

DRAWING THE LINE: DECLARING PUTIN ILLEGITIMATE AS A STEP TOWARDS FUTURE-RUSSIA

BY STEPHEN G. F. HALL



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The **Centre for Russia and Eurasia Studies** undertakes in-depth, analytically-focussed research into domestic and foreign policy issues in Russia and the other post-Soviet states. Established in 2010 as the Russia Studies Centre, the programme's geographical scope has widened since 2014, mirroring the high level of importance attached to the region.

Executive Summary

- The Russian presidential elections in March will see Putin re-elected.
- The only question is how much Putin will win by as the elections will be unfree.
- The elections give Western states the opportunity to **declare Putin illegitimate**, which Western governments should take.
- The lack of competition in the elections, the **death** of Alexei Navalny, the constitutional **shenanigans** to allow Putin to stand once again, and the loss of voice for many Russians in exile today makes these elections even more of a charade than before.
- Declaring Putin illegitimate would allow more support to help Ukraine **quickly win** the war, which would likely lead to positive changes in Russia and Belarus.
- Such a declaration would allow Western states to increase their presence in Russia's neighbours, offering them security, support and greater economic cooperation. **Moldova** should be integrated fully into the EU and given security guarantees. Other neighbouring states must be supported, although each requires an individual touch.
- Further NATO deployment of troops should happen across Eastern member states.
- This would send a strong message to the Kremlin elite that instead of **less** West, Russia now has **more** West that is willing to pressure the Kremlin at every turn.
- Western states **must** speak to Russian elites - **not** to negotiate, but to try to **splinter** the Kremlin.
- Part of these discussions should **set out** a plan for a democratic future-Russia, giving Kremlin elites an alternative.
- Western states **must** help the Russian diaspora unite and develop a plan for a democratic future-Russia.
- A Council-in-Exile (CiE) should be elected to give exiled Russians a voice and to give Western governments a body to work with that represents all strata of the diaspora while developing a plan for a democratic future-Russia.
- Western states **should declare** this CiE the legitimate Russian state entity and **make concessions** on some sanctions to give the CiE legitimacy in Russia.
- Western states should be **clear** that Putin's successor will be illegitimate until Russia withdraws from Ukraine, pays compensation, engages in wholehearted negotiations and begins lustration - ideally with Putin going to The Hague.

Introduction

Between 15 and 17 March, Russia votes. The three-day voting period will only loosely offer democratic competition. It will return Vladimir Putin as president and consolidate a full autocracy. The zeroing of presidential term limits was one of 206¹ – mainly conservative² and patriotic³ – constitutional changes in 2020. Thus, the 2024 presidential elections will give Putin another six years until 2030 and likely on to 2036 unless time defeats him.

Putin's expected re-election in 2024 provides Western nations with a crucial opportunity to denounce his legitimacy. Assuming the presidency for another six years eliminates the last remaining checks on his power, pushing Russia toward dictatorship. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) has signalled its refusal to recognise Putin as a legitimate leader post-2024,⁴ paving the way for Western states to adopt a similar stance.

Therefore, the West should declare Putin illegitimate, limiting interactions to essential humanitarian matters and seeking a peaceful resolution to Russia's aggression in Ukraine, although prospects are dim given Putin's disposition. This declaration would enable the West to support Russian opposition groups and formulate plans for a democratic future-Russia.⁵

Examining past instances of declaring illegitimacy, such as in Belarus and Venezuela, sets the stage for understanding why a similar stance is necessary in the case of Putin's 2024 re-election. This report further delves into the specifics of the upcoming elections and the imperative to declare Putin illegitimate.

While anticipating potential reactions from the Kremlin, it is evident that any response from the Russian authorities would likely be limited. Deeming Putin illegitimate weakens his standing, allowing the West to support opposition groups and Ukraine. Although it may not immediately topple the Putin regime, such a declaration increases pressure and accelerates internal divisions among elites.

This report emphasises mechanisms to remove the illegitimacy label if Putin's successor initiates reforms and steers Russia toward democracy. A transition of power in the Kremlin should not be equated with immediate change. Vigilance is required in assessing legitimacy. Turning attention to a negotiated resolution to the ongoing war, it is argued that sincere talks with Russia are unlikely while Putin remains in power. Initiating negotiations post-Putin would allow new Russian authorities to rebuild legitimacy. Declaring Putin illegitimate, coupled with support for Ukraine, enhances pressure on the Kremlin and facilitates Western planning for a democratic future in Russia. Methodologically, the report employs content analysis from diverse sources and incorporates interviews with experts, researchers, journalists and academics on Russia. Interviewees' identities are anonymised through a coding system of letters and numbers.

¹ Ben Noble and Nikolay Petrov, "From Constitution to Law: Implementing the 2020 Russian Constitutional Changes", *Russian Politics*, 6(1) 2021: 130-152.

² William E. Pomeranz, "Russia's Broken Constitution", Wilson Center, 26 June 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/russias-broken-constitution>.

³ William E. Pomeranz and Regina Smyth, "Russia's 2020 Constitutional Reform: The Politics of Institutionalizing the Status-Quo", *Russian Politics*, 6(1) 2021: 1-5.

⁴ "PACE urges the international community no longer to recognise Putin's legitimacy as president beyond 2024", Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 13 October 2023, <https://pace.coe.int/en/news/9254/pace-urges-the-international-community-no-longer-to-recognise-putin-s-legitimacy-as-president-beyond-2024>; Dinara Khalilova, "PACE declares Russia dictatorship, Putin's rule illegitimate after 2024", *yahoo!news*, 13 October 2023, <https://news.yahoo.com/pace-calls-recognizing-putin-illegitimate-105003777.html?guccounter=1>.

⁵ See: Stephen G. F. Hall, "Getting a Foot in the Door: Creating a Future Russia Now", *The Henry Jackson Society*, 8 November 2023, <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/publications/getting-a-foot-in-the-door-creating-a-future-russia-now/>.

Previous Examples of Declaring Illegitimacy

Western governments have denounced regimes as illegitimate in the past, citing electoral fraud, repression and atrocities. Putin's assumed presidency in 2024 would align him with other states labelled as rogue – Belarus, Libya, Syria and Venezuela.

In Venezuela, electoral fraud led to the declaration of President Nicolás Maduro as illegitimate by 50 states in 2019. Juan Guaidó, opposition lawmaker and Head of the National Assembly (which Maduro superseded with his own chosen parliament), was initially recognised as the legitimate head of state.⁶ But Guaidó proved ineffectual⁷ and the opposition had no coherent plan for democratic transition.⁸ The 50 states that declared Maduro illegitimate were left without a viable alternative.⁹ In need of alternative oil sources due to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, America eased sanctions on Venezuela.¹⁰

Belarus, which has geopolitical ties to Russia, faced similar challenges after Lukashenka's contested 2020 re-election.¹¹ The election saw opposition candidate Svitlana Tsikhanouskaya officially receive 10.23%, although an independent poll predicted her vote tally at 56% after tallying votes from polling stations it could access, where the vote for Tsikhanouskaya was over 95%.¹² The official count defied "the law of mathematics".¹³ Thus, Western states refused to recognise Lukashenka as the legitimate president.¹⁴

While Western declarations of illegitimacy have occurred in the past, in only one instance has it led to regime collapse. A declaration of illegitimacy by Western states contributed to Muammar Gaddafi losing power in Libya. An illegitimacy declaration did not lead to Bashar Al-Assad losing power in Syria due to support by Russia and Iran¹⁵ who backed him even after he gassed his own people.¹⁶ Similarly, Lukashenka in Belarus and Maduro in Venezuela are backed by external patrons,¹⁷ helping keep them in power. Geopolitical considerations,

⁶ Max Fisher, "Who Is Venezuela's Legitimate President? A Messy Dispute Explained", *The New York Times*, 4 February 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/04/world/americas/venezuela-maduro-guaido-legitimate.html>.

⁷ Kenneth Rapoza, "With Guaido out, Who Will Be Washington's 'President' Of Venezuela Now?", *Forbes*, 5 January 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kenrapoza/2020/01/05/in-venezuela-washingtons-president-guaido-voted-out-in-another-blow-to-opposition/>.

⁸ Maryhen Jimenez Morales and Laura Gamboa, "Invasions and coup attempts will not bring democracy to Venezuela", *Al Jazeera*, 8 June 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/6/8/invasions-and-coup-attempts-will-not-bring-democracy-to-venezuela>.

⁹ "US says Venezuela President Maduro is still illegitimate", *Le Monde*, 4 January 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/01/04/us-says-venezuela-president-maduro-is-still-illegitimate_6010232_4.html.

¹⁰ George Wright, "US eases Venezuela oil sanctions after election deal", *BBC News*, 19 October 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-67153460>.

¹¹ Joerg Forbrig, "Belarusians have rejected Lukashenko. So should the EU", *Politico*, 13 August 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/belarusians-have-rejected-lukashenko-so-should-the-eu/>.

¹² "Rezultaty gosovovaniya [Voting results]", *Holas*, <https://belarus2020.org/election?lon=-63.876183&lat=-77.673448&z=5>. Report can be found at the bottom of the page (in Russian).

¹³ Evgeny Krillov, "Karbalevich: 'Protokol' s bol'shim perevesom Tikhonovskoi lomayut obshchuyu kartinu' [Karbalevich: 'Protocols with a large preponderance of Tikhonovskaya break the overall picture']", *Salidarnats'*, 8 October 2020, <https://gazetaby.com/post/karbalevich-protokoly-s-bolshim-perevesom-tixanovs/167614/>.

¹⁴ Andy Heil, "The West Says It Won't Recognize Lukashenka As The President Of Belarus. Now What?", *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, 24 September 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/explainer-the-ramifications-of-not-recognizing-lukashenka-as-president-of-belarus/30856453.html>.

¹⁵ Nicole Grajewski, "The Evolution of Russian and Iranian Cooperation in Syria", Center for Strategic and International Studies, 17 November 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/evolution-russian-and-iranian-cooperation-syria>.

¹⁶ Martin Chulov, "Syrian regime found responsible for Douma chemical attack", *The Guardian*, 27 January 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/27/syrian-regime-found-responsible-for-douma-chemical-weapons-attack>.

¹⁷ Jakob Tolstrup, "How 'black knights' such as Vladimir Putin's Russia help dictators survive elections", *Democratic Audit*, 7 December 2015, <https://www.democraticaudit.com/2015/12/07/how-black-knights-such-as-vladimir-putin-help-dictators-survive-elections/>; Silja Thomas, "Russia's Wagner Group: Where is it active?", *Deutsche Welle*, 25 June 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/russias-wagner-group-where-is-it-active/a-66027220>; Moises Rendon and Claudia Fernandez, "The Fabulous Five: How Foreign Actors Prop up the Maduro Regime in Venezuela", Center for Strategic and International Studies, 19 October 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/fabulous-five-how-foreign-actors-prop-maduro-regime-venezuela>.

especially in oil-producing Venezuela, influenced Western actions. Declaring a government illegitimate does not guarantee swift regime change. However, despite the potential longevity of Putin's regime, Western states should assert his illegitimacy.

The 2024 Presidential Elections

The Kremlin has refined the election process with an extended three-day voting period adopted in the 2020 constitutional referendum and perfected during the 2020 local and 2021 parliamentary elections.¹⁸ This strategic move gives the Kremlin ample time to gauge election results and orchestrate effective manipulation. Notably, the constitutional referendum witnessed voting in unconventional spaces such as parks and cars.¹⁹ This practice, and the three-day voting period, significantly affects effective monitoring. Central Electoral Commissioner Ella Pamfilova has called it a new “tradition”²⁰ to be used again.

Before the 2024 election, the Central Election Commission denied journalist Ekaterina Duntsova’s candidacy, alleging signature irregularities.²¹ This decision raises questions about the transparency of the vetting process and the degree of political control over candidates. A notable entrant, Boris Nadezhdin, who emerged as a vocal critic of the war and even garnered support on state media,²² found unexpected popularity. In the murky world of Russian politics little is clear, but Nadezhdin’s longevity on the outskirts of Russian political life, his close association with Putin’s Deputy Chief of Staff Sergei Kirienko and his regularity as the faux liberal on state television all point to him being a Putin puppet.²³

It is plausible that the Kremlin wanted to see how much anti-war sentiment there was and to provide some *dramturgiya* to make the elections appear exciting. But Nadezhdin’s candidacy was quickly backed by opposition figures like Ekaterina Duntsova, Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Alexei Navalny while videos of many people queuing in the snow to give Nadezhdin’s team their support scared the authorities.²⁴

Support for Nadezhdin took on a life of its own and the authorities lost control of the situation.²⁵ The Kremlin wants to keep those Russians who do not like Putin believing that they are a minority. The queues of Nadezhdin supporters showed the exact opposite.²⁶ The Kremlin ended his campaign, declaring that 15% of his 105,000 signatures presented to the Central Electoral Commission were flawed²⁷ and included “dead souls”.²⁸ Although such an eventuality

¹⁸ Michael Scollon, “A ‘Single Voting Day’ In Russia...Held Over Three Days”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 16 September 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-three-day-voting/31462953.html>.

¹⁹ “Car Trunks, Tree Stumps and Playgrounds: The Weirdest Locations for Russia’s Constitutional Vote”, *The Moscow Times*, 26 June 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/06/26/car-trunks-tree-stumps-and-playgrounds-the-weirdest-locations-for-russias-constitutional-vote-a70702>.

²⁰ “Russia Announces 3-Day Vote for 2024 Election”, *The Moscow Times*, 8 December 2023, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/12/08/russia-announces-3-day-vote-for-2024-election-a83362>.

²¹ Sergei Kuprikov, “TsIK ne dopustil Ekaterinu Duntsovu k sboru podpisei na vybory [The Central Election Commission did not allow Ekaterina Duntsova to collect signatures for the elections]”, *Deutsche Welle*, 23 December 2023, <https://www.dw.com/ru/cik-ne-dopustil-ekaterinu-duncovu-k-sboru-podpisej-na-vybory/a-67809912>.

²² Marc Bennetts, “Help me run against Putin, opposition candidate war critic urges Russians”, *The Times*, 23 January 2024, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/russia-putin-opposition-politician-signatures-ukraine-war-6kvbjrph>.

²³ Mikhail Zygar, “Putin’s Puppets Are Coming to Life”, *The New York Times*, 15 February 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/15/opinion/putin-russia-election-nadezhdin.html>.

