intelligence<sup>131</sup> with the latter groups allegedly revealing classified information about Kremlin operations. Expanding this trend would not only provide valuable intelligence to European governments but also undermine Putin's control over his own state apparatus. If key figures in the Russian military or FSB begin to question their loyalty to the regime, it could set off a chain reaction of internal instability. The fear of internal betrayal and elite disloyalty has always haunted autocracies. By actively exploiting these insecurities, European governments can increase the pressure on Putin from within, forcing him to devote more resources to internal repression rather than external aggression.

Undermining the Kremlin from within requires a sustained and strategic effort going beyond traditional economic measures. Strengthening the Russian opposition, expanding independent media, exposing corruption, and fostering elite defections are all essential components of a long-term campaign to erode Putin's grip on power. While such efforts may not produce immediate results, history shows that autocracies often collapse not from external military defeat but from internal disintegration. If Europe supports anti-Kremlin narratives, amplifying opposition voices, and driving wedges between Russia's ruling elites, it can precipitate the destabilisation of Putin's regime. A weakened and fractured Kremlin would be less capable of sustaining its war in Ukraine, engaging in destabilising the West, or maintaining its global influence. The question is not whether Putin's system is vulnerable; it is how quickly Europe can push it towards irreversible decline.

### *3. Covert and Cyber Operations: Taking the Fight to Russia*

Europe must adopt a strategy of covert and cyber operations to systematically weaken Russia's warfighting capabilities, disrupt its internal stability, and erode the pillars that sustain the Putin regime. Direct military confrontation with Russia remains an unviable option, yet covert operations and cyberwarfare provide powerful alternatives to exert pressure on the Kremlin. These methods allow for targeted disruption while maintaining plausible deniability, ensuring that European states can impose significant costs on Russia without escalating to

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<sup>128</sup> Shaun Walker and Andrew Roth, "'I'm never going back': the high-profile Russian defectors rejecting the war", *The Guardian*, 25 May 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/25/im-never-going-back-the-high-profile-russian-defectors-rejecting-war>.

<sup>129</sup> Owen Matthews, "Boris Bondarev: Why more Russians aren't defecting", *The Spectator*, 21 January 2023, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/boris-bondarev-why-more-russians-arent-defecting/>.

<sup>130</sup> Eve Brennan, Olga Voitovych, Anna Chernova and Kostyantyn Hak, "Russian soldier defects to Ukraine after spying for resistance group for months", *CNN*, 20 August 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/08/20/europe/russian-soldier-defects-ukraine-intl-latam/index.html>.

<sup>131</sup> Andrew Roth and Pjotr Sauer, "Russian defector sheds light on Putin paranoia and his secret train network", *The Guardian*, 2 April 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/05/russian-defector-sheds-light-on-putin-paranoia-including-secret-train>.

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open conflict. By integrating sabotage, cyberattacks, intelligence leaks, and psychological operations, Europe can force Moscow to divert resources inward, create fractures within Russian power structures, and accelerate the regime's internal decay.

Sabotage has proven to be one of the most effective means of weakening Russia from within. Over the past year, mysterious fires,<sup>132</sup> train derailments,<sup>133</sup> and unexplained industrial accidents have increasingly targeted Russian supply chains, weapons factories, and fuel depots. Many of these incidents have been attributed to Ukrainian partisans – like Atesh in the Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine<sup>134</sup> – and anti-Kremlin insurgents.<sup>135</sup> But their impact could be significantly amplified with direct European intelligence, funding, and logistical support. By expanding these efforts, Russia's military-industrial complex could be further crippled, increasing delays in weapons production and forcing Moscow to reallocate resources internally towards security rather than externally towards Ukraine and other potential battlefields.

European intelligence agencies should actively assist anti-Kremlin networks within Russia by providing encrypted communications tools, surveillance technology, and operational guidance for carrying out acts of disruption. Train networks remain a critical vulnerability, and frequent derailments of military transport lines could severely slow the delivery of arms, ammunition, and reinforcements to the Ukrainian front. Likewise, military research facilities and weapons depots must be targeted to prevent the Kremlin from replenishing its arsenal. Beyond logistical sabotage, efforts should extend to fostering defections within Russian military and intelligence circles. Encouraging targeted defections would provide invaluable intelligence on Russian troop movements, battlefield strategies, and internal morale within the ranks of the Kremlin's security forces.

Cyberwarfare offers another avenue through which Russia's ability to function as a coherent state can be degraded. Europe possesses significant cyber capabilities, and these should be mobilised to attack the very infrastructure that enables Russia's continued war effort. Financial institutions, military command networks, and state-run propaganda channels all represent high-value targets. Russian banks are particularly vulnerable to cyber interference, and large-scale attacks on the country's financial sector could cause widespread instability. This would accelerate capital flight and exacerbate inflation. By penetrating Russian government networks, European cyber units could leak classified military strategies, intelligence communications, and internal assessments that reveal discontent within the regime.

