

A New EU Strategy for Russia

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Following its invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Russia has entered a phase of displaying increasingly authoritarian tendencies at home in combination with increased militarism and imperialism abroad. It is safe to assume that Russia's political development will be characterized by greater instability and uncertainty than at any previous point since 1991.

Russia's economy will continue to fall behind the world's leading economies. Putin's actions have caused long-term and potentially irreparable damage to Russian growth prospects. Europe is abandoning Russian oil and gas. Global demand for fossil fuels is expected to decline in the coming decades and Putin has done little or nothing to prepare his country for the transition.

Changes in Russia will have inevitable repercussions for the wider region – from Chechnya to conflict zones in Ukraine, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Karabakh and Transnistria. Political change in Moscow could be triggered by perceptions of Russian military defeat. The European Union cannot therefore maintain its support for Ukraine while anticipating political predictability in Russia. Helping Putin to avoid “losing face” cannot be a strategic objective for the EU, while upholding international law and a rules-based international order must.

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine is an attack not only on a peaceful neighbour, but on democracy, the European security order and international law – the values that underpin liberty, peace, security and prosperity in our societies. If Russia were allowed to harvest any fruits from its aggression, this would undermine the international rules-based order.

The combination of belligerence abroad and internal repression and economic decline does little to inspire any confidence in Putin's political system. The EU-Russia relationship will therefore continue to be subject to surprising and unpredictable events both domestically

and abroad. A risk-minimizing strategy should focus on fundamental European security interests, with the EU's unwavering support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders at its heart. Ensuring that Ukraine succeeds would not only mean victory for Ukraine; it could also have a positive impact on Russia as Ukraine would showcase prosperity and modernization through its democratic, non-antagonistic European path.

Europe's fundamental security interests can be described as:

- ❖ *Support for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.* There can be no “business as usual” or “normalization” until Russia complies with international law and adheres to its international commitments. The EU must embed its Russia relationship in active dialogue with all the other states in its Eastern neighbourhood. Support for Ukraine must be economic, financial, political and military, with clear prospects for membership of the EU and NATO.
- ❖ *Continued pressure on Russia and Belarus.* Sanctions should be tied to compliance with the core principles of the European security order: respect for the territorial integrity – there must be no “creative ambiguity” as to what Ukraine's internationally recognized borders are – and sovereignty of other states; and respect for democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Russia cannot and should not be rewarded in any way for its military aggression and violations of international law. The EU and the West have an obligation to ensure that there are no fruits of aggression. Sanctions should be tied to clear criteria and genuine developments on the ground, not wishful thinking about possible changes in Russian behaviour.
- ❖ *The EU must build resilience and invest in its own security.* This security is strengthened by integration, where the transatlantic relationship with NATO and the United States is a key strategic asset. The US is Europe's most important partner in managing strategic threats, deterrence and the reduction of nuclear risks.
- ❖ *The EU should continue its support for civil society and democracy in Russia and Belarus.* This first and foremost concerns support for Russian and Belarusian civil society actors, media and political opposition abroad. The EU should consider supporting the countries in the South Caucasus and Central Asia that are hosting Russian migrants and refugees.
- ❖ The EU must increase its public diplomacy efforts and strategic communication in order to counter Russian narratives and disinformation regarding Ukraine and the West, not least in the global South. It will also be essential to engage with countries able to help increase and diversify the EU's energy supplies. Putin's most important allies are increases in the price of energy and food, and possible war fatigue in Europe. The EU will have to manage these risks and alleviate undue burdens on households and business while clearly communicating what is at stake – democracy vs authoritarianism.

The risk-minimizing assumption is that Russia will remain authoritarian and imperialist. The defence of the European security order begins with Ukraine but has global implications – for Taiwan, Syria, North Korea and so on. The EU must prepare for a Russian military defeat

in Ukraine, but also for an alternative scenario in which public opinion against a Ukrainian victory grows. If Putin's government is eventually followed by a crisis of public order in Russia, demand for a new strongman authoritarian ruler could easily emerge. In such a way, a vicious circle could be repeated indefinitely.

The EU must avoid geopolitical complacency and wishful thinking and insist on a policy that puts international law, democracy and human rights, not Putin or Russia, first. The EU will need to coordinate its contacts with the democratic opposition to challenge Putin's system of power. A democratic Russia is a vital Western strategic interest. Support for civil society and the rule of law is particularly important in a situation where it remains unclear whether Russian institutions can survive the demise of Putin. In the long-term, Russian nuclear weapons will need to be brought under international control.

Finally, justice must be done. The EU should insist on legal accountability and prosecution of those actors responsible for committing war crimes in Ukraine and human rights violations inside and outside of Russia. Holding Russia accountable for its war of aggression and annexations of Ukrainian territory must be at the forefront. By willfully undermining the rules-based international order and blatantly violating the fundamental rights of Ukraine to independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity – core principles enshrined in the UN Charter and in international law – Russia is putting global security at risk. The EU must continue to defend the rules-based international order and its legitimacy after Russia's war of aggression. International law, including international humanitarian law, must be upheld and respected. Furthermore, Russian state assets, such as its currency reserves held abroad, should be confiscated and placed in a fund for the reconstruction of Ukraine.



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