²⁴ “‘Hope for Change’ or ‘Kremlin Spoiler’: Who Is Boris Nadezhdin, the Presidential Hopeful Uniting Pro-Peace Russians?”, *The Moscow Times*, 24 January 2024, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/01/23/hope-for-change-or-kremlin-spoiler-who-is-boris-nadezhdin-the-presidential-hopeful-uniting-pro-peace-russians-a83824>.

²⁵ Mark Galeotti, “How long will Nadezhdin dare to defy Putin?”, *The Spectator*, 8 February 2024, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/how-long-will-nadezhdin-dare-to-defy-putin/>.

²⁶ Andrei Pertsev, “Stoyanie za Nadezhdina. Chem opasen dlya Kremlya tikhii protest na punktakh sbora podpisei [Standing for Nadezhdin. Why silent protests at signature collection points are dangerous for the Kremlin]”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 26 January 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/91472>.

²⁷ “Russian Election Authority Says Found Flaws in 15% of Pro-Peace Nadezhdin’s Signatures”, *The Moscow Times*, 5 February 2024, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/02/05/russian-election-authority-says-found-flaws-in-15-of-pro-peace-nadezhdins-signatures-a83971>.

²⁸ Andrew Roth, “Russia finds ‘errors’ in paperwork of candidate hoping to stand against Putin”, *The Guardian*, 2 February 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/02/russia-says-dead-souls-found-among-anti-war-candidate-boris-nadezhdin-backers>.

was always on the cards, the Kremlin's exclusion of Nadezhdin underscored the controlled nature of the electoral environment. An election with only systemic opposition allowed raises concerns about the credibility of the electoral process. The election will be an endorsement of the incumbent rather than a competitive democratic exercise.

While there remains a theoretical possibility that the 2024 presidential elections in Russia could break from the patterns of previous polls in the Putin era and be conducted freely and fairly, such optimism appears increasingly implausible. The Kremlin's tight control over most media sources, particularly television, continues to shape the narrative surrounding the elections. Furthermore, the authorities have taken steps to ensure that only Kremlin-vetted candidates are in the running, limiting the potential for genuine competition.

The three-day voting period, despite its purported tradition, adds another layer of concern. Now the authorities can exercise significant control over the voting process. This raises questions about electoral fairness and transparency. The complexity of the voting landscape is compounded by the uncertainty surrounding the Russians who left the country after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Estimates range from 150,000 to 800,000.²⁹ The BBC puts the figure at 157,400³⁰ based on temporary residence permits issued. This is a separate figure to the estimated 700,000 Russians – mostly men – who fled³¹ after September 2022. Though some have returned,³² the trend of emigration under Putin reached five million from 2000 to 2020, and emigration grew precipitously after 2012.³³ The emigrant demographic represents a sector of society that is younger and better educated than those who chose to stay.³⁴

The connection between Russians abroad and the elections becomes evident as part of the Russian electorate resides outside the country and may not participate in the election. With discussions about potentially disallowing voting at Russian consulates,³⁵ concerns mount about the election's fairness and inclusivity. When combined with controlled opposition, a managed media landscape and a three-day election period that facilitates manipulation, the legitimacy of Putin's potential re-election in March 2024 is increasingly dubious, casting a shadow over the democratic integrity of the electoral process.

As if all this was not enough, the Kremlin has moved closer toward "hybrid totalitarianism"³⁶ and this trajectory is emphasised by the recent death in prison of opposition leader Alexei

²⁹ Marina Aronova, "'Ya prosto ne smogu tam bol'she zhit!': Novye rossiiskie emigranty rotovy na lyubuyu rabotu za rubezhom [I just can't live there anymore.' New Russian emigrants are ready for any job abroad]", *Sibir'.Realii*, 15 August 2022, <https://www.sibreal.org/a/novye-rossiyskie-emigranty-gotovy-na-lyubuyu-rabotu-za-rubezhom/31981825.html>.

³⁰ Mariya Kiseleva and Viktoriya Safronova, "Novye rossiiskie emigranty. Kto oni, skol'ko ikh i kuda uekhali [New Russian emigrants. Who are they, how many are there and where did they go?]", *BBC News - Russian Service*, 25 May 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-65686712>.

³¹ Elena Tofanyuk and Yuliya Sapronova, "Rossiyu posle 21 sentyabrya pokinuli okolo 700000 grazhdan [About 700,000 citizens left Russia after September 21]", *Forbes*, 4 October 2022, <https://www.forbes.ru/society/478827-rossiu-posle-21-sentabrya-pokinuli-okolo-700-000-grazhdan>.

³² "Demograf rasskazal o vozvrashchenii v Rossiyu do poloviny uekhavshikh iz Rossii v 2022 godu [The demographers spoke about the return to Russia of up to half of those who left Russia in 2022]", *Agentsvo*, 27 October 2023, <https://www.agents.media/demograf-rasskazal-o-vozvrashhenii-v-rossiyu-do-poloviny-uehavshih-iz-rossii-v-2022-godu/>.

³³ "Emigratsiya 2000-kh: kuda i pochemu uezzhali iz Rossii [Emigration of the 2000s: where and why they left Russia]", *Tochno*, 5 October 2021, <https://tochno.st/materials/emigratsiya-2000-kh>.

³⁴ Anton Troianovski and Patrick Kingsley, "'Things Will Only Get Worse.' Putin's War Sends Russians Into Exile", *The New York Times*, 13 March 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/13/world/europe/russia-exiles-putin-ukraine-war.html>.

³⁵ Natal'ya Glyukhova, "Konsul'stva RF v 'nedruzhestvennykh' stranakh mogut ne otkryt' uchastki dlya golosovaniya na prezidentskikh vyborah [Russian consulates in 'unfriendly' countries may not open polling stations for the presidential elections]", *Novaya Gazeta Evropa*, 9 January 2024, <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2024/01/09/konsulstva-rf-v-nedruzhestvennykh-stranakh-mogut-ne-otkryt-uchastki-dlia-golosovaniia-na-prezidentskikh-vyborah>.

³⁶ Andrei Kolesnikov, "Putin's War Has Moved Russia From Authoritarianism to Hybrid Totalitarianism", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 19 April 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/04/19/putin-s-war-has-moved-russia-from-authoritarianism-to-hybrid-totalitarianism-pub-86921#:~:text=What%20has%20happened%20to%20Russia,totalitarianism%E2%80%9D%20to%20describe%20the%20regime>.

Navalny on 16 February 2024.³⁷ The disinformation over how Navalny died, emphasised by the euphemism that he died of “sudden death syndrome”,³⁸ and attempts to hide his body before finally handing it over to Navalny’s mother nine days after his death³⁹ emphasise the callousness of the regime. The death of Navalny would be justification enough to declare Putin illegitimate. It has shown – yet again – the brutal face of the regime and taken hope from many in Russia.⁴⁰

³⁷ Andrew Roth, “Western leaders point finger at Putin after Alexei Navalny’s death in jail”, *The Guardian*, 16 February 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/16/russian-activist-and-putin-critic-alexei-navalny-dies-in-prison>.

³⁸ Leonie Cater, “Navalny died from ‘sudden death syndrome,’ mother is told”, *Politico*, 18 February 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/navalny-died-from-sudden-death-syndrome-mother-told/>.

³⁹ Alice Tidey, “Alexei Navalny’s body handed over to his mother more than a week after his death”, *Euronews*, 24 February 2024, <https://www.euronews.com/2024/02/24/alexei-navalnys-body-handed-over-to-his-mother-more-than-a-week-after-his-death#:~:text=Alexei%20Navalny’s%20team%20and%20family,the%20real%20cause%20of%20death>.

⁴⁰ Maura Reynolds, “‘I Have to Say Goodbye But I don’t Want to Go to Jail’”, *Politico*, 17 February 2024, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2024/02/17/alexei-navalny-death-russia-putin-00142002>.

Declaring Illegitimacy

If Putin secures re-election in March 2024, it will mark a critical juncture where any remaining semblance of legitimacy dissipates, and Russia inches closer to a state bordering on totalitarianism. The Kremlin has long been a repressive regime, but the re-election of Putin in mid-March is the perfect opportunity for Western governments to “unequivocally declare Russia’s upcoming election unlawful and its preordained leader an illegitimate president.”⁴¹ This anticipated return to the presidency, particularly amidst concerns of likely electoral fraud, poses a stark challenge to the notion of legality that Putin once seemed to respect.⁴² His decision to step down in 2008, followed by a return in 2012, was technically legal, though it raised questions about the spirit of constitutionality.⁴³ However, the 2020 constitutional referendum contradicted the constitution by grouping multiple changes together when they should be separate, overturned Article 3 paragraph 4 as the restarting of presidential term limits clearly usurped political power and due to numerous violations with early voting and the use of makeshift polling stations the referendum was a flagrant violation of Russian electoral law.⁴⁴ The combination of enshrining in the constitution that marriage is between a man and a woman – and other conservative values – and the elimination of term limits created uncertainty regarding the true motivations driving Russians to the polls.⁴⁵ Notably, the proposed amendments had been approved before the referendum, even available for purchase in bookstores, raising doubts about the authenticity of the voting process.⁴⁶

Assuming the presidency in 2024, Putin will undergo a transition from a leader who still had legitimacy to one operating in the realm of outright illegitimacy. Against the backdrop of Russia’s war on Ukraine, a conflict that has strained international relations, it becomes imperative for the West to use the 2024 presidential election as a definitive cutoff point in acknowledging Putin’s legitimate tenure. Government actions that significantly impact “the value patterns of the relevant systems”⁴⁷ can be categorically designated as illegitimate. The Kremlin’s actions, which include a departure from established international norms and values, warrant a firm stance from the international community. The West must declare Putin illegitimate. Governments owe legitimacy to all strata of society, irrespective of their support of or opposition to the authorities.

While public opinion polls seemingly show a high approval rating for Putin, hovering at 83%,⁴⁸ a more nuanced picture emerges upon closer examination. Independent pollsters such as Chronicles and Russian Field present a different perspective compared to state-aligned entities like Levada Center, VTsIOM and FOM. The framing of the war as a “special military operation” (SMO) by state-controlled entities contributes to distorted perceptions.⁴⁹ Russian

⁴¹ Aliona Hlivco and Mikhail Khodorkovsky, “It’s Time to Declare Putin an Illegitimate Leader”, *Foreign Policy*, 22 February 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/02/22/putin-russia-election-ukraine-war-crimes-navalny-sanctions/#:~:text=The%20European%20Parliament%2C%20while%20falling,mandate%20on%207%20May%202024.%E2%80%9D>.

⁴² Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2023): 54.

⁴³ William Partlett, “The Constitutionality of Vladimir Putin’s Third Term”, *Brookings*, 9 March 2012, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-constitutionality-of-vladimir-putins-third-term/>.

⁴⁴ Olga Chessler, “Amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation of July 4, 2020”, *Russie-Libertés*, 12 January 2023, <https://russie-libertes.org/2023-12-01-amendments-constitution-russia-en/>.

⁴⁵ Angela Stent, “Putin 5.0?”, *Brookings*, 14 July 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/putin-5-0/>.

⁴⁶ Andrew Higgins, “The Theatrical Method in Putin’s Vote Madness”, *The New York Times*, 1 July 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/01/world/europe/putin-referendum-vote-russia.html>.

⁴⁷ Peter G. Stillman, “The Concept of Legitimacy”, *Polity*, 17(1) 1974: 42.

⁴⁸ “Odobrenie deyatel’nosti Vladimira Putina [Approval of Vladimir Putin’s Activities]”, *Levada Tsentra*, 2024, <https://www.levada.ru/indikator/>.

⁴⁹ Maxim Alyukov, “In Russia, opinion polls are a political weapon”, *openDemocracy*, 9 March 2022, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/russia-opinion-polls-war-ukraine/>.

Field's polling reveals a significant refusal rate, with between 87% and 92.5% of respondents refusing to engage,⁵⁰ indicating potential dissatisfaction or scepticism. Most respondents, termed "pigeons", express a desire for negotiations,⁵¹ with 53% opposed to further mobilisation and 74% desiring an immediate peace deal. However, this peace deal is framed as a diktat for denazification, demilitarisation and neutrality for Ukraine.⁵² Notably, support for the war has seen a decline from 22% to 12% since late February 2022, suggesting a shift in public sentiment.⁵³ Furthermore, the number of Russians perceiving the country as heading in the right direction is at 65%, the lowest figure since the war began.⁵⁴

Understanding the complexity of Russian society is crucial. It is atomised, with individuals uncertain about the opinions of others beyond their immediate circles. Many rely on media that is often state-controlled or affiliated,⁵⁵ shaping responses that align with perceived expectations of pollsters and the government.⁵⁶ Opinion polls marred by low response rates and contradictory answers⁵⁷ create a distorted representation of public sentiment.

While Putin likely retains support from a significant portion of the Russian population, the war's endorsement is more nuanced. Striking a balance between those supporting the war and the "pigeon" majority,⁵⁸ particularly as economic challenges such as rising food prices and a heating crisis loom, poses a significant challenge for the authorities.⁵⁹ Putin's anticipated coronation as president in March 2024 has the potential to disenfranchise segments of Russian society and heighten the threat to the international order, thereby providing robust justifications for declaring Putin as illegitimate.

Deeming the presidential elections as the definitive cutoff point for announcing Putin and the regime as illegitimate is not just a symbolic gesture. The Putinist system is defined as kleptocratic.⁶⁰ A declaration of illegitimacy by Western states would sever links to this perceived 'thievocracy'. Beyond reinforcing democracy within their own borders, Western states could redirect their focus toward supporting Ukraine and assisting the Russian diaspora in developing a coherent plan for a democratic future-Russia. In essence, the 2024 presidential election is a pivotal moment that demands a resolute response from the international community in safeguarding democratic principles and international norms.

⁵⁰ "Otkazy: krizis ili novaya real'nost' sotsiologii? [Refusals: crisis or new reality of sociology?]", *Russian Field*, 2022, <https://russianfield.com/otkazneprigovor>.

⁵¹ "'Golubi,' 'yastreby,' loyalisty: segmentatsiya respondentov po ikh otnosheniyu k voennoi operatsii ['Pigeons,' 'hawks,' loyalists: segmentation of respondents according to their attitude towards the military operation]", *Russian Field*, October 2023, <https://russianfield.com/newsegmentation>.

⁵² "'Spetsial'naya voennaya operatsiya' v Ukraine: otnoshenie rossiyan. 13 volna (21-29 oktyabrya 2023) ['Special military operation' in Ukraine: the attitude of Russians. Wave 13 (October 21-29, 2023)]", *Russian Field*, October 2023, <https://russianfield.com/13volna>.

