

SEPTEMBER 2024

PAVEL HAVLICEK and ADAM BALCER

Russia 2030 Futures: The View from Central and Eastern Europe



Introduction

Russia, with its aggressive and imperialist foreign policy culminating in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, has continually been a crucial element for European countries to consider in their foreign and security policy. However, it is generally true that whatever the outcome of the ongoing war and the way in which Russia comes out of its aggression against Ukraine, Europe will need to prepare for some kind of future coexistence with it. Even if this might mean years of deterrence against Russia's expansionist policy unless there is some kind of change inside of its state and society. This is particularly true after the so-called Russian presidential election that allegedly brought Vladimir Putin back to the highest office until 2030—exactly the focus period of this scenario presented here.

This project implemented by the Association for International Affairs (AMO) together with the College of Eastern Europe (KEW), with the support of the German Marshall Fund of the United States, aimed to stir public discussion on potential scenarios for the future of Russia, based on the method of strategic foresight and scenario-building. The outcome strives to present a comprehensive view of the Russia of the future and to outline main conclusions, dilemmas, and policy recommendations for how to respond to what may happen to Russia until the end of 2030.

The added value of this exercise is that it was driven primarily by expertise from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)¹ and brought together experts from the region as well as other parts of Europe, including Belarus, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Ukraine, as well as Russia. This publication is based on a deep belief that the states neighbouring Russia, such as Ukraine or the Baltic states, have rich experience with its behaviour, which led them in the past to warn against its aggressive imperial foreign and security policy. Today, Central and Eastern Europe – particularly some of its countries – is in a good position to publicly speak about what Russia is and how the West should position itself towards it in the coming years, while offering constructive feedback and know-how to the whole of the European Union. This is also why it has been of crucial importance to concentrate on analytical capacity and know-how coming from the region, which all were part of the process for this project.

The end goal of this exercise is to show plausible and impactful courses of events, especially for the EU, that would determine the future of the continent and its relations with Russia. The scenarios show the costs of certain policy choices, or of making no choices at all, if and when these are taken by the EU and the wider international community. They are also seen as early warnings of crisis and conflict situations, which might be the outcome of most potential futures for Russia. Only within specific circumstances and with a clear course of action by the West is there an opportunity to change things for the better from the EU's point of view. That is why there is a profound need for readiness and engagement in the discussion among the member states to make sure that the EU is fit for such and similar future developments coming from Russia. It is of existential interest not only for the CEE countries.

1. Experts from Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia were actively involved in the scenario-building exercise.

The Regional Context

The driving question of today, from which it is necessary to start the discussion about the future of Russia, is where the country is standing right now and from where and in which direction it is going to move. Is Russia about to collapse in several next years (or possibly months), as Yevgeniy Prigozhin's mutiny – which was a very good example of a “black swan” unexpected factor – might have suggested? Is Russia just at the beginning of a long (and finally maybe victorious?) war, for which it might be sufficiently prepared, maybe unlike the West? Or is the Russian leadership just trying to cover serious ruptures in the economy and society as well as its own vulnerabilities, which might open the way for the sudden demise of the whole regime?

The honest answer is that we are not quite sure and can only try to read signals, trends, and messages from inside war-time Russia, and from the perspectives of outside observers who interpret Russia's domestic reality in their own way, and often in their own interest too. There is also a profound need for frank and unbiased analysis, more information from the ground, and continuous monitoring of Russia's domestic situation, which would help us to better understand the future trends and potential triggers that will shape its next course of actions and events happening inside and outside it.

Russia today might seem to present a moving picture with multiple variables, factors, and personalities, which are all interlinked and have various levels of importance for future developments. To navigate this, it was crucial to bring a wide range know-how and knowledgeable voices together to engage in such an exercise and brainstorm on what might come next with various degrees of impact and probability.

In any case, and especially in Central and Eastern Europe, it is also essential to acknowledge our own biases and predispositions in the discussion, which might influence our judgment when looking at Russia, with which many CEE countries share not only a border, but often centuries of, often violent, confrontation or at least comparing and competing dynamics.

This is even more evident since the unprovoked war of aggression that Russia launched against Ukraine not in 2022, but already in 2014 by illegally annexing Crimea and starting the conflict in Donbas, which is ongoing. Even more emotions, reactions, and judgments have spread around that generalize the country's nature and often equate the Kremlin with the rest of the country and the whole nation, which is analytically not helpful and might be misleading when predicting Russia's future course of action. This is not to say that a big part of Russia's society is not standing behind its leadership,² including when pursuing the aggression driven by the Russian imperialism that became the regime's driving ideological binding element.

