



UNPOWERING RUSSIA

How the EU can counter
and undermine the Kremlin

Edited by
Ondrej Ditrych and Steven Everts

With contributions from
Lizza Bomassi, Caspar Hobhouse,
Nad'a Kovalčíková, Rossella Marangio, Tim Rühlig,
Katarzyna Sidło, Giuseppe Spatafora, Bojana Zorić



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CHAILLOT PAPER / **186**
May 2025

European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS)

100, avenue de Suffren
75015 Paris

<http://www.iss.europa.eu>
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Print	ISBN 978-92-9462-428-4	PDF	ISBN 978-92-9462-427-7
	CATALOGUE NUMBER QN-01-25-029-EN-C		CATALOGUE NUMBER QN-01-25-029-EN-N
	ISSN 1017-7566		ISSN 1683-4917
	DOI 10.2815/9980241		DOI 10.2815/5882983

Published by the EU Institute for Security Studies and printed in Belgium by Bietlot.
Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2025.
Cover image credit: Design by EUISS based on photos by Wikimedia, Adam Bignell/
Unsplash, Dmitry Ant/Unsplash, Gavin Allanwood/Unsplash, Jacob Padilla/
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Acknowledgements

The editors and authors would like to thank Carole-Louise Ashby and the taskforce of EUISS trainees working under her coordination – Alessia Caruso, Lisa Hartmann González, Calvin Nixon, Tamara Noueir and Ioana Trifoi – for their invaluable assistance, both collective and individual, in providing background research for the chapters and preparing the visuals featured in this *Chaillot Paper*. Christian Dietrich, EUISS Data Visualisation Designer, deserves a special thanks for the innovative design of the visuals and infographics.

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INTRODUCTION

THE EU NEEDS TO 'UNPOWER' RUSSIA

by
ONDREJ DITRYCH

The EU needs to unpower Russia. It needs to go beyond a protective posture and adopt a more assertive stance against the Kremlin's subversive tactics and malign influence operations. While bolstering resilience remains essential – particularly in the face of increasingly reckless and irresponsible hybrid campaigns aimed at weakening European resolve – this alone is not sufficient. Strong deterrence, including though the credible option of asymmetric responses, is vital to dissuade Moscow from engaging in adversarial activities against the EU, including a potential conventional attack against a Member State. But the EU needs to go even further: it should take active steps to diminish Russia's capacity to erode European unity and challenge its core interests.

Moscow undermines the EU's core interests through its war of aggression against Ukraine, malign influence campaigns targeting Member States, and global hybrid warfare. In a world where US status and influence is rapidly declining and normative contestation is on the rise, the EU needs a new strategic playbook to prevail in what promises to be a long and drawn-out confrontation with Russia – one that will profoundly affect Europeans' security and prosperity.

This playbook should rest on three fundamental pillars: better resilience, improved deterrence, and a concerted effort to actively disable Russia's capacity to cause harm.

There is a fine line between resilience, deterrence and unpowering. Strong resilience will produce deterrent effects by denying the adversary opportunities to strike. Likewise, credible deterrence, through the threat of punishment for hostile activities, reduces the adversary's room for manoeuvre. Yet each concept – resilience, deterrence and unpowering – emphasises a distinct area of action for the EU: the Union's capacity to deal with crises (resilience), to prevent conflict escalation (deterrence), and to limit Russia's ability to cause harm (unpowering). Each is equally important.

Unpowering Russia does not mean reducing it to a minor state. Russia is a power – indeed a nuclear power – with significant material resources underpinning its strength. Russia's internationally recognised area of 17.1 million km² spans 11 time zones. Even as its population declines, with 144 million citizens it remains the ninth most populous country in the world. Its power should not be overestimated – forcing others to see

Russia through a magnifying glass has been a hallmark of Moscow's information warfare. Russia's GDP stood at \$2,161 trillion in 2024. This amounts to roughly one tenth of that of the US or one seventh of that of China or the EU⁽¹⁾. Europe has more military personnel (1,972,000 men and women in uniform compared to Russia's 1,134,000) and spends about the same on defence in purchasing power parity terms – despite Russia's major spikes in military expenditure over recent years, which have reached \$461.6 billion⁽²⁾. Still, Russia remains a force to be reckoned with. The idea behind unpowering Russia is not to disarm it, but to constrain its disruptive capacities and blunt the tools it wields against the EU.

Efforts to counter Russia's actions against EU interests must begin with a balanced assessment of its strengths and, critically, its vulnerabilities. This assessment needs to take into account the complex interplay of interests among various global actors. The EU is not alone, and unpowering Russia involves, among other strategies, collaborating with friends or even *ad hoc* partners on certain specific or localised issues (while disagreeing on others). But neither is Russia alone. As the EU moves to act more decisively against it, it must contend with the stark reality that other powers, most notably China, and lately, albeit to a lesser extent, also the Trump administration, are actively working to *empower* Russia. The EU needs to focus on exploring weak links in the intricate web of partnerships that the Kremlin is assertively building around the world. It should recognise that while some of these partnerships have ideological underpinnings and are

cemented by shared opposition to the liberal international order, there are actors who engage with Moscow for entirely pragmatic and opportunistic reasons.

Unpowering Russia should start with maintaining, and stepping up where possible, support for Ukraine. Russia strives to convince the global public that it is winning the war. It is not. However, the demands of attrition warfare are hard on both Russia and Ukraine, and uncertainty regarding future US support is impacting Ukraine's defensive efforts. Russia is not winning the war; it must not be allowed to win the peace by extracting an unjust settlement imposed on Ukraine.

This would thwart current efforts by European states to develop a stronger continental deterrent against the threat posed by Putin's regime to European security. The security of Ukraine is now inextricably linked with that of the rest of the continent. Moscow's effective control over Ukraine (and Belarus) would improve its strategic

position considerably. It would be naïve to assume that the Kremlin would not seek to leverage this advantage for further expansion.

The security of Ukraine is now inextricably linked with that of the rest of the continent.

OVERVIEW

This *Chaillot Paper* looks at eight other regions and domains where the EU can – and should – unpower Russia. Each chapter describes what Russia is doing, what its strengths and weaknesses are, and how the EU can exploit those weaknesses. While comprehensive, this analysis is

(1) World Bank Open Data (<https://data.worldbank.org/>).

(2) International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2025*, Routledge, London, 2025 (<https://www.iiss.org/publications/the-military-balance/2025/the-military-balance-2025/>).

not exhaustive: a similar approach could be applied to other domains not covered here, or developed from other perspectives. The authors can only hope that the publication will inspire further exploration into how Russia can be effectively unpowered.

We start by examining the relationship with China, which has become a crucial lifeline for Russia's war machine. Tim Rühlig underscores Russia's deepening dependency on China as well as the Kremlin's resulting unease over the growing asymmetry in the relationship, while highlighting Beijing's pragmatic and interest-driven approach to its relations with Moscow. In the second chapter, Lizza Bomassi delves into how the EU can unpower Russia elsewhere in Asia. She describes how the Kremlin seeks to expand ties across the region, including through soft power means, but also how it struggles to navigate the complex political landscape where deepening ties with China create obstacles for some other partners. In other words, Russia can't have it all. As in other regions, Moscow's efforts are furthermore constrained by its weak economic footprint, while the opaque networks on which it relies to safeguard trade flows and project influence are precarious and vulnerable.

This is the case also for the Southern Mediterranean where, Katarzyna Sidło argues, Russia's position is currently weakened not only by its limited resources but also by the damage to its credibility and influence following the fall of its ally, the Bashar al-Assad regime – a development that Moscow proved powerless to prevent. In yet another region close to home, the Western Balkans, Russia maintains influence by lending support to nationalist leaders, institutions

and other local proxies that amplify ethnic divisions or propagate pro-Russian narratives. As Bojana Zorić shows in her chapter, the Kremlin exploits shared Slavic and Orthodox Christian heritage to foster affinities with Russia, using cultural ties and disinformation campaigns to advance its geopolitical interests. But overall, Russia is on the defensive here, seeking to counteract the decline in its strategic influence rather than pursue expansion. In Africa, though, the story is different, as Rossella Marangio documents in the following chapter. Russia's activities here exemplify its adeptness at combining various instruments of influence to achieve cumulative strategic effects – Moscow's *forte*. Yet even in Africa, while the Kremlin continues to make inroads in countries like Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Mali and Sudan, cracks are emerging in its network of influence. These fissures stem from unfulfilled promises to deliver major infrastructural projects and economic development, as well as negative societal impacts associated with the activities of the Wagner Group and Africa Corps.

Russia frequently levels accusations of hypocrisy at the 'collective West' (коллективный Запад) as part of its efforts to shape global public opinion. In her chapter, Nad'a Kovalčíková suggests turning the tables by highlighting the stark contrast between Moscow's words and deeds, as well as the internal contradictions at the heart of Russia's propaganda. Her argument underscores one of the overarching themes of this publication – the imperative to push back against and dismantle the machinery of 'Normative Power Russia'⁽³⁾ through which Russia compensates for its shortcomings in other foreign policy domains. Giuseppe Spatafora follows with a chapter on

(3) Dityrych, O., 'Russia's conservative utopia: A means to global influence', in Ekman, A. and Everts, S. (eds.), 'Contestation: The new dynamic driving global politics', *Chaillot Paper* No. 183, EUISS, Paris, May 2024 (<https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/chaillot-papers/contestation-new-dynamic-driving-global-politics>).

Russia's red line playbook, describing how Moscow has sought to deter assistance to Ukraine by Western partners through threats of conflict escalation. Often it has failed, even if it has managed to cause delays in providing some critical systems, thus frustrating Kyiv's defence efforts. If the EU is to scale up assistance to Ukraine to compensate for a reduced US role, knowing how to counter Russia's playbook will be essential as Moscow is likely to continue using red line threats in the face of escalating tensions with the EU. Another key facet of Russia's hybrid operations has been its notorious 'shadow fleet'. The fleet serves multiple purposes – helping to secure oil exports on which the Russian economy critically depends while 'moonlighting' to attack the EU's critical undersea infrastructure and deliberately threatening major environmental damage. As Caspar Hobhouse explains in the last chapter of this *Chaillot Paper*, the EU is far from powerless to step up its response to this challenge.

The overall picture emerging from the analyses in this report portrays Russia as adept in some areas, but exposed to vulnerabilities in others. The Kremlin often excels at opportunistically exploiting – and at times exacerbating – external frictions and the weaknesses of others. It is particularly skilled at combining its own limited resources to achieve greater cumulative impact. These efforts can be understood in terms of basic forms of 'capital' – diplomatic, informational, military, or economic – that Russia generates and strategically deploys, offsetting limitations in one domain by investment in another. The clearest example is Moscow's strategy of compensating for its limited economic footprint by engaging in subversive activities and investing in manipulating the information environment. It carefully tailors messaging to local conditions – even at the cost of overall

coherence and consistency. Over time, some of the narratives it introduces into the global public discourse gradually gain mainstream acceptance: its false claim that Kyiv is responsible for the war of aggression that Russia launched against Ukraine is a case in point.

Russia has been able to muster diplomatic capital to avoid international isolation. Putin and Lavrov have paid 19 bilateral visits together to sub-Saharan Africa, and 17 to both the Middle East and North Africa (the most visited region over the last decade) and East and Southeast Asia, along with 10 visits to Central Asia and 6 visits to the Americas since 2022, according to our data. The Kremlin has also been able to leverage its extensive diplomatic and espionage networks to support its global hybrid warfare efforts. At the same time, despite often being depicted as a bureaucratic colossus mired in political stagnation and institutional inertia, the regime in Moscow has repeatedly demonstrated a capacity for improvisation, skilfully crafting *ad hoc* solutions to circumvent obstacles put in its way by competitors and adversaries. The shadow fleet is a prime example, as is Prigozhin's Wagner/Concord enterprise, both serving to compensate for Russia's weaknesses relative to other major powers.

However, these makeshift solutions are best understood as clever but temporary fixes to deeper, structural problems. Shifting to an openly confrontational posture *vis-à-vis* the West carries significant costs for Russia, as does weathering the pressures of a still globalised world economy – in which Russia remains entangled despite the unprecedented and complex sanctions regime imposed by the G7 since 2022. Diverting trade has proven far from straightforward, and has created new dependencies and negative externalities for Russia, as partners like

Shifting to an openly confrontational posture *vis-à-vis* the West carries significant costs for Russia.

China or India seek to capitalise on the opportunities presented to them. China's imports of Russian oil and gas nearly doubled in 2024 compared to 2021, as ship-to-ship transfers aimed at circumventing restrictive measures become widespread. At the same time, Chinese imports to Russia nearly doubled from \$67.2 billion in 2021 to \$115.5 billion in 2024⁽⁴⁾. Meanwhile, arms exports, Russia's traditional lever of influence, recorded a steep decline: according to SIPRI, the volume of military resources transferred in 2024 (\$24.8 billion) represented only 57 % of the 2021 level⁽⁵⁾.

Having limited resources at its disposal means that when Russia concentrates them in one place (Ukraine), it suffers losses elsewhere (Syria). 'Normative Power Russia' has served as a useful tool for cultivating ties with illiberal elites worldwide as well as for broadcasting disinformation to populations at large. However, global public opinion is not immune to Russian propaganda even as efforts to debunk it are challenged by the dynamics of the 'post-truth' era – where information and arguments are often accepted based on pre-existing beliefs, dispositions and emotions rather than objective evidence⁽⁶⁾. Despite this, views of Russia remain broadly negative around the world, with 65 % of respondents in 35 countries surveyed by the Pew Research Center in 2024 having an unfavourable view of the

Oil revenue remains a critical income stream for the Russian economy.

country⁽⁷⁾. This matters as the Kremlin continues to seek plausible deniability (however implausible in reality) for its hybrid operations worldwide, manipulating the information environment to that end. Russia values its reputation and, by extension, its status in world affairs. The EU should exploit this long-standing preoccupation⁽⁸⁾ to Russia's disadvantage by cleverly exposing the contradictions behind this self-image. Satire and incisive mockery can be powerful tools in this endeavour, undermining the carefully constructed facade that Putin's Russia has worked so laboriously to project.

Finally, there is the enigma that is the Russian economy. Its current problems, which are leading to decelerated growth (forecast at 1.5 % of GDP in 2025 by the IMF compared to 4.1 % of GDP in 2024⁽⁹⁾) are widely

recognised. These include high (but possibly peaking) inflation fuelled by rising government spending, exorbitant interest rates aimed at curbing inflation, low productivity, complicated supply chains, and labour shortages in sectors where some real economic value is produced – that is, outside the military sector. These challenges are further compounded by structural issues such as overreliance on hydrocarbons, a poor business and investment climate, widespread corruption and diminishing human capital. With the state budget based on an oil price of \$70 per barrel, a growing deficit is likely (at

(4) UN Comtrade Database (<https://comtradeplus.un.org>).

(5) SIPRI, Arms Transfers Database (<https://armstransfers.sipri.org/ArmsTransfer/>).

(6) See: McIntyre, L., *Post-Truth*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, Cambridge, MA, 2018.

(7) Pew Research Center, 'Views of Russia and Putin', in 'NATO seen favourably in member states; Confidence in Zelenskyy down in Europe, US', Report, 2 July 2024 (<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/07/02/views-of-russia-and-putin-july-24/>). For comparison, in a Pew poll conducted around the same time, 31% of respondents across 34 countries had an unfavourable opinion of the US. See: Pew Research Center, 'Views of the US', in 'Globally, Biden receives higher ratings than Trump', Report, 11 June 2024 (<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/06/11/views-of-the-u-s/>).

(8) See Neumann, I., *Russia and the Idea of Europe*, Routledge, London, 2017.

(9) International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook*, April 2025 (<https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2025/04/22/world-economic-outlook-april-2025>).

the time of writing, in May 2025, Urals oil is trading at around \$50 per barrel due to turbulence in the global economy, further depleting the national welfare fund's liquid assets, currently valued at \$56 billion (5.447 trillion roubles, or 2.8 % GDP)⁽¹⁰⁾. Oil revenue remains a critical income stream for the Russian economy – which is why this *Chaillot Paper* recommends prioritising efforts to limit its exports as part of a broader strategy to tighten pressure on Russia. What is less clear is how these structural problems will play out; whether the state will be able to adjust to avoid a recession or a crisis, potentially resorting to unorthodox measures; and what political effects might follow, either from a descent into economic crisis, or from the measures implemented to avert one. Persisting economic inequality increases the uncertainty, notwithstanding sizeable compensation payments to families of soldiers killed in action which however offer no long-term improvements in livelihoods. The jury is still out. Prophets of the imminent collapse of the Russian economy have not been in short supply, but it would be unwise to place one's bets on such an outcome. Over time, the economy, which is clearly not in good health, may do its share to unpower Russia. But it may be too little, too late. The EU needs to act now.

Each of the chapters that follow proposes concrete ideas and solutions on *how* it should act. In the Conclusion, these recommendations are summarised and organised for easy reference. The remainder of this Introduction illustrates the dynamics of Russian power through a global lens, using visual storytelling to highlight key patterns and trends.

(10) This is only 64 % of the prewar value. At the same time, the initially projected budget deficit for 2025 is 1.17 trillion rubles, equalling 0.5 % GDP.

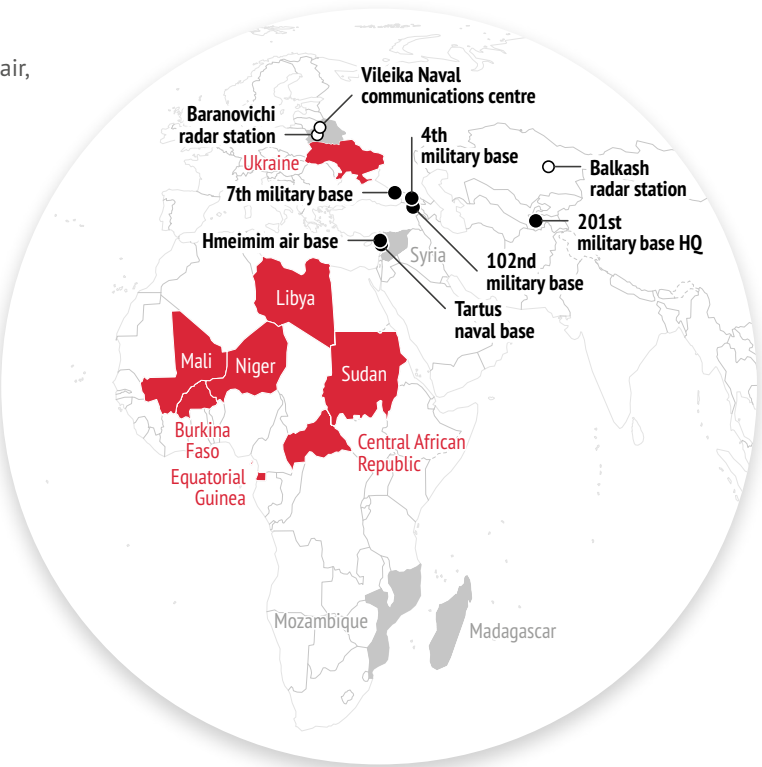
MILITARY

Russia continues to expend military capital to exert influence, but its capacity to do so is becoming more constrained.

Outposts of influence

Russia's declared foreign bases span air, ground, naval, and radar operations. Geographically, they are confined to Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East.

To compensate for its limited global military reach, Russia deploys paramilitary forces, more or less affiliated with the state, in a number of African countries. Irregular military companies have also participated in Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. The most notorious of these, the Wagner Group, now being integrated into the Africa Corps, has been deployed to Ukraine, Africa and the Middle East. Despite its designation as a 'private' company, Wagner was in fact conceived by the GRU, Russia's military intelligence agency.

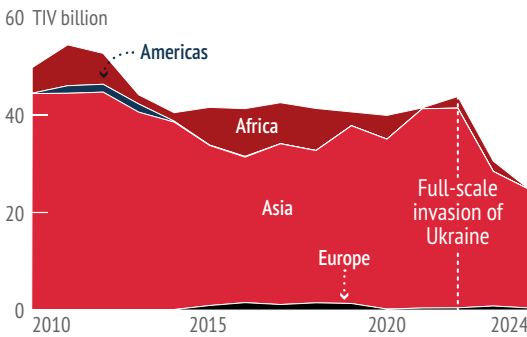


Declining arms exports

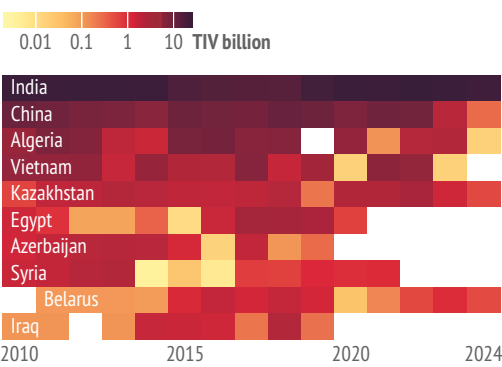
Russia's arms exports, a traditional lever of influence, nearly halved after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Most exports are destined for India and China, while other significant markets are located in the Middle East (Algeria, Egypt, Syria) and the post-Soviet space (Kazakhstan, Belarus). India is the most significant export market for Russia overall. However, deliveries from Russia constituted only 36% of India's total arms imports in 2020-2024, down from 55% in the previous five years according to SIPRI. Russia's arms exports to China have sharply declined in the past two years. In terms of export structure, air systems dominate, but naval systems are resurging after a decade of relative absence.



Arms exports by continent



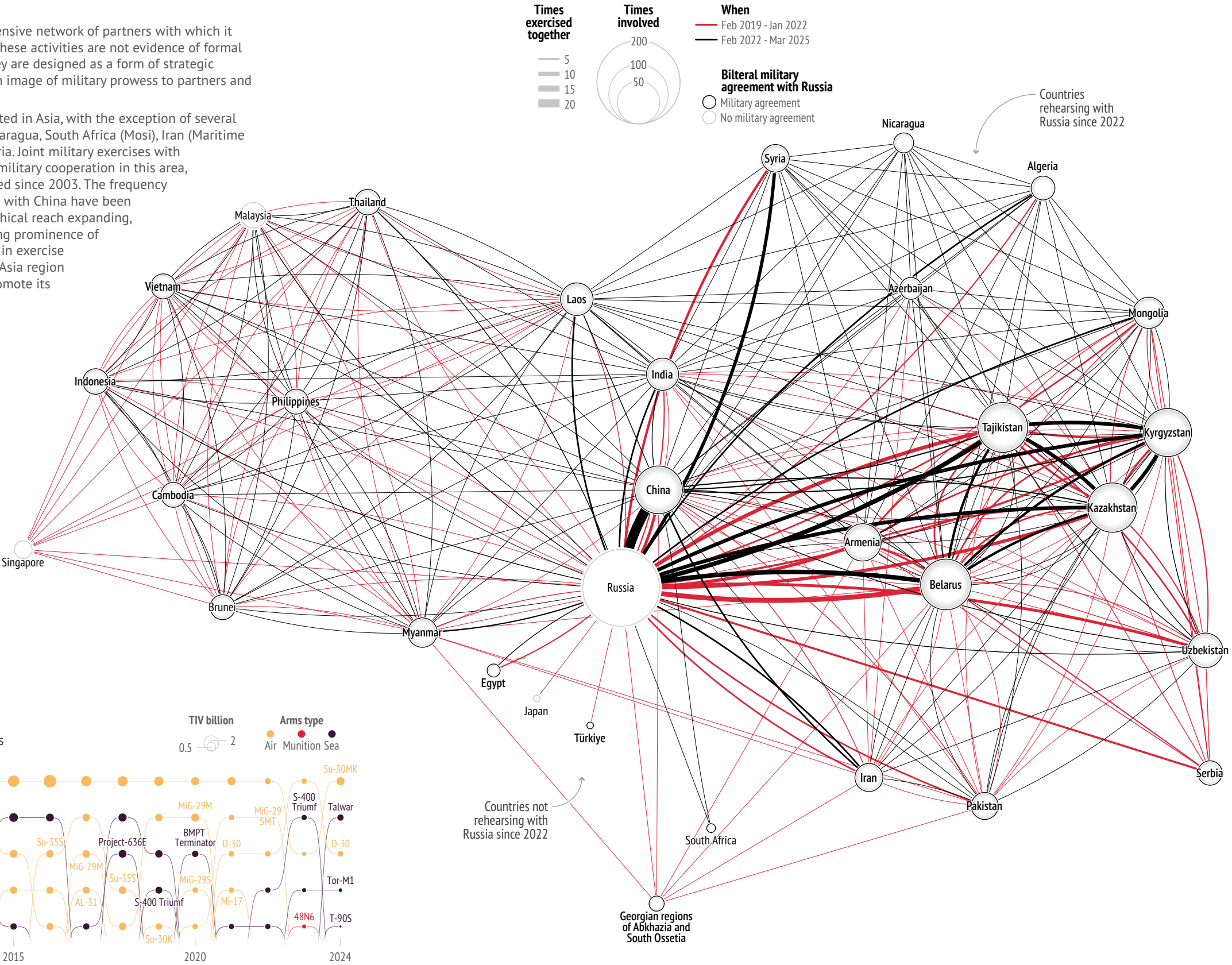
Top 10 recipient countries



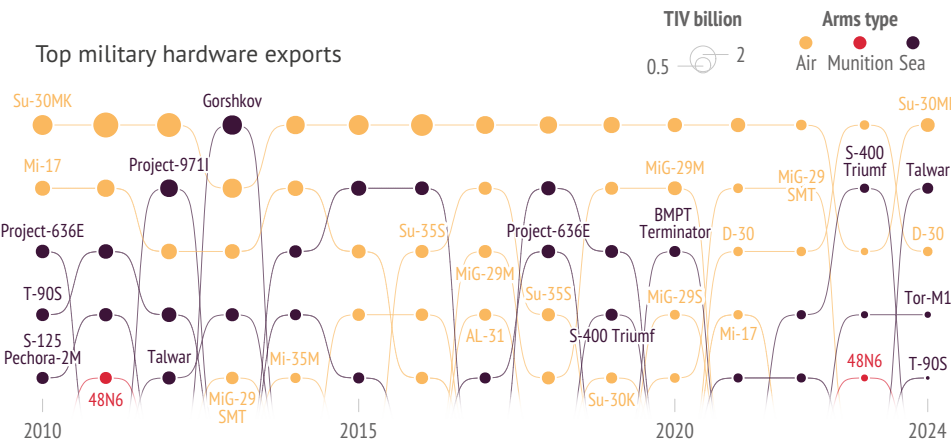
All fun and (war) games

Russia has developed an extensive network of partners with which it conducts military exercises. These activities are not evidence of formal military alliances – rather they are designed as a form of strategic communication, projecting an image of military prowess to partners and adversaries alike.