Russia has relied extensively on state-controlled media and social networks to sustain public support for the war. Disrupting the functionality of key propaganda platforms like Rossiya 1 and 24 and NTV would weaken the Kremlin's ability to control the domestic narrative, exposing Russian citizens to alternative perspectives. Targeted cyber intrusions could manipulate these networks to introduce dissenting voices, expose Kremlin corruption, and highlight the military's failures in Ukraine. By increasing the information available to Russians through Western – and Russian-diaspora – sources, Russians would get a better picture of reality. This in turn may amplify the divisions between Russian hardliners, nationalist factions, and moderates in the ruling elite. Psychological warfare campaigns should focus on spreading narratives that

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<sup>132</sup> Maya Mehrara, "Satellite Photos Show Spate of Mystery Fires in Russia's Black Sea Waters", *Newsweek*, 4 November 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/satellite-photos-fires-black-sea-russia-1979759>.

<sup>133</sup> "Freight train derails in southwest Russia due to 'interference,' officials say", *Reuters*, 11 September 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/freight-train-derails-southwest-russia-due-interference-officials-say-2024-09-10/>.

<sup>134</sup> Elizabeth Carr-Ellis, "Atesh: the Ukrainian partisans taking on Russia", *The Week*, 4 September 2024, <https://theweek.com/defence/atesh-ukrainian-partisans-taking-on-russia>.

<sup>135</sup> "Exclusive – Who are the 10,000 anti-Putin partisans in Russia and what do they do? The leader's story to Nova", *Nova News*, 16 July 2024, <https://www.agenzianova.com/en/news/esclusiva-chi-sono-e-cosa-fanno-i-10-mila-partigiani-anti-putin-in-russia-il-racconto-del-leader-a-nova/>.

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question Putin's long-term viability as a leader, emphasise Russia's growing economic isolation, and suggest that alternative leadership figures could stabilise the country more effectively than the current regime.

Beyond technological warfare, psychological operations should be deployed to deepen paranoia and suspicion within Putin's inner circle. The Kremlin is already a deeply secretive and factionalised environment, where power struggles exist between military commanders, security services, and oligarchs. Western intelligence agencies can exploit these divisions by feeding misinformation into these networks, fostering the perception that purges and betrayals are imminent. Leaking falsified intelligence suggesting that certain high-ranking officials are collaborating with the West could lead to internal crackdowns, weakening the very apparatus that sustains Putin's rule. If executed effectively, such operations could force the Kremlin into a self-destructive cycle of internal purges and elite distrust.

#### *4. Engaging with Russia's Neighbours to Reduce Kremlin Influence*

Russia's ability to project power is not confined to its military strength; it also depends heavily on its political and economic influence over neighbouring states. Many former Soviet republics, particularly in Central Asia and the Caucasus, remain tied to Russia through trade, energy dependence, and security arrangements. Europe must take proactive measures to draw these nations away from Moscow's orbit, reducing the Kremlin's ability to use them as strategic buffers or economic vassals.

A key component of this strategy involves deepening trade and investment ties with Kazakhstan, Georgia, Armenia, and the broader Central Asian region. Many of these states are eager to diversify their economies but remain constrained by Russian economic leverage. Offering attractive financial packages, infrastructure development, and greater access to European markets could provide these nations with a compelling alternative to continued dependence on Russia. Expanding European energy investments in these regions would also allow them to move away from reliance on Russian energy exports, further weakening Moscow's economic grip.

Indeed, one need only look at Moldova in Europe to see the possible impact that loosening the Russian grip may have. With Russian gas no longer flowing through Ukraine, Moldova is now less dependent on Russia. This helpfully weakens the Russian-sponsored breakaway republic in Transnistria, and European states must do more to supply Moldova with gas and integrate Transnistria into Moldova and bring Moldova closer to the EU.<sup>136</sup> Increased economic relations could in time lead to closer integration between European and those countries within the Kremlin's sphere of interest. For the Caucasian and Central Asian states, which could result in less Kremlin interference and eventual democratisation of these states.<sup>137</sup>

Another area that Europe could look to focus on is building security ties with Central Asia. Security cooperation must be strengthened to counter Russian influence. Joint military training programmes, intelligence-sharing initiatives, and arms deals would give these states greater autonomy in defending their sovereignty against potential Russian coercion. The European Union should work to strengthen diplomatic ties with these nations by integrating them into broader security discussions that provide them with strategic options beyond Russia's dominance. Additionally, if the Trump administration stops the American-led Peacekeeping

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<sup>136</sup> Arno Van Rensbergen, "End of Russian gas moves Moldova closer to EU", *The Parliament*, 20 January 2025, <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/end-of-russian-gas-moves-moldova-closer-to-eu>.