⁵³ "Za voinu men'she rossiyan, chem protiv [Fewer Russians are for the war than against]", *Chronicles*, October 2023, <https://www.chronicles.report/>.

⁵⁴ "'Spetsial'naya voennaya operatsiya' v Ukraine: otnoshenie rossiyan. 13 volna (21-29 oktyabrya 2023) ['Special military operation' in Ukraine: the attitude of Russians. Wave 13 (October 21-29, 2023)]", *Russian Field*, October 2023, <https://russianfield.com/13volna>.

⁵⁵ Interviews with KZ527L, AM071U, SH235F and MN572Y.

⁵⁶ Interviews with KZ527L and UY842G.

⁵⁷ Yekaterina Pachikova and Nadezhda Kolobaeva, "Oprosy bez otvetov. Pochemu vo vremya voiny nel'zya verit' dannym sotsoprosov, dazhe esli eto 'levada' [Polls without answers. Why during the war you can't trust polls, even if it's 'Levada']", *The Insider*, 31 May 2023, <https://theins.ru/obshchestvo/261961>.

⁵⁸ Thomas Graham, "How Firm Is Vladimir Putin's Grip on Power?", Council on Foreign Relations, 2 October 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/how-firm-vladimir-putins-grip-power>.

⁵⁹ Miike Eckel, "First it Was Eggs. Now Exploding Hot-Water Pipes. The Domestic Headaches Overshadowing Putin's Reelection Messaging", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 12 January 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-putin-reelection-campaign-headaches/32771989.html>.

⁶⁰ Miriam Lansky and Dylan Myles-Primakoff, "The Rise of Kleptocracy: Power and Plunder in Putin's Russia", *Journal of Democracy*, 29(1): 76-85.

The Claws of the Bear...

A declaration of Putin's illegitimacy will likely trigger a robust response from the Kremlin, potentially involving cyber-attacks reminiscent of the 2023 Royal Mail incident, which was linked to the Russian-backed LockBit hacking group.⁶¹ While Russia possesses its own formidable hacking capabilities, including groups like Cozy Bear with ties to the foreign intelligence service SVR,⁶² the Kremlin may strategically employ other hacking entities associated with Russian criminal organisations and private enterprises to maintain plausible deniability.⁶³

There will be an escalation in Kremlin-driven narratives across social media stating that the West is hostile to Russia. Utilisation of "useful idiots"⁶⁴ from diverse ideological backgrounds will intensify, disseminating disinformation aimed at undermining Western resolve against Russia and eroding international support for Ukraine. These individuals will amplify narratives suggesting impending Western collapse and Russia's certain victory in the war and disseminate fictitious Ukrainian casualty figures, drawing from the Russian Ministry of Defence's playbook of providing conflicting and misleading statistics.⁶⁵

The rhetoric surrounding use of nuclear weapons – a consistent theme in Russian discourse throughout the conflict⁶⁶ – will intensify following a declaration of Putin's illegitimacy. Threats will include claims that Russian rockets can reach major Western cities in minutes⁶⁷, accompanied by public displays of nuclear preparedness, a tactic seen in October 2023.⁶⁸

Internally, the Kremlin will push the narrative that Western declarations on Putin's legitimacy is Russophobia. This recurrent theme depicts the West as an enduring threat to Russia.⁶⁹ Such framing aligns with the Kremlin's broader strategy of equating criticism of Putin with disparaging the entire nation⁷⁰ – encapsulated in State Duma Chairman Vyacheslav Volodin's famous phrase, "there is no Russia today if there is no Putin".⁷¹ Thus the label of Russophobia is used to tarnish anyone involved in criticism or betrayal of Russia. This narrative has the dual purpose of consolidating internal support by painting Russia as besieged by internal and external enemies, a common tactic employed by autocratic regimes.⁷²

⁶¹ Kevin Poireault, "Royal Mail's Attackers Linked to Russia-Backed LockBit", *Infosecurity Magazine*, 13 January 2023, <https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/royal-mails-attackers-linked/>.

⁶² Daryna Antoniuk, "Cyber-espionage operation on embassies linked to Russia's Cozy Bear hackers", *The Record*, 14 November 2023, <https://therecord.media/cyber-espionage-campaign-embassies-apt29-cozy-bear>.

⁶³ Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, "Russian Cyberwarfare: Unpacking the Kremlin's Capabilities", CEPA, 8 September 2022, <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/russian-cyberwarfare-unpacking-the-kremlins-capabilities/>.

⁶⁴ Richard Mills, "'Useful idiots' equally present on the left and right", *Ahead of the Herd*, 7 July 2023, <https://aheadoftheherd.com/useful-idiots-equally-present-on-the-left-and-right-richard-mills/>.

⁶⁵ Alona Mazurenko, "Russian media calculates Shoigu's data on Russian and Ukrainian losses is lies", *Ukrainska Pravda*, 21 September 2022, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2022/09/21/7368500/>.

⁶⁶ David Axe, "Ukraine is winning a crucial part of the land war. It's nuclear button time for Putin – again", *The Telegraph*, 8 August 2023, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/08/08/russia-ukraine-war-medvedev-putin-nuclear-threat-weapons/>.

⁶⁷ James Hockaday, "Vladimir Putin's nuclear bomb threat is aimed at London, ex-advisor rants on BBC", *yahoo!news*, 21 September 2022, <https://uk.news.yahoo.com/vladimir-putin-ex-advisor-sergei-markov-tells-bbc-radio-4-russian-nuclear-threat-aimed-at-london-104305936.html>.

⁶⁸ George Wright, "Russia says it rehearsed 'massive' nuclear strike", *BBC News*, 25 October 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-67222213>.

⁶⁹ Neil Robinson, "'Russophobia' in Official Russian Political Discourse", *De Europa*, 2(2) 2019: 61-77.

⁷⁰ See: Ilya Yablokov, *Fortress Russia: Conspiracy Theories in Post-Soviet Russia* (Cambridge and Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2018); Sian MacLeod, "The myth of russophobia", Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 28 March 2022, <https://blogs.fcdo.gov.uk/sianmacleod/2022/03/28/the-myth-of-russophobia/>.

⁷¹ "'No Putin, No Russia,' Says Kremlin Deputy Chief of Staff", *The Moscow Times*, 23 October 2014, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/10/23/no-putin-no-russia-says-kremlin-deputy-chief-of-staff-a40702>.

⁷² Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, "A theory of informational autocracy", *Journal of Public Economics*, 186 2020; Samuel A. Greene and Graeme B. Robertson, "Putin's rule depends on creating foreign enemies – and domestic 'traitors'", *The Washington Post*, 24 February 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/02/24/putin-ukraine-invasion-domestic-support-strategy/>.

...Are Blunt

Russian nuclear threats should be met with unwavering resolve and an understanding that such threats are primarily a tool used for the Kremlin's domestic political survival rather than an immediate and credible danger. On the one hand, it increases Kremlin domestic support as the authorities are threatening the West and getting results from it. On the other hand, it shows the majority that the Kremlin will stop at nothing to keep power.⁷³

In the event of preparations for a nuclear strike, the West must utilise this critical time to diplomatically build a coalition. Any hypothetical use of a nuclear weapon by Russia is a scenario fraught with logistical challenges. The process of preparing and firing a missile of such magnitude would take a lengthy time to sign-off on and prepare for,⁷⁴ allowing for an international coalition to voice opposition and condemn these actions. 'Friendly' states like China and India, despite closeness to Russia, will likely condemn such a drastic step.⁷⁵ It becomes imperative for the West to make it explicitly clear that any preparation for a nuclear strike will not only result in severe consequences, such as the freezing and potential seizure of Russian state assets abroad, but also lead to the expulsion of Russia from international organisations⁷⁶ and the destruction of the Black Sea Fleet.⁷⁷

The nuclear threat, while a potent tool domestically for the Kremlin, is largely a bluff⁷⁸ on the global stage. Standing firm against such threats is crucial,⁷⁹ not only to neutralise the external nuclear blackmail but also to expose the Kremlin's vulnerability to its internal audience, potentially eroding the regime's legitimacy. By demonstrating resilience, the West can undermine the Kremlin's narrative that relies on intimidation tactics to achieve its goals.

Another potential threat is the Kremlin's warning that the West's seizure of Russian assets might lead to reciprocal actions against Western company assets in Russia.⁸⁰ Although the legal terrain is murky,⁸¹ with Western states being third parties to the war, they must assert their stance. The Kremlin frames the conflict as a battle with the West in Ukraine,⁸² and Putin's political survival is tied to countering perceived enemies. This makes it likely that the war will continue, and potentially expand, if it serves Putin's political objectives.⁸³ While seizing

⁷³ Kirill Rogov, "Putin's Blackmail Works Domestically As Well As Internationally", Wilson Center, 1 December 2022, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/putins-blackmail-works-domestically-well-internationally>.

⁷⁴ Keir Giles, "Russian nuclear intimidation: How Russia uses nuclear threats to shape Western responses to aggression", Research Paper – Russia and Eurasia Programme, Chatham House, March 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/2023-03-29-russian-nuclear-intimidation-giles.pdf>.

⁷⁵ Raphael S. Cohen and Gian Gentile, "Why Putin's Nuclear Gamble Is a Huge Mistake", RAND Corporation, 19 October 2022, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2022/10/why-putins-nuclear-gambit-is-a-huge-mistake.html>.

⁷⁶ Brian O'Toole and Daniel Fried, "How to respond if Putin goes nuclear? Here are the economic and political options", Atlantic Council, 20 October 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/how-to-respond-if-putin-goes-nuclear-here-are-the-economic-and-political-options/>.

⁷⁷ Eric Schlosser, "What If Russia Uses Nuclear Weapons in Ukraine?", *The Atlantic*, 20 June 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/06/russia-ukraine-nuclear-weapon-us-response/661315/>.

⁷⁸ See: Keir Giles, *Moscow Rules: What Drives Russia to Confront the West* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs Chatham House, 2019).

⁷⁹ Nigel Gould-Davies, "Putin Has No Red Lines", *The New York Times*, 1 January 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/01/opinion/putin-russia-ukraine-war-strategy.html>.

⁸⁰ Guy Faulconbridge and Dmitry Antonov, "Kremlin says it has list of Western assets to be seized if Russian assets are confiscated", *Reuters*, 29 December 2023, [https://www.reuters.com/world/kremlin-says-it-has-list-western-assets-be-seized-if-russian-assets-are-2023-12-29/#:~:text=MOSCOW%2C%20Dec%2029%20\(Reuters\),frozen%20Russian%20central%20bank%20reserves](https://www.reuters.com/world/kremlin-says-it-has-list-western-assets-be-seized-if-russian-assets-are-2023-12-29/#:~:text=MOSCOW%2C%20Dec%2029%20(Reuters),frozen%20Russian%20central%20bank%20reserves).

⁸¹ Nicholas Mulder, "The west would harm itself with rash seizures of frozen Russian assets", *The Financial Times*, 4 January 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/2c917ef5-60bd-4825-89e4-8b88dc9080a8>.

⁸² "Sovetnik Putina lizhivo nastalivaet, chto Rossiya voyuet s NATO, a ne c Ukrainoi [Putin's adviser falsely insists Russia is at war with NATO, and not with Ukraine]", *Voice of America*, 14 January 2023, <https://www.golosameriki.com/a/russia-is-at-war-with-nato/6917785.html>.

Western assets might be portrayed as reciprocal, it is more likely to be punitive, given that businesses are not equivalent to states.

The Kremlin's threat to challenge the seizure of state assets in court,⁸⁴ seize Western assets in Russia⁸⁵ and cut off diplomatic relations with Western states⁸⁶ should be viewed cautiously. Going to court may hurt the Kremlin, and the threat could be a bluff.⁸⁷ The West, however, must not yield to such threats, standing firm and understanding that the Kremlin often relies on intimidation tactics to manipulate outcomes.⁸⁸ Despite the unlikely prospect of a fair hearing in a Russian court, Western companies and governments may find recourse in international arbitration courts and seek compensation by identifying and seizing Russian state assets or resources.

The Kremlin's intimidation toolbox is running thin, particularly with the neutralisation of the Wagner Group, a significant destabilisation force. While new hacking attacks, assassinations and propaganda campaigns, and the use of criminal networks, will persist, the Kremlin's destabilisation capacity is weak.⁸⁹ The West must remain vigilant against such threats, recognising that the Kremlin is reliant on existing tools rather than new innovations.

The global south's lack of prioritisation for Ukraine⁹⁰ does not imply support for Russia. The purported unbreakable brotherhood⁹¹ between China and Russia remains more symbolic than substantive,⁹² with Putin becoming Xi's own useful idiot. China is providing limited aid and diplomatic gestures without significant support for the war.⁹³ The BRICS, once seen as a potential ally, is a weak institution with its own internal divisions, and Russia has struggled to rally its members to its cause.⁹⁴ Russia's isolation from its European market is evident, and while some states, like Iran, North Korea, Belarus and Eritrea, support Russia,⁹⁵ it remains isolated overall.⁹⁶

⁸³ Maksim Samorukov, "Ugroza mirom. Pochemu Putin nikogda ne zakonchit voynu [Threat to the world. Why Putin will never end the war]", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 16 June 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89993>.

⁸⁴ Burc Eruygur, "Kremlin says seizure of Russian assets will be challenged in court", AA, 5 February 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/kremlin-says-seizure-of-russian-assets-will-be-challenged-in-court/3128326>.

⁸⁵ Javier G. Cuesta, "The Kremlin has a plan: confiscate and conquer", *El País*, 26 February 2024, <https://english.elpais.com/economy-and-business/2024-02-26/the-kremlin-has-a-plan-confiscate-and-conquer.html>.

⁸⁶ "Russia: Diplomatic ties with US could break down over asset seizures", *Reuters*, 22 December 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-diplomatic-ties-with-us-could-break-down-over-asset-seizures-2023-12-22/>.

⁸⁷ Maximilian Hess, "It is time to use Russia's frozen assets to help Ukraine", *Al Jazeera*, 16 January 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/1/16/it-is-time-to-use-russias-frozen-assets-to-help-ukraine>.

⁸⁸ Vera Michlin-Shapir and Olga Khvostunova, "The Rise and Fall of Sputnik V: How the Kremlin used the coronavirus vaccine as a tool of information warfare", Institute of Modern Russia, October 2021, https://imrussia.org/images/stories/Reports/Sputnik-V/IMR_Sputnik_eng_final_web_v2.pdf.