Most of the partners are located in Asia, with the exception of several outliers – Serbia, Belarus, Nicaragua, South Africa (Mosi), Iran (Maritime Security Belt), Syria and Algeria. Joint military exercises with China are central to Russia's military cooperation in this area, with nearly 70 drills conducted since 2003. The frequency and intensity of the exercises with China have been increasing, and their geographical reach expanding, hand in hand with the growing prominence of air and naval drills. This shift in exercise locations toward the greater Asia region reflects Beijing's ability to promote its strategic interests within the Sino-Russian relationship.



Top military hardware exports

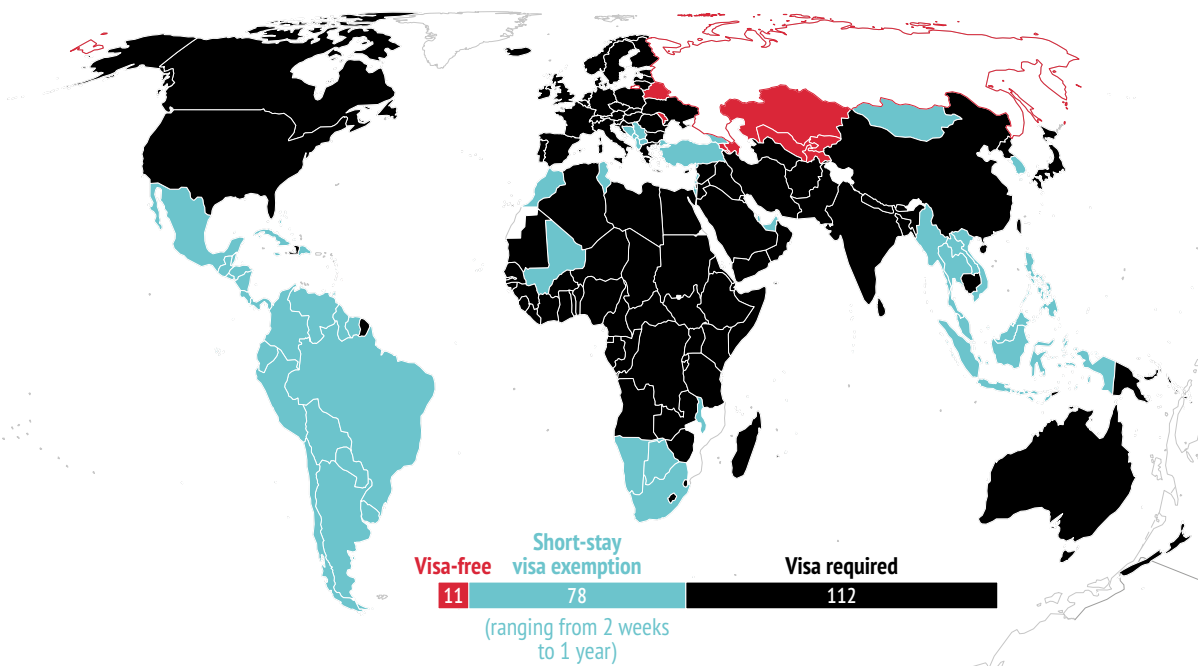


CONNECTIVITY

Russia is not isolated, but in a global economy defined by flows it suffers from significant setbacks in connectivity.

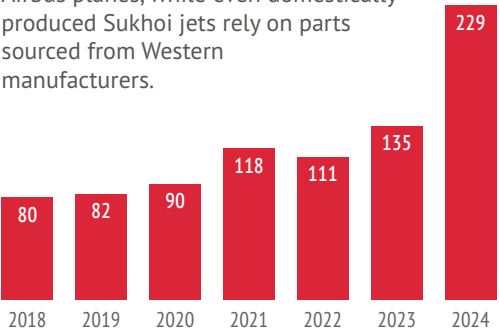
Passport power

With access to just 11 fully visa-free destinations, the Russian passport now ranks among the least powerful globally. The vast majority of countries either require Russians to obtain a visa in advance or allow only short stays.



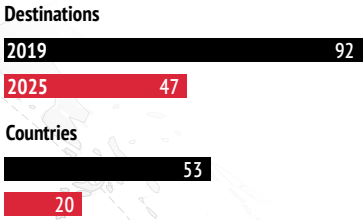
Dangerous skies

Difficulties in accessing spare parts have led to a sharp increase in domestic civil aviation incidents in Russia, such as unscheduled landings, in spite of efforts to evade sanctions and smuggle Western-made spare parts into the country. Russia's commercial fleet is predominantly composed of Boeing and Airbus planes, while even domestically produced Sukhoi jets rely on parts sourced from Western manufacturers.



Connections lost

In the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Aeroflot's international network has contracted significantly, serving 60% fewer countries than before. Most of its current destinations are now in Asia, where several new routes have been opened. In comparison, Air France serves destinations in 83 countries, Lufthansa in 71 countries, and Turkish Airlines in 123 countries.



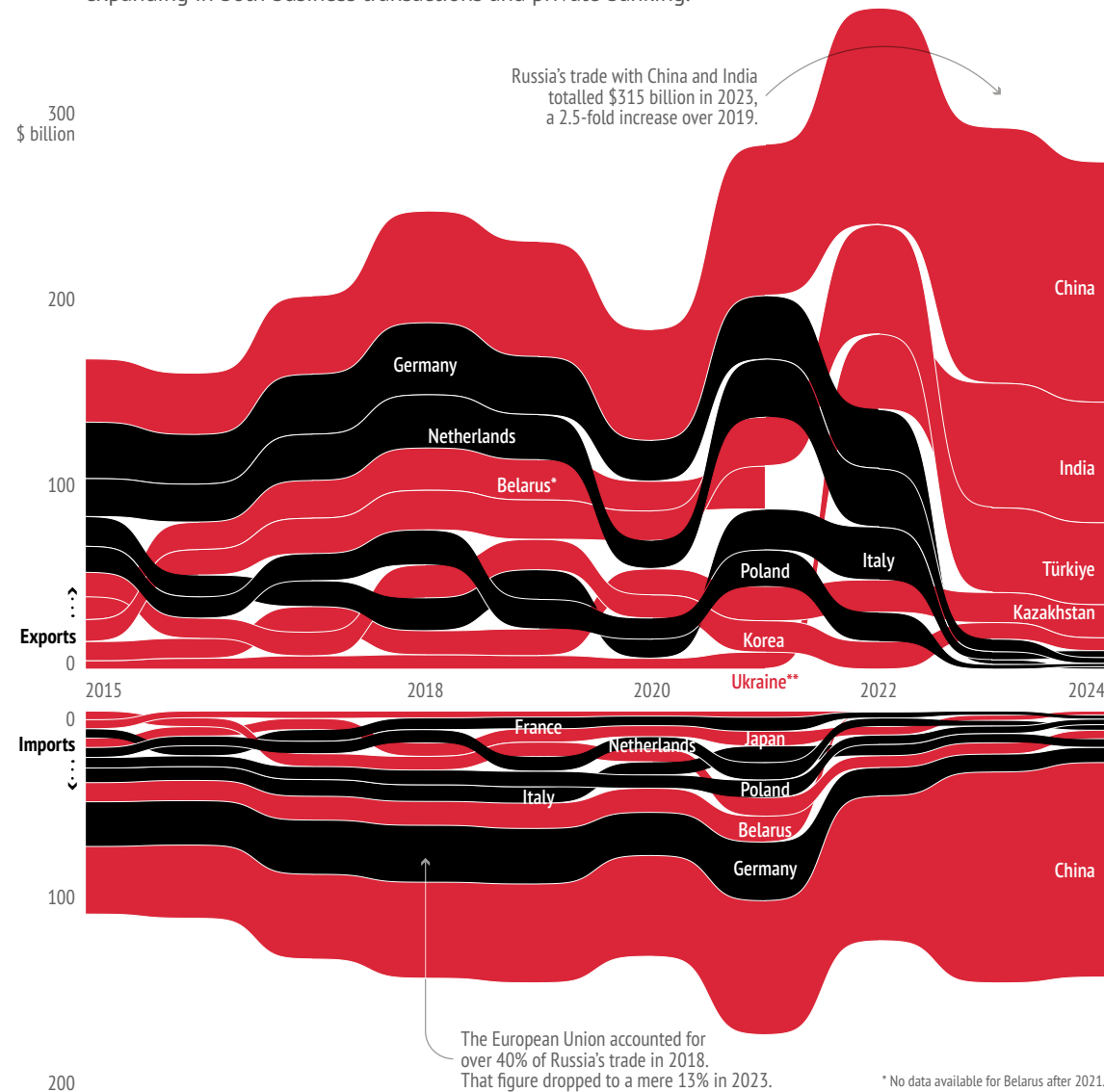
ECONOMY

The Russian economy faces complex supply-side pressures and Russia's economic footprint remains relatively weak globally.

In response to the unprecedented sanctions imposed following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia has restructured its imports and exports, severing many economic ties with Europe and the 'collective West'. The economy remains heavily dependent on raw material extraction and exports, with oil prices crucial for state revenue. However, the economy is also undergoing a transformation, with greater emphasis on domestic demand. The most significant risks currently facing the Russian economy include aggravated supply-side constraints due to additional sanctions, low oil prices and politically-driven interference in economic policy.

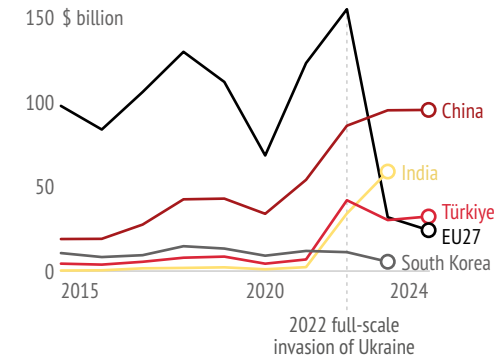
Russia's top trading partners

Diverting trade means Russia relies on a smaller number of key trading partners – with China and India looming large among these. Russia's trade with these two countries has increased by 250% compared to 2019, while official trade with the EU plummeted from 42% in 2019 to 13% in 2023. Imports from China (mostly of machinery and including dual-use items) are essential for Russia and are steadily increasing. At the same time, the yuan has emerged as Russia's main foreign currency, with its use expanding in both business transactions and private banking.



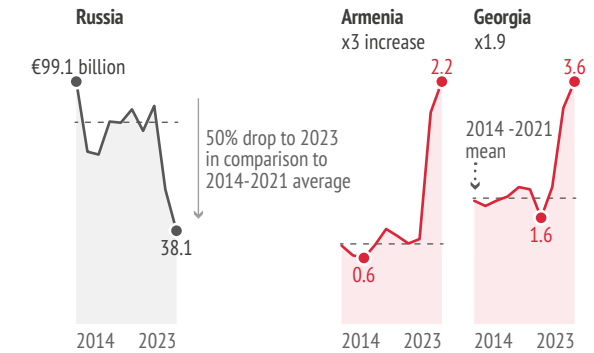
Raw trading

China and India are also key importers of Russian oil and gas. The trade in crude oil relies heavily on the use of Russia's notorious 'shadow fleet'.



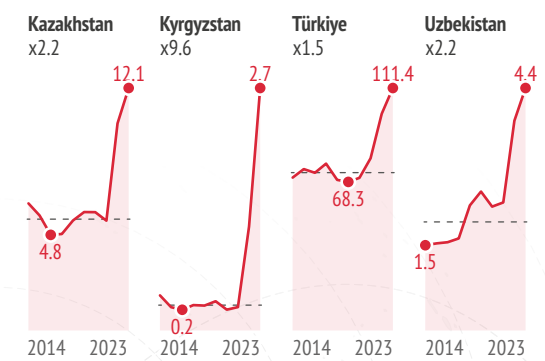
Trade in the shadows

While the EU's exports to Russia have plummeted, trade with several other countries has increased dramatically in relative terms, suggesting that these may be serving as alternative routes for sanctions evasion. The aggregate increase in trade with these countries has nearly offset the decline in the EU's exports to Russia.



Critical grounds

While extraction and trade in raw materials are essential for the Russian economy, Russia also relies on imports of valuable minerals such as gold, diamonds, uranium, lithium and bauxite. Kazakhstan and China are the main import markets for Russia in mineral products, even as Russian companies strive to maintain a global presence. Securing mining and resource concessions, with varying degrees of success, has been part of Russia's hybrid strategy notably in Africa.

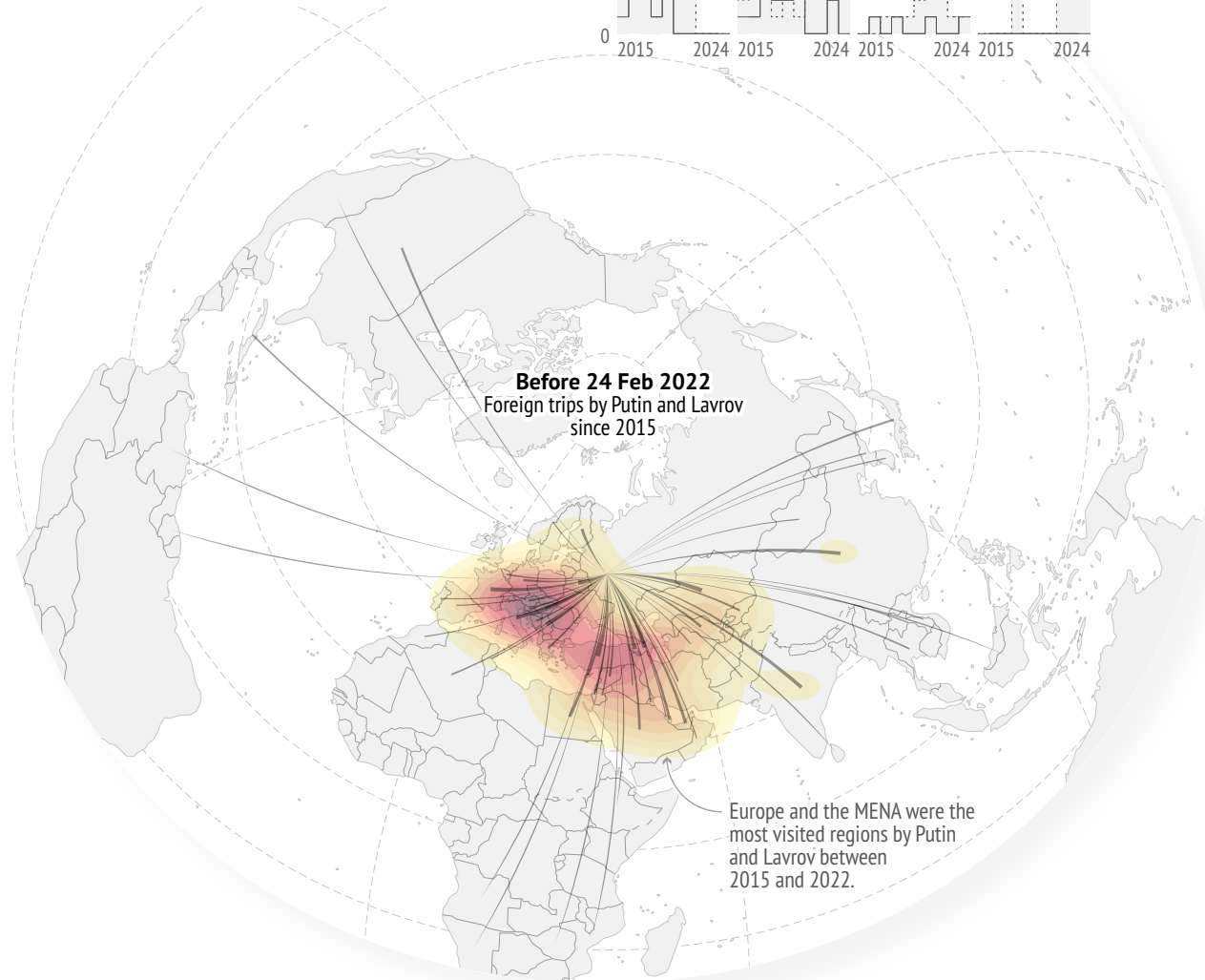
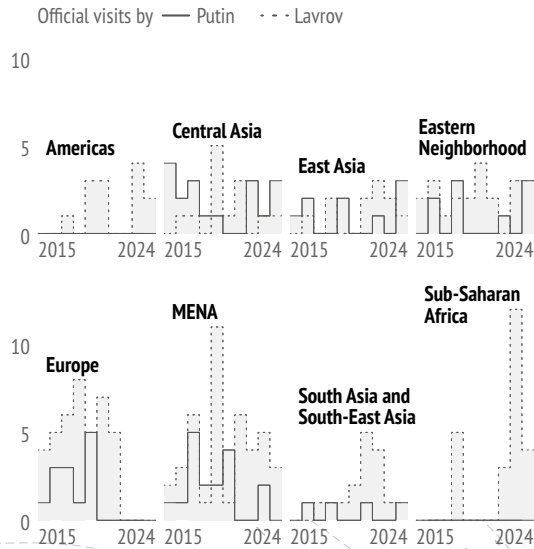


DIPLOMACY

Russia leverages its global diplomatic and espionage network in the pursuit of its interests, but in an increasingly pragmatic world its invocation of a multipolar order and 'traditional values' yields limited benefits.

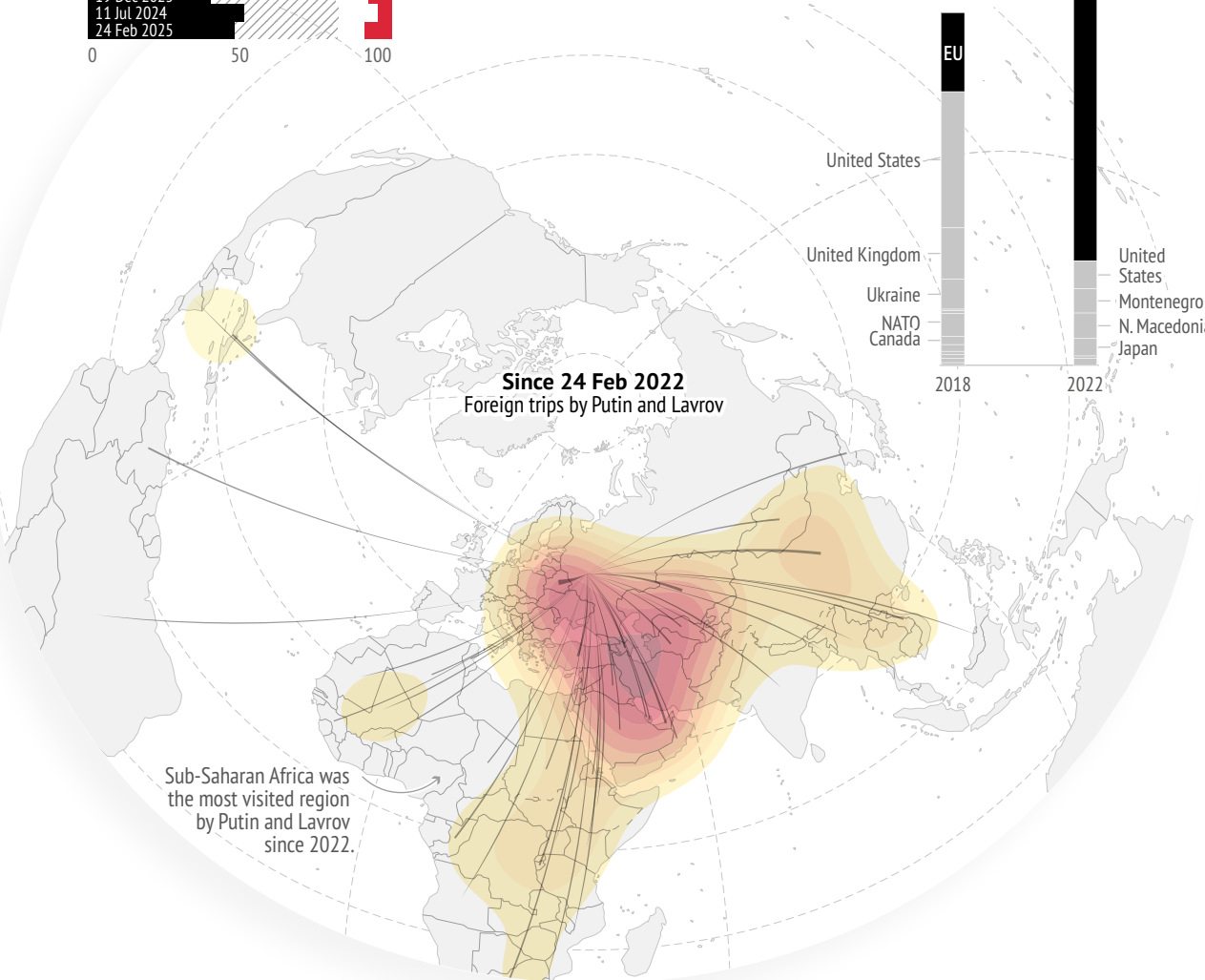
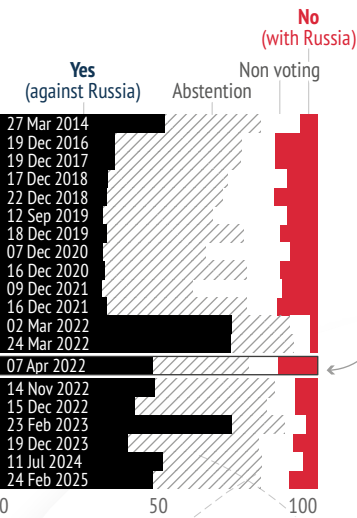
Looking for new friends

Russia's top brass has launched a charm offensive across Africa – the most frequently visited region by Foreign Minister Lavrov since 2022 – as well as the Middle East and South Asia. Europe, now branded as Russia's archenemy bent on its destruction, has disappeared from the picture entirely, despite Lavrov and Putin making 57 visits to the continent in 2015-2021.



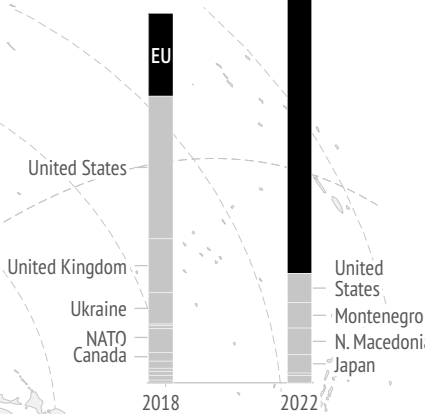
Minimal alignment

Russia presents itself as a challenger to the liberal hegemonic order, projecting 'Normative Power Russia' while also offering material incentives to its opponents. However, despite a broad plurality of non-aligned countries, only a small number of states have consistently supported Russia in UNGA votes on Ukraine-related resolutions.



Expulsion of Russian diplomats

Russia's extensive diplomatic and espionage network in Western countries has been significantly curtailed through several waves of diplomat expulsions. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2022) triggered the largest wave to date, exceeding earlier expulsions linked to revelations about the GRU-orchestrated sabotage in Vrbětice (Czech Republic) in 2021 or the Skripal poisoning (United Kingdom) in 2018.

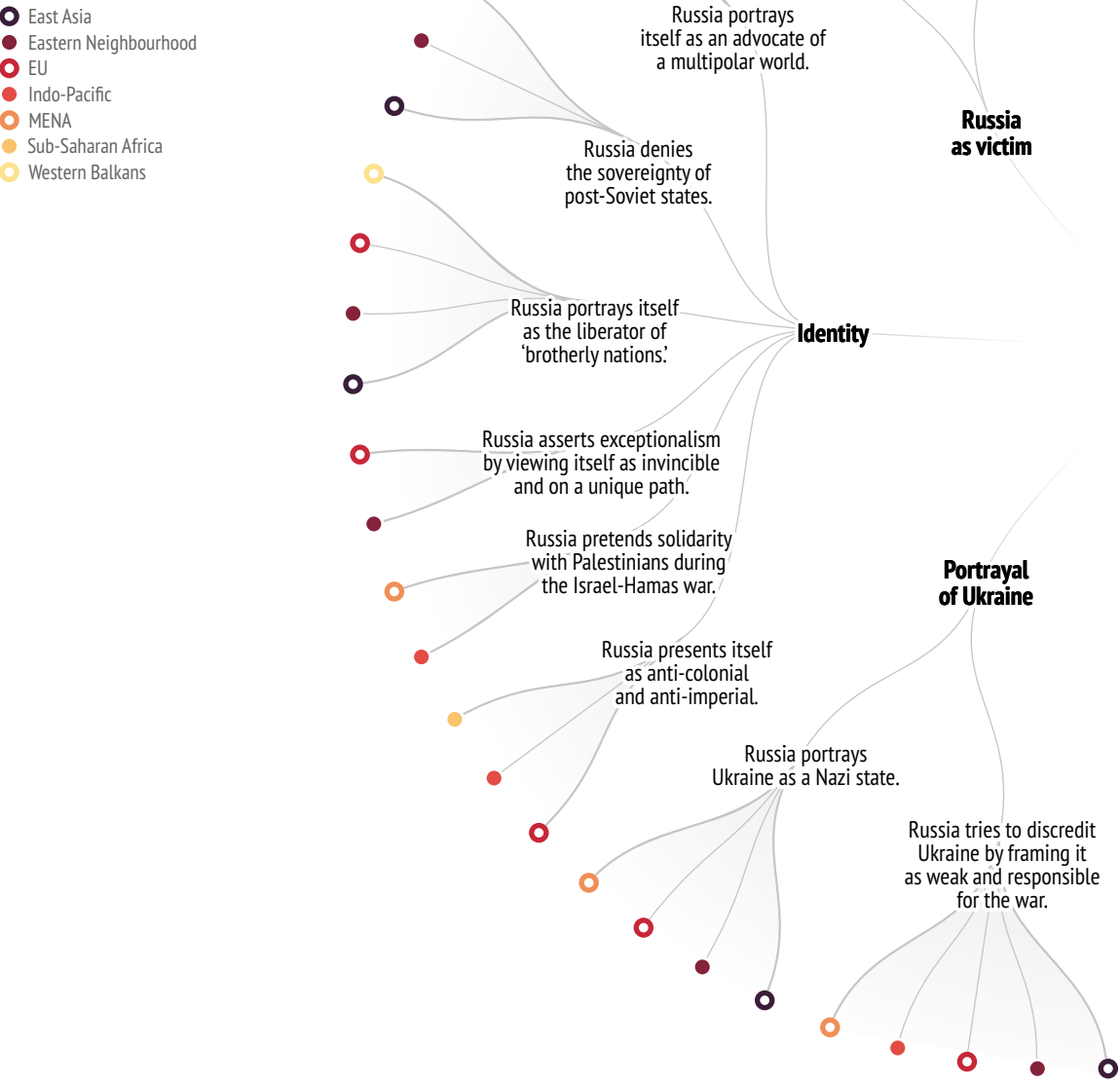


HYBRID

Russia is a skilled manipulator of the global information environment, but the results of its campaigns to shape global public opinion are mixed.