<sup>137</sup> Dr Stephen G F Hall, "Drawing The Line: Declaring Putin Illegitimate As A Step Towards Future-Russia", Henry Jackson Society, 12 March 2024, <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/HJS-Declaring-Putin-Illegitimate-Report.pdf>.

Operations Centre that supports security in the region,<sup>138</sup> then European governments should step in to finance the Centre. This would increase ties between Central Asian states and Europe, helping further dilute Russian influence in the region.

In more extreme cases, the idea of supporting regional independence movements within Russia itself could be explored as a means of fragmenting the Kremlin's power. Regions such as Chechnya, Dagestan, Tatarstan, and Siberia have long harboured separatist sentiments, and European policymakers could consider providing covert support to groups advocating for greater autonomy. However, this remains a high-risk strategy, as it could unite Russian nationalists behind Putin and justify even harsher crackdowns on internal dissent. If pursued, it would need to be done subtly, with the objective of keeping Moscow distracted by internal instability rather than escalating direct confrontation with Europe. Increasingly, disillusioned with Russian security guarantees over Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia remains formally attached to Russian-sponsored regional organisations but is looking for closer ties to Western states.<sup>139</sup> European governments must support this integration.

Already discussions around the possible fragmentation of Russia are being held in European fora. The European Parliament political group European Conservatives and Reformists, in January 2023, ran an event where the break-up of Russia was discussed,<sup>140</sup> and in December 2022, the fourth Forum of Free People of Russia was held in Helsingborg to discuss the disintegration of Russia and emergence of new states out of the Federation.<sup>141</sup> Yet such statements must be carefully weighed.

On the one hand, any talk of the breakup of Russia will not lead to elite or Russian public splits from the Kremlin but instead play into the Kremlin narrative that Western states are out to destroy Russia.<sup>142</sup> On the other hand, support for ethnic minority organisations would allow these groups to get their message back into the non-Russian regions of Russia and reshape perceptions in these regions about the war and their role in Russia. Ethnic minorities have faced “outsized fatalities”<sup>143</sup> and bringing this home may lead to ethnic minorities refusing to fight and increasing their perception of their ethnic difference vis-à-vis Russians. This report is reticent about calling for the break-up of Russia, as this will – regardless of propaganda narratives – be treated with mistrust by Russians. However, strengthening ethnic perceptions of difference would weaken the centralised state. This last point should be welcomed.

## 5. *Shaping Global Perceptions to Isolate Russia*

While efforts to destabilise Russia internally are critical, they must be paired with a strategy to weaken Moscow's influence globally. Russia has invested heavily in cultivating relationships with nations in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, positioning itself as an alternative to Western influence. Russia has also strengthened its ties with other toxic powers like North Korea<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Lynne O'Donnell, “Kazakhstan's Leader Makes Neutrality An Art”, *Foreign Policy*, 7 November 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/11/07/kazakhstan-russia-west-europe-balancing-act/>.

<sup>139</sup> Olesya Vartanyan, “Could Armenia's Bid for EU integration Finally Bring About Genuine Reform”, *Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center*, 22 January 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/01/armenia-eu-drift?lang=en>.

<sup>140</sup> “The imperial Russia: Conquer, Genocide & Colonisation”, *European Conservatives and Reformists*, 31 January 2023, [https://ecrgroup.eu/event/the\\_imperial\\_russia\\_conquer\\_genocide\\_colonisation](https://ecrgroup.eu/event/the_imperial_russia_conquer_genocide_colonisation).

<sup>141</sup> Vladimir Lukovsky, “IV Forum of Free Peoples of Russia will be held on December 7-11 in Helsingborg, Sweden”, *Kuban Republic*, 21 November 2022, <https://kuban-republic.info/en/113/168-168.html>.

<sup>142</sup> Peter Rutland, “Why pushing for the break up of Russia is absolute folly”, *Responsible Statecraft*, 24 March 2023, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2023/03/24/why-pushing-for-the-break-up-of-russia-is-absolute-folly/>.

<sup>143</sup> Leyla Latypova, “2 Years Into Ukraine War, Russia's Ethnic Minorities Disproportionately Killed in Battle”, *The Moscow Times*, 24 February 2024, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/02/24/2-years-into-ukraine-war-russias-ethnic-minorities-disproportionately-killed-in-battle-a84170>.

<sup>144</sup> Edward Howell, “North Korea and Russia's dangerous partnership”, *Chatham House*, 4 December 2024, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/12/north-korea-and-russias-dangerous-partnership/revival-north-korea-russia-relationship>.

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and Iran.<sup>145</sup> Africa, meanwhile, has become a battleground for Russian influence – particularly through the Wagner Group, which has provided military support to autocracies in exchange for access to natural resources.<sup>146</sup> European states should work to undermine Russian operations in Africa by offering debt relief, investing in infrastructure, and offering debt relief and security assistance that does not come with the exploitative conditions typically associated with Russian military support: namely, the taking of natural resources as collateral. Highlighting Russia’s extractive and self-serving engagements in Africa would further erode its credibility as a reliable partner.