⁸⁹ Andreas Kluth, "Putin Wins Any Staring Contest with Germany and Europe", *The Washington Post*, 27 August 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/putinwins-any-staring-contest-with-germany-and-europe/2020/08/27/096aaf52-e833-11ea-bf44-0d31c85838a5_story.html?variant=116ae929826d1fd3,116ae929826d1fd3.

⁹⁰ Howard W. French, "Why Ukraine Is Not a Priority for the Global South", *Foreign Policy*, 19 September 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/19/unga-ukraine-zelensky-speech-russia-global-south-support/>.

⁹¹ John Feng, "Xi Jinping Stresses 'Unbreakable' China-Russia Bond in Call With Vladimir Putin", *Newsweek*, 29 December 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/xi-jinping-vladimir-putin-unbreakable-china-russia-bond-1557709>.

⁹² Mark Galeotti, "Russia and China's Cosplay Alliance", *The Moscow Times*, 22 August 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/08/22/russia-and-chinas-cosplay-alliance-a66973>.

⁹³ Ben Scott, "Putin is Xi's useful idiot", Lowy Institute, 13 July 2023, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/putin-xi-s-useful-idiot>.

⁹⁴ Hess, "It is time to use Russia's frozen assets to help Ukraine"; Sumayya Ismail, "Can BRICS dethrone the US dollar? It'll be an uphill climb, expert says?", *Al Jazeera*, 24 August 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/8/24/can-brics-dethrone-the-us-dollar-itll-be-an-uphill-climb-experts-say>.

⁹⁵ Olivia Yanchik, "Arsenal of Autocracy: North Korea and Iran are arming Russia in Ukraine", Atlantic Council, 11 January 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/arsenal-of-autocracy-north-korea-and-iran-are-arming-russia-in-ukraine/>; Ryhor Astapenia, "Russia's war on Ukraine has strengthened Lukashenka but undermined Belarus", Chatham House, 4 December 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/12/russias-war-ukraine-has-strengthened-lukashenka-undermined-belarus>; Habtom Ghebrezghiabher and Tesfazion Gerhelase, "Eritrea: Supporting Russia to Stay in Power", Fikra Forum, 13 April 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/eritrea-supporting-russia-stay-power>.

⁹⁶ Scott Simon, "The world is isolating Putin. Here's what that could mean for the war", *NPR*, 22 July 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/07/22/1189580672/the-world-is-isolating-putin-heres-what-that-could-mean-for-the-war>.

The Kremlin's attempts to create mischief persist, albeit with a weakened destabilisation arsenal. Its isolation from the West, despite efforts to circumvent sanctions, is a significant blow. While it may find support from certain quarters, the global south's ambivalence, rather than support, signals the limits of Russia's influence in the current geopolitical landscape. The West must remain united, recognising that the Kremlin's ability to manipulate outcomes is waning. A firm response from Western governments will deter the Kremlin from resorting to threats and intimidation as it seeks to advance its agenda.

The Naked Emperor

The anticipated Kremlin response to the potential declaration of Vladimir Putin's illegitimacy after the March 2024 Russian presidential elections is not shrouded in mystery. It is expected to follow a familiar playbook, involving tactics such as hacking, intensified propaganda in social networks, further attempts to influence Western politicians and parties and, in extreme cases, targeted political assassinations of dissident Russians.⁹⁷ However, it is crucial to note that such a reaction is unlikely to extend to nuclear threats, according to the analysis. This understanding diminishes the level of fear associated with Western states declaring Putin illegitimate, suggesting that the more probable responses would be within the realm of conventional covert measures rather than an overt escalation.

A declaration of Putin's illegitimacy opens a spectrum of strategic possibilities for Western states. The logical consequence of such a declaration is to recognise that Putin, as an illegitimate leader, should be consistently pressured at every opportunity to weaken his grip on power. This approach aligns with the broader objective of facilitating the ascent of a more legitimate government in Russia, underscoring the potential for transformative geopolitical shifts.

The primary recommendation derived from this analysis is the urgency for Western states to actively contribute to Ukraine's swift victory in the ongoing war. The commendable unity⁹⁸ displayed by Western nations since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has encountered recent challenges.⁹⁹ The difficulties in supplying Ukraine stem not only from logistical constraints¹⁰⁰ but also, significantly, from a lack of courage to provide the support necessary for Ukraine's triumph. There's a palpable fear that empowering Ukraine might simultaneously weaken Russia, a perception viewed as perilous.¹⁰¹

While, on the surface, Western European states have dispatched considerable supplies of weaponry and humanitarian aid, a nuanced examination reveals variations in contributions. When measured against GDP, the Baltic States, Denmark, Norway and Poland emerge as the most significant contributors, with the United States ranking 15th in terms of proportional contribution.¹⁰² Germany's role as a substantial supplier is underscored, with additional weapons sent in November 2023.¹⁰³ However, persistent delays in delivering crucial weapons systems and the refusal to provide Taurus missiles capable of disrupting the Kerch bridge in Crimea illustrate the frustrating hurdles in expediting support.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁷ On assassinations see: Heidi Blake, *From Russia with Blood: Putin's Ruthless Killing Campaign and Secret War on the West* (London: WilliamCollins, 2019); Luke Harding, *A Very Expensive Poison: The Definitive Story of the Murder of Litvinenko and Russia's War with the West* (London: Faber and Faber, 2016); 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>.

⁹⁸ Nigel Gould-Davies, "The Astonishing Endurance of Unity on Ukraine", *Foreign Affairs*, 8 March 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/astonishing-endurance-unity-ukraine>.

⁹⁹ Nick Paton Walsh, "As Western unity on Ukraine falters, Putin eyes a slow-burn win", *CNN*, 7 December 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/12/07/europe/ukraine-western-unity-faltering-putin-intl-cmd/index.html>.

¹⁰⁰ James Lansdale, "Ukraine war: Western allies say they are running out of ammunition", *BBC News*, 3 October 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-66984944>.

¹⁰¹ Olesya Khromeychuk, "'Ukraine fatigue': why I'm fighting to stop the world forgetting us", *The Guardian*, 25 January 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/25/ukraine-fatigue-why-im-fighting-to-stop-the-world-forgetting-us>.

¹⁰² See: "Ukraine Support Tracker", 7 December 2023, <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/>.

¹⁰³ Veronika Melkozerova, "German defense minister announces €1.3B weapons package during visit to Kyiv", *Politico*, 21 November 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/german-defense-minister-announces-new-military-aid-package-during-his-visit-to-kyiv/>.

¹⁰⁴ Caleb Larson, "Why Germany is rattled about sending its Taurus missile to Ukraine", *Politico*, 12 October 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/why-germany-scholz-rattled-sending-taurus-missile-ukraine/>.

In America, military support for Ukraine has been hamstrung by the Republican Party. While an immigration deal that could have curtailed migrant flows into southern America and extended support to Ukraine appeared promising,¹⁰⁵ partisan motivations, particularly in aiding Trump's campaign, led to its rejection.¹⁰⁶ This highlights a broader issue – long-standing partisan inclinations and a Russia-centric bias that has, at times, bordered on a sycophantic love affair.¹⁰⁷

While the American and German Governments deserve criticism for their shortcomings, other Western governments' failures to sufficiently support Ukraine have been underreported.¹⁰⁸ Designating Putin as illegitimate would be a new catalyst to revitalise Western unity in supporting Ukraine unequivocally. The Kremlin perceives itself as engaged in a broader struggle against the West, aiming to destabilise the international order crafted by Western states. The argument against allowing Russia to lose the war hinges on the belief that Russia is an integral component of the international system. However, Putin's objectives are precisely the opposite – he seeks to dismantle this international order.¹⁰⁹

Therefore, declaring Putin as illegitimate can become a rallying point for galvanising Western support for Ukraine to secure a swift victory. Western governments are urged to bridge the gap between geopolitical realities and public perceptions, emphasising that Ukrainian success translates to broader peace and security.¹¹⁰ There needs to be a move to a war economy,¹¹¹ a concept that Western states have hesitated to communicate effectively to their electorates. Failure to communicate this necessity risks falling behind a Russian economy that has already adapted to a war footing.¹¹²

Britain, having been at the forefront of providing tanks and security guarantees to Ukraine,¹¹³ is positioned to take a leadership role. Designating Putin as illegitimate would not only set an example but also catalyse support for Ukraine, prompting a surge in weapons spending both for Ukraine and Western arsenals, fortifying defences against the Putin threat. The urgency

¹⁰⁵ Annie Karni and Karoun Demirjian, "With Deal Close on Border and Ukraine, Republican Rifts Threaten to Kill Both", *The New York Times*, 19 January 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/19/us/politics/border-immigration-ukraine-republicans-biden.html>.

¹⁰⁶ Manu Raju, Melanie Zanona, Lauren Fox and Ted Barrett, "GOP senators seethe as Trump blows up delicate immigration compromise", *CNN*, 25 January 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/01/25/politics/gop-senators-angry-trump-immigration-deal/index.html>.

¹⁰⁷ David Brennan, "How to Solve Ukraine's GOP problem", *Newsweek*, 12 November 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/how-solve-ukraine-gop-problem-republicans-2024-election-zelensky-trump-1842605>; Brad Dress, "Why Republicans are souring on Ukraine", *The Hill*, 29 November 2023, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/4331169-why-republicans-are-souring-on-ukraine/>.

¹⁰⁸ James Dwyer, "Australia is not giving Ukraine the military support it needs – sending our retired jets would be a start", *The Conversation*, 27 June 2023, <https://theconversation.com/australia-is-not-giving-ukraine-the-military-support-it-needs-sending-our-retired-jets-would-be-a-start-208570>; Laura Kayali, "Don't trust the data: France insists it's pulling its weight on arms to Ukraine", *Politico*, 8 November 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/dont-trust-data-france-military-aid-ukraine/#:~:text=Paris%20says%20it%20is%20committed,own%20stocks%20are%20not%20depleted>.

¹⁰⁹ Richard D. Hooker Jr, "2024 preview: The West must decide if it wants Ukraine to win", Atlantic Council, 17 December 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/2024-preview-the-west-must-decide-if-it-wants-ukraine-to-win/>.

¹¹⁰ Taras Kuzio, "The West reaps multiple benefits from backing Ukraine against Russia", Atlantic Council, 12 January 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/the-west-reaps-multiple-benefits-from-backing-ukraine-against-russia/>.

¹¹¹ Joseph E. Stiglitz "Wars Aren't Won with Peacetime Economies", *Project Syndicate*, 17 October 2022, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/west-needs-war-economics-energy-food-supply-shortages-by-joseph-e-stiglitz-2022-10?barrier=accesspaylog>; Daniel Michaels, "The West Again Learns That War Needs Industry", *The Wall Street Journal*, 6 July 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-west-again-learns-that-war-needs-industry-33c8ca88>.

¹¹² "Can Europe arm Ukraine – or even itself?", *Modern Diplomacy*, 17 January 2024, <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2024/01/17/can-europe-arm-ukraine-or-even-itself/>; Ott Tammik, "NATO Has Been Underestimating Russia's War Machine, Estonia Says", *Bloomberg*, 24 January 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-01-24/russian-ability-to-sustain-war-was-underestimated-says-general?leadSource=uverify%20wall>.

¹¹³ Federica Di Sario, "UK agrees to send Challenger 2 tanks to Ukraine", *Politico*, 14 January 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/uk-tanks-ukraine-war-challenger-2/>; "Ukraine, Britain announce security agreement during Kyiv visit by PM Sunak", *Al Jazeera*, 12 January 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/12/uk-to-increase-military-funding-for-ukraine-as-pm-sunak-visits-kyiv>.

lies in reframing the conflict as a land grab by a revanchist power aiming to dismantle the international order.¹¹⁴

While defence on NATO's Eastern flank has improved, more substantial actions are imperative. Britain's commendable rotation of 11,000 troops through Estonia is acknowledged,¹¹⁵ but the recommendation is for other NATO members to emulate Germany's approach and to station permanent deployments in Eastern Europe.¹¹⁶ The emphasis on ongoing exercises from the Baltic to the Black Sea,¹¹⁷ accentuating force posture, is a positive start but necessitates continuation. Notably, this report proposes incentivising Turkey to permit NATO warships and the minesweepers Britain sold to Ukraine¹¹⁸ into the Black Sea, potentially through arms deals on F-16s or Eurofighters.¹¹⁹ A more proactive NATO stance is recommended to communicate to Moscow that the West is steadfast in its commitment to safeguarding Ukraine and Eastern Europe over the long term.

There must be a multifaceted strategy combining diplomatic, economic and military efforts to counter the Kremlin's challenge. The imperative is clear: Western states must act decisively in the face of a Kremlin that sees itself at war with the West. The combined economic strength of Western nations dwarfs that of Russia, providing a significant advantage. However, the time for action is now, and collective efforts are essential to thwart Putin's destabilising ambitions and ensure a more secure future for the region.

Declaring Putin illegitimate is not merely a reactionary measure but a strategic imperative with profound implications for reshaping geopolitical dynamics, especially in regions caught between Russia and the West. This comprehensive approach involves bolstering support for these states, fostering democratisation, and strategically countering Kremlin influence. A multifaceted strategy encompasses Moldova, the Caucasus, Central Asia and Belarus.

The EU's announcement of membership discussions with Moldova in December 2023¹²⁰ presents a pivotal opportunity for Western states to deepen ties and counter Kremlin influence. Moldova, historically susceptible to Kremlin interference, has witnessed destabilising Kremlin-sponsored protests.¹²¹ However, there is a discernible shift among Moldovans toward approving Western integration, offering a window for strategic intervention. To capitalise on this momentum, Western states must provide robust support for Moldova's ongoing reforms, both economically and politically.

The Moldovan Government's official neutrality masks the delicate dance it performs between East and West. Serious discussions about Moldova joining a larger security alliance are

¹¹⁴ William Courtney, "Russia's Appetite May Extend Beyond Ukraine", RAND Corporation, 17 February 2023, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2023/02/russias-appetite-may-extend-beyond-ukraine.html>.

¹¹⁵ Andrew Whyte, "Estonia now UK military's largest overseas deployment worldwide" *ERR*, 10 August 2023, <https://news.err.ee/1609058693/estonia-now-uk-military-s-largest-overseas-deployment-worldwide>.

¹¹⁶ Peter Wilke and Hans Von Der Burchard, "Germany ready to put 4,000 soldiers permanently in Lithuania", *Politico*, 26 June 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-station-4000-soldiers-permanently-lithuania/>.