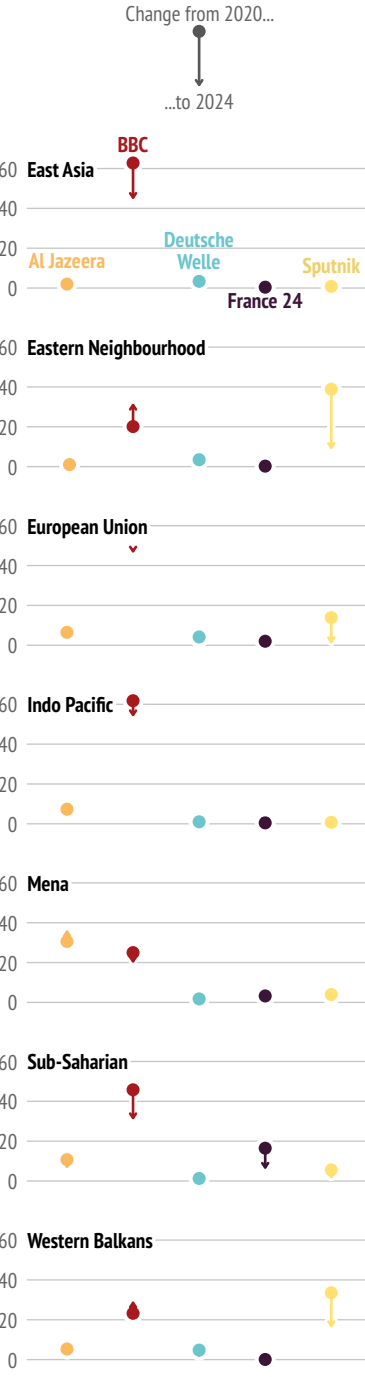
The same (old) story

The Russian state deploys foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) tactics to compensate for its relative limitations in the military or economic domains. In doing so, it uses a range of narratives adapted for different regional audiences. These narratives focus on reinforcing Russia's identity, portraying the (collective) West as Russia's primary adversary, and delegitimising Ukraine while falsely blaming Kyiv for the war of aggression waged by Moscow.



News pulse

While Russia employs a wide range of channels – including social media and messaging apps – in its effort to manipulate the global information environment, Google Trends data shows that Sputnik's global reach remains limited compared to Western major news outlets.



Moscow's unholy war

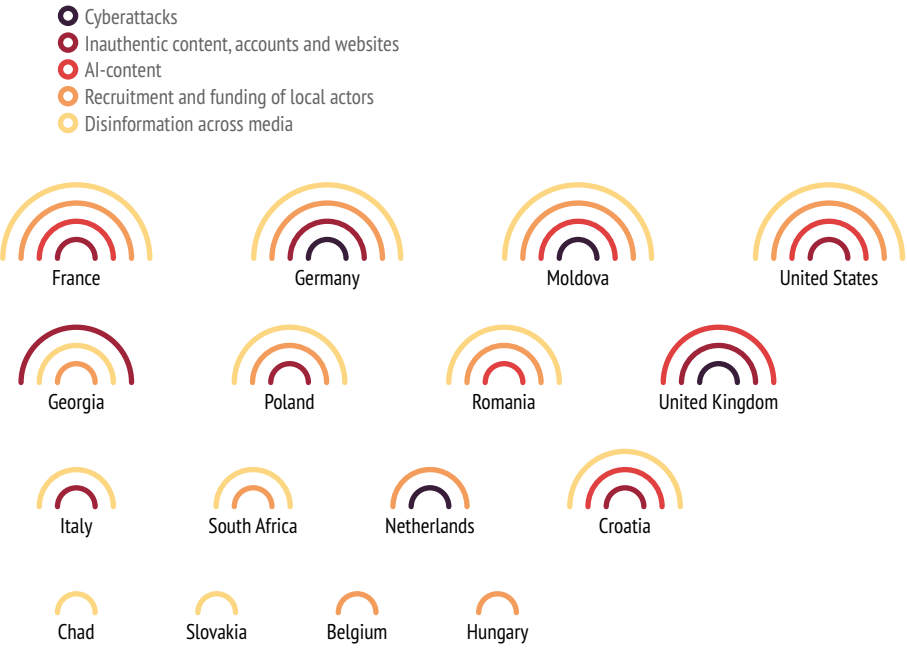
The Kremlin leverages Orthodox Church networks abroad to wage its cultural war against the West and to support covert intelligence activities.



Elections as a target of choice

In addition to manipulating the information environment by the spread of propaganda and disinformation, and shaping and distorting the cognitive perception of target audiences, Russia's hybrid warfare continues to interfere in democratic elections. It combines a variety of

means to this end, tailored to local conditions. While the impact of these interference efforts on particular electoral outcomes remains unclear, they contribute to rising domestic political polarisation and contestation.



CHAPTER 1

CHINA

Reducing its calculated support for Russia

by
TIM RÜHLIG

China has never expressed its explicit support for Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. However, it continues to empower the Russian Federation by providing it with indispensable resources as well as diplomatic support for actions which threaten the European security order. The People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia are far from fully aligned⁽¹⁾; their friendship is not 'unlimited', as they proclaimed in early 2022⁽²⁾. However, driving a wedge between them is virtually impossible because they are united in their opposition to US power and the influence of democracy. Instead of attempting to prise Russia and China apart, the EU should strive to influence the PRC so that it freezes or reduces its support for Russia. This has become more difficult after the United States' policy reversal under President Trump. But China adopts an interest-driven approach, balancing a range of domestic and international strategic priorities. Evidence presented in this chapter indicates that China responds to pressure. This creates an opportunity for the EU to increase

the economic and diplomatic price that the PRC needs to pay for its support of Russia. Reducing China's support is in the EU's interest, regardless of whether a ceasefire takes hold or not and no matter how the US positions itself.

TRACING VULNERABILITIES IN CHINA'S SUPPORT FOR RUSSIA

The strategic relationship between Russia and China provides four key forms of capital to both countries: military, economic, diplomatic and informational. However, Russia is increasingly concerned about the growing asymmetry in this relationship. The Kremlin is wary of its deepening dependence on China but knows that without Chinese assistance,

(1) Bērziņa-Čerenkova, U. and Rühlig, T., 'China's complex relations with Russia: Tracing the limits of a "limitless friendship"', *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, 12 September 2023 (<https://ip-quarterly.com/en/chinas-complex-relations-russia-tracing-limits-limitless-friendship>).

(2) 'Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development', The Kremlin, 4 February 2022 (<http://www.en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>).

Russia would face economic collapse and heightened political instability. In such circumstances, Moscow would be unable to sustain its war of aggression for long.

Military capital

It is unlikely that China gave its full backing to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine prior to 24 February 2022. However, Beijing has a strong interest in Russia succeeding in its war aims. China is concerned that if Russia lost the war it could lead to instability and secessionist movements within a country with which it shares a border of 4 200 kilometres⁽³⁾. The prospect of Vladimir Putin being overthrown and replaced by a pro-US leader presents a deeply unsettling scenario for Beijing. China is concerned that a change in Russian leadership could result in the loss of its closest strategic partner in

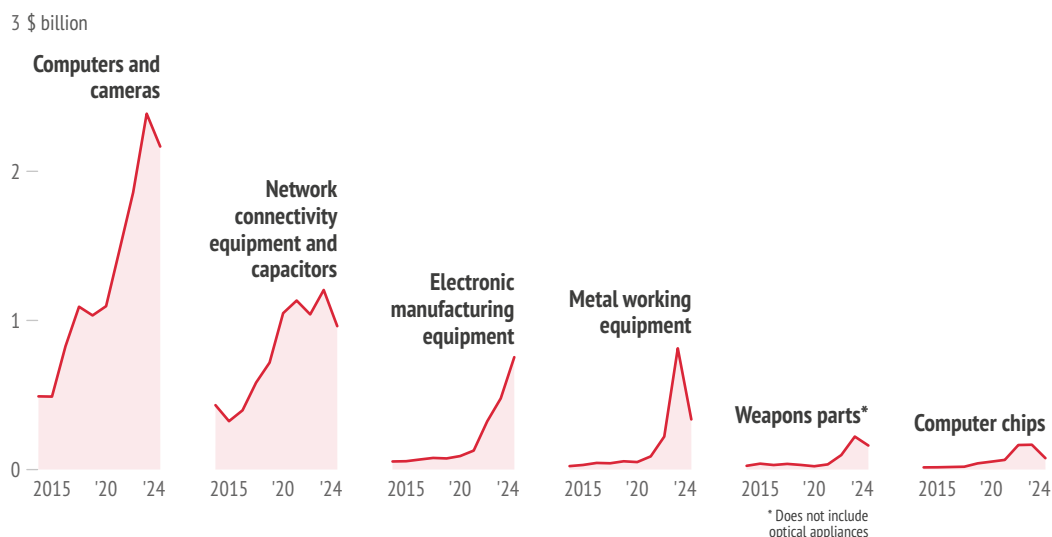
counterbalancing US power. Moreover, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine offers Beijing a valuable opportunity to observe and analyse military operational tactics and the effectiveness of weapon systems it has acquired from Russia. Russia accounts for around two-thirds of China's foreign arms imports⁽⁴⁾.

In 2023, according to some estimates, the PRC delivered around 90% of Russia's dual-use imports⁽⁵⁾. Many of these imports have been re-exports. Beijing's own, albeit potentially incomplete, customs data indicates a sharp rise in imports of Common High Priority Items (CHPIs) which are considered critical targets of EU and US sanctions against Russia.

China's support of Russia is, however, not unlimited. China's arms exports to Russia have remained marginal, with the only recorded arms delivery since the

Stockpiling the war machine

China boosts dual-use items exports to Russia



Data: Chinese customs, 2025

(3) Anonymous author interviews with Chinese Communist Party officials, December 2024, Beijing.

(4) EUISS calculations based on SIPRI data.

(5) Sher, N., 'Behind the scenes: China's increasing role in Russia's defense industry', *Carnegie Politika*, 6 May 2024, (<https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/05/behind-the-scenes-chinas-increasing-role-in-russias-defense-industry?lang=en>).

outbreak of the full-scale invasion being seven armoured vehicles. The main destination for Chinese arms exports is not Russia but Africa⁽⁶⁾. Our data further suggests that US sanctions introduced in December 2023 (E.O. 14114), which imposed secondary sanctions threats on foreign financial institutions for export control violations, may have prompted a swift response from Chinese banks – resulting in the suspension or even cessation of financial transactions linked to shipments of dual-use goods. For example, the Chouzhou Commercial Bank, a key Chinese bank, which had become the main transaction channel to Russia since 2022, halted all settlements with Russia in response to the US sanctions⁽⁷⁾. While other factors may have also contributed to the decline of Chinese dual-use exports to Russia, it appears that US sanctions were the primary cause of the marked decline observed in 2024 compared to 2023⁽⁸⁾. To circumvent such challenges, Russia has reportedly set up a new ‘China Track’ bank netting system with a web of intermediaries to shield these transactions from the eyes of Western regulators. This suggests that the effectiveness of sanctions could be significantly diminished. China has also shown some signs of being sensitive to reputational costs. Beijing’s ambiguous and contradictory posture – enabling Russia’s aggression through the provision of critical resources

The main destination for Chinese arms exports is not Russia but Africa.

while remaining susceptible to external pressure – presents a strategic opening that the EU can exploit. With or without a ceasefire, limiting Chinese dual-use exports to Russia would substantially weaken its military capabilities. This represents a significant vulnerability that the EU should aim to leverage as effectively as possible.

Economic capital

China-Russia trade has increased since the outbreak of the full-scale invasion, offsetting the loss of imports from the EU and other like-minded partners. In particular, the import of critical goods such as machinery, mechanical appliances and electrical equipment has provided a vital lifeline to the Russian economy. However, this is also a cause of concern for the Kremlin which fears, for example, the displacement of its own automotive industry, as vehicle imports have seen the sharpest increase⁽⁹⁾. Russia is now more dependent on Chinese imports than ever, with China accounting for 36.5% of its total imports, while China’s reliance on the Russian export market remains minimal at only 3.3%⁽¹⁰⁾.

China’s economic support for Russia has clear limits. Contrary to Russian hopes,

(6) EUISS calculations based on SIPRI data.

(7) ‘Major Chinese bank halts all settlements with Russia – Vedomosti’, *The Moscow Times*, 7 February 2024 (<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/02/07/major-chinese-bank-halts-all-settlements-with-russia-vedomosti-a84001>).

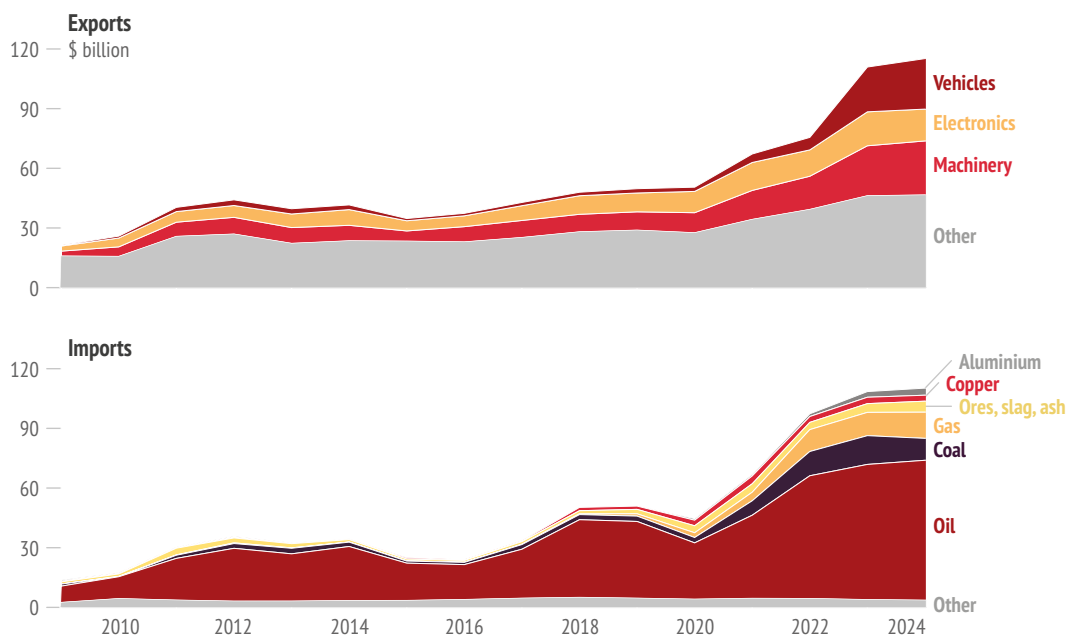
(8) Anonymous author interviews with a sanctions expert, November 2024, Brussels; ‘Behind the scenes: China’s increasing role in Russia’s defense industry’, op. cit.

(9) Sebastian, G., ‘Collision course: The future of Chinese carmakers in Russia’, Rhodium Group, 12 December 2024 (<https://rhg.com/research/collision-course-the-future-of-chinese-carmakers-in-russia/>).

(10) Kluge, J., ‘Russia-China economic relations: Moscow’s road to economic dependence’, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, SWP Research Paper 6, May 2024 (https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research_papers/2024RP06_Russia-ChinaEconomicRelations.pdf).

Chinese trade with Russia

Machines out, energy in: main goods trade by categories



Data: Chinese customs, 2025; UN Comtrade, 2025

there are fewer if any major investments of Chinese firms in Russia anymore⁽¹¹⁾.

Russian exports to China have also increased since 2021. This trend aligns with China's interest in diversifying its energy supply at lower prices, while meeting Russia's need to find new export destinations for its fossil fuels after the introduction of EU sanctions. While Russia's dependence on China as an export destination is at a record 30.5%, China's reliance on Russian exports remains much lower at 5.1%⁽¹²⁾. In fact, growing energy imports from Russia have helped China to reduce its previous reliance on imports mainly from Angola and Saudi Arabia. Similarly, rising imports of raw materials reflect Beijing's broader strategy to

diversify its supply chains. China's reluctance to agree to the proposed Power of Siberia 2 gas pipeline demonstrates that China's energy policy is primarily driven by its own strategic interests – namely, enhancing energy security through import diversification – rather than offering unconditional support to Russia.

China has also taken steps to shield itself from the impact of sanctions. As a result, companies with significant exposure to international markets tend to avoid trade with Russia or at least comply with existing sanctions⁽¹³⁾. Equally, the share of Russia-China trade conducted in Renminbi (RMB) rather than US dollars has increased. Before the full-scale invasion, less than 5% of their bilateral trade was

(11) American Enterprise Institute, 'China Global Investment Tracker' (<https://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker>).

(12) 'Russia-China economic relations: Moscow's road to economic dependence', op. cit.

(13) Spivak, V., 'How sanctions have changed the face of Chinese companies in Russia', *Carnegie Politika*, 18 May 2023 (<https://carnegieendowment.org/russia- Eurasia/politika/2023/05/how-sanctions-have-changed-the-face-of-chinese-companies-in-russia?lang=en>).

settled in RMB. By December 2023, the share of transactions in RMB had grown to 37.5% of Russia's total imports and 40.8% of its total exports. However, the Chinese currency plays a marginal role in Russia's trade with third countries, where only 5% of payments are settled in RMB⁽¹⁴⁾.

Just like in the military domain, the EU should seek to exploit the dichotomy between Russia's reliance on the economic lifeline provided by China and the fact that Chinese economic actors remain largely responsive to external pressure and primarily guided by their own economic interests.

Diplomatic capital

China and Russia offer each other mutual diplomatic support, often aligning in their voting behaviour in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). But their alignment remains below that of the two European permanent members of the UNSC, France and the United Kingdom. This suggests that while Russia and China are strategic partners, they are not formal allies. The PRC shares the Kremlin's opposition to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) but has frequently expressed its general aversion to entering alliances⁽¹⁵⁾.

Russia and China share a strategic interest in the weakening of US power and

challenging the acceptance of universal values⁽¹⁶⁾. Through frequent high-level visits, both bilaterally and as part of broader frameworks such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) or BRICS summits, China provides diplomatic legitimacy to Russia, which continues to face a certain degree of diplomatic isolation.

China argues that NATO's eastward expansion is one of the main causes of the war in Ukraine.

China and Russia do not see eye-to-eye on all core interests. The PRC has not recognised any of Russia's territorial claims in Ukraine. Senior Chinese party-state officials characterise Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine as a double-edged sword: on

the one hand, it can serve China's interests by tying down US and allied defence capabilities in Eastern Europe; on the other hand, increased military spending and growing economic security concerns across the EU hamper EU-China trade and investment cooperation, ultimately harming Chinese economic interests⁽¹⁷⁾. This exposes yet another vulnerability in the Russia-China relationship that the EU should strive to exploit: despite their broad diplomatic alignment, they diverge significantly on strategic priorities.

Informational capital

In the information space, China is increasingly echoing Russian narratives. In 2024 around three quarters of references to Ukraine made by official Chinese social media accounts directly amplified

(14) 'Russia-China economic relations: Moscow's road to economic dependence', op. cit.

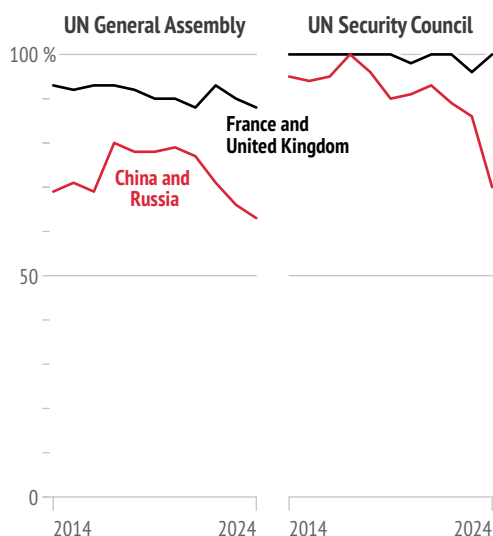
(15) Ekman, A., 'China and the battle of coalitions: The "circle of friends" versus the Indo-Pacific strategy', *Chaillot Paper* No. 174, EUISS, April 2022 (https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP_174_0.pdf).

(16) 'Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development', op. cit.

(17) Anonymous author interviews with senior party-state officials, December 2024, Beijing.

Together but apart

Russia and China are less aligned in UN voting than France and the United Kingdom



Data: UN, 2025

Russian messaging ⁽¹⁸⁾. China argues, just like Russia, that NATO's eastward expansion is one of the main causes of the war in Ukraine ⁽¹⁹⁾. This indicates that China is, for the first time, taking a direct stance on the European security order by denying EU Member States their sovereign right to choose how to protect their national security. Russia may not be in favour of a Sinocentric international order *per se*, but it frequently supports Chinese attempts to incorporate political concepts into UN documents, for example the concept of a 'Community of Shared Future for Mankind', the 'Global Development Initiative', the 'Global Security Initiative' or the 'Global Civilisation Initiative' ⁽²⁰⁾. China's assessment of the war in Ukraine remains heavily influenced by

information provided by the Russian Federation. This includes factually incorrect claims, such as alleged discrimination against Russian-speaking minorities in Ukraine ⁽²¹⁾. In countering such disinformation narratives, the EU should place greater emphasis on the fact that China's reliance on Russian-supplied information represents a strategic vulnerability.

WEAKENING RUSSIA THROUGH A MORE STRATEGIC CHINA POLICY

The potential to 'unpower' Russia by targeting its relationship with China is considerable, but it is unrealistic to expect a decisive rupture between the two. Regardless of the situation in Ukraine, the EU should aim to freeze China's provision of the four key forms of capital – military, economic, diplomatic, and informational – to Russia at current levels or, where possible, gradually reduce it. China will neither put pressure on the Kremlin to end the war nor fundamentally oppose any Russian rearmament effort or preparations to confront the EU and NATO militarily.

(18) Unpublished analysis privately obtained by the author.

(19) '王毅同俄罗斯外长拉夫罗夫通电话' (Wang Yi and Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov make phone call), Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 24 February 2022 (https://www.mfa.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202202/t20220224_10645222.shtml); '2022年2月23日外交部发言人华春莹主持例行记者会', Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Press Conference, 23 February 2022 (https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/fyrbt_673021/jzhsl_673025/202202/t20220223_10644870.shtml).

(20) Garcia-Herrero, A. et al., 'China influence at the United Nations: Words and deeds', Bruegel, Working Paper 19/2024 (https://www.bruegel.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/WP%2019%202024_1.pdf).

(21) Anonymous author interviews with senior party-state officials, December 2024, Beijing.

Unilateral measures

To unpower Russia, regardless of whether a ceasefire is in place or not, the EU should adopt more measures that *increase the economic and diplomatic costs* that China incurs for supporting Russia:

- > Militarily, Europe could threaten China with imposing tighter controls on exports of arms and dual-use items to the PRC. To tackle the problem of Chinese re-exports of sanctioned dual-use items to Russia, the EU could threaten freezing exports of these goods at 2021 levels (prior to the full-scale invasion). This assumes that 2021 export volumes equal China's domestic demand for these items. If Chinese companies choose to re-export these goods, they risk creating domestic shortages. The more difficult it is to substitute a given dual-use item, the more effective this strategy is. Hence, the EU should undertake a targeted analysis of the substitutability of the sanctioned items and threaten to employ this instrument in a targeted manner. Upholding financial sanctions and convincing partners, especially the US, to do the same is crucial. If successful, this policy would weaken Russia's military capabilities, which is in the EU's interest regardless of whether a ceasefire is in place or not.
- > Economically, the EU could threaten China with the broadening of investment restrictions, including outbound investment screening, as well as imposing more export controls. The latter are particularly effective in sectors where China is heavily reliant on European technology imports⁽²²⁾.
- > Diplomatically, the EU could adopt a dual strategy. First, in international forums, it should remind China of the PRC's own commitment to uphold territorial sovereignty as a core principle of international relations – citing, for example, Xi Jinping's endorsement of the 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence'. Second, recognising that China cares most about its reputation in the Plural South, the EU should deepen its relations with those same countries (see chapter 5 on Africa in this volume). Reaching out to the Plural South requires investing more financial and diplomatic capital, as well as a willingness to address the EU's own perceived double standards.
- > In the informational domain, the EU should invest more in countering Russian narratives, especially in the Plural South. The less credibility Russian propaganda has in the Plural South, the greater the reputational cost for China when it chooses to amplify such narratives. This would help highlight the strategic hypocrisy underpinning Russian and Chinese propaganda (see chapter 6 in this volume).

MEASURES TO CONTINUE COOPERATION WITH PARTNERS

All of these measures will be more effective if undertaken in close coordination with the EU's international partners, rather than unilaterally.

(22) Murphy, B., 'Chokepoints. China's self-identified strategic technology import dependencies', Center for Security and Emerging Technologies, May 2022, (<https://cset.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/CSET-Chokepoints.pdf>); Rühl, T. (ed.), 'Reverse dependency: Making Europe's digital technological strengths indispensable to China', Digital Power China Report 3, 6 May 2024 (<https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/reverse-dependency-making-europes-digital-technological-strengths>).