Elsewhere, India and China remain pivotal actors in Russia’s ability to sustain its economy,<sup>147</sup> particularly as Western sanctions continue to bite. While persuading China to fully distance itself from Russia may be unrealistic – due to the “bromance” between both leaders<sup>148</sup> – economic diplomacy with India could offer more promising results. Strengthening trade partnerships with New Delhi, particularly in technology and defence, could encourage India to gradually reduce its dependence on Russian military exports and energy supplies. Similarly, diplomatic engagement with other BRICS nations should aim to highlight the risks of excessive dependence on Russian economic and military ties, positioning Europe as a more stable and reliable partner. While closer integration between European states and North Korea and Iran is beyond the pale, if Europe is to isolate the Kremlin further, it must actively challenge Russia’s geopolitical standing by offering these regions more attractive economic and security alternatives.

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<sup>145</sup> Elis Gjevori, “Analysis: Russia, Iran strengthen alliance after Syria setback”, *Al Jazeera*, 18 January 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/1/18/iran-russia-analysis-syria-setback>.

<sup>146</sup> Nimi Princewill, “Across Africa, Russia is growing in influence. What might Moscow want”, *CNN*, 18 January 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/01/18/africa/russia-expanding-influence-in-africa-intl-cmd/index.html>.

<sup>147</sup> Felix K Chang, “China’s and India’s Relations with Russia after the War in Ukraine: A Dangerous Deviation”, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 5 April 2023, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/04/chinas-and-indias-relations-with-russia-after-the-war-in-ukraine-a-dangerous-deviation/>.

<sup>148</sup> Šejla Ahmatović and Eva Hartog, “Putin-Xi bromance flourishes as Russia-China summit kicks off”, *Politico*, 16 May 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/china-russia-vladimir-putin-xi-jinping-summit-bromance/>.

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## Keeping America Engaged While Preparing for European Self-Reliance

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With Donald Trump's return to the White House, there are significant challenges for European security. Unlike previous American presidents who emphasised the importance of NATO and the transatlantic alliance, Trump has expressed scepticism about America's role in defending Europe, pushing Europe to defend itself.<sup>149</sup> There are increasing doubts as to whether the Trump administration would continue to uphold America's commitments under NATO's Article 5.<sup>150</sup> Trump's transactional – and some would argue, imperial<sup>151</sup> – approach to foreign policy means that, unless European states can demonstrate a clear economic and strategic benefit to continued American engagement, Washington will likely reduce its military footprint in Europe or push for negotiations with Russia that favour a spheres-of-influence or significant land-change arrangement.<sup>152</sup> Given this uncertainty, Europe must adopt a dual approach: first, making continued American engagement politically and economically attractive to Trump and his administration, and second, preparing for the possibility that America will scale back its security commitments, requiring Europe to become more self-reliant. This balancing act is crucial – not only for ensuring European security but also for maintaining Western unity in the face of ongoing Russian aggression.

The leak by members of the Trump administration on Signal about the American strikes on the Houthis in Yemen highlighted that many of the members of the Signal group have little admiration for Europe.<sup>153</sup> Trump's announcement of 20% tariffs on EU member states<sup>154</sup> highlights that European governments need to be seen to do more quickly. One of the most effective ways to keep the US engaged in European security under a Trump administration is to appeal to his transactional mindset by emphasising the economic benefits of continued transatlantic cooperation. Trump has repeatedly framed NATO as a financial burden on the United States, arguing that European states are not doing enough to contribute to their own defence. Rather than attempting to persuade him with traditional arguments about shared democratic values or historical alliances, European leaders should instead focus on what tangible benefits NATO and European security provide to the United States.

While Europe should look to become independent from what has become an untrustworthy America, it needs military equipment in the here-and-now and to maintain American support – especially regarding intelligence – even if it is on the sidelines under Trump. Thus, to keep America onside, Europe must purchase American military hardware.<sup>155</sup> If European countries commit to expanding their defence budgets with a strong emphasis on procuring American-made weapons, aircraft, and missile defence systems, this could align with Trump's 'America First' economic agenda, particularly his focus on domestic job creation.<sup>156</sup> Poland, for example,

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<sup>149</sup> Steven Erlanger, "Trump Wants Europe to Defend Itself. Here's What It Would Take", *The New York Times*, 7 March 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/07/world/europe/europe-self-defense-trump.html>.

<sup>150</sup> "Trump casts doubt on willingness to defend Nato allies 'if they don't pay'", *The Guardian*, 7 March 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/mar/07/donald-trump-nato-alliance-us-security-support>.