¹¹⁷ "NATO to hold biggest drills since Cold War with 90,000 troops", *Reuters*, 19 January 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/nato-kick-off-biggest-drills-decades-with-some-90000-troops-2024-01-18/>.

¹¹⁸ Peter Suci, "Turkey Won't Allow UK Minehunters into the Black Sea", *The National Interest*, 12 January 2024, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/turkey-wont-allow-uk-minehunters-black-sea-208564>.

¹¹⁹ Huseyin Hayatsever and Ece Toksabay, "Turkey sought Eurofighters after uncertainty over U.S. F-16 buy - source", *Reuters*, 23 November 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/turkey-sought-eurofighters-after-uncertainty-over-us-f-16-buy-source-2023-11-23/>.

¹²⁰ Jessica Parker and Paul Kirby, "EU to open membership talks with Ukraine and Moldova", *BBC News*, 14 December 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-67722252>.

¹²¹ Dumitru Minzarai, "Population-centric: Lessons from Russia's hybrid war in Moldova", European Council on Foreign Relations, 17 March 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/article/population-centric-lessons-from-russias-hybrid-war-in-moldova/>; Vladimir Solovyov, "Ukraine War Risks Repercussions for Transnistria", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 23 September 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/87986>; Galiya Ibragimova, "How Russia Torpedoed Its Own Influence In Moldova", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 11 May 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89731>.

ongoing.¹²² Western military support to Moldova has increased,¹²³ signalling a commitment to safeguarding its sovereignty. By declaring Putin illegitimate, Western states can galvanise this support, actively working to stabilise Moldova's territorial integrity.

Crucially, Moldova's reliance on Russian gas remains a vulnerability. Some Western states, such as Austria, Hungary and Spain (via Russian LNG),¹²⁴ still depend on Russian gas, presenting an opportunity for collective action. As the Russian gas transit contract with Ukraine ends in 2024, Moldova stands to benefit from the renegotiation or termination of this agreement. Moldova's breakaway region Transnistria – which is financially propped up by the Kremlin – is 100% reliant on Russian gas. The loss of this market would collapse the economy and force re-integration with Moldova. The 2500 Russian troops in Transnistria do not have the capacity to defend the region without Russian support. Ending Moldova's gas reliance on Russia would significantly reduce Kremlin influence and be the start of re-integrating Transnistria into Moldova.¹²⁵

The West's financial commitment to Moldova is pivotal for the country's stability. Providing the Moldovan Government with the necessary funds to integrate Transnistria into Moldova is strategic.¹²⁶ This integration strengthens Moldova's territorial integrity and eliminates a potential Kremlin stronghold in its borders.¹²⁷

In the Caucasus, Western states can actively shape regional dynamics by offering strategic incentives and deterrents. Georgia, with its EU candidate status, should be presented with the prospect of ascension talks,¹²⁸ contingent upon maintaining strategic distance from Moscow.¹²⁹

Armenia, disillusioned by Russian peacekeepers' failure and detrimental peace agreements in Nagorno-Karabakh, seeks closer security ties with the West.¹³⁰ While mindful of Russian military bases and peacekeepers, the current preoccupation of Russia with the conflict in

¹²² Suzanne Lynch, "Time to join NATO? Moldova eyes joining 'a larger alliance'", *Politico*, 20 January 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/maia-sandu-moldova-nato-alliance-joining-ukraine-war-russia-invasion/>.

¹²³ Kamil Cașu, "Moldova: enhancing military cooperation with the West", *OSW*, 25 September 2023, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2023-09-25/moldova-enhancing-military-cooperation-west>; Steve Holland and Doina Chiacu, "US to help Moldova fight Russia's destabilization efforts", *Reuters*, 10 March 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-help-moldova-fight-russias-destabilization-efforts-2023-03-10/>.

¹²⁴ Elitsa Simeonova, "The EU Is Much less Dependant On Russian Gas But Still Isn't Ready To Give It Up," *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, 31 December 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-natural-gas-european-union-dependence-ukraine-war/32754244.html>; "Spain relying on Russian gas as overall imports fall", *Reuters*, 8 September 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/spain-relying-russian-gas-overall-imports-fall-2023-09-08/>.

¹²⁵ Leo Litra, "The final frontier: Ending Moldova's dependency on Russian gas", European Council on Foreign Relations, 1 November 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/article/the-final-frontier-ending-moldovas-dependency-on-russian-gas/>.

¹²⁶ Ian Bond, "Note to the West: Help Georgia and Moldova as Well as Ukraine", Centre for European Reform, 21 April 2023, <https://www.cer.eu/insights/note-west-help-georgia-and-moldova-well-ukraine>.

¹²⁷ Evghenii Ceban, "Time is running out to solve Moldova's Transnistria question", *openDemocracy*, 23 August 2023, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/ukraine-war-moldova-transnistria-peace-plan/>.

¹²⁸ Emil Avdaliani, "Georgia and the West – A Turning Point", *CEPA*, 10 October 2023, <https://cepa.org/article/georgia-and-the-west-a-turning-point/>.

¹²⁹ Aleksandr Atasuntsev, "Raschet ili proschet. Kak dakleko zaidet ottepel' v otnosheniyakh Gruzii i Rossii [Calculation or miscalculation. How far will the thaw go in relations between Georgia and Russia?]", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 16 May 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89759>; Emil Avdaliani, "Playing with Fire: Georgia's Cautious Rapprochement With Russia", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 21 July 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/90246/>.

¹³⁰ Rikard Jozwiak, "Wider Europe Briefing: Armenia's Pivot To The EU", *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, 16 October 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/eu-armenia-russia-pivot-sanctions/32639183.html>; Aleksandr Atasuntsev, "Smena garanta. Kuda dvizhutsya otnosheniya Armeniya i Rossii [Change of guarantor. Where are the relations between Armenia and Russia heading?]", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 9 October 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/90740>; Walter Kaufmann and Sonja Katharina Schiffers, "Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia: Policy Options for Germany and the EU", *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, 29 September 2023, <https://www.boell.de/en/2023/09/28/bergkarabach-und-armenien-was-deutschland-und-eu-jetzt-tun-sollten>; Arshaluis Mgdesyan, "Unhappy with Russia, Armenia seeks new security partners", *Eurasianet*, 15 November 2023, <https://eurasianet.org/unhappy-with-russia-armenia-seeks-new-security-partners>; Arshaluys Barseghyan, "Armenia steps up military ties with West as Russia relations tumble", *OC Media*, 10 November 2023, <https://oc-media.org/armenia-steps-up-military-ties-with-west-as-russia-relations-tumble/>.

Ukraine provides a favourable window for Western engagement. The Armenian Government's desire for a more balanced security partnership, less reliant on Russia, presents an opportunity for the West to expand its influence.¹³¹

Central Asia emerges as a critical theatre where Western states, although facing limitations in directly countering Kremlin designs, can play a crucial role in enhancing domestic security.¹³² The EU's increased meetings with Central Asian Foreign Ministers and augmented funding for regional cooperation¹³³ demonstrate a commitment to engaging with the region. The focus on intensifying trade with Central Asian states aligns with broader economic cooperation goals.

America, by establishing a peacekeeping operations centre in Almaty, Kazakhstan, has signalled increased dialogue on security, the economy and human rights.¹³⁴ Kazakhstan, a hub for Western companies that left Russia,¹³⁵ showcases the potential for economic cooperation. The number of Central Asian workers coming to Britain and Europe since February 2022 has increased¹³⁶ and this is another avenue that should be further explored.

While Western sanctions on Russia have been circumvented on occasion,¹³⁷ incremental improvements in relations with Central Asian states can contribute to regional stability and reduce Kremlin influence. The nuanced approach involves recognising the strategic importance of Central Asia in the geopolitical landscape.

The imperative to declare Putin illegitimate provides Western states with a strategic lever to address another local illegitimacy problem in Belarus. Lukashenka's increasing reliance on Russian support,¹³⁸ exemplified by allowing Russian troops to use Belarusian territory to attack Ukraine,¹³⁹ allowing Russia to deploy nuclear weapons in Belarus¹⁴⁰ and leasing military facilities to Russia until 2047,¹⁴¹ underscores the urgency of Western action.

Designating Putin illegitimate enables Western states to act against Lukashenka and increase pressure on both. Western states can strategically leverage pressure in Ukraine and neighbouring states to curtail Kremlin influence. The return of nuclear weapons to Belarus,

¹³¹ Mikayel Zolyan, "Defeated Armenia Looks to a New, Post-Russia Foreign Policy", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 27 November 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/91121>.

¹³² Joshua Russell and Jasmine D. Cameron, "The US Can – and Must – Counter Russian Influence Undermining Kyrgyzstan's Democratic Progress", Just Security, 22 December 2023, <https://www.justsecurity.org/90843/the-us-can-and-must-counter-russian-influence-undermining-kyrgyzstans-democratic-progress/>.

¹³³ Anna Matveeva, "A New Opening for EU-Central Asian Relations?", Carnegie Europe, 13 April 2023, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2023/04/13/new-opening-for-eu-central-asia-relations-pub-89454>; Marie Dumoulin, "Steppe change: How Russia's war on Ukraine is reshaping Kazakhstan", European Council on Foreign Relations, 13 April 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/steppe-change-how-russias-war-on-ukraine-is-reshaping-kazakhstan/>.

¹³⁴ 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/>.

¹³⁵ Paul Sampson, "Central Asia Breaking Free", *Energy Intelligence*, 11 January 2023, <https://www.energyintel.com/00000185-a0c1-dc8a-a99d-f5e3124f0000>.

¹³⁶ Farangis Najibullah, "Happy To Be In Britain, Central Asian Migrants Want More Work To Cover Expenses", *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, 20 August 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/britain-central-asia-migrants-more-work-expenses/31997221.html>.

¹³⁷ Nurbek Bekmurzaev, "Perspectives: Central Asian states walking fine line on Russian sanctions", *Eurasianet*, 31 December 2023, <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-central-asian-states-walking-fine-line-on-russian-sanctions#:~:text=A%20potential%20indicator%20of%20sanctions,suspicious%20trade%20have%20been%20documented>.

¹³⁸ Stephen Hall, "The End of Adaptive Authoritarianism in Belarus", *Europe-Asia Studies*, 75(1) 2023: 22.

¹³⁹ Elsa Court, "Lukashenko admits Russian troops invaded Ukraine through Belarus in 2022", *The Kyiv Independent*, 18 August 2023, <https://kyivindependent.com/lukashenko-admits-russian-troops-invaded-ukraine-through-belarus/>.

¹⁴⁰ Max Seddon, "Russia has sent nuclear weapons to Belarus, says Vladimir Putin", *Financial Times*, 16 June 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/2353be6d-7573-4b24-bf76-e77f4039f957>.

¹⁴¹ Maria Yeryoma, "Belarus Weekly: Belarus allows Russia to use two military bases for 25 more years", *The Kyiv Independent*, 16 September 2022, <https://kyivindependent.com/belarus-weekly-belarus-allows-russia-to-use-two-military-bases-for-25-more-years/>.

a first in 30 years, sets a dangerous precedent.¹⁴² A coordinated approach to support the Belarusian opposition and diaspora, akin to efforts regarding Russia,¹⁴³ becomes imperative.

Supporting Ukraine to win the war quickly becomes a catalyst for the fall of both Putin and Lukashenka. The Belarusian opposition, under Svitlana Tsikhanouskaya, has proactively built a Transitional Cabinet and Coordinating Council and is developing a 'New Belarusian' passport. Western states must support the Belarusian opposition and diaspora, engaging with mid-level regime personnel to pave the way for a democratic future-Belarus.

The imperative to declare Putin illegitimate is a strategic move that transcends a reactive response. It provides a comprehensive framework for Western states to navigate the complex challenges in Moldova, the Caucasus, Central Asia and Belarus. By adopting coordinated and nuanced actions, Western states can strategically shape a more stable, secure and democratic future in these states.

Declaring Putin illegitimate necessitates a diplomatic recalibration rather than a complete shutdown. While acknowledging the role of Russian diplomats as conduits for propaganda,¹⁴⁴ it is crucial to retain select communication channels for insights into Kremlin perspectives. The proposed strategy involves a substantial reduction in Russian embassy staff across Western states, establishing a streamlined, barebones system, and the closure of Russian consulates. This nuanced approach anticipates potential reciprocal measures from the Kremlin while preventing a complete breakdown in diplomatic ties.

Drawing a historical parallel, Britain allowed the German Embassy to operate during World War II, but with fewer personnel who were exhaustively monitored. This underscores the pragmatic nature of the strategy proposed here regarding Russia. A nuanced diplomatic restructuring serves multiple purposes. It signals a robust response to Putin's illegitimacy, maintains essential communication channels for potential future dialogue, and ensures that Western states do not abandon the Russian people. By retaining limited diplomatic connections, Western states can gather firsthand information, vital for understanding the evolving situation and informing their strategies. This approach reflects a commitment to principled engagement, acknowledging the complexities of international relations amid significant geopolitical challenges.

The assertion of Putin's illegitimacy offers a pivotal moment for Western states to employ a comprehensive and multifaceted strategy, utilising economic tools and diplomatic measures to exert substantial pressure on the Kremlin and its elite.

On the economic front, a nuanced approach involves constraining financial resources and incentivising strategic shifts. By lowering the cap on Russian oil and gas, Western states can significantly impede the Kremlin's economic resilience. Despite alternative markets in China and India,¹⁴⁵ the reduced prices and restricted access to Western funds is straining Russia's financial capacity, especially amid the economic distortions caused by military spending and inflation.¹⁴⁶ The Kremlin is having to rely on using the ruble for foreign exchange, which causes prices to rise domestically as reserves are depleted.¹⁴⁷ Western states must lower the cap

¹⁴² Derek Bisaccio, "Belarus adds nukes to its military doctrine", *Defense One*, 18 January 2024, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2024/01/belarus-adds-nukes-its-military-doctrine/393405/>.

¹⁴³ See: Hall, "Getting a Foot in the Door".

¹⁴⁴ Simon Tisdall, "Putin's lying diplomats make excuses for terror in Ukraine. Expel them all", *The Guardian*, 16 October 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/oct/16/putin-diplomats-terror-ukraine-expel-peace-embassies-russia>.

¹⁴⁵ Leon Aron, "The Sanctions Against Russia Are Starting to Work", *The Atlantic*, 7 December 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/12/russia-economic-sanctions-putin/676253/>.