- > Of particular importance is the role of the United States under President Trump. The decline of dual-use item exports from China to Russia due to US financial sanctions underlines how impactful the US position can be. At the time of writing, extensive US-EU alignment seems unrealistic. In a worse-case scenario, the US might even strive for alignment with Russia in an effort to win Moscow over as part of its broader strategy to contain Chinese power. The relevance of such a scenario, often referred to as 'Reverse Nixon' ⁽²³⁾, is not that it is realistic. It is highly unlikely that Russia would side with the US against China ⁽²⁴⁾. However, a genuine attempt by the US to pursue a 'Reverse Nixon' would strengthen Putin's strategic position. Not only would this increase the risk that the US could be inclined to sacrifice Europe, but it would likely prompt China to deepen its support for Russia in order to keep it firmly in its sphere of influence. Hence, the EU should make every effort to raise awareness of the inherent risks of a 'Reverse Nixon' strategy. To this end, it should – in close cooperation with like-minded partners – underline the political and strategic costs that the US would incur if such a strategy were to fail.
- > The EU should intensify its efforts to convince the US and countries in East Asia of the relevance of the 'single theatre' scenario – namely, that Chinese aggression in East Asia is closely linked to the outcome of Russian aggression in Europe. For this purpose,

the EU should conduct an increasing number of single theatre simulations that model simultaneous Russian aggression in Europe and Chinese aggression in East Asia. These simulations would serve to demonstrate the plausibility of such a scenario and assess the strategic risks it poses to the interests of the US and its East Asian partners.

(23) The term 'Reverse Nixon' references US President Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972. In its aftermath, the US and its allies established diplomatic relations with Mao's China, effectively ending the partnership of the PRC with the Soviet Union. The idea of a 'Reverse Nixon' is that the Trump administration could try to win Russian support in its attempt to contain Chinese power.

(24) A 'Reverse Nixon' is unrealistic for several reasons. Unlike in the 1970s, Russia and China are now closely aligned, with both Xi and Putin deriving legitimacy from strong anti-Americanism. Moreover, Russia is highly dependent on China. For President Putin to replace dependency on China with reliance on the US, the US would need to be seen as a reliable partner. However, President Trump is known more for his erratic than predictable style of governance, and it is not unlikely that his successor will adopt a more critical stance towards Russia. Under these circumstances, abandoning China is not a realistic option for President Putin.

CHAPTER 2

THE INDO-PACIFIC

Navigating constraints and opportunities

by
LIZZA BOMASSI

Russia's war in Ukraine has left Moscow isolated from much of the West, prompting the Kremlin to deepen its Indo-Pacific partnerships to offset sanctions and maintain global influence. This has important implications for the EU as Brussels seeks to counter Russia's efforts to fund its war economy and extend its global sway. Moscow's approach is constrained by economic challenges and complex regional dynamics that shape both its opportunities and vulnerabilities in the Indo-Pacific. This chapter explores the scope and limitations of Russia's influence in the region focusing on Moscow's objectives, the tactics it employs, and the weaknesses in its strategy. It argues that the EU's response cannot rely on defensive measures alone and outlines potential strategies for more long-term and constructive European engagement.

RUSSIA'S INDO-PACIFIC ENGAGEMENT

In the face of its estrangement from Europe, Moscow's primary objective in the Indo-Pacific is to sustain its geopolitical relevance and diversify its partnership base. This engagement is not new. During the Soviet era, Moscow established extensive relationships across the region, ranging from military and economic partnerships to educational and cultural exchanges. These historical ties provide the Kremlin with a lasting, albeit fragile, foothold in the region. Since its all-out invasion of Ukraine and subsequent loss of access to traditional European markets, the Indo-Pacific has become a key arena for Russia to offset the economic impact of sanctions and develop new revenue streams to fund its war efforts. Consequently, the Kremlin has intensified tactics designed to undermine the West's 'power of attraction'. Yet Moscow's ability to fully realise its ambitions is contingent on how effectively the Kremlin can leverage its remaining tools of influence. Russia's Indo-Pacific approach can be assessed across several dimensions – economic, military,

diplomatic and informational – each revealing distinct limitations.

Economic and military presence: from energy to arms

Russia's economic presence in the region is limited, preventing Moscow from competing with the market appeal of powers like the EU, Japan, the US and China. In 2023, for example, trade with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) reached just €15 billion⁽¹⁾, compared to over €250 billion⁽²⁾ with the EU. Even with India, a longstanding Russian partner, trade in 2023 stood at some €60 billion⁽³⁾ – less than half of the EU's €124 billion⁽⁴⁾. As such, Moscow's economic engagements are largely confined to utilitarian objectives, like energy exports and arms sales.

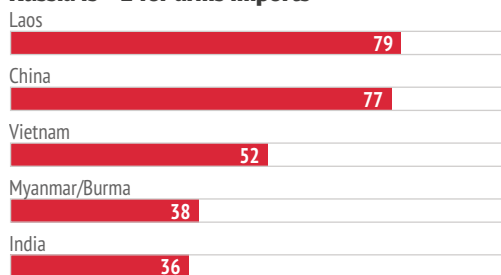
Yet even in the energy sector – ostensibly a Russian strength – Moscow's leverage is fragile. Large-scale initiatives, such as oil refinery and power plant projects, often stall⁽⁵⁾, signalling that high-profile deals like Rosneft's \$20 billion partnership in India⁽⁶⁾ are more the exception than the norm. The war in Ukraine has exacerbated Moscow's challenges. Sanctions have constrained the Kremlin's financial flexibility, pushing it to exploit loopholes to maintain access to international markets. One key strategy involves channelling Russian seaborne oil through intermediary countries⁽⁷⁾ such as India and Malaysia where it is blended and rebranded before entering global markets. These activities imply a need for at least tacit cooperation from regional actors. While difficult to quantify, estimates suggest that Asia accounts for some 60–70%⁽⁸⁾ of disguised Russian seaborne oil, generating billions in revenue⁽⁹⁾ to sustain Russia's war campaign in Ukraine.

- (1) ASEAN, 'The Thirteenth AEM–Russia Consultation: Joint media statement', 19 September 2024 (<https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/aem-russia-13-joint-media-statement-adopted.pdf>).
- (2) European Commission, 'EU trade relations with the Association of South East Asian Nations. Facts, figures and latest developments' (https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/association-south-east-asian-nations-asean_en).
- (3) Sharma, A. and Cyrill, M., 'India–Russia Economic Partnership: Strengthening ties across trade and investment', India Briefing, 26 November 2024 (<https://www.india-briefing.com/news/india-russia-economic-partnership-trade-and-investment-maritime-developments-35233.html>).
- (4) European Commission, 'EU–India Free Trade Agreement, Investment Protection Agreement and Geographical Indications Agreement' (https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/india/eu-india-agreement_en).
- (5) Soeriaatmadja, M., 'Indonesia and Russia to build \$22b refinery in East Java among other projects', *The Straits Times*, 1 July 2022 (<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/putin-offers-russian-railways-investment-in-new-indonesia-capital>); 'Indonesia's Pertamina may seek new Tuban refinery partner due to Rosneft uncertainty', Reuters, 6 October 2023 (<https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/indonesia-may-seek-new-partner-pertaminas-tuban-refinery-over-rosneft-issues-2023-10-06/>).
- (6) Dayal, S., 'Russia's Rosneft invested \$20 bln in India, Indian government quotes Putin as saying', Reuters, 5 December 2024, (<https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/russias-rosneft-invested-20-bln-india-indian-government-quotes-putin-saying-2024-12-05>).
- (7) Baypae, C., 'India–Russia ties will be tested under Trump 2.0', *Nikkei Asia*, 4 February 2025 (<https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/India-Russia-ties-will-be-tested-under-Trump-2.0>); Subramanian, S., 'Malaysia and the Dark Fleet', *The Diplomat*, 14 July 2023 (<https://thediplomat.com/2023/07/malaysia-and-the-dark-fleet>).
- (8) Lin, M., 'Singapore's role in the effective enforcement of Russian fuel sanctions', Center for Strategic and International Studies, 30 May 2023 (<https://www.csis.org/blogs/new-perspectives-asia/singapores-role-effective-enforcement-russian-fuel-sanctions>); U.S. Energy Information Administration, 'Country Analysis Brief: Russia', 29 April 2024 (https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries_long/Russia/pdf/russia.pdf).
- (9) Burri, E., 'India is buying lots of crude oil from Russia. Who benefits?' *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, January 28 2025 (<https://www.nzz.ch/english/india-is-buying-lots-of-crude-oil-from-russia-who-benefits-ld.1867852>).

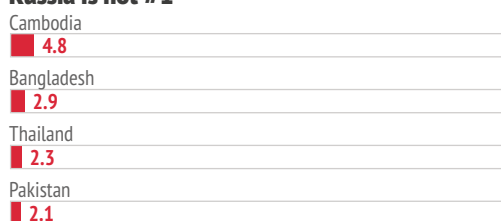
Important to some, less to others

Arms imports from Russia in 2025, %

Russia is #1 for arms imports



Russia is not #1



Data: SIPRI, 2025

Russian military exports are another cornerstone of Russia's Indo-Pacific footprint (see graph above) with arms sales to India, Myanmar/Burma, Lao PDR, and Vietnam reinforcing bilateral ties and regional influence. A notable example of Moscow's diplomatic influence is its success at blocking European observer status⁽¹⁰⁾ in the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus, a key regional security forum where military linkages can underpin diplomatic clout. Yet Russia's dominance in this domain is steadily declining, particularly in India, where Moscow's share of arms imports has fallen from 72% (2010–2014) to just 36%

(2020–2024)⁽¹¹⁾. India's diversification strategy, including expanded defence cooperation with France, Israel and the US, signals a long-term shift away from Russian systems with broader implications for Moscow's relevance in the region's shifting defence architecture. Interestingly, Russian arms sales are complemented by the Kremlin's broader security posture in the form of joint military exercises with regional partners, most notably with China⁽¹²⁾. These drills, often conducted near regional hotspots, are framed as efforts to enhance regional security but are widely perceived as signalling alignment with Beijing.

Diplomatic positioning: navigating regional partnerships

Russia's external relations in the Indo-Pacific are shaped by its asymmetric relationship with Beijing and a deeper identity paradox between Moscow's Eurasian aspirations and historically European orientation⁽¹³⁾. China is a key partner, but the imbalance in their relationship often pushes Moscow to adopt a position of calculated neutrality on sensitive regional issues. This is particularly evident in the South China Sea where the Kremlin avoids criticising Beijing's assertiveness – conveying implicit support, both rhetorically and through joint activities – which in turn complicates

(10) Storey, I., 'Russia's defence diplomacy in Southeast Asia: A tenuous lead in arms sales but lagging in other areas', ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 18 March 2021 (<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-33-russias-defence-diplomacy-in-southeast-asia-a-tenuous-lead-in-arms-sales-but-lagging-in-other-areas-by-ian-storey>).

(11) Stockholm International Peace Research Institute 'SIPRI Fact Sheet: Trends in International Arms Transfers 2024', March 2025 (https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/fs_2503_at_2024_0.pdf).

(12) Dityrych, O. and Ekman, A., 'Rehearsing for war: China and Russia's military exercises', Brief No. 11, EUISS, 3 July 2024 (<https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/briefs/rehearsing-war-china-and-russias-military-exercises>).

(13) Rumer, E., et al., 'Russia in the Asia-Pacific: Less than meets the eye', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 3 September 2020 (<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2020/09/russia-in-the-asia-pacific-less-than-meets-the-eye?lang=en>).

Moscow's relations with ASEAN states like the Philippines. The reluctance to alienate China undermines Russia's credibility among regional actors seeking more assertive support. A similar balancing act plays out in Russia's ties with India where Moscow remains a key defence partner despite New Delhi's tensions with Beijing and the Modi government's deepening engagement with the US and the Quad.

Across the Indo-Pacific, this diplomatic ambiguity intersects with differing levels of engagement with Russia. Myanmar/Burma and Lao PDR maintain ties rooted in military and political dependence, while others like Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea are largely resistant to Russian influence given their stronger Western security ties. Meanwhile, countries like Singapore have chosen principles over sides, strongly condemning Russia's aggression while emphasising the importance of a rules-based order⁽¹⁴⁾, drawing links between Russia's behaviour in Ukraine and China's potential conduct in the region. In between lies a more complex middle ground where countries like Indonesia navigate a more nuanced position and where scepticism towards the West and local strategic interests shape diverse perspectives on global governance. Rather than setting the agenda, Moscow's diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific tends to be reactive, focused on strategic hedging rather than steering regional dynamics.

Moscow uses historical links, information influence and soft power as compensatory tools in the Indo-Pacific.

Informational influence: narrative control and soft power

Constrained economically and limited in its ability to shape regional diplomacy, Moscow uses historical links, information influence and soft power as compensatory tools in the Indo-Pacific.

Its approach is bifocal, combining short-term narrative disruption with longer-term efforts to build ideological affinity. On the disruptive end, social media campaigns and state-sponsored outlets like RT and Sputnik amplify narratives that highlight perceived Western double standards, from NATO's 'expansionism' to foreign interventions and anti-Islamic bias. These narratives have found resonance in several Indo-Pacific countries; 2023 Pew Research Center data⁽¹⁵⁾ showed surprising levels of public sympathy for Russia in places like Bangladesh, Malaysia and Thailand – demonstrating how pre-existing scepticism towards Western powers can become fertile ground for (dis)information campaigns. Simultaneously, Russia engages in longer-term perception-shaping efforts through educational and cultural outreach. Through initiatives like the Russkiy Mir Foundation and Rossotrudnichestvo Agency, the Kremlin nominally offers around 15,000⁽¹⁶⁾ scholarships annually to foreign students worldwide. This far exceeds the EU's Erasmus Mundus programme,

(14) Seng Tan, S., 'Singapore's stand on Russia's war against Ukraine: Hobson's choice?', *International Politics*, Vol. 61, 2024, pp. 1018–1035 (<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-023-00506-z>).

(15) Fagan, M., et al., 'Views of Russia and Putin', Pew Research Center, 2 July 2024 (<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/07/02/views-of-russia-and-putin-july-24/>).

(16) Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, ifa ECP Monitor Country Report, 'Russian Federation', 2021 (https://opus.bsz-bw.de/ifa/frontdoor/deliver/index/docId/36/file/ECP_Monitor_Russia_Country_Report.pdf).

which averages about 2 500 students per year⁽¹⁷⁾. Although figures are opaque, available data ⁽¹⁸⁾ suggests that many of Russia's scholarships target countries such as Cambodia, India, Malaysia and Vietnam. This soft power strategy reinforces diplomatic ties, cultivates future elites, and moulds perceptions of Russia's global role over time.

Moscow's ability to dictate outcomes may be far more limited than its ambitions imply.

EU STRATEGIES IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

While Russia remains a player in the Indo-Pacific, the varied reception to the Kremlin's overtures suggests that Moscow's ability to dictate outcomes is far more limited than its ambitions imply. These differences offer opportunities for the EU to counter Russian influence through targeted strategies that are genuinely aligned with local priorities. Building a credible and enduring alternative to Russia's influence will require sustained presence, consistency, and mutual investment. In this context, the EU's goal should not be to 'outcompete' Russia, but to establish itself as a trusted partner that offers stability, transparency and value.

- > **Address structural vulnerabilities:** Energy is an area where Russia's

influence is built on precarious foundations. The practice of energy laundering demonstrates not only how sanctions can be bypassed but also how such circumvention relies on unstable, unsustainable workarounds. Such strategies depend on external cooperation and loopholes, making them vulnerable to increased regulatory scrutiny. Disincentivising these

practices is critical, alongside investment in transparency tools⁽¹⁹⁾ to help identify and curb third-party oil rebranding. Equally important is addressing the underlying drivers that compel regional actors to engage in such arrangements. Given the Indo-Pacific's interest in energy security and sustainable development, the EU's expertise in renewable energy presents an opportunity to position itself as a credible partner in supporting countries in the region to transition away from dependence on Russian energy. Investing in credible alternatives, co-financing clean infrastructure, and finalising initiatives like the EU-ASEAN Energy Dialogue work programme – broadly aimed at energy security – are important steps in this direction.

- > **Offer credible alternatives:** Russia's reliance on soft power in the Indo-Pacific is an extension of a broader strategy that focuses on narrative control. Responding to this form of narrative competition in

(17) European Commission, '20 years of Erasmus Mundus – in figures', 14 June 2024 (<https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/resources-and-tools/factsheets-statistics-evaluations/statistics/erasmus-mundus-20>).

(18) See: Rinith, T. 'MoEYS announces 40 Russian scholarship offers', *Khmer Times*, 7 January 2024 (<https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501619813/moeys-announces-40-russian-scholarship-offers/>); LinkedIn, 'Free Education in Russia – 2025 Session', 24 October 2024 (<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/free-education-russia-2025-session-eduplor-qthef>); Bernama, 'Applications for Russian Scholarship Programme now open for eligible Malaysians', 30 October 2024 (<https://bernama.com/en/news.php?id=2357916>); Baohaiduong, '18 types of agreement scholarships for Vietnamese students studying abroad in 2025', 30 January 2025 (<https://baohaiduong.vn/en/18-loai-hoc-bong-hiep-dinh-cho-du-hoc-sinh-viet-nam-nam-2025-404148.html>).

(19) Pili, G. et al., 'Oil laundering at sea: defeating Russia's shadow fleet in the Mediterranean', 20 December 2024 (<https://dfrlab.org/2024/12/20/oil-laundering-russia-osint/>).

a like-for-like strategy risks being counterproductive. Instead, the EU would be better served by strengthening independent information ecosystems and deploying a more nuanced public diplomacy toolkit – one that is not just country-specific but also tailored to distinct demographic audiences. Where appropriate, support for

journalistic integrity, fact-based media initiatives, and expanded educational partnerships can provide meaningful counterweights to disinformation. Europe's power of attraction should not be underestimated. A strong foundation already exists in the steady flow of international students from countries in Asia into the EU (see graph opposite), offering a solid platform for building long-term educational and cultural ties. While the EU cannot fill the vacuum left by recent US cutbacks to platforms like Voice of America, the popularity⁽²⁰⁾ of such outlets underscores the continued demand for trusted international sources of information in the region. This highlights the importance of ensuring that Europe's voice is present in the Indo-Pacific's evolving knowledge landscape. Lessons from the EU's EUvsDisinfo project or the Code of Practice on Disinformation, should be adapted where appropriate, and supported through EU funding mechanisms like the EU's Directorate-General for International Partnerships and its Foreign Policy Instruments.

- > **Sustain regional engagement:** Every opportunity to engage the region should be seized, whether

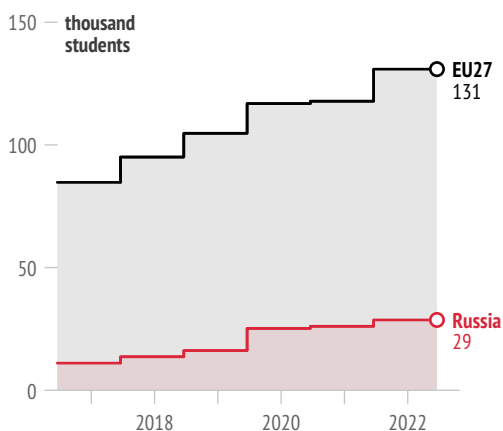
through political visits, institutional dialogues, security cooperation, cultural programming, visa facilitation, or strengthened economic ties. People-to-people and business-to-business links are especially valuable in building long-term trust. Presence and credibility are cumulative; they grow only through sustained attention and responsiveness. This is particularly important in a region where strategic competition is high, but expectations of external actors vary greatly. If the EU wants to be seen as

a reliable actor in the Indo-Pacific, relationships must be cultivated continuously, not episodically. This means prioritising not only visibility but also investing in long-term coordination mechanisms with regional institutions and national governments. The aim should be to ensure European perspectives are

Europe's power of attraction should not be underestimated.

Not that popular

More than four times as many South and South-East Asian university students travelled to the EU27 to study as to Russia in 2022



Data: UNESCO, 2025

(20) Lowy Institute, 'Regional influence: Radio broadcasters' data – Lowy Institute Asia Power Index', 2024 (<https://power.lowyinstitute.org/data/cultural-influence/information-flows/radio-broadcasters/>).

part of sustained dialogue, not just headline-level diplomacy.

All this must be done with a view to fully acknowledging each Indo-Pacific country's unique historical and contemporary underpinnings so that the EU can engage in a truly meaningful way. Indo-Pacific countries, especially those in South and Southeast Asia, are not looking for binary choices in a broader geopolitical contest. Framing engagement as a decision between the West and Russia (or China) will likely meet resistance. The challenge lies in balancing strategic ambition with realism. Overpromising and underdelivering risk undermining credibility, while selectively compromising on core values invites accusations of double standards. Ultimately, success depends on demonstrating a clear and consistent commitment that aligns with the region's evolving priorities.

CHAPTER 3

THE SOUTHERN MEDITERRANEAN

Reducing Russia's footprint in the post-Assad era

by
KATARZYNA SIDŁO

Russia's presence in the Southern Mediterranean is driven by its broader foreign policy goals, chiefly the need to counter what it perceives as 'Western encirclement', and to reassert itself as a global power. Currently, these objectives are subordinated to the Kremlin's primary focus: achieving victory in the war in Ukraine. The region serves as a strategic gateway to Sub-Saharan Africa, where Russia – through the deployment of private military companies like the now-disbanded Wagner Group – has circumvented EU sanctions and engaged in resource extraction and illicit trade to help fund its war effort. Alongside its military and economic activities, Russia has waged an aggressive information campaign, exploiting anti-Western sentiment through propaganda and disinformation.

At the same time, the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria, once a major Russian ally, underscores the Kremlin's difficulties in balancing multiple regional

engagements, particularly as its capacity is stretched by the war in Ukraine. As one unusually candid Russian analyst has observed, beyond the post-Soviet space, Russia can act only 'with the grudging permission of other powerful nations and for as long as they permit it'⁽¹⁾. This chapter argues that this 'grudging permission' must be withdrawn. Achieving this will require a more concerted effort to counter Russian disinformation and close the loopholes that enable sanctions evasion. It also means articulating a unified position on peacebuilding in Libya and seizing the current opportunity to support Syria's political transition in a consistent and credible manner.

(1) Pukhov, R., 'Lessons from Syria' ['Уроки Сирии'], *Kommersant*, 08 December 2024 (<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/7362241>).

RUSSIA'S USE OF FORCE AND INFLUENCE IN THE SOUTHERN MEDITERRANEAN

Russia's return to the Mediterranean was driven by the 2011 Arab uprisings, and particularly NATO's intervention in Libya, which intensified Moscow's fears of Western-backed regime change⁽²⁾. The US pivot to Asia further deepened the regional power vacuum. Since then, Russia has pursued a strategy blending military assertiveness, economic opportunism and geopolitical signalling.

Economic and military capital: strategic reach, structural weakness

In conventional economic terms, Russia remains a minor actor. Its foreign direct investment and development assistance in the Southern Mediterranean are minimal. The EU, by contrast, is the leading trading partner for most countries in the region, accounting for up to 56% of their total trade, while Russia represents less

than 1% in most cases⁽³⁾. However, Russia continues to hold relevance in the areas of food, energy and military security. Countries like Egypt, Lebanon and Libya all depend to varying degrees on imports of Russian wheat⁽⁴⁾. Russian state-owned companies like Gazprom, Rosneft and Novatek hold stakes in regional gas exploration projects, although oil exports to the region remain modest. More notably, Russia is a significant arms supplier to Algeria and, to a lesser extent, Egypt, providing 48% and 9% of their imports, respectively⁽⁵⁾. It also plays a shadow role in Libya, reportedly supplying weapons in contravention of the UN arms embargo⁽⁶⁾.

Militarily, Russia views the Southern Mediterranean as a vital arena for power projection. Its 2015 the Russian Maritime Doctrine⁽⁷⁾ called for a 'sufficient' and 'permanent' naval presence in the region. The 2022 update⁽⁸⁾, which takes a more confrontational stance, designated the Eastern Mediterranean as important enough to Russian national interests to warrant the use of force to defend them. In 2013, Moscow reestablished a Mediterranean Task Force, reviving a Soviet-era structure and marking its return to the regional maritime stage.

The Task Force enables Russia to conduct naval drills, shadow NATO ships and collect intelligence. Its presence also supports broader ambitions to expand

(2) Similar logic applied in later years to the 'coloured revolutions' in the post-Soviet space.

(3) European Commission, 'EU trade by country/region' (https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions_en).

(4) Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, *Statistical Yearbook – World Food and Agriculture 2022*, 2022 (<https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/0c372c04-8b29-4093-bba6-8674b1d237c7/content>).

(5) SIPRI, 'Arms Transfers Database' (<https://armstransfers.sipri.org/ArmsTransfer/>).

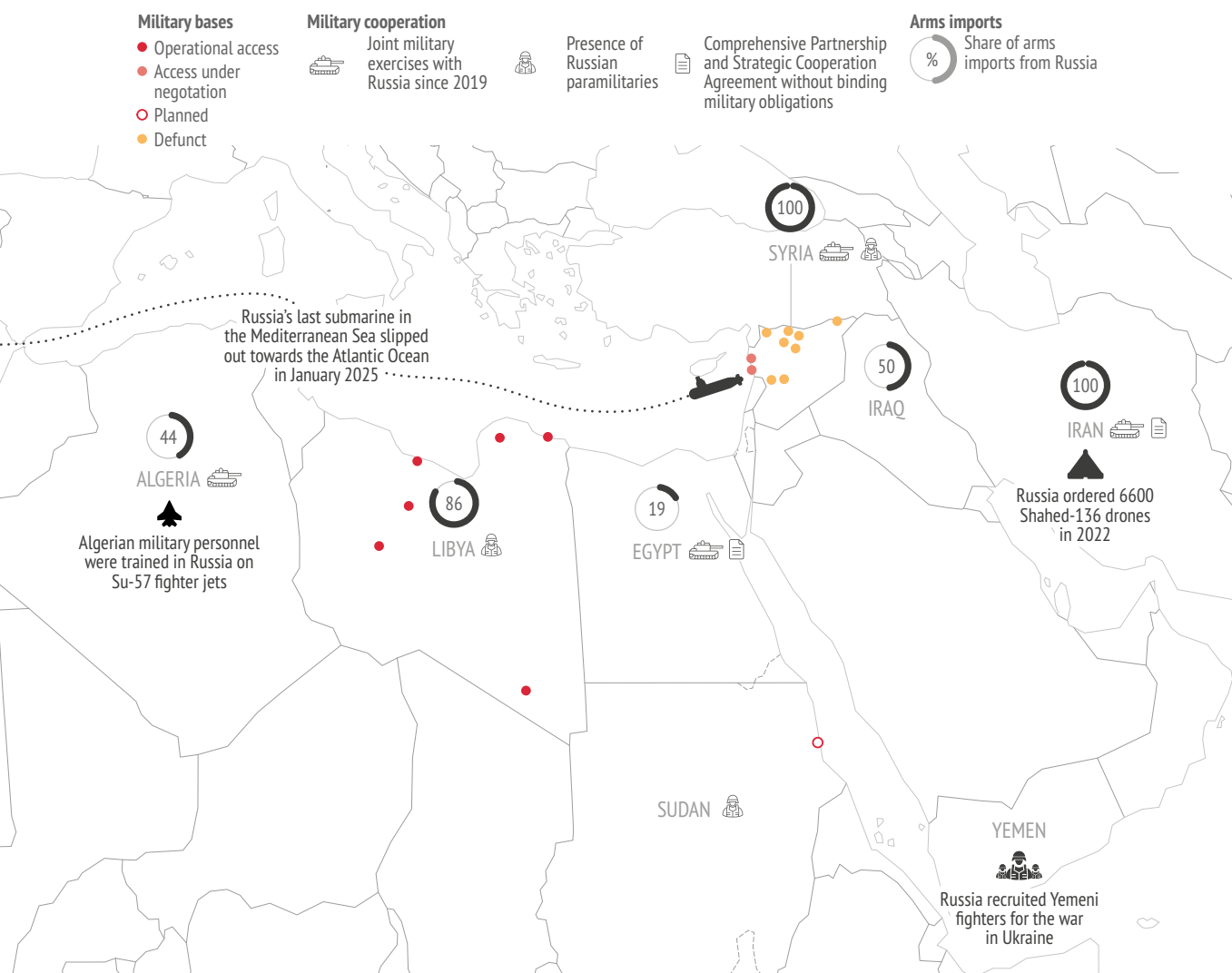
(6) Megerisi, T., 'The bear who came to tea: Russia, Libya and the Kremlin's playbook for fragile states', *Policy Brief*, ECFR, 28 March 2025 (<https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-bear-who-came-to-tea-russia-libya-and-the-kremlins-playbook-for-fragile-states/>).