<sup>151</sup> Jeanna Smialek, "Europe Expected a Transactional Trump. It Got Something Else", *The New York Times*, 13 March 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/13/world/europe/trump-europe-tariffs-retaliation.html>.

<sup>152</sup> David E Sanger, "Trump Discussion With Putin to Focus on What Ukraine Will Lose", *The New York Times*, 17 March 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/17/us/politics/trump-putin-ceasefire-negotiation-ukraine-concessions.html>.

<sup>153</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Trump Administration Accidentally Texted Me Its War Plans", *The Atlantic*, 24 March 2025, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2025/03/trump-administration-accidentally-texted-me-its-war-plans/682151/>.

<sup>154</sup> Kayla Epstein, "Trump's tariffs on China, EU and more, at a glance", *BBC News*, 2 April 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cljxrn19xe2o>.

<sup>155</sup> Colby Badhwar, "Europe Needs to Keep Buying American", CEPA, 18 February 2025, <https://cepa.org/article/europe-needs-to-keep-buying-american/>.

<sup>156</sup> Jack Kelly, "Revitalizing The Job Market: Key Takeaways From President Trump's Address", *Forbes*, 5 March 2025, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackkelly/2025/03/05/revitalizing-the-job-market-key-takeaways-from-president-trumps-address/>.

has already invested heavily in US defence systems buying Patriot missile defence systems, F-35 fighter jets, and M-1 Abrams tanks.<sup>157</sup> If other European states follow suit – especially Germany, France, and the UK – it could make transatlantic defence cooperation more attractive from a financial standpoint. Additionally, joint military-industrial projects, such as co-manufacturing defence equipment in both Europe and America, could provide further economic incentives for continued American military engagement.

Moreover, while the White House wields significant influence over US foreign policy, Congress and the Pentagon remain important players in transatlantic security. Many senior American military officials and members of Congress on both sides of the political spectrum remain staunch supporters of NATO and European security cooperation.<sup>158</sup> European governments must engage directly with lawmakers and military officials in Washington, emphasising the strategic risks of withdrawing from Europe and reinforcing the idea that continued American engagement is not just about protecting Europe but about ensuring broader global stability and American influence too. By working with key figures in the Senate Armed Services Committee, the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and top Pentagon officials, European leaders can ensure that US military-to-military cooperation remains strong, even if political shifts in the White House create uncertainty.

While it would be better if America were to remain engaged in European security – or at least provide support – the reality is darker, and Europe must do more to prepare for a bigger role in its own security. Increasingly, it is no longer a question of if America were to leave, but when. The reality is stark. It is estimated that Europe must find 300,000 new soldiers and spend €250 billion – or 3.5% of the continent’s GDP – in the next two or three years.<sup>159</sup> Rather than hiding or trying to create new security architecture to incorporate Russia, which would be an unmitigated disaster, Europe must face the situation and accept this is an existential crisis. Having benefitted from a world built on Western norms and values, Europe must react to a threat that wants to destroy that world order and must realise that, in the current present, Europe is alone and can only survive through unity. The EU has pushed for a big military aid package,<sup>160</sup> but France, Italy, and Spain have rejected the initiative due to quibbles over whether the spending will be debt-based or grants.<sup>161</sup> Similarly, France has been intransigent over what constitutes ‘European,’ meaning that Britain and Turkey are excluded from the military funding.<sup>162</sup> Yet at the same time ‘Europe’ includes Japan and South Korea, both of whom are included in the proposed European military spending.<sup>163</sup>

Europe has made some headway, though. A key element of Europe proverbially standing on its own feet involves strengthening joint European defence initiatives such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Sky Shield Initiative. PESCO, a framework under which EU states develop collaborative defence projects, has already laid the groundwork for a more integrated European military structure. It has instigated 60 projects across the EU

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<sup>157</sup> Jim Morris, “Poland Buys \$2 Billion in F35s, Patriots Missiles & Abrams Tanks”, *Warrior Maven*, 13 July 2024, <https://warrormaven.com/global-security/poland-buys-2-billion-in-f-35s-patriot-missiles-abrams-tanks>.

<sup>158</sup> Robert Tait, “Congressional Republicans threaten revolt over Trump-led defence shake-up”, *The Guardian*, 20 March 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/mar/20/defense-senate-republicans-nato>.

<sup>159</sup> Alexandr Burilkov and Guntram B Wolff, “Defending Europe without the US: first estimates of what is needed”, *Bruegel*, 21 February 2025, <https://www.bruegel.org/analysis/defending-europe-without-us-first-estimates-what-needed>.

<sup>160</sup> Gregorio Sorgi, Jacopo Barigazzi and Giovanni Faggionato, “EU slams the door on US in colossal defense plan”, *Politico*, 19 March 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-freeze-us-multi-billion-defense-plan-arm-makers/>.