However, based on individual standpoints, our positions on the current situation in Russia differ, which illustrates the profound need for dialogue, mutual exchange, and critical discussion on what is going on now and what might be next. To this end, this publication strives to contribute to and promote the discussion about the Russia today

2. Levada Center, “Conflict with Ukraine: Assessments for April 2024”.

and of tomorrow as well as about the Western approach and response to it that would – from primarily the EU's point of view – deliver the best-case scenario, while trying to minimize the costs and risks of the worst-case one.

This view is needed and necessary since the West is struggling to plan in a mid-to-long-term perspective and to develop any policies that would address the longer term and deliver the most desired outcome from our own point of view. This problem is part of the bigger issue of a general lack of shared vision and consistency in EU and CEE approaches, which again comes from the same divergence of voices and differing points of view about where we are now and where the situation might develop. This is especially true when mixed with 27 national contexts and political and ideological biases of the EU's leadership, primarily at the level of the member states that cannot agree on what to then do together. EU and Western governments and societies should prepare strategic, policy, and communication actions to prevent worst-case scenarios and strive for the best outcomes.

Methodology

This project used the method of strategic foresight and, stemming from that, a scenario-building exercise, which originates from the private sector and the risk analysis industry. The methodology has been used on a number of occasions by the EU institutions, including most prominently the European Commission and its Joint Research Centre, as well as other policy and research centres and the [think tank community](#).

Expert discussions outlined probable and impactful scenarios for Russia until the end of 2030. Working with crucial factors and key trends and triggers identified, and combining and categorizing them along the two axes of varying degrees of international isolation and internal authoritarianism, produced a mix of scenarios that capture realistic circumstances as well as wild cards (“black swans”) and more predictable fractures (“grey rhinos”) within Russian society, as well as the ongoing longer-term trends and triggers that can be predicted already now and that will gain momentum as 2030 nears. While the scenarios may conflict, they all lead to high-impact outcomes.

The final selection of factors and policy courses reflects five distinct policy directions, each characterized by varying degrees of authoritarianism in Russia and of Russia's international isolation. These policy trajectories encompass Russia's interactions not only with the West, but also with its closest partners and allies. The assessment considers the extent to which other countries have cut themselves off from Russia and Russia's choices regarding engagement with other countries. These dimensions are inter-related but represent separate aspects of the dynamics of Russia's international relations.

The scenario-making exercise used several different groups of experts as well as “backcasting” to verify the initially suggested conclusions and assumptions of previous groups to produce the most credible results and prepare a realistic and plausible series of outcomes, while generally disregarding the “more of the same” status quo option, which we already see now and for which the West is somehow preparing today, despite some notable problems with sustainability of the deterrence and defence of its posture.

Russia
2030:
Five
Scenarios



After Putin: A Shift to Domestic Focus and Western Re-Engagement

Putin's death leads Russia's leadership to focus primarily on domestic affairs. There is no complete reshuffle within the elite, but younger and/or relatively more liberal, technocratic, and pragmatic politicians increase considerably their influence, and the most nationalistic, conservative, and autocratic ones lose a huge part of their leverage. We can start to talk about the beginning of generational change in Russia's leadership. It struggles to maintain a high level of control over society and intensity of repression. With fewer resources due to the ongoing war against Ukraine and less legitimacy in the eyes of the public after the collapse of Putin's personalized regime, it is forced to make compromises and gradually re-engages with the West. The, at least partially, new leadership needs substantial support from the EU and the United States, especially to keep the relative economic well-being and order in society, and thus to prevent further significant societal ruptures. The lack of unequivocal Western support may disrupt the cohesion of the ruling elite's newcomers, potentially leading to a divergence in the approach to the ongoing war and the funding of costly military operations at the expense of the Russian population. After a wave of protests and an elite split in the Kremlin, the leadership is forced to make concessions to the public.

Enabling factors:

- The West is open to dialogue on normalising relations, which is the only way out for a regime under domestic pressure stemming from socioeconomic suffering. However, the West is expected to be reluctant to engage in significant negotiations (on a new global order) and to offer unwavering support to the new elite in post-Putin Russia, largely because of the lack of trust and division among its countries.
- A more robust sanctions regime as a bargaining chip in relations with the post-Putin elite as well as a clearly defined set of conditions for internal changes and reforms, including regarding increasing pluralism and reducing repression, or decentralization.