(7) US Naval War College Digital Commons, 'The 2015 Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation' (English translation), 2015 (https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1002&context=rmsi_research).

(8) Decree of the President of the Russian Federation dated July 31, 2022, No. 512, 'On approval of the Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation' (<http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202207310001?index=55>).

Win some, lose some

Russia might have lost influence in Syria with the fall of Assad, but it is building up its presence elsewhere in the Middle East



Data: SIPRI, Arms Transfer Database, 2025; IISS, *Military Balance*, 2025; *Financial Times*, 'Russia recruits Yemeni mercenaries to fight in Ukraine', 2024; Al Monitor, 'Algeria becomes first foreign buyer of Russia's Su-57 fighter jet: What to know', 2025; ISW, 'Africa file: Kremlin pivot to Libya or Sudan post-Syria', 2024; *Naval News*, 'After loss of Tartus, Russia now has no submarines in the Mediterranean', 2025; European Commission, GISCO, 2025

towards the Red Sea and Indian Ocean⁽⁹⁾. However, it serves economic functions as well. The Southern Mediterranean acts as a logistical hub for operations in

Sub-Saharan Africa. Through private military companies such as Wagner (now partly incorporated into Africa Corps)⁽¹⁰⁾, Russia facilitates arms transfers and

(9) Kjellén, J. and Lund, A., *From Tartous to Tobruk: The return of Russian sea power in the Eastern Mediterranean*, Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2022 (<https://www.foi.se/rapportsammanfattning?reportNo=F01-R--5239--SE>); see also Parmar, S., Sawan, R.S. and Agnihotri, K.K., 'Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation 2022: An analysis', National Maritime Foundation, 2022 (<https://maritimeindia.org/maritime-doctrine-of-the-russian-federation-2022-an-analysis-maritime-doctrine-of-the-russian-federation-2022-an-analysis/>).

(10) Allison, O., Connon, N., Giustozzi, A. and Pasca, J., 'Wagner's business model in Syria and Africa: Profit and patronage', RUSI, *Occasional Paper*, February 2025 (https://static.rusi.org/wagners-business-model-in-syria-and-africa_0.pdf).

engages in illicit trade. These illicit activities include gold smuggling (estimated at USD 2.5 billion⁽¹¹⁾), fuel trafficking via Libya (estimated at USD 5 billion⁽¹²⁾), and captagon (estimated at USD 5.7 billion in 2021 alone⁽¹³⁾). Russian naval escorts also play a role in facilitating these illicit activities⁽¹⁴⁾.

Yet the collapse of the Assad regime in late 2024 exposed the fragility of Russia's position. With its resources diverted to Ukraine, Russia opted not to intervene, evacuating Assad and losing *de facto* control over key assets – most notably the Tartus naval base and Hmeimim airbase. While the new Syrian authorities have adopted a pragmatic tone, the likelihood of Russia retaining access to these facilities on previous terms is low. Alternative bases in Port Sudan or eastern Libya offer less strategic value, and local actors such as Khalifa Haftar are more independent, and thus likely to demand greater concessions.

Informational and cultural capital: more influence than affinity?

Russia's cultural influence in the Southern Mediterranean remains limited.

Efforts to project soft power through institutions such as the Russkiy Mir Foundation, which promotes Russian language and culture, are concentrated in the Mashreq. Although the Rossotrudnichestvo agency has a broader geographical presence, its absence from Algeria and Morocco limits its ability to engage with two of North Africa's most influential societies.

The collapse of the Assad regime in late 2024 exposed the fragility of Russia's position.

Migration and education trends highlight the limited appeal of Russia's cultural outreach. While motivations differ across countries, individuals in the region generally prefer destinations such as Europe, particularly

Southern European states, when considering emigration beyond the broader Middle East region⁽¹⁵⁾. In education, although the number of Arab students studying in Russia has grown, reaching 34 500 in 2022, the EU remains a significantly more attractive destination⁽¹⁶⁾. By contrast, nearly five times as many students from the Southern Mediterranean alone (excluding Gulf nationals) have studied in the European Union⁽¹⁷⁾. Russia's appeal as a place to live, study or build a future is simply not comparable.

Where Russia has been more assertive – and more effective – is in its information strategy. RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic, although less influential than dominant

(11) Berlin, J. et al, *The Blood Gold Report: How the Kremlin is using Wagner to launder billions in African gold*, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, January 2023 (<https://bloodgoldreport.com/>).

(12) 'The Odyssey of the Queen Majeda', Bloomberg, 6 February 2024 (<https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2024-libya-russia-oil-smuggling/>).

(13) Rose, C. and Söderholm, A., *The Captagon Threat: A profile of illicit trade, consumption, and regional realities*, New Lines Institute, 2022 (<https://newlinesinstitute.org/state-resilience-fragility/illicit-economies/the-captagon-threat-a-profile-of-illicit-trade-consumption-and-regional-realities/>).

(14) Sadjadpour, K. and Grajewski, N., 'Autocrats United: How Russia and Iran defy the US-led Global Order', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2024 (<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/10/russia-iran-oil-gas-ukraine-syria>).

(15) Arab Barometer, Data Analysis Tool (<https://www.arabbarometer.org/survey-data/data-analysis-tool/>).

(16) UNESCO, 'Internationally Mobile Students' (<https://uis.unesco.org/en/glossary-term/internationally-mobile-students>).

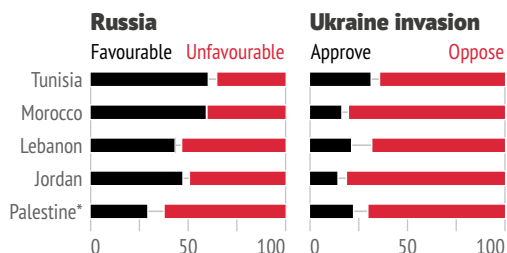
(17) Eurostat, 'Mobile students from abroad enrolled by education level, sex and country of origin' (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/educ_uae_mobs02__custom_16088362/default/map?lang=en).

regional networks like Al Jazeera or Al Arabiya, remain among the most-watched media outlets in the region, attracting millions of views monthly⁽¹⁸⁾. Their impact is amplified through formal content-sharing agreements with local media such as Egypt's Al-Ahram, Algeria's Algérie Press Service, and Morocco's Maghreb Arabe Press. Through these partnerships and a robust social media presence (Sputnik's Arabic-language Telegram channel alone has over 155 000 subscribers) Russia's narratives are embedded in local media ecosystems⁽¹⁹⁾.

These disinformation campaigns have been more effective in eroding perceptions of Western actors – namely the EU, NATO and the United States – as well as supporting its operations in countries such as Libya⁽²⁰⁾ than in bolstering Russia's own image. Drawing on pre-existing anti-Western sentiment, they have helped shift blame for the war in Ukraine away from Russia. The 2023 Arab Youth Survey found that a plurality of respondents attributed responsibility for the conflict to the West (NATO)⁽²¹⁾. Nevertheless, recent Arab Barometer data suggests that regional perceptions of Russia have remained largely unchanged, and attempts to leverage the Israel–Hamas war for image-building have had limited effect as well⁽²²⁾.

Not too bad

Middle Easterners do not condone the invasion, but Russia's image in the region suffers only marginally



Data: Arab Barometer, Wave VIII 2023–2024

* This designation shall not be construed as recognition of a State of Palestine and is without prejudice to the individual positions of the Member States on this issue.

These dis-information campaigns have helped shift blame for the war in Ukraine away from Russia.

Whether the Kremlin's standard approach of denial, narrative control and blame shifting will prove effective in the case of Syria remains uncertain. Aware of the reputational hit to its image as a reliable security guarantor,

Russian state media moved swiftly to reframe the withdrawal not as a failure, but as a calculated, strategically sound decision. Official narratives emphasised the successful evacuation of Assad and his family⁽²³⁾, while placing responsibility for the regime's collapse on Syrian leaders themselves – suggesting that Moscow had little reason to intervene further on behalf of a government unwilling to secure its own survival⁽²⁴⁾.

(18) Similarweb, Website traffic checker: Arabic.rt.com, website analysis for March 2025 (<https://www.similarweb.com/website/arabic.rt.com/#ranking>).

(19) RSF, 'Egypt: Inside Russia's Arabic disinformation factory', January 2025 (<https://rsf.org/en/egypt-inside-russia-s-arabic-disinformation-factory>).

(20) 'The bear who came to tea: Russia, Libya and the Kremlin's playbook for fragile states', op.cit.

(21) ASDA'A BCW, 'A White Paper on the findings of the 14th annual ASDA'A BCW Arab Youth Survey 2022'. 2023 (https://arabyouthsurvey.com/wp-content/uploads/whitepaper/AYS-2022-WP_English_FINAL.pdf).

(22) 'Russia's strategy in MENA garners marginal returns in public opinion', *Manara Magazine*, 19 July 2024 (<https://manaramagazine.org/2024/07/russias-strategy-in-mena-garners-marginal-returns-in-public-opinion/>).

(23) 'Putin spoke about the fate of Russian bases in Syria', *Vedomosti*, 20 December 2024 (<https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2024/12/20/1082627-putin-rasskazal-o-sudbe-rossiskih-baz-v-sirii>).

(24) Bespalov, A., 'From war to peace and from Middle East to West Asia', Valdai Club, 10 February 2025 (<https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/from-war-to-peace-and-from-middle-east-to-west/>).

MOVING BEYOND GRUDGING SUPPORT

To ‘unpower’ Russia in the Southern Mediterranean, the EU should raise the strategic costs of Moscow’s actions and prevent the emergence of any vacuum that Russia could exploit in the region.

Facilitating Syria’s transition

It is of paramount importance to ensure that the new authorities have no incentives to allow continued Russian presence in the country – or at least impose a significant cost on the Kremlin for any such concessions. The EU must tread a fine line, as conditioning its assistance on severing ties with Russia (or, for that matter, embracing cooperation with Israel) could be perceived as an assertion of neocolonial influence and risk backfiring. The EU has already taken steps in the right direction in terms of removing certain economic sanctions⁽²⁵⁾. It should continue to work alongside other partners committed to preventing a re-escalation of the civil war and supporting Syria’s reconstruction, particularly Türkiye and the Gulf. Together they should develop a support framework centred on the rule of law, human rights and inclusivity (a task that is already proving increasingly difficult – and all the more urgent for that very reason). Cooperation with Türkiye (within or, given the recent geopolitical shifts, outside the NATO framework) should extend

to the fields of defence and security, as Ankara is negotiating a pact with the new Syrian authorities that will reportedly involve the establishment of military bases and training of Syrian military personnel⁽²⁶⁾.

Supporting the political process in Libya

Russia is strengthening its position in the eastern part of the country. The EU must collaborate with all relevant actors, particularly with Türkiye, to support the peace process in Libya and ensure the withdrawal of Russia, its mercenaries, and all other foreign forces. Crucially for the success of the process, individual Member States should close ranks and adopt a common strategy.

Leveraging strategic communication channels

The EU must intensify its strategic communication efforts to expose Russia’s narrative manipulation and highlight its reputational vulnerabilities. The Kremlin’s decision to abandon the Assad regime in Syria – despite attempting to spin it as strategic restraint – has damaged its credibility as a reliable security partner. This moment should remain a focal point throughout the year, serving as a clear example to partner governments and publics that Russia is neither capable of offering economic support nor willing to

The Kremlin’s decision to abandon the Assad regime has damaged its credibility as a reliable security partner.

(25) European Council, Council of the European Union, ‘Syria: EU suspends restrictive measures on key economic sectors’, 24 February 2025 (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/02/24/syria-eu-suspends-restrictive-measures-on-key-economic-sectors/>).

(26) ‘Exclusive: Syria’s Sharaa to discuss defense pact with Turkey’s Erdogan, sources say’, Reuters, 4 February 2025 (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrias-sharaa-discuss-defense-pact-with-turkeys-erdogan-sources-say-2025-02-04/>).

uphold alliances when inconvenient. The message that Russia is a self-interested, neo-imperial actor is already gaining traction in parts of Africa and should be reinforced across the Southern Mediterranean⁽²⁷⁾. To this end, the EU should allocate more resources to 'Task Force South' within the European External Action Service (EEAS) and focus on ensuring the production of locally resonant, Arabic language counter-narratives that expose Russian disinformation. At the same time, it should significantly increase funding for independent media and civil society across the region to help uncover and report on Russian corruption networks, influence operations, and propaganda – particularly critical in light of US funding cuts to various media outlets, including the Middle East Broadcasting Network⁽²⁸⁾.

Curtailing capacity to circumvent sanctions

Russian oil continues to move across the Mediterranean through shadow fleet operations, undermining EU sanctions and sustaining Moscow's war economy. Despite the 16th EU sanctions package targeting these vessels, enforcement remains weak. Russian oil is routinely transferred to ships under neutral flags and resold in Mediterranean ports with little scrutiny. This must stop. EU and NATO member states – together with regional partners – should expand joint maritime enforcement, drawing on models like the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF)⁽²⁹⁾. Investment in naval assets, maritime tracking, and AI-enabled

monitoring is urgently needed. In parallel, the EU should develop and maintain dynamic sanctions watchlists focused on arms dealers, logistics firms and proxy facilitators operating in Libya and other Southern Mediterranean countries. Turning a blind eye in Libya enabled Russia to establish a regional foothold. The same mistake must not be repeated.

Closing ranks: Unity is leverage

Russia exploits divisions within the EU. When Member States prioritise short-term national agendas over collective security, they play directly into the Kremlin's hands. This vulnerability is amplified by recent shifts in US foreign policy, which Moscow appears to interpret as a green light for advancing its agenda. As already mentioned, in Libya, disunity among EU countries has severely weakened the bloc's influence over peace and stabilisation efforts. In Syria, the EU has so far maintained a unified position – but this consensus risks unravelling as Member States pursue competing interests around reconstruction and refugee return. Maintaining a common EU stance is not just desirable – it is strategic. Fragmentation empowers Moscow. Unity constrains it.

(27) See chapter 5 in this volume: 'Sub-Saharan Africa: Debunking the Russian mirage and strengthening EU-Africa ties' and, e.g. 'Why African leaders shunned Vladimir Putin's summit', *The Economist*, 26 July 2023 (<https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2023/07/26/why-african-leaders-shunned-vladimir-putins-summit>).

(28) 'Trump administration ends financing for Middle East Broadcasting Networks and other US-funded outlets', *The National News*, 17 March 2025 (<https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/mena/2025/03/17/trump-guts-us-funded-media-outlets/>).

(29) See chapter 8 in this volume, 'The shadow fleet: Time for action not reaction'.

CHAPTER 4

THE WESTERN BALKANS

The power of connection

by
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In the Western Balkans, Russia offers no credible alternative to the EU. As countries of the region increasingly turn westward, Moscow is reduced to playing the role of a disruptor. The EU has the tools to counter its malign influence. It just needs the resolve to use them.

While Russia lacks the economic and institutional capacity to serve as a genuine alternative, it continues to exploit divisions and vulnerabilities in the region. Moscow leverages political alliances and economic ambitions while maintaining ideological presence through shared culture and Orthodox Christian heritage. This fusion of religion and identity has been a key pillar of Russia's soft power, reinforcing its foothold alongside political and economic ties. It has built an extensive network of proxies that penetrates spheres beyond politics, infiltrating media outlets, internet troll farms and online groups (e.g. on Telegram), far-right parties and movements, business elites, cultural NGOs, and religious institutions. Russia adapts its tactics to each national context, drawing on different resources according to the specific vulnerabilities of individual countries.

This chapter examines Russia's tactics and vulnerabilities across key domains

since the start of its war of aggression against Ukraine. It recommends that the EU turn promises into action by accelerating integration for reform-minded countries while making obstruction costly. To stay ahead, the EU must ramp up coordinated sanctions, engage directly with citizens, and take the reins of the narrative, empowering independent media to counter Russia's influence.

MOSCOW'S PLAYBOOK: EXACERBATING TENSIONS BY DESIGN

Although Russia lacks the breadth of resources available to the West, it uses its limited toolkit strategically to exploit existing divisions and position itself as an indispensable actor in the region. One of Russia's key objectives is to prevent further NATO and EU enlargement. Moscow opposes the region's Euro-Atlantic integration, viewing it as a direct threat to its geopolitical standing and influence.

Especially since the onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russian state-supported media and official institutions have been relentless in crafting narratives aimed at influencing local populations. Much of this propaganda centres on deflecting blame for the war onto Western countries, with NATO singled out as the primary antagonist. Following the invasion, the Russian embassy in North Macedonia accused the West of propping up the so-called 'Nazi Ukrainian regime', obstructing peace efforts, and violating international law⁽¹⁾. Echoing Kremlin propaganda, Milorad Dodik, President of the Republika Srpska entity, endorsed Russia's framing of the invasion as a 'special operation' soon after the war began, aligning his rhetoric with Moscow's disinformation campaign⁽²⁾. In turn, Russia has backed Dodik's actions as part of a deliberate strategy to undermine the legitimacy of Bosnia and Herzegovina, weaken its institutions and pull the country away from the EU. Such support not only inflames ethnic and political divisions but also cements Moscow's role as a destabilising actor in the region, all while presenting itself as the champion of Serbian national interests.

In the north of Kosovo*, where the Serb-majority population is concentrated, Russia has deployed nationalist symbols and messaging. Graffiti bearing slogans like 'The army is returning to Kosovo' (*Kad se vojska na Kosovo vrati*),

the name 'Putin', and the 'Z' symbol have appeared in public spaces alongside clothing featuring pro-Wagner insignia, such as 'PMC Wagner Group'. This is all part of a calculated strategy intended to reassure Kosovo Serbs in the north that Wagner could act as their protector, while simultaneously intimidating the Albanian population by creating the illusion of Wagner's presence. Many Serbs view Russia as a steadfast ally on the global stage, opposing Kosovo's full independence and acting as a protector of Serbs in general. This is also evident in the sharp contrast in public opinion: while only 1% of Kosovar Albanians hold a positive view of Russia, 92% of Kosovar Serbs see it in a favourable light⁽³⁾.

These efforts notwithstanding, a key Russian vulnerability is its waning strategic position in the region. The illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 led several countries to reassess their allegiances. Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia – EU candidate countries and NATO members – have aligned fully with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). In response, Russia designated all three as 'unfriendly countries'⁽⁴⁾. Even Serbia, seen as a Russian stronghold, has shown signs of leaning towards the West. In 2024, it moved to modernise its air force by purchasing 12 French Dassault Rafale multirole fighter jets, replacing its ageing Soviet-era fleet. By January

A key Russian vulnerability is its waning strategic position in the region.

(1) See Kožnárek, T. and Stojarová, V., 'Building russskiy mir online – Russia's competing narratives', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 2024 (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/14683857.2024.2448351?needAccess=true>).

(2) See: 'Dodik za ruske medije: Specijalna operacija Rusije u Ukrajini važna za RS', Vox, 2024 (<https://vox.ba/2024/04/06/dodik-za-ruske-medije-specijalna-operacija-rusije-u-ukrajini-vazna-za-rs/>).

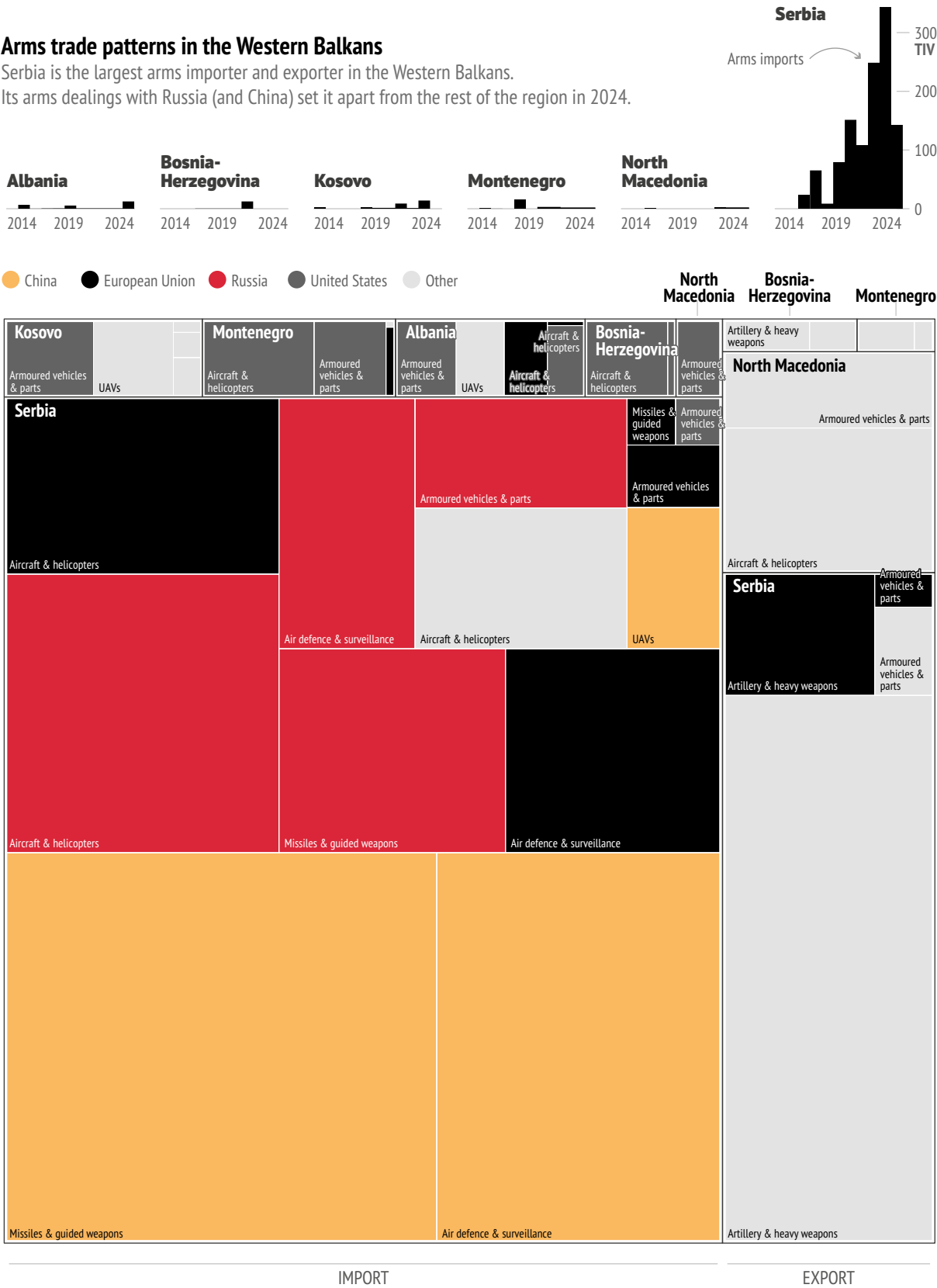
(3) See: International Republican Institute, 'National Survey of Kosovo', 2024 (<https://www.iri.org/resources/national-survey-of-kosovo-may-2024/>).

(4) See: 'Order of the Government of the Russian Federation dated 17.09.2024 No. 2560-r', Official publication of legal acts 2024 (<http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/document/0001202409200036?index=3>).

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

Arms trade patterns in the Western Balkans

Serbia is the largest arms importer and exporter in the Western Balkans.
Its arms dealings with Russia (and China) set it apart from the rest of the region in 2024.

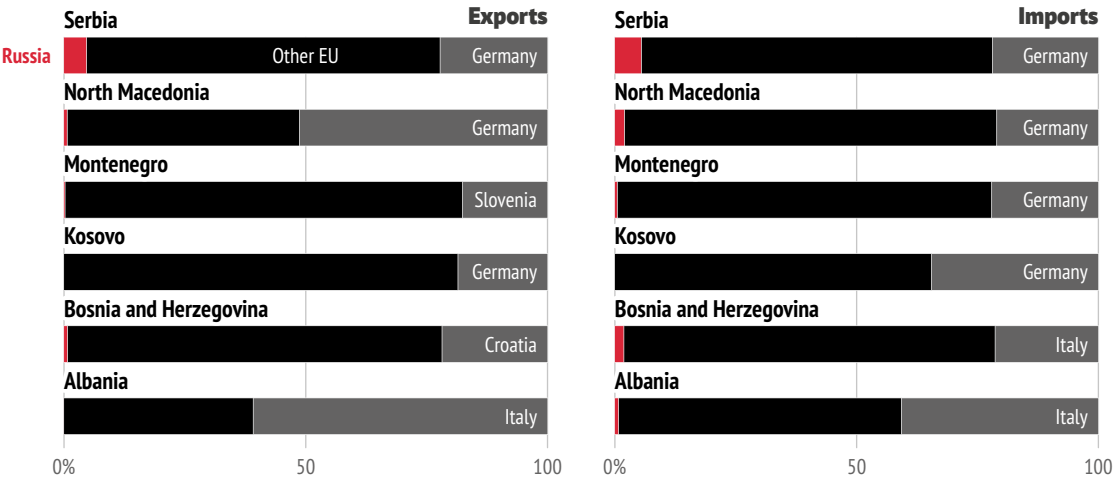


Data: SIPRI, 2024;

The trend-indicator value (TIV) of an item being delivered is intended to reflect its military capability rather than its financial value.