<sup>161</sup> Gregorio Sorgi and Giovanni Faggionato, “Southern Europe rebuffs von der Leyen’s debt-based defense plan”, *Politico*, 26 March 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/southern-europe-ursula-von-der-leyen-defense-plan-debt-france-italy-spain/>.

<sup>162</sup> Henry Foy and Lucy Fisher, “EU to exclude US, UK and Turkey from €150 bn rearmament fund”, *Financial Times*, 19 March 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/eb9e0ddc-8606-46f5-8758-alb8beae14f1>.

<sup>163</sup> Gregorio Sorgi, Jacopo Barigazzi and Giovanni Faggionato, “EU slams the door on US in colossal defense plan”, *Politico*, 19 March 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-freeze-us-multi-billion-defense-plan-arm-makers/>.

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and Britain to support cooperation on military projects.<sup>164</sup> However, military initiatives take decades to reach fruition.<sup>165</sup> Having been created in 2017, PESCO is at best two years from achieving its first results. The SkyShield Initiative, launched by Germany, aims to establish a coordinated European air defence system, which is crucial given the growing missile threats from Russia. It has been proposed that SkyShield could be used to secure Ukraine's skies from Russian missiles.<sup>166</sup> Expanding these programmes and ensuring that European militaries can operate seamlessly together are essential if Europe is to build a credible defence force that is not reliant on American command structures.

Yet the biggest problem is that Europe lacks leadership. Europe's two nuclear powers – Britain and France<sup>167</sup> – are woefully unprepared, only able to muster a “reassurance force” for Ukraine.<sup>168</sup> The Ukrainian government should request the reassurance force and SkyShield. This may lead to American criticism, but at present, the Trump-negotiated peace seems likely to push Ukraine to accept a poor deal with Trump<sup>169</sup> and Steve Witkoff<sup>170</sup> promoting Russian talking points recently – and Trump genuinely believing that he and Putin have a special bond.<sup>171</sup> Such a show of force by Europe would receive much vocal angst by the Kremlin but would send a signal that Europe is serious – likely giving the Kremlin pause.

By sending a strong signal, European governments would give themselves time. Granted the signals of Russian irredentism started in 2008, were clear after 2014, and should have set alarm bells ringing across Europe after 2022; but better late than never, Europe must act, now that the American security blanket is being removed. European states must unite military efforts and refrain from thinking along state lines. Europe is now in an existential crisis where its survival is at stake. Thus, Europe must pool resources on military production and supply chains,<sup>172</sup> which will support Ukraine and help European states rebuild their military capacity for the future. It is imperative that European governments go past 2% of GDP on military spending and push past the 3% barrier, to 3.5% at a minimum.<sup>173</sup> This would be another strong signal to the Kremlin that along with the force in Ukraine, would show that Europe is prepared to stand together and with Ukraine. Such a stance would emphasise that European governments see Ukraine as a strong and indispensable part of European security architecture politically and practically. At a time of existential crisis, it is imperative that European governments unite and stop petty squabbling. War may never come if Europe spends more on the military, but war is more likely to come if Europe does nothing. Spending to maintain the *status quo* is worth it if the alternative is to lose the current situation that, for better or worse, has benefitted Europe.

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<sup>164</sup> Beatriz Cózar-Murillo, 2022, “PESCO As A Game-Changer for Differentiated Integration in CSDP After Brexit”, *European Papers*, 3: 1303-1324.

<sup>165</sup> “PESCO unlikely to deliver much in the short term”, *The Progressive Post*, 9 February 2018, <https://feps-europe.eu/pesco-unlikely-deliver-much-short-term/>.

<sup>166</sup> Brendan Cole, “120 Combat Jets Could Defend Ukraine's Skies Under ‘SkyShield’ Plan”, *Newsweek*, 6 March 2025, <https://www.newsweek.com/skyshield-ukraine-drones-europe-2040616>.

<sup>167</sup> Kenton White, “Why the British army is so unprepared to send troops to Ukraine”, *The Conversation*, 18 February 2025, <https://theconversation.com/why-the-british-army-is-so-unprepared-to-send-troops-to-ukraine-250123>; Sophia Khatsenkova, “Does France have what it takes to lead Europe's defence initiative”, *Euronews*, 24 March 2025, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/03/24/does-france-have-what-it-takes-to-lead-europes-defence-initiatives>.

<sup>168</sup> Dan Sabbagh, “Britain and France working on plans for ‘reassurance force’ to protect Ukraine”, *The Guardian*, 19 February 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/feb/19/britain-and-france-working-on-plans-for-reassurance-force-to-protect-ukraine>.

<sup>169</sup> Anthony Zurcher, “Trump echoes Russia as he upends US position on Ukraine”, *BBC News*, 19 February 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c36wn949jxno>.

<sup>170</sup> Christian Edwards, “Trump's foreign envoy touts Kremlin talking points, in interview that will alarm Europe”, *CNN*, 24 March 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/03/22/europe/witkoff-carlson-trump-russia-ukraine-talks-intl/index.html>.