Chechnya's Power Play: Shifting Dynamics Amid the Kremlin's Decline

Chechnya, which is under the ultimate control of Ramzan Kadyrov, is fully authoritarian. At the same time, Kadyrov and the Chechen leadership is currently completely dependent and personally linked to Putin's regime in Moscow. After Putin's death, the Chechen leadership tries to negotiate a new compact with the new Kremlin leadership. Kadyrov's strength grows thanks to successful pacification of the resistance by Chechen opponents and diaspora. Another possibility is that Kadyrov might himself die before Putin or could be toppled by opponents within the Chechen ruling elite in cooperation with the diaspora and external patrons (Turkey, the Gulf states). In that case, the new Chechen leadership is even more eager to gain de facto or de jure independence.

The Kremlin's struggle to assert control over Chechnya is compounded by external powers, notably Turkey and the Gulf states, seeking to expand their influence inside Russia. Chechnya's bid for independence following Russia's defeat in the war in Ukraine leads to internal chaos and a resurgence of Russian nationalism that conflicts with the aspirations of non-Russian ethnic groups, fuelling political fragmentation across the country's regions. Moscow's central leadership weakens as it grapples with internal divisions and struggles to maintain territorial integrity. Chechnya achieves independence through a rapid conflict or a prolonged political crisis, possibly prompting other North Caucasus republics and some in Siberia to follow suit, while Moscow retains control over some republics through devolution. Despite Western reluctance to intervene directly, some countries forge partnerships with emerging elites in Russian republics. The resurgence of Russian nationalism acts as a centralizing force under the Kremlin's banner, while the aspirations of non-Russian ethnic groups, including in Chechnya, serve as a dividing force. This dynamic intensifies political fragmentation across regions, challenging Moscow's authority.

Enabling factors:

- A high level of infighting among the national-level elite, which leaves Kadyrov (or his successors) in Chechnya under less pressure and control than today, when he has many enemies and few allies, especially after the fall of Yevgeniy Prigozhin.
- Not only external financial and political support, but also a significant flow of military materiel and foreign fighters into Chechnya to support the rebellion against Moscow, like the situation in the 1990s.
- The war against Ukraine depletes Russia financially, depriving the Kremlin of resources to distribute among the elites as well as to the country's regions.



**Level of
authoritarianism:
MIDDLE TO HIGH**

**Level of international
isolation:
MIDDLE**

Russia's Pivot Amid Sino-American Confrontation

Russia under Putin, or his autocratic successors, continues its transformation from intensifying authoritarianism into a full-fledged totalitarian regime, which entrenches itself solidly for a longer period. This internal totalitarian slide is boosted by “favourable” developments in the international arena. A major confrontation between China and the West (primarily the United States) in the South China Sea spills over into a major economic and trade war. This also prompts China to fully support Russia in its war against Ukraine. Beijing endorses even more the totalitarian trajectory of Putin’s regime against the Western democratic narrative (especially promoted by the EU or previously the United States under Joe Biden). Washington under the new leadership of Donald Trump keeps supporting Ukraine militarily and financially, but on a substantially reduced scale as it focuses on the Indo-Pacific region. Washington leaves the lead on Ukraine to Europe, which is unable to deliver on Kyiv’s massive war needs. This leads to divisions within the EU and NATO, aggravated by democratic backsliding in Trump’s United States and in certain EU member states (notably, the victory of Marine Le Pen and her party in parliamentary and presidential elections in France). France under Le Pen and the United States under Trump start a process of gradual rapprochement with Russia. Trump’s outreach to the Kremlin stems from his wrong assumption that the Putin regime can change sides and distance itself from China. All of this eventually leads to Russia’s victory in Ukraine, while Beijing wins a short war with Taiwan. China becomes a real economic and military superpower, with Russia increasingly as its economic and political vassal. This helps the leadership in Moscow to stay in power in the short-to-medium term. To a certain degree, Russia also benefits from China’s growing economic importance on the world stage.

Enabling factors:

- China engages in confrontation with its neighbours and the United States and prevails in the war against Taiwan.
- The West is seriously weakened by democratic decline and internal divisions. It is also weakened by the efforts of authoritarians to shape its foreign policy.
- China’s financial, economic, and military support for Russia against the West increases substantially.
- Thanks to the set of above-mentioned factors, Russia wins the war with Ukraine.



Russian Stalemate: Consequences of Ukraine's Success

In this scenario, Ukraine's gradual success on the battlefield has significant consequences for Russian domestic politics and the future of Putin's rule. While Putin's authority is significantly weakened, it is not completely undermined due to insufficient pressure from the elite and the public. The result is a stalemate between society and the elite, as well as within the leadership. Despite significant pressure from these groups on the top leadership, still led by Putin, they fail in ousting him from power, but they weaken the strong decision-making power concentrated in his hands. This situation is characterized by a delicate balance, with neither side able to decisively influence the political landscape.