Western Balkan trade ties

Compared to EU Member States, Russia was a marginal trading partner in 2024



Data: Statistical Office of Western Balkan countries, 2024

2025, Belgrade had further strengthened its air defence capabilities with Thales Ground Master radar systems, including the GM400α and GM200, enhancing long-range surveillance and target detection⁽⁵⁾. NATO and the US remain key security partners for Serbia, which temporarily suspended its freeze on military exercises to participate in the US-led *Platinum Wolf 2023*. Nevertheless, while Serbia's military modernisation and security partnerships indicate a strategic pivot toward the West, it continues to maintain strong defence trade ties with Russia, particularly in arms imports (see graph on arms trade patterns on previous page).

Economically, another vulnerability for Russia is the steady erosion of its foothold in the region, driven by structural limitations. For years, the gas industry has been a powerful leverage tool,

supplying much of the region's energy needs. Russian gas still flows through the TurkStream pipeline under long-term contracts with Gazprom, serving Greece, Hungary (which has diverted its imports from the Ukrainian route), Slovakia, Romania and Croatia, in addition to North Macedonia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina⁽⁶⁾. However, the EU has taken active steps to diversify its energy supplies and develop alternative energy sources and supply routes⁽⁷⁾. Further accelerating this shift, Ukraine's decision to terminate Russian gas transit from 1 January 2025 marks the end of decades of direct gas links between Europe and Russia, weakening the Kremlin's energy influence. Without its energy monopoly, Moscow risks losing a key instrument of pressure over regional governments. With the suspension of this route, TurkStream/Balkan Stream remains the only pipeline delivering Russian gas to Serbia

(5) See Ministry of Defence, Republic of Serbia, 'ASEWG units boast outstanding level of training and technological advancement', 2025 (<https://www.mod.gov.rs/eng/21959/vrhunska-obucenost-i-tehnicki-iskorak-jedinica-vazdušnog-osmatranja-i-javljanja21959>).

(6) For more see: Urbasos, I., 'The future of Russian gas in the EU', Elcano Policy Paper, Elcano Real Institute, March 2024 (<https://media.realinstitutoelcano.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/policy-paper-the-future-of-russian-gas-in-the-eu.pdf>).

(7) European Commission, 'Liquefied Natural Gas' (https://energy.ec.europa.eu/topics/carbon-management-and-fossil-fuels/liquefied-natural-gas_en).

via Bulgaria. However, the broader shift in European gas supply dynamics has prompted Serbia to explore diversification options⁽⁸⁾, including imports from Azerbaijan and LNG supplies via Greece's Alexandroupolis terminal (also relevant for North Macedonia). This decline in energy leverage is mirrored in Russia's shrinking economic footprint across the region. In terms of trade and investment, the EU and its Member States overwhelmingly dominate the Western Balkans, both collectively and individually (see graph on Western Balkan trade ties on previous page).

The Serbian Orthodox Church is another key instrument of influence, wielding significant socio-political power in countries with predominantly Orthodox populations – including Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and the Republika Srpska entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Russia draws on shared Slavic heritage and Orthodox Christian traditions to cultivate a sense of kinship, a narrative often amplified through public diplomacy and state-backed media. The slogan 'Serbs and Russians are brothers forever' (*Srbi i Rusi braća zauvijek*) serves as a potent symbol of this bond. Over the past decade, Moscow has strategically sought to elevate the status of Orthodoxy in the region, strengthening its ties with local Orthodox churches. This has been achieved largely through financial support, funding the restoration of historic religious sites and the construction of new ones, thereby deepening its cultural and political foothold⁽⁹⁾.

The Serbian Orthodox Church is another key instrument of regional influence.

In the information domain, the tactic of creating fake online accounts has facilitated the widespread dissemination of Russian narratives. Regional outlets like RT Balkan serve the goal of amplifying Russia's messaging across the region. The primary challenge in this context arises from the decentralised nature of social media, where content is easily shared by individuals, often without oversight or accountability. As a result, disinformation originating from the Kremlin becomes deeply embedded in the information ecosystem, reaching vast audiences through local media outlets that only echo and reinforce Moscow-shaped narratives.

The EU has imposed sanctions on Russia Today (RT) and other Russian state-funded media for their role in spreading propaganda and disinformation. De-

spite EU restrictions, RT Balkan launched online in Serbia in November 2022, just eight months after the invasion. Backed by Russia, its Belgrade newsroom serves as a strategic springboard for spreading Kremlin narratives across the region. A key factor specific to the Western Balkans region is the shared linguistic space, which facilitates cross-border media influence. This is evident in Montenegro, where despite the ban on Sputnik and RT, pro-Russian messages still reach citizens indirectly through local media and social networks.

Nonetheless, the case of Montenegro also highlights the limitations of disinformation narratives, as trust in Russian messaging remains largely confined to Serbian and Serb-majority communities.

(8) See Institute of Central Europe, 'Serbia activates natural gas supply efforts', 2023 (<https://ies.lublin.pl/en/comments/serbia-activates-natural-gas-supply-efforts/>).

(9) See: Karčić, H., 'Serbs and Russians are brothers forever: Russian religious influence in the Western Balkans', Berkeley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, Georgetown University, 2023 (<https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/publications/serbs-and-russians-are-brothers-forever-russian-religious-influence-in-the-western-balkans>).

EU-imposed bans on Russian state media hinder dissemination, and more efforts by independent media in the region could help counter these false narratives. Besides, Russia faces significant challenges in shaping public opinion, particularly regarding its war in Ukraine. In much of the region, public sentiment is largely opposed to Russia's actions, with a majority of citizens believing its invasion is 'completely to somewhat unjustified' – 82% in Albania, 72% in Kosovo, 65% in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 61% in Montenegro, and 53% in North Macedonia (in Serbia, the figure stands at 37%)⁽¹⁰⁾. This widespread scepticism curtails the effectiveness of Russian propaganda, as overt attempts to justify the war risk further alienating audiences.

RUSSIA IS STRONG WHEN THE EU IS WEAK

Russia's influence in the Western Balkans is constrained by a number of key factors: limited investment potential compared to the EU and its Member States; the lack of a military presence; diminishing energy leverage; political alliances built more on personal loyalties than institutional ties; and the region's growing alignment with the EU and NATO. The EU has the power to further reduce Russia's harmful influence. To achieve that, it should in particular:

> **Reward reform, deter obstruction.** Russia skilfully exploits political and strategic gaps left unaddressed by

the EU and its allies. Countries like North Macedonia, which went so far as to change its name to advance its EU aspirations, still face delays in their accession talks. This prolonged stagnation is weaponised by Russian and local influence agents alike. To counter this, the EU should reward meaningful progress while imposing diplomatic and economic consequences on those obstructing EU integration. Measures could include political and diplomatic pressure, such as suspending high-level dialogues, expanding sanctions on political figures and businesses through asset freezes and travel bans, and reducing financial support from the Reform and Growth Facility. The EU should recognise that every delay in delivering on its commitments strengthens Russia's hand.

> **Form a coalition of the willing.** The EU should take a firmer stance on targeted sanctions, addressing not only Russian actors operating in the region but also local actors, individuals and companies who actively promote pro-Russian narratives, fuel disinformation and undermine public trust in the EU. While the US and the UK have imposed sanctions on patronage networks and individuals in Republika Srpska⁽¹¹⁾, the EU has struggled to reach a consensus. Rather than individual EU Member States acting alone, a coordinated approach among the willing Member States would be far more effective in reinforcing the EU's credibility.

> **Undertake stronger public diplomacy on the ground.** Winning over citizens is just as important as engaging with

(10) See International Republican Institute, 'IRI 2024 Western Balkans Poll', 2024 (<https://www.iri.org/news/iri-2024-western-balkans-poll/>).

(11) For more on sanctions against Bosnia and Herzegovina, see: UK Government, 'Financial sanctions, Bosnia and Herzegovina', 2024 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/financial-sanctions-bosnia-and-herzegovina>) and US Department of Treasury, 'Treasury sanctions destabilizing actors and financial enablers in Republika Srpska', 2025 (<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2793>).

political elites. Both the EU Delegations and the diplomatic missions of its Member States should proactively communicate the EU's role in the region. This is to ensure that people see the EU not just as a bureaucratic entity, but as a concrete force for economic growth, democracy and opportunity. This means expanding EU-backed educational and youth programmes, hosting EU-themed events to foster a sense of European identity, and strengthening the EU's presence in local communities through citizens' dialogues and campaigns to highlight tangible positive outcomes of EU investment. The Western Balkans is not a military battleground like Ukraine, but it remains a key front in the information war. The EU should step up its response by supporting (local) independent journalism, improving the media landscape, and promoting media literacy and critical thinking through local engagement and the application of EU best practices. Exerting influence in the region is not just about policy – it is about shaping the narrative.

CHAPTER 5

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Debunking the Russian mirage and strengthening EU-Africa ties

by
ROSSELLA MARANGIO

Not all that glitters is gold. While Russian influence in Africa has certainly grown in recent years in terms of diplomatic, cultural and military outreach, its engagement on the continent remains uneven and complex. African countries are far from monolithic; they assert diverse interests and resist external influence in varied ways.

While it may be hard to believe, scepticism towards external powers is no longer reserved for former colonial rulers but increasingly extends – albeit to varying degrees – to other actors, such as China and Russia. This chapter examines the realities and limitations of Russian engagement in sub-Saharan Africa. It argues that, so far, disinformation and propaganda campaigns have been Russia's most effective tools for exerting influence on the continent. These amplify Russian narratives and promises, while grand economic investment pledges often go unfulfilled. If the EU wants to curb Moscow's influence in Africa, it should first and foremost prioritise its partnership with the continent. But it should also counter disinformation through targeted communication strategies, support African representation in global governance

institutions, and diplomatically exploit the disconnect between Russian tactics and African priorities – such as stability.

RUSSIA'S STRATEGIC GAMBLE

Russia's ties to Africa date back to the Soviet era. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) supported national liberation movements and provided education and training opportunities to young Africans. After the fall of the USSR, Russia retreated from the continent but continued to show support for traditional allies like Eritrea and Sudan, for instance, by abstaining from UN sanctions resolutions.

Since the 2010s, Moscow has intensified its outreach to Africa as part of its broader foreign policy goal of reclaiming great power status. But since the 2014 annexation of Crimea and especially following the 2022 war of aggression against Ukraine, Moscow's engagement in Africa has increasingly aimed at avoiding

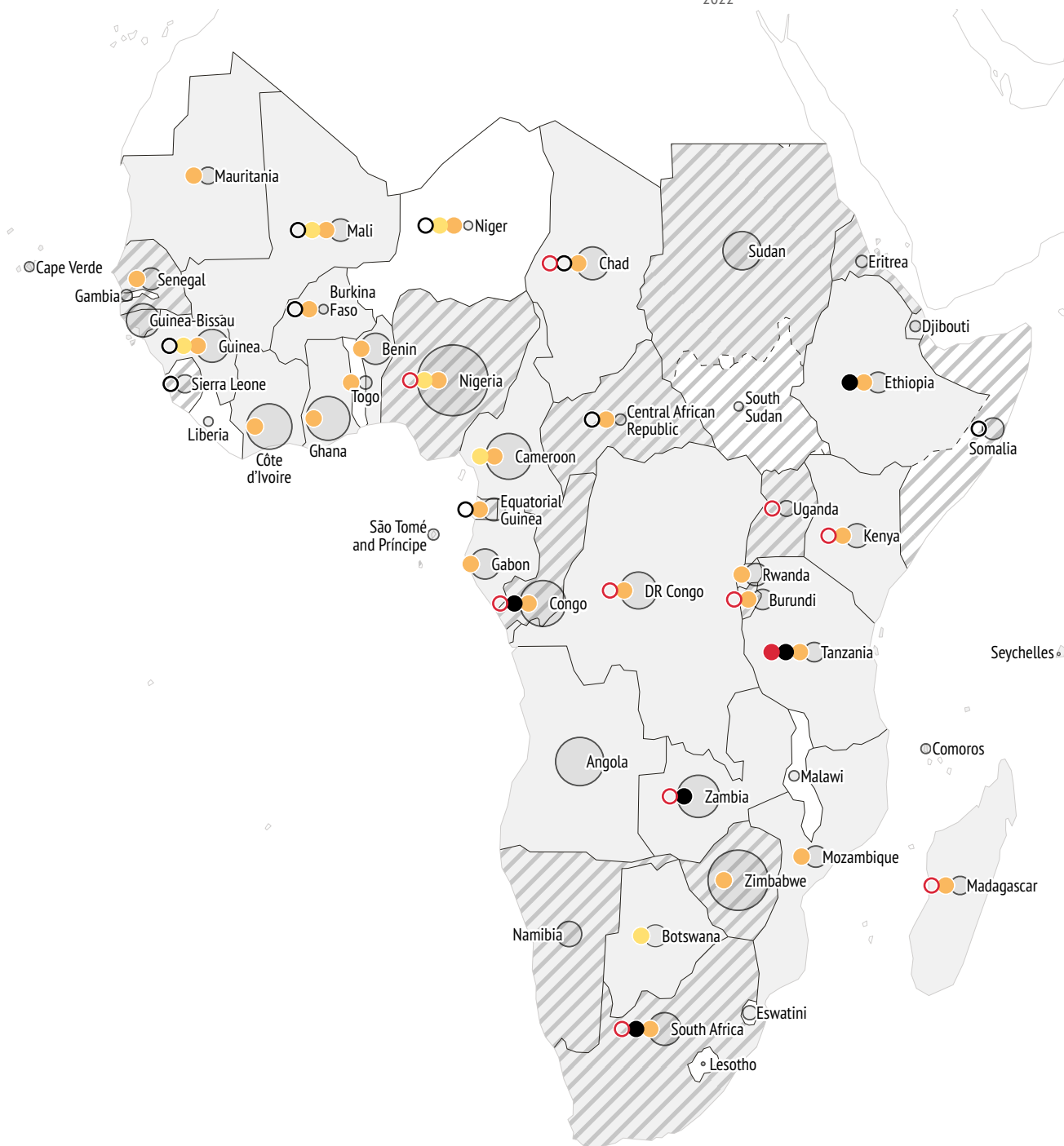
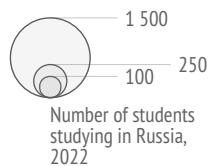
Magnifying lens

Russia's soft power in Africa blends diplomacy, education, and information outreach

- High-level bilateral visits to Russia since Feb 2022
- Presence of a Russian embassy

Russian cultural presence

- Russia House
- Russkiy Mir Centre
- Availability of RT TV channel
- Availability of Sputnik Africa Radio FM frequency
- Russia House partner
- Russkiy Mir Cabinet



Data: European Commission, GISCO, 2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2025; Embassies.org, 2025; UNESCO, UIS database, 2025; Agence nigérienne de Presse, 2025; RT, 2025

international isolation, securing financial support for its war effort and countering Western influence. Russian capital in Africa takes the form of strong diplomatic and information networks that compensate its comparatively weak economic and military presence. As supplies of weapons to Africa declined after 2022, private military companies (PMCs) continued to provide a form of military capital – albeit with mixed results – often accompanied by extensive disinformation campaigns.

Ultimately, Russia leverages information distortion to enhance its image and pursue its strategic goals. However, most African governments aim at maximising their agency and benefits by diversifying their international partnerships. African openness to Russia, and massive abstention rates in UN votes on resolutions concerning Ukraine, often reflects pragmatic attempts to enhance sovereignty and bargaining power rather than genuine political alignment⁽¹⁾.

Russia seeks to tap into broader regional grievances.

economic and military footholds, such as securing mining concessions and establishing military bases in Libya and Sudan, to gain control over key trade routes and submarine cable infrastructure (see chapter 3 on the Southern Mediterranean in this volume).

Russia currently maintains a robust diplomatic presence in sub-Saharan Africa, with 35 embassies across the region and an emerging network of soft power institutions. The Russkiy

Mir Foundation, which promotes Russian language and culture, operates in 12 countries, while the federal state agency Rossotrudnichestvo manages Russia Houses in five sub-Saharan countries, alongside a network of affiliated Russia Houses established through local partnerships. In 2021, the Russian Orthodox Church, another conduit of Russian state influence abroad, followed suit with the establishment of an ecclesiastical province in Africa⁽³⁾.

Diplomatic and cultural capital

High-level meetings and visits like the Russia-Africa Summit, launched in Sochi in 2019, and ongoing diplomatic engagement at the UN and BRICS+⁽²⁾ forums underscore this strategy. Russia seeks to leverage Africa's voting power in the UN General Assembly and tap into broader grievances to promote its vision of a multipolar world order. At the same time, it seeks to carve out strategic

Going viral: information capital

Arguably, the most extensive and powerful instrument of Russian outreach in Africa is its network of information agencies. Platforms such as Africa Initiative, Sputnik, Afrique Media, and Russosphere sponsor multilingual content on Russia and often spread disinformation campaigns with strong anti-Western narratives. These narratives are often echoed by other actors with similar

(1) See: Staeger, U., 'The war in Ukraine, the African Union, and African agency', *African Affairs*, Vol. 122, No. 489, October 2023, pp. 559–586 (<https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adado26>).

(2) Originally standing for Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS), now the group counts 10 members with the accession of Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates.

(3) Russkiy Mir Foundation (<https://russkiymir.ru/rucenter/cabinet.php>); Rossotrudnichestvo (<https://rs.gov.ru/en/contacts/russian-houses-abroad/represents-with-map/>); Hoyle A., 'As Russia builds influence in Africa, its Church takes a role', USIP, 24 July 2024 (<https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/07/russia-builds-influence-africa-its-church-takes-role>).

media ecosystems, such as China, further contributing to their dissemination ⁽⁴⁾. A key feature of Russia's outreach to Africa is its reliance on narratives that build on pre-existing beliefs or grievances. Content disseminated through various channels, including articles, video games, comic strips and films, often aims to reinforce the perception of Russia as an 'anti-colonial power' and a 'genuine friend', portrayed in stark contrast to the West's 'paternalistic' and 'neo-colonialist attitudes' – sentiments that often resonate with post-colonial grievances. Since 2021, regular screenings of *The Tourist* in the Central African Republic (CAR) and the Sahel have glorified Wagner fighters as heroes battling CAR rebels and their alleged colonial backers, while Russian officials regularly depict 'the West' as engaging 'in dialogue with the Global South from a position of "white supremacy"' ⁽⁵⁾.

Russian investments in information agencies often go hand-in-hand with other strategic activities on the ground. It is no coincidence that Radio Lengo Songo in CAR and Perspective Sahélienne in Mali broadcast in both French and local languages to promote a positive image of Russia – coinciding with the deployment of the Wagner Group/Africa Corps. Likewise, Russia actively seeks concessions for mining activities and recruits locals – both for its information campaigns and, increasingly, for military combat roles in

Russia's full-blown presence in Africa remains geographically concentrated in the Sahel and CAR.

Ukraine ⁽⁶⁾. Russia-linked companies such as Nordgold, Rusal, Rosatom and Alrosa currently operate mines in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, CAR and Sudan. Russia's ability to influence the information space, deploy PMCs under the pretext of fighting insurgencies, and provide protection for political elites also serves the interests of local regimes seeking to maintain power – while granting Russia access to valuable mineral resources, especially gold and diamonds.

Thus, Russia's full-blown presence in Africa remains geographically concentrated in the Sahel and CAR. However, its extensive information campaigns span the continent, promoting Moscow's image as a reliable partner for African countries. Should new opportunities arise elsewhere, these propaganda efforts could help Moscow to expand its influence in other regions of the continent.

Military capital: a double-edged sword

The Wagner Group/Africa Corps is present in five sub-Saharan countries (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, CAR and Sudan), with troop estimates ranging from 2 000 in Mali and CAR to around 100 in Niger. Although officially deployed to support counter-terrorism operations, these forces are unlikely to decisively eliminate

(4) Aukia J. et al., 'Strings attached: China's narrative influence in Sub-Saharan Africa', *Hybrid CoE Research Report 13*, January 2025 (<https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/hybrid-coe-research-report-13-strings-attached-chinas-narrative-influence-in-sub-saharan-africa/>).

(5) Audinet, M., "À bas le néocolonialisme!" Résurgence d'un récit stratégique dans la Russie en guerre', Etude no. 119, IRSEM, October 2024 (<https://www.irsem.fr/media/etude-119-audinet-russie-et-néocolonialisme-v2.pdf>); African Initiative, 'Lavrov: The West engages in dialogue with the Global South from a position of "White Supremacy"', 21 February 2025 (<https://afrinz.ru/en/2025/02/lavrov-the-west-engages-in-dialogue-with-the-global-south-from-a-position-of-white-supremacy/>).

(6) 'Les confessions d'un agent repent de la "désinformation" et des "messages haineux" de Wagner en Centrafrique', *Le Monde*, 21 November 2024; RFI, 'African troops "forced to Ukraine frontlines" while Russians stay in camp', 17 January 2025 (<https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20250117-african-troops-forced-to-ukraine-frontlines-while-russians-stay-in-camp>).

the terrorist threat in vast countries like Mali, which spans 1 240 000 km² (roughly a quarter of the EU's territory). Wagner often acts as both a Praetorian Guard for governments and a Trojan horse for Russian interests, particularly in the mining sector.

However, resistance is beginning to emerge to the CAR-model of Wagner-linked resource exploitation. In 2023, one of Russia's key partners, Mali, introduced a 30% tax on mining profits that *de facto* limits the dominance of Wagner-linked companies in the sector while boosting state revenues. Moreover, the transition from Wagner to Africa Corps – more directly linked with the Kremlin – has proven challenging due to Wagner's entrenched presence, and the ruling junta's determination to preserve both its autonomy and its image as a 'liberator' ⁽⁷⁾. Recently, Russia's offer to support the creation of a combined force of 5 000 troops in the Alliance of Sahelian States may have facilitated the *rapprochement* ⁽⁸⁾.

Russia's military effectiveness has also come under scrutiny due to a string of recent defeats. Its inability to defend Assad in Syria, its withdrawal from Mozambique in 2019, and the heavy losses suffered in Tinzawaten, Mali, in August 2024 have all highlighted the limitations

of its military capabilities ⁽⁹⁾. Mauritania has repeatedly voiced concerns over unlawful incursions by Malian armed forces (FAMA) and Russian PMCs – described as militias – on its territory ⁽¹⁰⁾. As the host of a growing number of refugees from Mali, Mauritania has long realised that target-

ing civilian populations is unlikely to resolve the Malian conflict. On the contrary, such ethnically-targeted violence – particularly against Tuareg, Arab and Fulani communities – risks fueling ethnic conflict and social instability, outcomes which most African governments are keen to avoid.

Russia's military effectiveness has come under scrutiny due to a string of recent defeats.

Economic capital: grand gestures and empty promises?

Economically, Russia plays a rather minor role as a trade partner compared to the EU and China, and its investments in Africa remain scarce. In 2023, trade in goods between sub-Saharan Africa and Russia amounted to €6.6 billion – about 1% of the region's total trade volume. By contrast, trade with the EU and China amounted to €155 billion (23.5%) and €136.5 billion (20.7%) respectively. In 2021, Russia's foreign direct investment (FDI) stock in sub-Saharan Africa amounted to about €62 million,

(7) 'De Wagner à Africa Corps: au Mali, les putschistes jouent à la roulette russe', *Jeune Afrique*, 21 janvier 2025 (<https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1649876/politique/de-wagner-a-africa-corps-au-mali-les-putschistes-jouent-a-la-roulette-russe/>).

(8) 'Russia backs up military plans for the juntas', *Africa Confidential*, 7 April 2025 (<https://www.africa-confidential.com/article/id/15432/russia-backs-up-military-plans-for-the-juntas>).

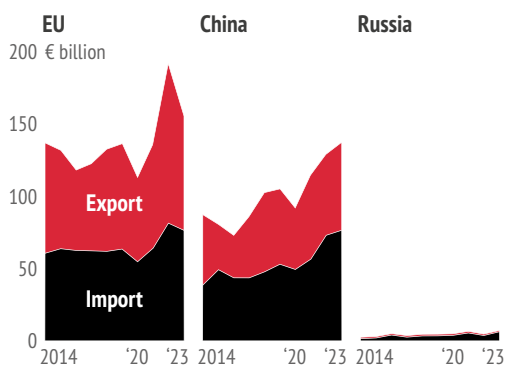
(9) See: Ramani, S., *Russia in Africa: Resurgent great power or bellicose pretender?*, Oxford University Press, 2023, p. 227–233; Brown, W., 'The sweating bear: Why Russia's influence in Africa is under threat', ECFR, 9 October 2024 (<https://ecfr.eu/article/the-sweating-bear-why-russias-influence-in-africa-is-under-threat/>).

(10) 'Mali-Mauritanie: en Chine, Goïta et Ghazouani tentent de déminer la crise', *Jeune Afrique*, 5 September 2024 (<https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1605564/politique/mali-mauritanie-en-chine-goita-et-ghazouani-tendent-de-deminer-la-crise/>).

compared to €143 billion for the EU and €34 billion for China⁽¹¹⁾.

Sub-Saharan Africa trade with selected partners

Russia's trade footprint remains small compared to the EU and China



Data: UN Comtrade database, 2025; European Commission Directorate General for Trade, 2025

In the mining sector, African countries are increasingly rejecting exploitative terms imposed by Russian companies. Angola is negotiating the exit of Russia's Alrosa from the Catoca diamond mine due to sanctions, while Namibia has revoked uranium concessions from Rosatom-linked companies over environmental concerns. Similarly, Russian projects in Zimbabwe (platinum) and Madagascar (chromite) have been abandoned due to insufficient

capital and waning investor confidence⁽¹²⁾. High-profile proposals, such as space programme cooperation in Zimbabwe and nuclear partnerships, have so far remained unfulfilled amid doubts about their financial viability. Mali is the sole exception, where Novawind (a Rosatom affiliate) has begun the construction of a solar plant – alongside similar Chinese and Emirati projects. Although the plant was expected to start delivering electricity within four months, Mali continues to grapple with an energy crisis⁽¹³⁾.