<sup>171</sup> Jonathan Chait, “The Real Reason Trump Berated Zelensky”, *The Atlantic*, 28 February 2025, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2025/02/zelensky-trump-putin-ukraine/681883/>.

<sup>172</sup> Jack Watling, “Europe's War in Ukraine”, *Foreign Affairs*, 24 March 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/europes-war-ukraine>.

<sup>173</sup> “Europe will need to pull all the levers to up its defence spending”, *The Economist*, 27 February 2025, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2025/02/27/europe-will-need-to-pull-all-the-levers-to-up-its-defence-spending>.

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## **Policy Recommendations & Action Plan: A Strategic Roadmap for Destabilising the Kremlin**

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Successfully weakening the Kremlin requires a structured, phased approach that combines immediate actions with long-term strategic initiatives. European policymakers must recognise that destabilising Putin's regime is not a short-term project, but a sustained campaign unfolding over multiple years. By taking decisive action in the short term (next six months), consolidating strategic gains in the medium term (6-18 months), and building a self-sufficient European security order over the long term (2-5 years), Europe can erode Russia's ability to wage war, disrupt its internal stability, and secure itself against future aggression.

## **Short Term (Next Six Months): Intensifying Immediate Pressure on Russia**

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In the immediate term, European states must ramp up their efforts to support Ukraine, tighten economic warfare against Moscow, and penetrate Russia's information ecosystem. The war remains the single greatest vulnerability for the Kremlin. Continued Ukrainian resistance drains Russian military resources, deepens public discontent, and fractures Putin's ruling coalition. The most urgent priority must be to increase military aid to Ukraine. European nations should expedite deliveries of advanced weaponry, including long-range missile systems, air-defence batteries, and artillery munitions to sustain Ukraine's capacity to repel Russian offensives. While America has played a dominant role in providing military aid thus far, Europe must ensure that its own weapons supply chains can function independently in case of future US disengagement. Fast-tracking the production of European-made defence systems – such as Leopard tanks, Taurus and Storm Shadow missiles, IRIS-T air-defence systems, and next-generation drones – will be critical in maintaining Ukraine's battlefield resilience.

Simultaneously, Europe must escalate economic warfare against Russia to further weaken Moscow's ability to finance its war machine. With the potential of an American sanctions' rollback under Trump, Europe must develop a sanctions strategy that is independent of American policymaking. This includes closing loopholes that allow Russia to circumvent sanctions, like the re-export of Russian oil through India and the UAE. Enforcing secondary sanctions on entities that facilitate Russian trade, including companies in Turkey and China, is crucial for combatting Moscow's financial stranglehold. Freezing and repurposing Russian state assets – particularly its sovereign wealth fund holdings in Europe – should be accelerated, with assets redirected toward Ukraine's security and reconstruction.

Equally important is expanding media influence inside Russia. The Russian government has maintained its control over the population largely by monopolising the information space and suppressing alternative narratives. To counter this, European states must fund and amplify independent Russian-language media platforms such as the BBC Russian Service, Meduza, and Dozhd and support Telegram and YouTube. Developing secure distribution channels that allow Russian citizens to bypass censorship – including encrypted messaging apps, proxy networks, and VPN services – will enable greater access to dissenting viewpoints. Highlighting battlefield losses, economic hardship, and government corruption through a sustained information campaign will help weaken Putin's domestic legitimacy.

Increasingly, the EU has had to hope that the Orbán government in Hungary continues to opt out of vetoing the decisions made by the other 26 member states.<sup>174</sup> Yet this stopgap may not be enough should Orbán decide to stop opting out. Similarly, Slovakia's Robert Fico is widely considered to be pro-Russian.<sup>175</sup> Thus, it is imperative that the EU change its voting procedures soon, so that every vote is taken by majority decision. This will reduce the chances of pro-Russian leaders holding EU decision-making to ransom.

Russia's efforts to interfere in European elections have become a persistent and evolving threat, targeting national and EU-level contests through disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, covert funding of sympathetic political actors, and the amplification of divisive narratives on social media. These activities aim to erode public trust in democratic institutions, polarise

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<sup>174</sup> Gabriel Gavin, "Europe's new unanimity: Orbán doesn't need to agree", *Politico*, 20 March 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-new-unanimity-viktor-orban-hungary-ukraine-diplomats-summit/>.