Central authority is discredited by failure in Ukraine, and regional politicians and middle-rank representatives of the elite have more manoeuvring space to influence decision-making and increase internal pluralism ("factionization"). However, this does not lead to a "civil war" within the elite and fundamental ruptures within the Kremlin, which would be necessary for a palace coup. There is a high level of continuity, even if time is against Putin's clique, which faces growing pressure, with an unclear future post 2030. In general, the space for autocratization remains rather limited, but at the same time Russia turns inwards because of serious internal economic, social, and political problems. This suggests a possible shift towards greater political openness and internal pluralism within the authoritarian framework of the regime, prompted by the failure in Ukraine, with economic problems potentially acting as a catalyst for further liberalization. A potential pushback from the hawkish hardcore supporters of the war and internal autocratization cannot be excluded.

Enabling factors:

- Ukraine receives sufficient military, economic, and financial support from the West that allows it to win the war against Russia.
- Russian society and the relatively more moderate, technocratic, politicians from the ruling elite become more assertive and outspoken, but pressure from below and within the leadership remains insufficient to provoke regime change.



Ruskiy Mir Is Not Yet Lost

This scenario is built around a logic of Russia's takeover of Belarus, under the condition of Alexander Lukashenko's incapacitation by natural causes or a deliberate move by some of his opponents. The departure of the Belarusian dictator finally opens the way for full-scale Russian control in the form of the Union State, which both countries have been "building" since mid-1990s.

At the same time, the bigger geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West does not disappear, but the Kremlin finds itself under pressure in Ukraine, which is supported by its Western allies, to the degree that it is strategic and sustainable to continue the war. Therefore, the leadership in Moscow decides to make a great bargain with a tired West by "exchanging" Belarus for Ukraine, to normalize relations and to keep control over its last new "province." This is something it can present to the Russian public as a success and a display of keeping great-power status in the so-called near abroad, which somewhat helps stabilize the system from inside.

Enabling factors:

- The general geopolitical situation in the West remains the same and there are no substantial ruptures and/or paralysis among its members.
- The weakened and tired West – particularly some countries – is willing to negotiate with Moscow to stabilize the situation in Ukraine and to bring it closer to the EU and NATO, but at the expense of sacrificing Belarus for the sake of Russia.
- Belarus remains a subject of negotiations without a substantial agenda on its own.



**Level of
authoritarianism:
HIGH**

**Level of international
isolation:
MIDDLE**

Policy Implications for the CEE Countries, the EU, and the West

The Russia 2030 Futures project raises fundamental questions about the future of Russia and the Western reaction to it:

- a) If and under which conditions to intervene in Russian domestic affairs?
- b) If and under which conditions to engage with a future Russian leadership?
- c) How to maintain unity within the EU and NATO?

This is especially true for the CEE countries, which are near or neighbouring Russia and preparing for their respective worst-case scenario, in the case of the Baltic states an open invasion of their territories.

If they do not tackle these questions, Western countries will not be prepared for potentially crucial changes in Russia. As a result, they will risk failure, as happened in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This could be through either (or a combination of) domestic instability with an intra-elite split, a major conflict between the centre and periphery, or a change in the Russian leadership. And in all cases the course of Russia's war against Ukraine will be a decisive factor, as it is not only weakening Russia's state, economy, and society but also bringing costs for and pressuring the West itself.

Would the West be willing to talk to new actors in Russia, or would it prefer to close off Russian society and focus on deterrence and sanctions? On the other hand, in the case of democratic backsliding in key Western countries (the United States, France), the West might be more willing to compromise and find a way to deal with Russia. This would be highly damaging to the vital interests of the CEE countries, which perceive Russia's neo-imperialism as the main threat to their independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. They define as the best outcome a permanent weakening of Russia so that it could not attack them or a change of leadership in Moscow and at least a partial democratization of Russia, followed by its acceptance of international law. It is also in their interest to help Ukraine as well as Moldova and Georgia to integrate with the Euro-Atlantic structures, replicating the CEE experience during Russia's weakness in the 1990s.

However, for that to happen, unity among the Western allies, including the United States and Germany, will be a crucial condition, without which they could be paralyzed and fail to act towards the desired outcome. And unity will be helped by a clear common understanding among Western countries, and especially among the EU members, of the Russia challenge as seen from the CEE countries, which define Russia's foreign policy as a fundamental challenge. The CEE countries thus need to take action to persuade the rest of the EU and the West to pursue their desired course.