¹⁴⁶ Marc Bennetts, "Russian economy is biggest in Europe, claims Putin", *The Times*, 11 January 2024, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/russian-economy-is-biggest-in-europe-claims-putin-v7hts68h0#:~:text=Speaking%20in%20Khabarovsk%2C%20a%20city,This%20is%20an%20amazing%20result>.

¹⁴⁷ Alexandra Prokopenko, "A Sickly Ruble Reveals What Putin Will Not", *Bloomberg*, 17 August 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2023-08-17/a-sickly-ruble-reveals-russian-economic-weakness-that-vladimir-putin-will-not>.

price on oil and gas again to reduce payments for Russia on the markets and increase efforts to ground the Kremlin's ghost tanker fleet used to break the cap.¹⁴⁸ The Kremlin is paying for components with rubles or in oil and gas.¹⁴⁹ Lowering the cap will reduce the capacity of the Kremlin to buy what it needs for the war.

To fortify this economic stranglehold, Western states can exploit the vulnerability of Chinese banks, which have shown increased compliance with Western sanctions.¹⁵⁰ A judicious application of secondary sanctions – or the threat thereof¹⁵¹ – against companies supplying dual-use technology to Russia underscores the interconnectedness of economic and security concerns. Such targeted sanctions would not only curb the Kremlin's access to crucial military components but also impose a cost on entities aiding Russia's war efforts.

Engagement with the Russian business elite is a pivotal aspect of this strategy. Presently, only a handful of business elites have condemned the war, while others have gone to court to recover frozen assets in Western jurisdictions.¹⁵² Western states must allow Russian elites to unfreeze assets contingent upon a post-Putin era. Assets can be unfrozen if Russian elites support a trajectory toward a more democratic and responsible governance.¹⁵³ Western businesses could give loans to Russian elites that would be linked to the frozen assets. If the reforms stopped, then the frozen assets would be used to pay back the Western businesses. This approach seeks to fracture the symbiotic relationship between the Kremlin and its business allies, weakening internal support for Putin's aggressive policies.

Travel bans will isolate the Kremlin elite. By tightening travel restrictions for the ruling elite and their families,¹⁵⁴ Western states can underscore the consequences of their complicity in an illegitimate regime's actions. Implementing no-travel lists and refusing to renew foreign passports¹⁵⁵ for elite children residing abroad adds a layer of personal accountability, emphasising that supporting Putin's regime comes at the cost of global isolation.

Beyond economic and diplomatic levers, declaring Putin illegitimate after the March 2024 elections enables Western states to enact a significant financial sanction – cutting off Russian banks from SWIFT. While initial hesitancy among European states stalled this drastic measure,¹⁵⁶

¹⁴⁸ George Glover, "Russia's 'ghost ships' could be targeted at a sea choke point in a bid to enforce the West's oil price cap", *Business Insider*, 18 November 2023, <https://www.businessinsider.com/russia-ukraine-war-ghost-ships-oil-price-cap-eu-crackdown-2023-11?r=US&IR=T>.

¹⁴⁹ Aleksandra Prokopenko, "Bol'she, chem tsifry. Kak sanktsii izmenili osnovy ekonomicheskoi politiki Rossii [More than numbers. How sanctions changed the fundamentals of Russian economic policy]", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 28 April 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89633>.

¹⁵⁰ "Chinese State Banks Step Up Compliance on Russian Clients – Bloomberg", *The Moscow Times*, 16 January 2024, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/01/16/chinese-state-banks-step-up-compliance-on-russian-clients-bloomberg-a83738>.

¹⁵¹ Tobias Gehrke and Filip Medunic, "Rules of the road for the EU's secondary sanctions", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 9 June 2023, [Foreign Policy, 7 September 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/07/western-sanctions-russia-ukraine-war/>.](https://ecfr.eu/article/rules-of-the-road-for-the-eus-secondary-sanctions/#:-:text=Secondary%20sanctions%20should%20be%20reserved,trading%20with%20certain%20third%20countries; Jeffrey A. Sonnenfeld and Michal Wyrebkowski,)

¹⁵² Max Colchester, "The West Sanctioned Russia's Billionaires. Now They Are Fighting Back", *The Wall Street Journal*, 6 August 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-west-sanctioned-russias-billionaires-now-they-are-fighting-back-836ee65>.

¹⁵³ Aleksandra Prokopenko, "Vkhod – kopeika, vykhod – zhizn'. Chto sdelal god voiny s rossiiskoi elitoi [Entrance is a penny, exit is life. What did a year do to the Russian elite?]", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 7 March 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89212>.

¹⁵⁴ Marc Bennetts, "Where are the sons and daughters of Russian defence officials?", *The Sunday Times*, 25 May 2023, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/where-are-the-sons-and-daughters-of-russian-defence-officials-k6lwt5qfb>.

¹⁵⁵ Karolis Broga, "Abramovich son's Lithuanian passport was renewed last October – media", *Delfi*, 5 January 2024, <https://www.delfi.lt/en/politics/abramovich-son-s-lithuanian-passport-was-renewed-last-october-media-95541247>.

¹⁵⁶ Robert Greene, 2022, "How Sanctions on Russia Will Alter Global Payment Flows", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 4 March 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/03/04/how-sanctions-on-russia-will-alter-global-payments-flows-pub-86575>.

the assertion of Putin's illegitimacy provides a principled basis for implementing this severe step.¹⁵⁷ Stripping Russian banks of SWIFT access constitutes profound economic disruption in Russia as it isolates banks from the global financial mainstream¹⁵⁸ and compounds challenges already posed by existing sanctions. The threat of being kicked off SWIFT has been ongoing since 2014, with the Kremlin's first invasion of Ukraine. For all the touted Russian propaganda that the new Russian alternative – SPFS – is ready and effective, only 514 participants in Russia and abroad had signed-up,¹⁵⁹ compared to 11,000 on SWIFT. The disruption of being kicked off SWIFT would be a big problem for the Russian economy.

Moreover, a declaration of illegitimacy serves as a catalyst to encourage Western companies still operating in Russia to reassess their positions. By highlighting their complicity in supporting an illegitimate government, Western governments can use public opinion as a tool for change. A two-pronged approach involving public shaming and financial repercussions – through a blood tax on profits in the company's home state – creates a powerful incentive for these companies to exit Russia. The moral and financial costs associated with continued operation under an illegitimate regime will become untenable, pressuring these companies to align with Western values.

In this multifaceted strategy, economic measures intertwine with diplomatic initiatives, creating a comprehensive framework to address the complex challenges posed by the Kremlin. Tightening economic screws through sanctions, oil and gas caps and technology restrictions amplifies external pressure. Simultaneously, diplomatic measures, such as travel bans and SWIFT exclusion, isolate the Kremlin and its elite on the global stage. The engagement with Russian elites offers a pathway for internal transformation, fragmenting their support for Putin and fostering conditions for democratic change. There are competing factions and Western governments can use these fracture-lines to splinter elite support for Putin.

As the Kremlin remains entangled in a war-driven legitimacy bind,¹⁶⁰ Western states must persist in efforts to tighten economic constraints. The Russian economy is likely over-heating.¹⁶¹ For now, it can confound previous predictions of economic collapse due to increasing gas and oil sales and being an economy on a war footing.¹⁶² Yet increased Western sanctions and greater efforts to build ties with the Global South can precipitate diplomatic isolation. Such a potent combination may catalyse internal dissent – especially if infrastructure continues to fail and prices on basic subsidies keep rising.¹⁶³ By continually refining and escalating this multifaceted strategy, Western states can leverage their influence to precipitate meaningful change in Russia, paving the way for a more democratic and accountable future.

¹⁵⁷ Anders Åslund and Maria Snegovaya, "The impact of Western sanctions on Russia and how they can be made even more effective", Atlantic Council, 3 May 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/the-impact-of-western-sanctions-on-russia/#h-harmful-international-repercussions-of-russia-s-authoritarian-kleptocracy>.

¹⁵⁸ "For the Russian banks banned from SWIFT, are there any options left?", *Euronews*, 3 August 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/08/03/for-the-russian-banks-banned-from-swift-are-there-any-options-left>.

¹⁵⁹ "Banki s 1 oktyabrya ne mogut ispol'zovat' SWIFT dlya perevodov vnutri Rossii [From October 1, banks cannot use SWIFT for transfers within Russia]", *Interfaks*, 1 October 2023, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/923589>.

¹⁶⁰ Tat'yana Stanovaya, "Putin i voina. Kuda zavedut prezidentskie vybory [Putin and the war. Where will the presidential election lead?]", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 11 January 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/91373>.

¹⁶¹ Alexandra Prokopenko, "Putin's Unsustainable Spending Spree", *Foreign Affairs*, 8 January 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/putins-unsustainable-spending-spree>.

¹⁶² Anastasia Stognei and Max Seddon, "The surprising resilience of the Russian economy", *The Financial Times*, 2 February 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/d304a182-997d-4dae-98a1-aa7c691526db>.

¹⁶³ "'Total Disgrace': Anger, Frustration as Mass Heating Failures Across Russia Leave Thousands in the Cold", *The Moscow Times*, 12 January 2024, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/01/10/total-disgrace-anger-frustration-as-mass-heating-failures-across-russia-leave-thousands-in-the-cold-a83676>; "Worry in Russia as egg prices soar ahead of festive season", *Euronews*, 12 December 2023, <https://www.euronews.com/business/2023/12/12/worry-in-russia-as-egg-prices-soar-ahead-of-festive-season>.

The declaration of Putin's illegitimacy should trigger comprehensive scrutiny of Russians in the West with Kremlin ties. A sophisticated elite asset tracker, modelled after the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project's Russian Asset Tracker database,¹⁶⁴ becomes essential. Western states must actively endorse and support such tracking initiatives, compelling individuals associated with the Kremlin to transparently disclose their assets. Non-compliance should carry severe consequences, including revoked residency permits, financial penalties or even legal action. Simultaneously, Western nations should intensify efforts to identify and seize business and cultural assets linked to the Russian state and companies,¹⁶⁵ particularly those exploiting legal loopholes or used for sanctions circumvention.¹⁶⁶ The subsequent liquidation of these assets should contribute to financial support for Ukraine.

Sixthly, the declaration of Putin's illegitimacy provides an opportunity for Western states to strategically navigate the expulsion of Russia from international organisations. Despite being ousted from the Council of Europe, Russia maintains a position in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Suspending a country from the OSCE requires consensus, which poses challenges, especially with Belarus potentially resisting. To enhance effectiveness, Western states can advocate for the reform of the OSCE, creating a new structure that facilitates the suspension of Russia.

A parallel need for reform exists within the United Nations (UN). Removing a permanent Security Council member is a formidable task. But it has happened before. Taiwan was removed from the Security Council in 1971. An attempt to remove Russia would need approval by all Security Council members to suspend Russia's veto and then a two-thirds +1 supermajority in the General Assembly.¹⁶⁷

It is a tall order, but Western states can initiate discussions on comprehensive UN reform. Proposals could involve expanding the Security Council to include more representatives with a two-term mandate, providing an alternative to the current structure that involves protracted negotiations. Additionally, advocating for changes that subject a permanent member's veto to General Assembly debate and potential rescinding with a two-thirds majority would demonstrate a commitment to reshaping the UN's outdated framework. While the process of reform is inherently gradual, Western states signalling a commitment to restructuring these international organisations can affect Russia's influence and fortify the collective response to Putin's actions.

Beyond institutional reforms, justice for Putin's actions is paramount, requiring the involvement of the International Criminal Court (ICC). Utilising the ICC, with a composition of judges from 'friendly' and 'unfriendly' countries, ensures a fair trial. This approach avoids the perception of victors' justice, allowing the evidence against Putin to be scrutinised. Such a trial not only holds Putin accountable for his actions but serves as a powerful tool for conveying to the Russian population the consequences of violating international law.¹⁶⁸

Simultaneously, Western states should engage in diplomatic efforts to build an international coalition committed to isolating Russia further. Utilising the ICC as a rallying point, Western

¹⁶⁴ Link to the database is here: <https://cdn.occrp.org/projects/russian-asset-tracker/en/>.

¹⁶⁵ "Poland seizes Russian high school building in Warsaw", *France 24*, 29 April 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230429-poland-seizes-russian-high-school-building-in-warsaw>.

¹⁶⁶ "Security Service suspects Moscow House's management of breaching EU sanctions", *The Baltic Times*, 22 December 2023, https://www.baltictimes.com/security_service_suspects_moscow_house_s_management_of_breaching_eu_sanctions/.

¹⁶⁷ Ariel Cohen and Vladislav Inozemtsev, "How to expel Russia from the UN", *The Hill*, 11 March 2022, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/3717566-how-to-expel-russia-from-the-un/#:~:text=To%20accomplish%20this%2C%20first%2C%20a,supermajority%20in%20favor%20of%20expulsion>.

¹⁶⁸ Rashmin Sagoo and Talita Dias, "The ICC response to Russia's war gives hope for justice", Chatham House, 19 March 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/03/icc-response-russias-war-gives-hope-justice>.

nations can leverage Kremlin threats against the court ¹⁶⁹ as evidence of the urgent need to bring Putin to justice. By fostering international collaboration on this front, Western states can bolster their efforts to isolate Russia diplomatically and demonstrate a united front against impunity for egregious actions.

¹⁶⁹ "ICC concerned by Russia's 'threats' over Putin warrant", *Al Jazeera*, 23 March 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/23/icc-concerned-by-russian-threats-over-putin-arrest-warrant>.

Helping Future-Russia

The adage has it that actions speak louder than words. Western states cannot simply declare Putin illegitimate. While that would get a reaction from the Kremlin in increased vitriol, it would not in itself show that Western states are prepared to follow through. Therefore, not only should Western governments designate Putin illegitimate, but to show their resolve to the Kremlin they must follow through with a comprehensive strategic package on the lines outlined above. Consequently, after the declaration, Western states must support Ukraine to win the war quickly. They must increase NATO's presence in east Europe, boost the Western presence in Russia's neighbours – supporting Moldova in particular, but also Armenia, Georgia and Central Asia – and underwrite the Belarusian opposition to build a democratic future-Belarus. Western states should tighten Russian sanctions, remove all Russian banks from SWIFT and locate – and if necessary, seize – Russian state and cultural assets abroad. Western companies still operating in Russia that have not attempted to move should have profits taxed in their home country with proceeds sent to Ukraine.

Such actions would show the Kremlin that the West is prepared to stand firm and will take this stance long-term. This would emphasise to the Russian elite that there is no way out of the war except by removing Putin. Peering into the murky world of Russian elite politics is difficult, but there are divisions. On the one hand, some elites are privately against the war. On the other hand, the elites fear that if Russia does not win, then the regime will collapse – and so they support it.¹⁷⁰ Western states must work on this dichotomy and talk to the different elite factions to gauge their views and what it would take to bring them onside in supporting a change in power from Putin.