BRIGHTER AND SMARTER: HOW THE EU CAN COUNTER RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN AFRICA

To strengthen its relationship with Africa, the EU should focus on building meaningful partnerships based on shared priorities rather than being drawn into geopolitical rivalries on the continent in a way that would play into Russia's hands. Instead, the EU should focus on contextualising Russian influence,

- (11) European Commission, 'Trade in goods with Sub-Saharan Africa', 2024 (https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/region/details_sub-saharan-africa_en.pdf); UN Comtrade (<https://comtradeplus.un.org/>); Bank of Russia, 'Direct Investment of the Russian Federation Abroad' (https://www.cbr.ru/statistics/macro_itm/external_sector/di/); OECD Data Explorer (<https://tinyurl.com/yymycr48>); SAIS China-Africa Research Initiative, 'Data: Chinese Investments in Africa 2003-2022' (<https://www.sais-cari.org/chinese-investment-in-africa>).
- (12) 'Angola força saída da multinacional russa Alrosa da Sociedade de Catoca', *Expansão*, 19 January 2024 (<https://expansao.co.ao/empresas/detalhe/angola-forca-saida-da-multinacional-russa-alrosa-da-sociedade-de-catoca-61311.html>); Africa Intelligence, 'L'ancien fleuron minier Kraoma prisonnier des luttes politiques', 8 December 2022 (<https://www.africaintelligence.fr/afrique-australe-et-iles/2022/12/08/l-ancien-fleuron-minier-kraoma-prisonnier-des-luttes-politiques,109871869-art>); Al Jazeera, 'Is Russia poisoning Namibia's water in its hunt for uranium?', 27 November 2024 (<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/11/27/russia-woos-namibia-to-mine-uranium-sparking-water-safety-fears>); 'Russian billionaire now an obstacle to Zimbabwe's multibillion platinum project', *The Zimbabwe Mail*, 5 June 2022 (<https://www.thezimbabwemail.com/business/russian-billionaire-now-an-obstacle-to-zimbabwes-multibillion-platinum-project/>).
- (13) 'Énergie solaire au Mali: installation avec la Russie d'une mégacentrale', *Jeune Afrique*, 25 May 2024 (<https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1571589/economie-entreprises/energie-solaire-au-mali-installation-avec-la-russie-dune-megacentrale/#:~:text=Mali-,%C3%89nergie%20solaire%20au%20Mali%20%3A%20installation%20avec%20la%20Russie%20d'une,%20collaboration%20avec%20la%20Russie.>); aBamako, 'Crise énergétique au Mali: le Gal Assimi Goïta rassure les populations', 31 December 2024 (<http://news.abamako.com/h/297643.html>).

(Un)kept promises

Active agreements and their implementation

- Civil nuclear cooperation agreement
- Military-technical cooperation agreement
- Minerals extraction and exploration partnership agreement
- Nuclear power plant project deal
- Solar power plant projects deal

Implementation

- Ongoing implementation
- No implementation



Data: European Commission, GISCO, 2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2025; Africa Policy Research Institute, 2025; Reuters, 2025; African Energy, 2024; BBC, 2017

reassuring African and European audiences while reaffirming the mutual importance of their partnership.

To do so effectively, the EU should concentrate on five key areas:

- > **Debunk and expose propaganda.** Russian disinformation fuels resentment toward the EU and deepens social divisions in Africa, undermining peace and economic development. The EU should expose Russia's unfulfilled promises, Wagner's human rights abuses, the mistreatment of migrants, and instances of fraudulent recruitment while correcting false narratives. To be effective, EU communication efforts must build on the work of the Stratcom Task Force for sub-Saharan Africa and EU Delegations which support independent journalism, fact-checking, and positive storytelling. This requires matching Russian influence with adequate resources and using tailored, country-specific approaches. To maximise its reach and impact, the EU should also prioritise widely accessible media formats across Africa – such as radio, podcasts, and engaging social media content easily shared via platforms like WhatsApp.
- > **Invest in a positive narrative and in the partnership.** Countering disinformation is not enough. The EU must shift the narrative around EU-Africa relations beyond crisis management to emphasise economic growth, innovation, and mutual interests and benefits for both continents. Cultural diplomacy – through initiatives that promote mutual learning in history, the arts, media and education – can play a key role in fostering mutual understanding and trust. Expanding people-to-people connections through student and journalist exchanges, business collaborations and training programmes is equally vital. EU leaders should also increasingly

highlight the Africa-EU partnership and its importance in their public messaging and communications.

- > **Support African agency and representation in global governance.** The EU should support Africa's push for greater influence in global governance, including in the UN Security Council and international financial institutions. Strengthening partnerships with the African Union and regional organisations will not only reinforce Africa's agency but also help counter Russia's claims of Western neglect and marginalisation of the continent.
- > **Expand outreach to other countries when interests or concerns converge.** Many countries such as India, Türkiye, the Gulf states, and China are deepening their engagement with Africa. While their interests may not always align with those of the EU, there is common ground that can be leveraged. For instance, while Russia benefits from divisive narratives and conflict, instability threatens Chinese business interests in Africa. Similarly, the activities of Russian PMCs often fuel terrorist recruitment, a growing concern for Türkiye, Morocco, Algeria, Egypt and the US as well as for the EU. The EU should use diplomacy to capitalise on these inherent tensions both through diplomatic outreach and by exposing the negative effects of Russian propaganda.
- > **Take the partners' interests seriously.** Despite significant variations across Africa, most states and communities share common needs: infrastructure, access to energy, education, urban planning, and, most importantly, jobs. While the EU cannot address all these challenges, the Global Gateway Initiative focuses on many of these issues. To maximise impact, the initiative should prioritise Africa's industrialisation aspirations and invest in integrated infrastructure and

service networks that directly improve community livelihoods and enhance EU visibility, rather than dispersing projects across vast areas.

CHAPTER 6

HYBRID WARFARE

Dismantling the hypocrisy of Russia's rhetoric

by
NAĎA KOVALČÍKOVÁ

In waging hybrid warfare, Russia trades in fear and hypocrisy. Since the launch of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia has conducted a range of hybrid operations targeting the EU ⁽¹⁾. These coordinated destabilising activities deliberately blend digital, economic, political and military tactics. They are strategically designed to operate below the threshold of conventional warfare, while advancing its core objectives: to systematically undermine Europe's stability, weaken internal cohesion, distance the EU from its partners, deepen divisions between Washington and Brussels, and expand Russia's influence within its near abroad. Central to the Kremlin's long-term strategy is the manipulation of narratives to either justify its aggressive actions or divert public attention from them. This tactic predominates alongside cyberattacks within the broader opacity of Russia's hybrid warfare operations. The latter have also shaped Russia's foreign and security policies, which often

rely on contradictory and hypocritical messaging – the main focus of this chapter. A key element of Russia's hypocritical rhetoric is its self-portrayal as leader of the 'world majority' challenging Western dominance while denying its own colonial history, violating international laws, and deflecting blame onto its adversaries.

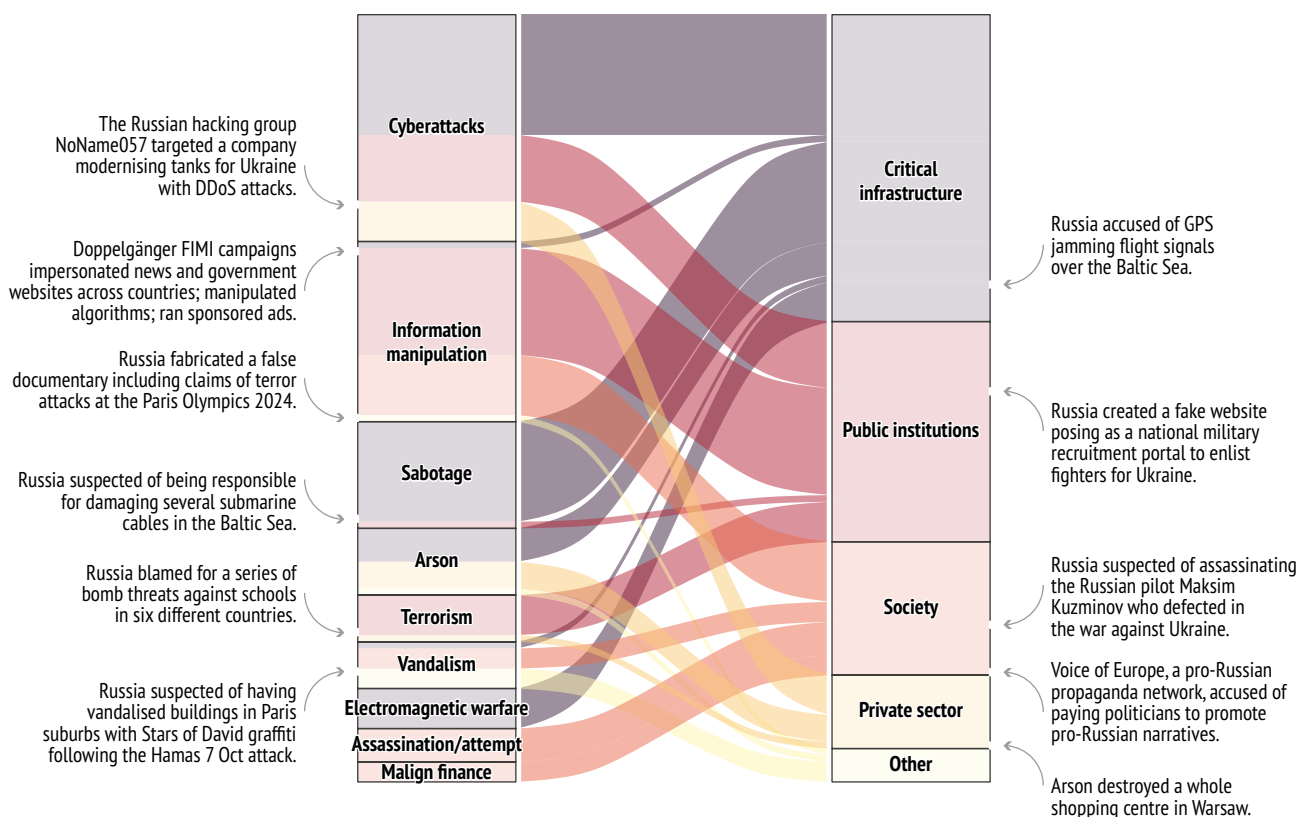
This hypocritical rhetoric serves to erase Ukrainian identity, framing Ukrainian culture as merely an extension of Russian civilisation. In doing so, it denies Ukraine's agency ⁽²⁾, and applies similar tactics to other countries within Russia's perceived 'sphere of influence'. The Kremlin uses this narrative to justify forced assimilation and cultural suppression, while aiming to undermine EU credibility and obstructing the EU and NATO membership aspirations of candidate countries. To effectively counter Russia's growing aggression and hypocrisy in the information space and across multiple dimensions of hybrid threats,

(1) McGrath, S., 'Spotlight on the shadow war: Inside Russia's attacks on NATO territory', Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), A Report by the US Helsinki Commission Staff, 12 December 2024 (<https://www.csce.gov/publications/spotlight-on-the-shadow-war-inside-russias-attacks-on-nato-territory/>).

(2) Kuriata, N., 'Odesa's true identity: countering Russian propaganda and imperialist myths', *New Eastern Europe*, 4 March 2025 (<https://neweasterneurope.eu/2025/03/04/odesas-true-identity-countering-russian-propaganda-and-imperialist-myths/>).

Russia's shadow playbook

Cyberattacks and information manipulation dominate
Russian hybrid operations targeting the EU since February 2022



Data: EBU Investigative Journalism Network, 2025; Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 2024; various think tank/media reports, 2022–2025

Critical infrastructure: energy companies, hospitals, hydroelectric power plants and other water facilities, ports and airports, railways, submarine cables, transportation vehicles, other facilities;
Public institutions: elections, EU institutions, governments, ministries, schools; Private sector: banks, companies, shopping centres; Society: individuals, media, politicians; Other: events, memorials

NB: The examples provided are not exhaustive.

the EU needs to further pursue a dual strategy of resistance and active defence. Resistance entails the systematic detection and exposure of the disinformation and distortions that fuel Russia's imperial ambitions and underpin its duplicitous rhetoric. Active defence, on the other hand, requires the EU to adopt a more assertive approach, one that moves beyond merely acknowledging the 'grey zone' of hybrid warfare to comprehensively address Russia's increasingly overt acts of aggression.

HYPOCRISY AS A TOOL OF RUSSIAN IMPERIAL AMBITIONS

The Kremlin's hybrid operations often precede, accompany and reinforce its military actions. Russia deploys disinformation in support of its ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine – a war rooted in colonial-style domination and imperial nostalgia. While the Kremlin targets Ukraine's national identity,

viewing it as a threat to Russian imperial ambitions, Vladimir Putin has openly denied Ukraine's right to exist, declaring it 'not even a state'⁽³⁾. In an article published just months before the February 2022 invasion, Putin amplified this notion⁽⁴⁾, exposing a central contradiction in Russia's posture: while presenting itself as an anti-colonial power it pursues neo-imperial ambitions similar to those it attributes to the West, particularly the United States. The Kremlin deploys its hybrid tools across the informational, military, economic and diplomatic domains, enabled by the dynamics of today's post-factual digital era. In such a context, simply exposing the truth does not necessarily produce the desired effect of unpowering Russia.

Hypocrisy underpins Russia's shadowy hybrid warfare and 'dark power' strategy⁽⁵⁾, an approach characterised by covert and often inconsistent rule-breaking that deliberately blurs the lines between past and present, perception and reality. By saturating the information space with distorted narratives about its colonial past and international law, the Kremlin manipulates its audiences in a grey zone of ambiguity. While Russia's hypocritical rhetoric may often work, benefiting from its various target audiences' limited access to factual information or contextual knowledge, it contains a critical vulnerability, i.e. the mismatch between what Russia has done, continues to do, and says. Exploiting this inconsistency presents a significant challenge. By exposing and highlighting this hypocrisy, we can better reveal vulnerabilities that

Russia seeks to obscure, detect patterns, anticipate its next moves and ultimately disable its informational capital to raise costs of its hybrid warfare.

There are three key dimensions of Russia's hypocrisy.

First, the Kremlin routinely condemns Europe for its colonial past, the US for its global dominance, and the West overall for hegemonic behaviour. While Europe and the broader West should not shy away from acknowledging historical realities and upholding their democratic values, Vladimir Putin's real objective in using this rhetoric is to advance Russian hegemony under the guise of anti-colonial solidarity. Historically, and

particularly since the Cold War, Russia has sought to expand what it regards as its 'sphere of influence' based on its strategic interests. Russia's imperial legacy in the last century was marked by systemic violence and repression. Notable incidents included the 1881 Geok-Tepe massacre in Turkmenistan

and Moscow's subsequent domination of the region until 1991; the occupation of Kyrgyz lands and forced conscription of local populations during World War I; the Soviet invasions of Armenia in 1920, of Georgia in 1921, and Afghanistan in 1979; the brutal collectivisation campaign in Kazakhstan, which led to a famine that claimed 1.5 million lives; and the mass deportations of Chechens and Crimean Tatars.

Today, in addition to the kinetic war of aggression against Ukraine, Moscow

Hypocrisy underpins Russia's shadowy hybrid warfare and 'dark power' strategy.

(3) Marson, J., 'Putin to the West: Hands off Ukraine', *Time*, 25 May 2009 (<https://time.com/archive/6946776/putin-to-the-west-hands-off-ukraine/>).

(4) President of Russia, 'On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians', 21 July 2021 (<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>).

(5) Balkan Documentation Foundation, 'Putin's Europe', 2023, p. 107 (https://bdf.ba/v2/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Putins_Europe.pdf#page=107).

conducts proxy operations that range from promoting pro-Kremlin narratives abroad, to imposing cultural symbols of imperial conquest in Odesa and elsewhere, or even attempting political assassinations. It uses state-controlled media outlets such as Russia Today, Sputnik and VKontakte, as well as cyberattacks targeting hospitals and European government websites, often accompanied by disinformation campaigns and subsequent accusations of incompetence. These activities are skilfully concealed behind the backdrop of major global events or crises to deliberately confuse, mislead or divert attention from Russia's underlying agenda. For instance, Russia has been expanding its influence in Africa for decades, primarily through arms supplies and military training programmes. However, the Kremlin has repeatedly failed to support African interests when its actions have conflicted with them – particularly in cases involving the Wagner Group, Russia's private military contractor, which has been involved in illicit mining operations and military conflicts in countries such as the Central African Republic, Mali, Libya and Mozambique. The profits from these illicit activities have helped finance Russia's broader campaigns of aggression, including in the Middle East and Ukraine. Moreover, within Russia's borders, there is a troubling history of aggression against Africans, including African students, dating back to the early 2000s⁽⁶⁾. Despite this, the Kremlin continues to fuel its hypocritical propaganda machine, projecting an image of

anti-colonial solidarity abroad while perpetuating hostility and exclusion at home.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine exemplifies its highly instrumental approach to international law.

Second, **Russia presents itself as a staunch defender of international law, despite violating numerous international treaties and agreements⁽⁷⁾**. These violations include, but are not limited to, the breach of the European Convention on Human Rights through the invasion of Georgia; the disregard for foundational OSCE principles, such as those enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act and Paris Charter; the violation of the Hague Convention by failing to provide security to civilians when occupying territory in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008, and more recently in Ukraine; the contravention of Security Council resolutions 2139 and 2254 by continuing military attacks in Syria in 2015; breaches of the Geneva Conventions through direct military actions in Syria; and the flagrant violation of the UN Charter by illegally annexing Crimea in 2014 and launching a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Russia's aggression against Ukraine further exemplifies its highly instrumental approach to international law. While many globally view the war as a bilateral conflict between two neighbouring countries, Russia and Ukraine, over half of the public surveyed in Brazil, China, India, South Korea, Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom for a report published by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) in January 2025 view it as part of a broader struggle between the West and Russia, between democracies and autocracies⁽⁸⁾.

(6) St. Julian-Varnon, K., 'Is Russia really Africa's friend?', Al Jazeera, 3 January 2023 (<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/1/3/is-russia-really-africas-friend>).

(7) Fischer, S., 'Diplomacy in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine', SWP, 2023, p. 7 (<https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/diplomacy-in-the-context-of-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine>).

(8) Garton Ash, T., Krastev, I. and Leonard, M., 'Alone in a Trumpian world: The EU and global public opinion after the US elections', European Council on Foreign Relations, 15 January 2025 (<https://ecfr.eu/publication/alone-in-a-trumpian-world-the-eu-and-global-public-opinion-after-the-us-elections/>).

Only a few months before Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, Putin published an article in the *New York Times* titled 'A plea for caution from Russia' in which he condemned foreign military interventions – specifically citing US airstrikes in Syria's civil war – as acts of aggression. Yet, Russia's own invasion of Ukraine in 2014 violated the UN Charter and the principle of territorial integrity. In 11 surveyed EU countries, 58% of respondents think Russia is primarily responsible or bears greater responsibility for the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, while only 19% believe that both countries are equally responsible. In contrast, in countries such as India, Indonesia, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia and China, at least 28% or more attribute equal responsibility to both sides. Russia's ability to manipulate global perceptions through distorted messaging allows it to maintain a façade of legitimacy despite its rogue actions. In Vladimir Putin's 2021 article 'On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians', he frames Ukraine's independence as a historical error in need of correction, to legitimise Russia's aggression. Russia continues to pursue neo-imperial policies and activities in defiance of international law. Furthermore, it is critical and increasingly urgent to recognise and expose how Russia's hypocrisy drives its push for dominance in the EU's eastern neighbourhood, Central Asia and beyond. Particularly, as countries traditionally considered as part of Russia's perceived 'sphere of influence' are beginning to show signs of shifting perceptions.

For example, in the wake of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and amid mounting tensions with Russia, Armenia now evaluates its relationship with Russia in increasingly negative terms.

According to a 2024 survey, only 35% of Armenian respondents rated the relationship as good. In contrast, 70% viewed their relationship with the EU positively, and only 3% considered the EU a political threat, while 41% considered Russia a political threat. After the 2022 unrest in Kazakhstan, and amid suspicions of Russian involvement, the Kazakh president rejected Russia's request to join the war against Ukraine. Kazakhstan also formally abstained in the March 2022 UN General Assembly vote condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine as well as during the recent vote on 24 February 2025. While these incidents may seem isolated, they highlight Russia's vulnerabilities.

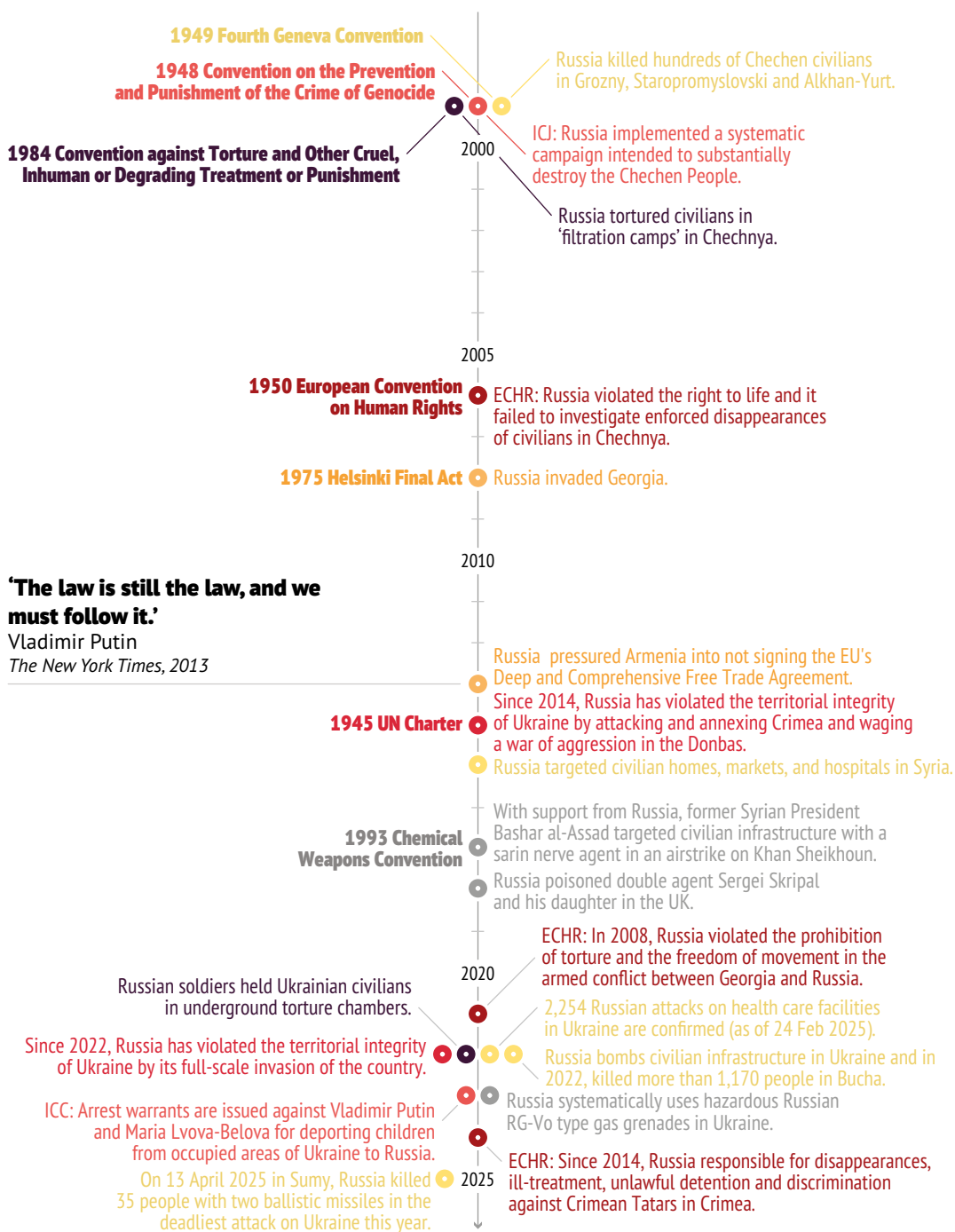
Third, Russia condemns the targeting of civilians while consistently violating this principle. Russian officials have repeatedly claimed that Russia does not strike civilian targets. Yet, on 13 April 2025 in Sumy, Russia launched two ballistic missiles, killing 35 people in the deadliest attack on Ukraine this year. In recent history, Russian forces have been responsible for countless civilian casualties, from the bombing of cities in Chechnya and Syria, to obstructing UN humanitarian aid efforts in flooded occupied areas, to ongoing killings of civilians in Ukraine. For instance, in the city of Kherson, this included the killing of aid workers delivering assistance. In Bucha, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has documented hundreds of unlawful killings of civilians and cases of sexual violence since the full-scale invasion⁽⁹⁾. Meanwhile, Russia's disinformation campaigns continue to deny these atrocities⁽¹⁰⁾, exposing the deep hypocrisy at the core of its actions. The recently revealed Viktoriia project, an investigation into state-orchestrated abductions and

(9) OCCRP, 'Ukrainian women share their accounts of rape by Russian forces as reporters investigate their assailants', 14 June 2024 (<https://www.occrp.org/en/feature/ukrainian-women-share-their-accounts-of-rape-by-russian-forces-as-reporters-investigate-their-assailants>).

(10) Maldita.es, 'Bulos y desinformaciones que niegan las víctimas de Bucha en Ucrania y las verificaciones para desmentir ese discurso', 9 April 2022 (<https://maldita.es/malditobulo/20220409/bulos-desinformaciones-niegan-victimas-bucha-ucrania/>).

Russia's victims and broken laws

Russia has repeatedly failed to adhere to its international law commitments



Data: EUISS research based on Amnesty International (Nov 1999, 3 Mar 2016, 30 Jun 2022), Bellingcat (5 Apr 2017), Civil Georgia (7 Aug 2024), Cluster Munition Monitor (2024), Council on Foreign Relations (28 Feb 2022), European Council on Foreign Relations (19 Feb 2024), European Court of Human Rights (28 Apr 2023), European Parliament (27 Jun 2018), EUvsDisinfo (30 Aug 2016), France24 (15 Feb 2016), Heinrich Böll Stiftung (25 Oct 2022), Human Rights Watch (1997, 23 Feb 2000, 20 Mar 2009, 28 Jul 2016, 15 Oct 2020, 21 Apr 2022, 2025), International Court of Justice (14 Oct 1999, 31 Jan 2024), International Criminal Court (17 Mar 2023), Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (18 Nov 2024), Radio Free Europe (11 Sep 2008), Sciences Po (9 Mar 2015), Syrian Network for Human Rights (13 Oct 2023), War on the Rocks (16 Mar 2018), World Health Organisation (15 Jan 2025).