<sup>175</sup> Jon Henley, "Robert Fico doubles down on pro-Russia stance after Slovakia election win", *The Guardian*, 1 October 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/01/robert-fico-doubles-down-on-pro-russia-stance-after-slovakia-election-win>.

electorates, and elevate parties or candidates more favourable to Kremlin interests. To counter this, European states must invest in a coordinated and multi-layered defence. This includes bolstering cybersecurity for electoral infrastructure, enforcing strict transparency requirements on campaign financing to expose foreign funding, and regulating online political advertising to prevent covert influence operations. The EU should create a centralised mechanism for monitoring and responding to election interference – combining intelligence-sharing, rapid-response teams, and common standards for digital platforms. Moreover, collaboration with civil society, investigative journalists, and academic experts will be crucial in identifying new influence tactics and educating the public about them. By treating election meddling not just as a national issue but as a shared European security concern, the EU can develop the tools and political will necessary to safeguard the integrity of its democratic processes.

## **Medium-Term (6-18 Months): Establishing a Enduring Strategy Against Russia**

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After securing short-term gains, European governments must shift to building a sustainable deterrence strategy that protects against Russian aggression in the long run. Russia has long relied on cyberattacks, economic coercion, election interference, and covert operations to undermine European stability. A medium-term response must focus on developing a coordinated European-led deterrence framework that counters these threats. To achieve this, European states should create a rapid-response security mechanism for countering Russian threats. This could take the form of an EU-led intelligence-sharing coalition, perhaps modelled after the Five Eyes alliance, in which European intelligence services work together to detect and neutralise Russian cyber intrusions, disinformation campaigns, and political subversion efforts. Expanding cyber capabilities will be critical, as offensive cyber operations targeting Russian infrastructure and state networks could impose real costs on Moscow's ability to function effectively.

During this period, Europe must deepen intelligence and covert support for anti-Kremlin factions. The emergence of resistance groups in Russia - including partisans who have attacked military installations and railway networks - presents an opportunity for European governments to covertly fund, train, and equip underground movements seeking to undermine the Kremlin from within. Intelligence agencies should work to identify key figures in Russia's security services and oligarchic elite who may be willing to defect or provide valuable information. Encouraging these figures to leak internal state secrets, expose Kremlin corruption, and create divisions in Russia's leadership will accelerate the destabilisation of Putin's government. Simultaneously, Europe must strengthen military cooperation with Russia's neighbours to further isolate Moscow. Deepening defence partnerships with Moldova, Kazakhstan, Georgia, Armenia and Ukraine - coupled with the recent enlargement of NATO to Finland and Sweden - will ensure that Russia is surrounded by an increasingly hostile geopolitical environment. Offering post-Soviet states alternative security guarantees, economic incentives, and energy diversification projects will further pull them away from Russian influence.

## **Long-Term (2-5 Years): Building a Self-Sufficient European Security Framework**

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While immediate and medium-term strategies will weaken Russia's ability to wage war, the long-term objective must be to build a European security architecture that can function independently of American leadership. The trajectory of American politics has made it clear that Washington's long-term commitment to European security cannot be taken for granted. Consequently, Europe must prepare for a world in which it must take full responsibility for its own defence. The foundation of this security transformation must be the creation of a self-sufficient European military-industrial complex. For decades, Europe has relied on American defence manufacturing to sustain its armed forces, particularly in air power, missile defence, and intelligence capabilities. A long-term strategy must prioritise European weapons-production expansion, ensuring that European states can arm themselves without dependency on American supply chains. The joint development of next-generation fighter jets, missile-defence systems, and cyber defence infrastructure will be key in achieving strategic autonomy.

Institutionally, Europe must formalise a new security framework that complements but is not dependent on NATO. Initiatives like PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation) and the European Sky Shield Initiative must be scaled up into a fully operational defence alliance capable of independent crisis response, deterrence, and rapid force deployment. Britain, as a nuclear power and a leading European military force, must play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between NATO, the EU, and non-EU European states, ensuring that European defence cohesion is not fragmented by Brexit-era political divisions. In addition to military preparedness, Europe must position itself as a strategic leader in global geopolitics. As America shifts to the Indo-Pacific, Europe must take the lead in reshaping the balance of power in its own neighbourhood. This includes asserting economic influence in post-Soviet states, countering Russian expansionism in Africa and Latin America, and challenging Moscow's grip on global energy markets. Establishing deeper trade agreements with India, Japan, and Latin American economies will reduce global dependence on Russian exports, further weakening Moscow's economic leverage.

## **Conclusion: A Roadmap for Permanent European Strength**

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The road to destabilising the Kremlin and securing Europe's future requires a phased, long-term commitment. The immediate priorities must be to sustain military support for Ukraine, intensify economic pressure on Russia, and erode Putin's internal control through information warfare. Over the medium term, building a European deterrence strategy against Russian hybrid warfare and fostering internal dissent within Russia will further weaken Moscow's ability to act as a destabilising force. In the long run, Europe must establish itself as a fully self-sufficient geopolitical power, independent of American political volatility, ensuring that it can confront future Russian threats without external reliance. If executed decisively, this roadmap will not only accelerate the decline of Putin's regime but also lay the foundation for a European security order that is resilient, autonomous, and prepared for the challenges of the next century.



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