Such a situation is repugnant, but necessary. The West must build elite support for change in Russia. This does not mean a great power concert which abandons Ukraine. Western states should support Ukraine to win this war quickly, increase sanctions and show that the West is united. By showing Western support for Ukraine, ever-tighter sanctions, Western militarisation and support for Russia's neighbours will all help the Russian elite see that Putin has taken Russia down a path of ruin and a way out must be found. By preparing a plan for a democratic future-Russia, Western states can show that Russia is not being 'cancelled' without a coherent way out if Russian elites take the opportunity.

While autocracies can collapse because the regime loses popular legitimacy – or they become ossified – this is a long-term waiting game. A speedier solution is to talk to Russian elites to offer them a way out and an endgame. Such a stance would allow those who see the war for what it is – Putin's folly – the opportunity to know what is necessary to put Russia on a positive track. Of course, there should be no official talks – and certainly not with Putin. American and British officials – and former government representatives – have held talks with Russian elites, although these were back channels for peace for America¹⁷¹ and global security issues for Britain.¹⁷² Such initiatives are not what this report proposes, but they laid the groundwork for

¹⁷⁰ For this dichotomy see: Tat'yana Stanovaya, "Administratory protiv revizionistov. Kak rossiiskaya elita khochet zhit' dal'she [Administrators against revisionists. How the Russia elite wants to live further]", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 10 October 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/90750>; Isaac Chotiner, "Why Russian Élites Think Putin's War Is Doomed To Fail", *The New Yorker*, 3 May 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/why-russian-elites-think-putins-war-is-doomed-to-fail>; Tat'yana Stanovaa, "Zvonok dlya Prigozhinykh. Utekshii razgovor o nastoyashchem i budushchem rossiiskoi elite [A call for the Prigozhins. Leaked conversation about the present and future of the Russian elite]", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 29 March 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89399>.

¹⁷¹ Josh Lederman, "Former U.S. officials have held secret Ukraine talks with prominent Russians", *NBC News*, 6 July 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/former-us-officials-secret-ukraine-talks-russians-war-ukraine-rcna92610>.

¹⁷² Richard Holmes, "UK has held secret talks with Russia during the Ukraine war", *iNews*, 22 September 2023, <https://inews.co.uk/news/uk-secret-talks-russia-ukraine-war-2633482>.

Western representatives to show that there is a coherent plan for a democratic future-Russia and what it will take to get there.

There have been defections in state institutions spurred by the sense that the full-scale invasion was a mistake.¹⁷³ While numbers are small, both the CIA and MI6 have publicised efforts to convince more Russians to defect.¹⁷⁴ Such a stance emphasises that while the public numbers are small, actual defector numbers are likely much higher. All this is happening without established dialogue. If Western states began dialogue it could precipitate mass defection and weaken the Kremlin inexorably. Western states cannot be seen to be engaging with Russian elites, but former officials could initiate this process. Britain could take the lead in asking other states that Russia views as 'friendly' to engage. Britain could incentivise the Brazilian or Turkish authorities to speak to Russian elites by speeding up free-trade agreements with both.

There would need to be some financial incentives. The Kremlin is a kleptocracy.¹⁷⁵ The state buys loyalty through resource control and access. By giving the elite the business left by Western companies, Putin is trying to shore up their support.¹⁷⁶ Western states must be clear what it will take to move to a democratic future-Russia and should continue locating and freezing Russian elite assets abroad. There have been murmurings of discontent among Russian elite groups over the loss of status symbols and wealth in the West. Few want to give up the French Riviera, New York, London and Paris for Sochi. Western states must up the pressure¹⁷⁷ while being clear what needs to change. If Western states showed that the Russian elites could benefit from a democratic future-Russia, it may cause splits. Many in the regime consider themselves patriots.¹⁷⁸ So a coherent future-Russia plan putting Russia on a wealthier and democratic path may appeal to some in the regime.

It is increasingly clear that Putin fears an elite coup and has made his inner circle smaller because of it.¹⁷⁹ This growing mistrust in the Kremlin's corridors can be used to the advantage of Western states. By talking to elites about defections, Western states can sow discord in the Kremlin and increase Putin's mistrust of those around him. If someone goes to Putin and says that they have spoken to Western representatives, he will likely assume others are doing this too. If elites do not tell Putin but he finds out another way, suspicion will increase. Both options will lead to Putin – who is increasingly mistrustful of those around him¹⁸⁰ – and a small band of true believers lashing out at those around them. This would cause more defections. It is another reason why Western states must talk to the elite.

Representatives from the West must engage with very diverse elite groups. On the one hand, there are the so-called modernisers, with the current Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin being one key player in this group. Constitutionally, should Putin be incapacitated or removed, then Mishustin would become president. Having put great stock in projects to modernise

¹⁷³ Melissa Bell, Saskya Vandoorne and Joseph Ataman, "High-ranking Russian officials are defecting. This man is aiding them", *CNN*, 25 January 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/01/25/europe/russia-fsb-defectors-osechkin-intl-cmd/index.html>.

¹⁷⁴ Huw Dylan, David V. Gloe and Daniela Richterova, "Western Agencies Offer an Open Door for Russian Defectors", *Foreign Policy*, 26 July 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/26/western-intelligence-recruit-russian-defectors/>; Andrew Osborn, "CIA tries to recruit double agents in Russia with new video", *Reuters*, 23 January 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/cia-tries-recruit-double-agents-russia-with-new-video-2024-01-23/>.

¹⁷⁵ See: Karen Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

¹⁷⁶ Alexandra Prokopenko, "Putin Is Betting On a New Class of Asset Owners to Shore Up His Regime", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 14 September 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/90543>.

¹⁷⁷ Olga Chyzh, "Putin enables the lifestyle of Russia's elite – until they lose faith, there is little hope of peace", *The Guardian*, 17 March 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/mar/17/putin-lifestyle-russia-elite-peace-military-loyalty>.

¹⁷⁸ John Sipher, "If You Want to Understand Russian Power, Listen to the People Who Leave It", *Time*, 22 May 2023, <https://time.com/6281663/russia-vladimir-putin-defectors/>. This idea that the sloviks see themselves as patriots was corroborated by: LG692X, LU925M, SH235F, AM071U, EH382J.

¹⁷⁹ Interviews with EH382J, LU925M, GJ983M, LG692X, LU925M, EH328J, EM736K, CE072P, FR826J.

¹⁸⁰ Interviews with EH382J, LU925M and SH235F.

Russia, Mishustin is likely dissatisfied by a war that has ruined those plans.¹⁸¹ Similarly, other modernisers are likely disgruntled at having to firefight to support the economy and that modernisation plans have become redundant due to the war.¹⁸²

On the other hand, Western states must also speak to Head of the Security Council Nikolai Patrushev – the hardliner’s hardliner. Any potential transition needs his tacit approval. Patrushev was looking to elevate his son, Dmitry, to the prime ministership – and eventually the presidency – and will not want his son in charge of a destroyed country. If Western governments opened discussions on Patrushev Junior being the next president, this may obtain Patrushev’s acquiescence on regime change.¹⁸³ Such talks would have to be done in secret to give both sides plausible deniability. Either former Western officials and Russians linked to Patrushev could make the initial running on this in say the United Arab Emirates – or representatives from third countries could make the initial running. Short of instigating regime change, Western states have few alternatives other than to splinter the Russian elite.

Ideally the current elite should go to The Hague. Certainly, some form of lustration must occur. This may spark increased regime support in the elite. But an intelligible democratic future-Russia plan¹⁸⁴ – with a place for elites who show remorse after a time out of politics and playing to elites’ patriotism – can induce elites to step aside. Few autocracies collapse cleanly. Western states must talk to the Russian elite to splinter the regime. It is an unpalatable option, but it is crucial to creating a democratic future-Russia.

Like the Belarusian opposition-in-exile – which holds elections in 2024 for a Coordinating Council – the Russian opposition-in-exile should follow suit. Western states should support the Russian Council-in-Exile (CiE) and work closely with the Russian opposition to find out the exact numbers of diaspora Russians in each Western country and develop a secure online voter server. Such a system should be rolled out to post-Soviet states where diaspora Russians have gathered since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The opposition tried during the 2011–2012 protest to run a Coordination Council but this was hampered by members’ disparate ideological stances and a lack of advertising to Russians about its purpose.¹⁸⁵

However, the diaspora is now more ideologically aligned and anti-Putin. Britain should set up a committee of diaspora opposition to meet and develop a coherent CiE plan to give the diaspora information as to how the structure will function. This would mean including representatives from the different political factions, but also academics, journalists and people from civil society. There have already been meetings of Russian opposition groups and people who want to work towards developing a plan for future-Russia.¹⁸⁶ There have

¹⁸¹ Andrey Pertsev, “Ne vyskazyvaetsya dazhe pri zakrytykh dveryakh. Kak voyna izmenila rabotu Mikhaila Mishustina – i pochemu prem’er otkazalsya ot piara, kotoryi tak lyubit. Rasskazyvaet spetskor “Meduzy” Andrei Pertsev [He does not speak out even behind closed doors. How the war changed the work of Mikhail Mishustin – and why the prime minister abandoned the PR that he loves so much. Meduza special correspondent Andrey Pertsev reports]”, *Meduza*, 21 July 2022, <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/07/21/ne-vyskazyvaetsya-dazhe-pri-zakrytyh-dveryah>.

¹⁸² Svetlana Reiter and Margarita Lyutova, “Kryshka groba zakryta i zakolochena. Pochemu Elvira Naibullina ne ushla iz Tsentrobanka posle nachala voyny – i kak TsB pytaetsya spasti rossiiskuyu ekonomiku. Rassledovanne “Meduza” [The lid of the coffin is closed and boarded up. Why Elvira Naibullina did not leave the Central Bank after the start of the war – and how the Central Bank is trying to save the Russian economy. Meduza investigation]”, *Meduza*, 27 June 2022, <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/06/27/kryshka-groba-zakryta-i-zakolochena>.

¹⁸³ Interview with AM071U.

¹⁸⁴ Andrey Yakovlev, “Rossiiskoi elite pridetsya dogovarivat’sya o prekrashchenii voyny [The Russian elite will have to negotiate an end to the war]”, *The Moscow Times*, 31 August 2023, <https://www.moscowtimes.ru/2023/08/31/rossiiskoi-elite-pridetsya-dogovarivatsya-o-tom-chtobi-prekratit-voynu-a53600>.

¹⁸⁵ Georgy Bovt, “Opposition’s Coordination Council Is Pointless”, *The Moscow Times*, 24 October 2012, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/10/24/oppositions-coordination-council-is-pointless-a18833>.

¹⁸⁶ Elizaveta Fokht, “‘My budem rabotat’ s Rossiei. No drugoi Rossiei.’ O chem rossiiskaya oppozitsiya govorila s evropeitsami na konferentsii v Bruyussele [‘We will work with Russia. But a different Russia.’ What the Russian opposition talked about with the Europeans at a conference in Brussels]”, *BBC News – Russian Service*, 12 June 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-65877931>.

also been meetings of former municipal deputies to develop plans at the local level.¹⁸⁷ Some diaspora groups have agreed to unite against Putin rather than continue their separate paths,¹⁸⁸ although there remains ambiguity as to the best course of action.¹⁸⁹

During the third wave of Russian emigration in the Brezhnev period, many Russians went to Germany where the authorities set up a council of anti-Soviet activists in Munich to give first-hand opinions on how to effectively weaken the Soviet Union.¹⁹⁰ The British Government could create something similar, bringing together Russian oppositionists, academics, journalists and civil society to form a committee tasked with organising elections to the CiE and beginning to plan for future-Russia.

In Georgia there were elections for the Moscow government-in-exile,¹⁹¹ and while it was on a much smaller scale than that proposed here, it is a start. Ideas can be fleshed out later, but the elections would occur in Western states and the post-Soviet region, with polling stations and online voting available at various places in each country. Candidates would represent the Russian diaspora in each country and Russians in the country would have a choice of candidates. Seat allocation to representatives of each country can be confirmed later, but countries like Germany with a large Russian diaspora at 1.8 million should have more seats than say Portugal with a Russian population of slightly over 5000. Separate elections would be held for a CiE president across all countries, and they would choose a cabinet. This would give the Russian diaspora a voice – which will likely be denied if the Kremlin decides to limit voting in unfriendly countries¹⁹² – and provide a coherent body for Western states to work with. It would show that Russians even in difficult times can do democracy and can run effective elections, in contrast to the charade in Russia. A president, a cabinet and an elected CiE can give the Russian diaspora a voice and help bring the stability necessary for forming a democratic future-Russia plan and preparing for the fall of Putin. The CiE would not be a government-in-exile – as any government should be voted on by all Russians – but it can create a coherent plan for a democratic future-Russia.

Some of the challenges around giving Russian state frozen assets to Ukraine¹⁹³ could be overcome with the CiE's creation. By declaring Putin illegitimate after the 2024 elections the CiE, after holding free and fair elections, would be a quasi-legitimate Russian entity that Western states can work with to develop a comprehensive plan for future-Russia. The CiE

¹⁸⁷ Anastasia Lotareva, “‘Nel’z’ya zhe prosto nichego ne delat’! U rossiiskoi oppozitsii poyavilas’ eshche odna organizatsiya [‘You can’t just do nothing: The Russian opposition has another organization]”, *BBC News – Russian Service*, 17 October 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/cje9jq847w3o>.

¹⁸⁸ “Kremli’ razdrazhen aktivnost’yu rossiiskoi oppozitsii za pubezhom [The Kremlin is annoyed by the activity of the Russian opposition abroad]”, *Golos Amerikii*, 23 November 2023, <https://www.golosameriki.com/a/moscow-fears-exiled-russian-opposition-will-influence-presidential-elections/7367381.html>.

¹⁸⁹ Dar’ya Bernshtein, “Forum Rossiiskoi Oppozitsii: Ni u kogo net plana po Rossii [Russian Opposition Forum: Nobody has a plan for Russia]”, *Deutsche Welle*, 24 February 2024, <https://www.dw.com/ru/ni-u-kogo-net-plana-po-rossii-cto-oppozicia-govorit-po-itogam-dvuh-let-vojni/a-68361113>.

¹⁹⁰ Maksim Katz *YouTube* channel, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vTV402mRsnU>.