Policy Recommendations for the CEE countries

- In terms of policy towards Russia, the region (led by the Baltic states, Czechia, Poland, Romania, etc.) should try to overcome its very deep internal divisions and find the lowest common denominators concerning, for instance, the maintenance or widening of the international sanctions on Russia. Simultaneously, the countries that are the most supportive of Ukraine's war effort should coordinate more closely their policies by establishing a much closer coalition of the willing. In that case, the increase of military, economic, and financial support for Ukraine to the level of best pupils in the class (the Baltic states) is of crucial importance. However, the region also needs much more of unity, not just a coalition of the willing.
- Be assertive and proactive in the EU and NATO debates on a common Euro-Atlantic strategy towards Russia, which is currently lacking and on which there is no consensus.
- Strive to be constructive, innovative players and the go-to place for expertise on Russia, which must be consulted on how to deal with the Russian leadership, no matter of which type in the future. It is also necessary to diligently develop expertise on Russia, not only among civil servants but also in academia, think tanks, and expert circles.
- Propose concrete plans for future possible engagement with Russia's state and society, with fundamental preconditions and red lines before any dialogue can begin.
- Help to build up a future Russian elite – including by reflecting the country's ethnic and regional diversity – with the resources, competences, and know-how to be prepared for a potential change in leadership in the Kremlin.
- Be a clear and consistent advocate for the integration of Ukraine, Moldova, and, when relevant again also Georgia (and potentially also Armenia) with the EU and NATO and offer them concrete help to go through the EU enlargement process and integration with NATO wherever relevant.
- Reflect on CEE weaknesses and biases in observing and analysing Russian domestic political and social processes and contribute to the understanding of what is happening inside Russia, including when consulting with like-minded voices from inside the country.
- Enhance the coalition of the willing in the region with more regular consultations and meetings of officials and more common military, infrastructure, and energy projects. This could persuade the reluctant actors to refrain from open opposition to the mainstream Western position on Russia.

Policy Recommendations for the EU and the West

- Be united in the response to developments in Russia. It is necessary to find a way out of future crisis situations. Although this way out may not be certain, it cannot be done without unity inside the EU and NATO.
- Establish a transatlantic dialogue on the future of Russia, in which the EU must take the lead, since it is the European continent that will be most affected.
- Invest in deterrence, defence posture, and new measures through a decisive increase in military spending and a credible EU and NATO position on the eastern flank (including in the Black Sea) to deter Russia from any future disruptive actions.
- The security of CEE countries needs to be strengthened by increasing NATO military deployment in the region, with new bases and contingents.
- Work with the democratic Russian diaspora, using its potential for countering Russian propaganda and developing alternatives to the Kremlin's narratives, and invest in monitoring and integrating it in Western societies.
- Tighten the sanctions regime and introduce additional measures, including personal targeting of the lower ranks of Russia's nomenklatura, which would increase the West's bargaining chips, leverage, and manoeuvring space potentially for a "day after" situation.
- Pre-agree on the conditions to be met for removing the sanctions and on what the Russian regime would need to do to normalize relations in the case of Russia's defeat in the war.

Russia 2030 Futures: The View from Central and Eastern Europe

About the Authors

Pavel Havlicek is a research fellow at the Association for International Affairs (AMO). His research focus is on Eastern Europe, especially Ukraine and Russia, and the Eastern Partnership. He also deals with questions of security, disinformation, and strategic communication as well as democratization and civil society support in the CEE and post-Soviet space.

Adam Balcer is a program director at the Kolegium Europy Wschodniej im. Jana Nowaka-Jeziorańskiego, lecturer at the Studium Europy Wschodniej at the University of Warsaw and national expert of the European Council on Foreign Relations.

A project of



AMO.CZ

The **Association for International Affairs (AMO)** is a non-governmental not-for-profit Prague-based organization founded in 1997. Its main aim is to promote research and education in the field of international relations. AMO facilitates expression and realization of ideas, thoughts, and projects in order to increase education, mutual understanding, and tolerance among people.



Founded in 2001, the **Jan Nowak-Jezioranski College of Eastern Europe (KEW)** is a politically independent NGO specialised in studies on Eastern Europe. KEW informs and shapes public debate about Central and Eastern Europe and policies toward Northern Eurasia and organises conferences, summer schools, and seminars. KEW publishes two bi-monthlies (Nowa Europa Wschodnia – NEW and New Eastern Europe - NEE). KEW operates also two info portals NEE and NEW. The college publishes books, reports, and policy papers; records podcasts and makes documentary movies.

With the support of



The **German Marshall Fund of the United States** is a non-partisan policy organization committed to the idea that the United States and Europe are stronger together. GMF champions the principles of democracy, human rights, and international cooperation, which have served as the bedrock of peace and prosperity since the end of the Second World War, but are under increasing strain.