¹⁹¹ Ivan Nansen, “Maksim Kats vozglavit pravitel’stvo Moskvy v izgnanii [Maxim Katz will head the new government in exile]”, *Panorama*, 2 July 2022, <https://panorama.pub/news/maksim-kac-vozglavit-pravitelstvo-moskvy>.

¹⁹² “Russia Mulls Barring Citizens in ‘Unfriendly’ Countries From Voting in 2024 Election – Vedomosti”, *The Moscow Times*, 9 January 2024, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/01/09/russia-mulls-barring-citizens-in-unfriendly-countries-from-voting-in-2024-election-vedomosti-a83665>.

¹⁹³ Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz, “Europe must seize Russia’s state assets now”, *Politico*, 24 January 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-must-seize-russia-state-assets-now/>; Nigel Gould-Davies, “Seize the moment, seize Russian assets for Ukraine”, *IJSS*, 15 December 2023, <https://www.ijss.org/online-analysis/commentary/2023/12/seize-the-moment-seize-russian-assets-for-ukraine/>; Maximilian Hess, “It is time to use Russia’s frozen assets to help Ukraine”; “Seizing Russian Assets Won’t Save Ukraine”, *Bloomberg*, 23 January 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2024-01-23/ukraine-needs-western-commitment-before-russian-assets?leadSource=verify%20wall>; Julia Payne and Jan Strupczewski, “EU unlikely to confiscate Russian central bank assets – officials”, *Reuters*, 23 January 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-unlikely-confiscate-russian-central-bank-assets-officials-2024-01-23/>.

election would be the only fully free and fair election in Russia's history, thereby giving CiE representatives more legitimacy than previous Russian governments. Russian state assets to given to the CiE could then be legitimately given to Ukraine for the reconstruction. Some of those assets could be used to help the Russian diaspora run more effective information campaigns inside Russia to emphasise that there is a plan for a democratic future-Russia.

If there is no future-Russia plan, then Russia will return to another autocratic regime after Putin – or Putin will succeed in solidifying his position for longer – leading to further Kremlin attempts to destabilise neighbours and Western states. The West must unite the diaspora opposition, build up exiled media, develop narratives for Russian domestic audiences and advance a coherent and effective plan for a democratic future-Russia.¹⁹⁴ The diaspora is the West's secret weapon in developing this plan. The post-February 2022 diaspora has developed grassroots structures, creating a new politics away from the opposition leaders of the 1990s whom the Kremlin has successfully tarnished as beyond the pale for most Russians. The new diaspora has a "greater capacity for collective action and cooperation".¹⁹⁵ Western states must use these skills to construct a democratic future-Russia.

Although time is short, the Russian diaspora must have a say in the presidential election. This does not mean trying to manipulate the vote. This would play to Kremlin narratives about external forces trying to manipulate the vote and destroy Russia. With all opposition having been removed, the diaspora must act now to show that the elections are a charade. Ideally, a campaign of folded ballots¹⁹⁶ should have been called for. It would have shown polling station volunteers and employees at the regional and central election commissions the level of anti-Putin support. It would be harder for the authorities to steal the election. Election commission employees would know the real result and information would be leaked, thus making the election fraudulent and giving Western states another argument for declaring Putin illegitimate. However, a simpler solution is now required due to time constraints and so the opposition-in-exile should call for voters to come at midday.¹⁹⁷ Coming at a specific time would show that the diaspora is listened to and that there is opposition in Russia. It would also be very difficult for the regime to stop and to repress.

The Kremlin will portray the CiE as a Western fifth column out to destroy Russia. There is little that can be done to stop this. But Western states, by seeing the CiE as the legitimate Russian state entity, could ease sanctions in some areas that have little military purpose like medicine and food. Almost 20% of vital drugs have disappeared from Russian pharmacies and in some cities this figure is at 65%.¹⁹⁸ If the CiE got Western states to change their stance on such an issue and publicised it in Russia, it would give the CiE legitimacy. Of course, Russian state media will try to spin it as victory for the Kremlin, but if publicised correctly and constantly it can show that the CiE is doing more than the authorities to support Russians domestically. The CiE should monitor sanctions and advise Western states on where to adjust these – although the overall strategy should be tightening.

Another issue is to increase visa issuance for Russians by Western states. The CiE should work with Western states to create a special visa for Russians in the media, civil society and the

¹⁹⁴ See: Hall, "Getting a Foot in the Door".

¹⁹⁵ Magarita Zavadskaya, "Antivoennaya volna emigratsii: uekhat' nel'zya ostat'sya [Anti-war wave of emigration: you can't leave and stay]", *Riddle*, 25 July 2022, <https://ridl.io/ru/antivoennaya-volna-emigratsii-uehat-nelzya-ostatsya/>.

¹⁹⁶ "How Belarus voted: Minsk election commission members explain the shenanigans and intimidation used to stage Alexander Lukashenko's 'landslide victory'", *Meduza*, 18 August 2020, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2020/08/19/how-belarus-voted>.

¹⁹⁷ "Navalny Calls On Russians To Flock To Polling Stations at Noon During Election To Show Opposition To Putin", *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, 1 February 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/navalny-protest-presidential-election-putin/32801298.html>.

¹⁹⁸ Dariya Talanova, "Ot voiny net lekarstv [There is no cure for war]", *Novaya Gazeta Evropa*, 9 November 2023, <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2023/11/09/ot-voiny-net-lekarstv>.

opposition in post-Soviet states and in Russia who want to contribute to a democratic future-Russia. The number of student and humanitarian visas should be increased, and Britain should expand the number of High Potential Individual (HPI) visas for Russians. Western states and the CiE should cooperate on a Russian democracy passport,¹⁹⁹ thus allowing the diaspora to stay in their new chosen country. The Belarusian regime is contemplating stopping issuing passports at embassies, forcing diaspora activists to either return to renew passports or face deportation from the West when passports expire.²⁰⁰ What happens in Belarus first is often implemented by the Kremlin later. Thus, Western states, the Russian CiE and the Belarusian Coordinating Council (CC) CO must create Belarusian/Russian democracy passports, allowing the diaspora to stay, remain safe and better plan for a future-democratic Belarus/Russia. Visa liberalisation and protective passports would give the CiE legitimacy and undermine the Kremlin narrative that the CiE is a fifth column.

¹⁹⁹ "Draft Report", European Parliament, 28 September 2023, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/AFET-PR-753627_EN.pdf.

²⁰⁰ "Lukashenka Orders Belarusian Embassies To Stop Issuing Passports", *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, 5 September 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-lukashenka-embassies-stop-passports/32579703.html>.

Putin's Successor?

This is a long-term endeavour, but there are ways for Western states to expedite a democratic future-Russia. Historically, a change in Russia's government has led to misplaced optimism about improved relations. At times the relationship between Western states and Russia was akin to Stockholm syndrome, with the West as the in-love captive. To avoid repeating past misjudgements, Western states must assert that any new Russian leader will be illegitimate. The outlined pressure points will persist until specific actions are taken.

Western states should demand internationally observed free and fair elections, the release of political prisoners and the repeal of restrictive legislation like the foreign agents' law. However, these initial steps, if taken, should not result in dropping the illegitimacy decision or lifting sanctions. Instead, they would signal the Kremlin's willingness to change. Subsequent stages should involve troop withdrawal from all of Ukraine, demobilisation, compensation to Ukraine, lustration and, ideally, sending Putin and his inner circle to The Hague. Only full implementation of these measures would justify lifting the Kremlin's illegitimacy designation. Western states must communicate these requirements to the Russian elite, outlining the steps necessary to extricate themselves from the present. A comprehensive plan for Russia's democratic future would serve as a guiding framework in this endeavour.

Negotiating an End to the War

The argument for Ukraine to negotiate with Russia or for Western states to negotiate over Zelensky's head has gained traction, citing concerns about Ukraine's limited prolonged warfare capacity and the unsustainability of Western funding. Three recent reports posit that Russia has greater capacity²⁰¹ so Western states should no longer fund Ukraine,²⁰² and propose giving Russia its frozen assets and urging it to finance Eastern Ukraine,²⁰³ a plan unlikely to align with Kremlin interests and risking more division in Ukraine.

But this report argues that Putin seeks nothing short of Ukraine's capitulation, believing that he can outlast Western involvement. Forcing premature negotiations would leave Ukraine under suzerainty and amplify perceptions of Western weakness globally. There is little assurance that if Putin prevails in Ukraine, he will stop there,²⁰⁴ which would lead to further instability. The preferred strategy remains swift support for Ukraine to win the war and subsequently integrate into the EU and NATO, even if restoration of its 1992 borders is delayed.²⁰⁵ Prolonging the conflict benefits Putin, reinforcing domestic legitimacy and demonstrating Western hesitation against potential Russian aggression elsewhere. Talks might occur eventually, but substantive negotiations are unlikely with Putin in power.

²⁰¹ Anatol Lieven, "Ukraine facing increasingly unfavourable odds", *Responsible Statecraft*, 4 January 2024, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/russia-ukraine-peace/>.

²⁰² George Beebe and Anatol Lieven, "Russia's upper hand puts US-Ukraine at a crossroads", *Responsible Statecraft*, 11 January 2024, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/russia-ukraine-peace-talks-2666922064/>.

²⁰³ Nicolai Petro, "Could Russia play a role in Ukraine reconstruction?", *Responsible Statecraft*, 6 December 2023, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/ukraine-reconstruction/>.

²⁰⁴ Raphael S. Cohen and Glan Gentile, "Negotiating With Russia Is Still a Bad Idea", *Foreign Policy*, 9 October 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/10/09/ukraine-russia-war-negotiations-peace-deal-military-aid/>.

²⁰⁵ Tom Malinowski, "Opinion: Here Are 3 Ways to End the War in Ukraine. One Might Actually Work", *Politico*, 18 August 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/08/18/how-to-end-ukraine-war-00111752>.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The upcoming Russian presidential elections in March will likely see Putin's re-election until 2030, with expectations of a 70% voter turnout securing 75% of the vote for Putin.²⁰⁶ This election presents a strategic opportunity for Western states to declare Putin illegitimate, opening the door for intensified efforts toward fostering a democratic future in Russia.

Declaring Putin illegitimate would invigorate Western support for Ukraine's swift victory in the ongoing war. This involves reinforcing the Western presence in Russia's neighbours and bolstering NATO's activities in Eastern member states. A decisive win for Ukraine would not only send shockwaves through Russian elite circles and society but also trigger a significant shift in cultural and political perceptions, hastening the end of Putin's tenure.

The ensuing consequences would lead to Putin's downfall, demanding that Western states formulate a coherent plan for a democratic future-Russia. Engaging with the current elites, uncomfortable though it may be, is necessary to encourage regime splits and provide Kremlin elites with a viable alternative, making defection or Putin's removal more attractive.

Establishing a democratic future involves supporting the Russian diaspora and electing a Council-in-Exile (CiE) as the legitimate Russian state entity. While engaging in talks with the illegitimate Russian state is essential, supporting the CiE through initiatives like facilitating access to medicine and visas will undermine Kremlin narratives and grant it legitimacy despite Kremlin efforts to label it as a fifth column.

Western states must assert unequivocally that Putin's successor will remain illegitimate until certain actions are undertaken, including withdrawing from Ukraine, providing compensation, initiating lustration and commencing negotiations. Only such measures would justify rescinding the illegitimacy label, with negotiations ideally beginning upon Putin's departure.

It is evident that, for Putin, negotiations imply Ukrainian capitulation, reinforcing his belief that the West is weak and unresponsive to Russian destabilisation attempts elsewhere. Ignoring Ukraine would be the worst outcome.²⁰⁷ Seizing the opportunity to declare Putin illegitimate aids Ukraine and has positive implications for Russia and Belarus, marking a crucial step toward a more stable and democratic geopolitical landscape.

Recommendations of the report are listed in bullet points below:

- The charade of the presidential elections in March 2024 is a good time for Western states to declare Putin illegitimate. 2024 is the end of Putin's second presidential term and his re-election will follow constitutional changes and fly in the face of legality. The lack of opposition, denial of voice for many Russians and the death of Alexei Navalny all require that Western states declare Putin illegitimate.
- A declaration of illegitimacy should convince Western states to support Ukraine further. That Western states have remained united – although that is weakening – deserves a lot of praise. But that support has been piecemeal and Western governments appear

²⁰⁶ Natal'ya Galimova, "V Kreml'e obsudili 'formulu' prezidentskikh vyborov v 2024 godu. V kachestve orientira vzyata yavka 70% pri 75% golosov za osnovnogo kandidata [The Kremlin discussed the 'formula' for the presidential elections. As a guide, a turnout of 70% was taken with 75% for the main candidate]", *RBK*, 2 April 2023, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/02/04/2023/64297e629a7947fae31033c2>.

²⁰⁷ Alexander Baunov, "The Dangers of Losing Focus on Russia's War on Ukraine", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 17 January 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/91398>.

to be losing interest. A declaration of illegitimacy for Putin would re-galvanise Western governments and induce further military and humanitarian support for Ukraine.

- Similarly, a declaration of illegitimacy would allow the West to increase support for Russia's neighbours to better protect them from Russian interference. Each state should be treated differently, but Western states should offer security and financial support. Moldova should be brought into the EU quickly and given security assurances like Ukraine.
- While the Russian economy has stood up well to sanctions, it is overheating. More economic pressure must be exerted on Russia by Western governments which need to get over their fear of a Russian collapse. Third country businesses should also face the threat of secondary sanctions if working with Russia. Similarly, Western companies operating in Russia should be penalised for continuing to do so. Russian banks should be moved off SWIFT with no exceptions. The families of the Russian elite should be banned from Western states and asked to leave if they are already here. At the same time, Western states must do more to support Russians living-in-exile or those wanting to come to the West.
- The report does not advocate for closing all diplomatic channels with Russia. However, Western states should push all Russian embassies to only have a barebones staff and expel most Russian embassy staff back to Moscow. The Kremlin will reciprocate, but that is to be expected.
- The next stage in the process of declaring Putin illegitimate is to expel Russia from international organisations. This will be a challenge and will take time. However, it would lead to reforms in international organisations like the OSCE and the UN. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine has shown that neither organisation is fit for purpose and so reform - and the potential for Russian expulsion - are crucial.
- Declaring Putin illegitimate would allow Western governments to help the Russian diaspora to start planning for a democratic future-Russia. Crucial steps on this journey are to organise elections for a Council-in-Exile (CiE), giving representation to the Russian diaspora, and to develop a plan for a democratic future-Russia.

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