NB: This is a non-exhaustive selection of documented Russian violations of international law.

Russia's sustained torture of Ukrainian civilians, has uncovered extensive evidence of these crimes. Ukrainian authorities believe as many as 16 000 civilians may currently be subjected to such abuses.

Actively addressing the rising costs of hybrid warfare is no longer optional – it has become a strategic imperative. As Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine continues, it will further expose the contradictions embedded in its manipulated narratives. In 2023, global perceptions of Russia and President Putin hit an all-time low⁽¹¹⁾. Although there has been a modest recovery since then⁽¹²⁾, public opinion in countries such as India (62%), South Africa (60%) Brazil (58%), Türkiye (48%) and China (44%)⁽¹³⁾ indicates a growing belief in the EU's rising influence over the next decade. Still, the enduring validity of such polling data remains open to question, especially considering the rapidly evolving shifts in the geopolitical landscape.

CONFRONTING RUSSIA'S SHADOW TACTICS

The EU needs to take specific steps to counter Russia's information manipulation tactics and hybrid warfare operations.

- > The EU should **strengthen its institutional capacity through co-ordinated psychological defence, integrated analysis across hybrid domains and enhanced threat anticipation**. The prospective creation

of a European-level Psychological Defence agency similar to the Swedish Psychological Defence Agency and the European Democracy Shield addressing the EU's vulnerabilities against adversaries have the potential to succeed if the EU commits to systematically decoding and exposing the hypocrisy embedded in both Russia's rhetoric and actions. The European network of fact-checkers, as outlined in the European Commission's Political Guidelines for 2024–2029, should be leveraged to monitor (social) media trends and identify emerging disinformation patterns. Strengthening their anticipatory capabilities would enable both fact-checkers and policymakers to forecast Russia's future moves, including in the audio-visual realm. By developing anticipatory capabilities and integrating them with existing reactive fact-checking systems, the EU can create a more efficient and cost-effective approach – building on accumulated information capital to swiftly bolster active defence mechanisms against future attacks.

- > **The EU could tighten social media regulations to further limit the spread of Russia's manipulative disinformation campaigns**. The EU should continue expanding the scope of its Digital Services Act, Digital Market Act, AI Act and other regulatory initiatives against FIMI and hybrid threats, building on their initial role as starting points. Social media already plays a critical role in shaping public opinion. For instance, in the region of Central Asia, social media often eclipses Russian state-controlled TV or even national broadcasters across Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, while ranking second

(11) Oelofse, L., 'Global trust in Russia and Putin at all-time low, survey finds', *Deutsche Welle*, 7 October 2023 (<https://www.dw.com/en/global-trust-in-russia-and-putin-at-all-time-low-survey/a-66182295>).

(12) 'Alone in a Trumpian World', op.cit.

(13) Ibid.

only to national news sources in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan⁽¹⁴⁾. To proactively target its regional efforts, the EU should further expand its presence on these platforms, engaging citizens through content in local languages, and promoting Ukrainian stories of resistance and resilience against Russian hegemonic control – particularly targeting vulnerable and often overlooked demographics such as those aged 55+⁽¹⁵⁾. The EU should however remain highly vigilant against Russian influence also at home. For example, on 9 March 2025, ‘Peace and neutrality, not our war’ demonstrations occurred in Madrid, fuelled by social media accounts with a combined following of over 2 million users. Of these, 82% had previously spread anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian disinformation⁽¹⁶⁾. As this widespread amplification is taking place in the context of social media platforms cutting back on fact-checkers and content moderation, the EU must hold them accountable for questionable policy changes that have led to increasing reliance on tools like ‘Community Notes’, which are often considered ineffective.

- > Future wars will inevitably involve hybrid threat actors leveraging information manipulation. **The EU should allocate increased funding within its defence budget as part of an active defence strategy to take countermeasures against information manipulation**, acknowledging that kinetic warfare is systematically reinforced by cyber operations, cognitive manipulation, and political and economic coercion. This would strengthen the EU's staunch defence of the principles of

territorial integrity, civilian protection, and international law – values frequently threatened and undermined by Russia, including through its hypocritical rhetoric. **The EU should also invest more to fill the gaps left where USAID pro-democracy and anti-disinformation foreign aid initiatives have been discontinued**, particularly in regions where Russia propagates its anti-colonial and anti-Western rhetoric, such as in Africa, Latin America, and the Western Balkans, among others. Given the high costs involved, and the likelihood that increased funding may only preserve the current *status quo* in the fight against information manipulation, it is vital to act now. Otherwise, Russia will continue to exploit the existing vacuum, with growing consequences for both European and global security.

(14) European Commission, ‘Tackling disinformation: New report on media consumption in Central Asia’, 28 March 2023, p. 29 (https://fpi.ec.europa.eu/news/tackling-disinformation-new-report-media-consumption-central-asia-2023-03-28_en).

(15) Ibid, p.25.

(16) Maldita.es, ‘82% of the main promoters of the “not our war” demonstration in Spain have also spread pro-Russian disinformation’, 10 March 2025 (<https://maldita.es/malditaeexplica/20250310/promoters-demonstration-spain-pro-russian-disinformation/>).

CHAPTER 7

THE RED LINE PLAYBOOK

Understanding and neutralising Russian escalation threats

by
GIUSEPPE SPATAFORA

European military assistance has helped Ukraine resist Russia's invasion for three years. To disrupt this flow of aid, Moscow has developed a 'red line playbook': threatening economic, military and even nuclear consequences for states supporting Kyiv. Red lines are part of the Kremlin's coercive deterrence strategy against Europe and its allies.

The Russian playbook has achieved mixed deterrent effects. Red lines have often proved to be empty threats: violating them has resulted in little to no reaction from Moscow against Ukraine's backers. However, some red lines have not been tested, and Russia was still able to disrupt assistance to Ukrainian defenders through its threats, especially when it comes to the provision of major platforms like tanks, aircraft or long-range missiles. This delay reduced the battlefield effectiveness of these weapons.

Although the strategic environment at the time of writing is uncertain, Russia will likely continue to use the playbook against EU Member States – regardless

of how the war evolves. This is why the EU should develop concrete and specific measures to counter future red line tactics. In particular, it should make support to Ukraine 'red line-proof', and take active measures to erode Russia's informational capital.

HOW THE PLAYBOOK WORKS

Informational capital for deterrence

Speaking on 24 February 2022, President Putin threatened that Russia's response to anyone interfering with the 'special military operation' against Ukraine 'will be immediate and will lead you to such consequences that you have never experienced in your history' ⁽¹⁾. Members of the Russian government (especially

(1) 'Full text: Putin's declaration of war on Ukraine', *The Spectator*, 24 February 2022 (<https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/full-text-putin-s-declaration-of-war-on-ukraine>).

Sergey Lavrov, Dmitry Medvedev, Dmitry Peskov and Maria Zakharova) and propagandists have issued similar threats. Between 2021 and 2024, Russia made more than 350 ‘red line’ threats concerning Ukraine.

While some of these threats are abstract, others imply specific punishment across various domains, such as economic and diplomatic retaliation, or even military consequences. In 45 red lines, Russia specifically threatens to use nuclear weapons. Nuclear threats were issued most frequently in September 2022, after Ukraine’s successful offensive in Kharkiv, and in September 2024, after Kyiv hit Moscow with 144 drone attacks.

Red lines are part of Russia’s arsenal of deterrence. Putin’s deterrence goals in Ukraine have been threefold: ‘to deter the West from directly intervening, to paralyse NATO’s indirect support, and to compel Ukraine to surrender’⁽²⁾. In that context, the Kremlin is expending informational capital in the form of red line threats aimed at persuading public opinion and politicians within Ukraine’s support coalition to avoid getting more deeply involved in the conflict. Red lines are also used in combination with military capital. Sometimes, the Kremlin amplifies the threat with displays of military power – such as missile barrages over Ukraine’s cities and critical infrastructure. Other times, red lines have been invoked to compensate for poor battlefield performance. For instance, Russia

ratcheted up its nuclear sabre-rattling after losing swathes of Ukrainian territory in late 2022.

Russia has frequently employed red-line threats to dissuade Ukraine’s allies from providing advanced military platforms to the country.

Red lines are part of Russia’s arsenal of deterrence.

Over the past three years, debates in EU Member States and other backers of Ukraine have often revolved around providing Kyiv with

tanks (like Germany’s Leopard 2 or the American M1 Abrahms), fighter jets (MiG-29, JAS-29 Gripen or F-16), and long-range missiles such as Storm Shadows, SAMP-T and ATACMS. Russia has repeatedly sought to influence these debates by invoking red-line threats. Every time a new major platform was put on the table, the Kremlin argued that supplying Kyiv with the new platform would make the donor countries a ‘direct party to the conflict’⁽³⁾, implying that Russia would use force against them. Possible Russian retaliation is not the only issue that Western policymakers debated. The discussions also focused on the impact of such donations on donor countries’ own weapons stockpiles, or the challenges of training Ukrainian soldiers to operate the new platforms⁽⁴⁾. However, the discussions rarely remained limited to military circles, but often spilled over to parliamentary debates, the media and news channels.

For example, Russia said that Leopard tanks provided by Germany would take

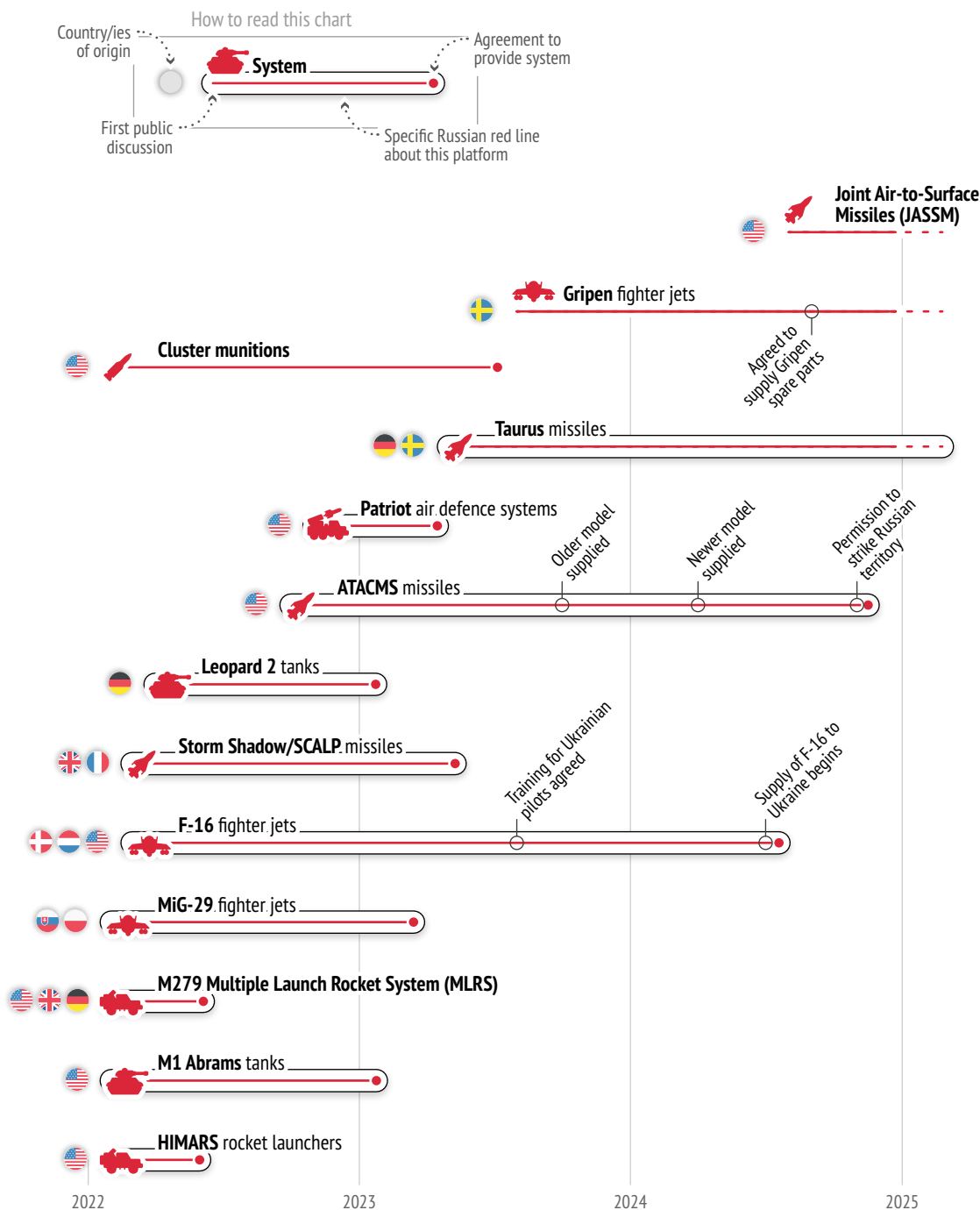
(2) Adamsky, D., ‘Quo vadis, Russian deterrence? Strategic culture and coercion innovations’, *International Security*, Vol. 49, No. 3, February 2025, p. 60 (https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00502).

(3) ‘Russia says longer-range U.S. missiles for Kyiv would cross red line’, Reuters, 15 September 2022 (<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-says-longer-range-us-missiles-kyiv-would-cross-red-line-2022-09-15/>).

(4) Deni, J. R. and Aronsson, L.A., *The Role of America’s European Allies in the Russia-Ukraine War, 2022–24*, U.S. Army War College Press, 2024 (<https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/972/>).

Endless debates

It took a long time for many countries to greenlight the provision of major platforms to Ukraine



Data: Pentagon, June 2022; *Washington Post*, June 2022; CNBC, January 2023; The Hill, January 2023; CNN, December 2022; CSIS, July 2023; *Moscow Times*, July 2023; *The Guardian*, June 2022; Army Recognition.com, June 2022; CNN, June 2022; Breaking Defense.com, July 2022; *The Guardian*, August 2023; RFI, July 2024; BBC, January 2023; *The Guardian*, January 2023; Euronews, January 2023; *Le Monde*, March 2023; Brookings, April 2023; RBC, November 2024; *Le Monde*, November 2024; France24, November 2024; *Wall Street Journal*, October 2023; CNN, October 2023; *National Post*, November 2022; Al Jazeera, April 2024; *Kyiv Independent*, November 2024; CNN, November 2024; *Politico*, August 2024; Anadolu, August 2024

‘the conflict to a new level of confrontation’⁽⁵⁾. The front page of Italy’s mainstream newspaper *La Repubblica* echoed this sentiment with the headline ‘Escalation’, indicating how far the idea that the West was crossing red lines had made it into the public discourse⁽⁶⁾. This anecdote shows how debates on major platforms presented an opportunity for Russia to expend informational capital to influence public opinion.

Success and failures of the playbook

The Russian red line playbook has yielded mixed results against Ukraine’s allies. When red lines were violated, they often proved to be empty threats. Putin’s warning of ‘unimaginable consequences’ for EU Member States supporting Ukraine at the beginning of the war ultimately translated into a reduction in Russian energy supplies – a minor impact since the EU had already decided to decouple from Russia. As more weapons were sent to Kyiv, Russian officials often threatened severe consequences for the violators – but failed to act on these threats⁽⁷⁾.

Some EU Member States in the coalition have been the target of Russian hybrid

campaigns, such as sabotage, cyberattacks and the cutting of subsea cables.

The Russian red line playbook has yielded mixed results against Ukraine’s allies.

One could argue that these were in response to red line violations. However, Russia never openly linked these actions to the delivery of specific weapons – partly because it needed to maintain plausible deniability – making it more difficult for

the targets to link tangible consequences to the violation of red lines.

The only times Russia explicitly responded to red line violations were when Ukraine used Western weapons to strike inside Russian territory. In November 2024, the Kremlin adopted a new nuclear doctrine, notionally reducing the threshold for a nuclear response to an attack⁽⁸⁾. Putin also justified the use of the hypersonic Oreshnik missile against Dnipro, explicitly citing the use of ATACMS for long-range strikes in Russian territory⁽⁹⁾. However, neither action amounts to the threatened ‘unimaginable consequences’, and Ukraine’s supporters were not directly affected.

Hence, the red line playbook failed to dissuade Ukraine’s backers from continuing to support Kyiv, from gradually providing forms of assistance that were previously off-limits, or from removing restrictions on their use. The Kremlin’s repeated bluffs, particularly in the nuclear

(5) Ellyatt, H., ‘Russia fumes at West’s decision to send tanks to Ukraine, says red lines have been crossed’, CNBC, 25 January 2025 (<https://www.cnbc.com/2023/01/25/russia-fumes-at-west-decision-to-send-tanks-to-ukraine.html>).

(6) ‘Ucraina – Russia, le news dalla guerra del 25 gennaio’, *La Repubblica*, 25 January 2023 (https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2023/01/25/diretta/ucraina_russia_guerra_news_oggi-384977931/).

(7) ‘Don’t arm Ukraine with Patriot missiles, Ex-Russian president Medvedev warns “criminal entity” NATO’, *The National Post*, 29 November 2022 (<https://nationalpost.com/news/world/dont-arm-ukraine-with-patriot-missiles-ex-russian-president-medvedev-warns-criminal-entity-nato>).

(8) Pifer, S., ‘How credible is Russia’s evolving nuclear doctrine?’, Brookings, 14 November 2024 (<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-credible-is-russias-evolving-nuclear-doctrine/>); Grajewski, N., ‘Russia’s updated nuclear doctrine isn’t a blueprint for weapons use. Its primary value is manipulation’, Carnegie, 26 November 2024 (<https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2024/11/russia-nuclear-doctrine-update-weapons-use-sovereignty?lang=en>).

(9) Kulakova, M. “‘There will always be a response’: Full text of Putin’s fearmongering speech on retaliation against the West”, United 24 Media, 21 November 2024 (<https://united24media.com/latest-news/there-will-always-be-a-response-full-text-of-putins-fearmongering-speech-on-retaliation-against-the-west-3913>).

domain, have likely diminished the credibility of Russia's deterrent posture⁽¹⁰⁾.

Nevertheless, red line tactics *were* successful in other aspects. First, some threats have never been tested. For instance, at the time of writing, troops from NATO countries have never directly joined the fight on Ukraine's behalf, largely due to the widespread belief that this could trigger a direct war with Russia. Also, in late 2022, US intelligence assessed a 50% likelihood that the Kremlin would use tactical nuclear weapons to forestall a major defeat on the Kherson front. That threat assessment probably influenced decisions by the US and other allies on supplying certain military assets to Ukraine⁽¹¹⁾.

Second, even those red lines that were ultimately violated have had effects. In particular, they slowed down and disrupted the delivery of major platforms to Ukraine, consequently reducing their effectiveness on the battlefield.

As mentioned above, Russian threats focused on major platforms, since these were widely discussed in the media. The high visibility of the debates amplified the impact of Moscow's threats on public opinion, likely increasing pressure on decision-makers – especially those who were nervous about losing votes or coalition partners. As a result, often the decision on supplying these systems took

many months – or even years, in the case of F-16 fighter jets and ATACMS missiles.

To protect themselves against the retaliation promised in Russian red lines, EU countries often looked for additional assurance from other allies, especially from the United States. Germany only cleared the way for the delivery of Leopard tanks when the US also agreed to provide M1 Abrams tanks, thereby sharing the risk with Berlin⁽¹²⁾. On other occasions, providers placed restrictions on Ukraine's freedom to use the new weapons – demonstrating a degree of restraint towards Moscow. For instance, the US did not allow Ukraine to use long-range ATACMS missiles for strikes against Russia until May 2024 – and even then, it limited their use to areas bordering the Kharkiv region. Only in November 2024 did the Biden administration allow Ukraine to carry out long-range strikes in the rest of Russian territory⁽¹³⁾.

These delays and limitations imposed real constraints on Ukraine's defence efforts. By the time these platforms were eventually provided – once again, without resulting in significant Russian retaliation – their battlefield utility proved lower than expected. As Western countries debated whether to provide F-16 fighter jets, Russia had time to establish a powerful network of anti-aircraft systems. Similarly, ATACMS strikes on Russian territory were less effective than anticipated, because the Russian armed

(10) 'Quo vadis, Russian deterrence?', op.cit., p. 62.

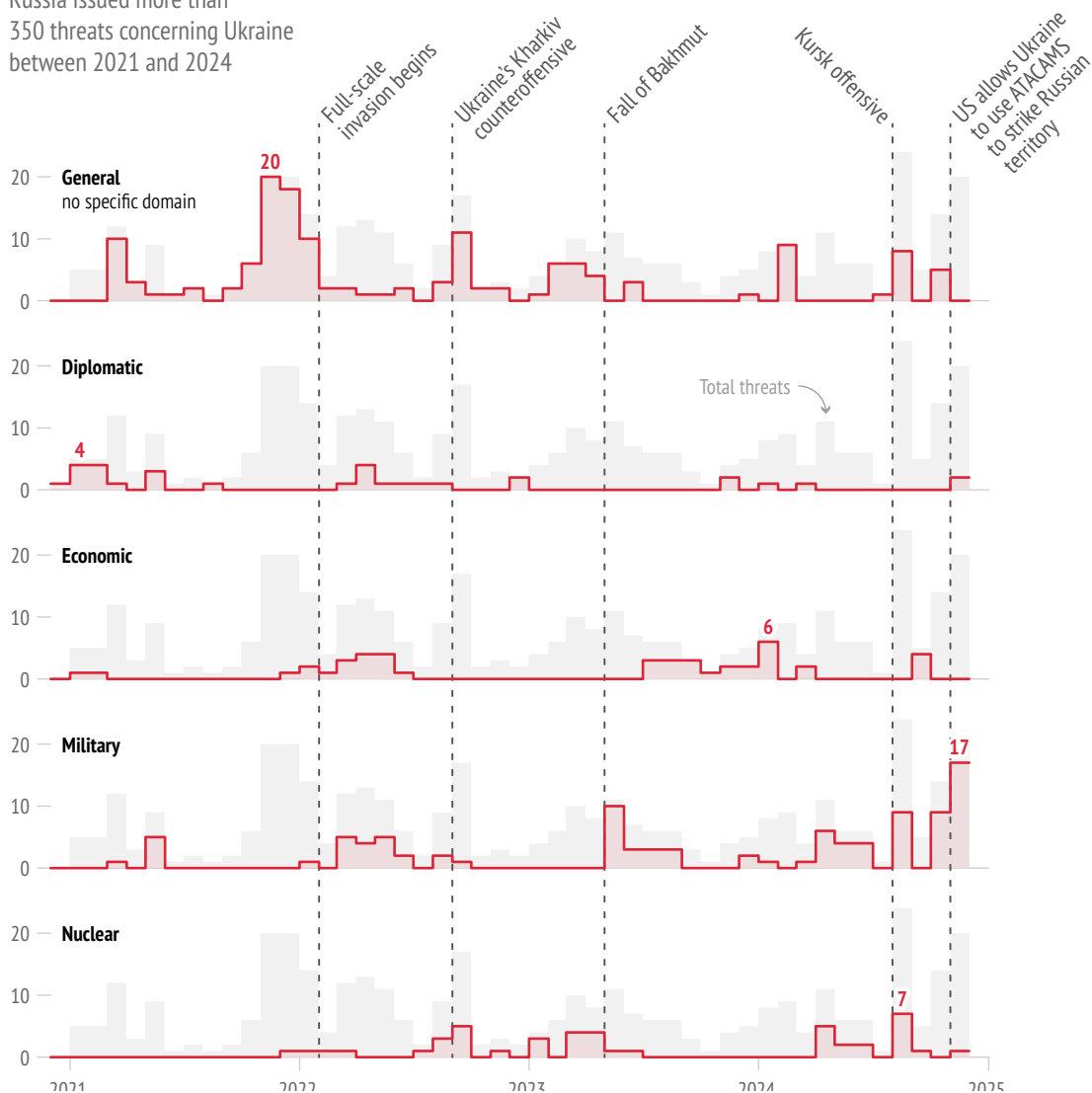
(11) Entous, A., 'The partnership: The secret history of the war in Ukraine', *The New York Times*, 29 March 2025 (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/03/29/world/europe/us-ukraine-military-war-wiesbaden.html>); Woodward, B., *War*, Simon & Schuster, 2024.

(12) Hickmann, C., 'Deutschland schickt Leopard-Panzer in die Ukraine', *Die Spiegel*, 24 January 2023 (<https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/krieg-in-der-ukraine-deutschland-schickt-leopard-panzer-a-e2dde871-88d0-4cf5-8aae-482d58fd850f>); Ward, A., Seligman, L., McLeary, P., Von der Burchard, H., Karnitschnig, M. and Lynch, S., 'Inside Washington's about-face on sending tanks to Ukraine', *Politico*, 25 January 2025 (<https://www.politico.com/news/2023/01/25/inside-washingtons-about-face-on-sending-tanks-to-ukraine-00079560>).

(13) Adams, P. and Armstrong, K., 'Biden allows Ukraine to strike inside Russia with missiles', *BBC News*, 18 November 2024 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c789x0y91vvo>).

Tracking the red lines

Russia issued more than 350 threats concerning Ukraine between 2021 and 2024



Data: OpenMinds, 'Russian Threat Index towards Ukraine and the West hits record high' (7 Jan 2025)

forces were able to relocate possible targets such as aircraft storage facilities and logistical supply nodes to positions farther away from Ukraine's borders⁽¹⁴⁾.

This is not to say that large weapons systems are irrelevant to this war.

If provided at the right time and in the appropriate quantities, they can significantly degrade Russia's military power. However, these two conditions have rarely been met for major platforms. On the other hand, low-cost items such as 155mm artillery ammunition and attack

(14) Giles, K., 'Are Ukraine's F-16s another case of too little, too late?', Chatham House, 3 September 2024 (<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/09/are-ukraines-f-16s-another-case-too-little-too-late>); Segura, C., 'Ukrainian commander-in-chief admits the war against Russia is at a stalemate', *El País*, 3 November 2023 (<https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-11-03/ukrainian-commander-in-chief-admits-the-war-against-russia-is-at-a-stalemate.html>).

drones have proven highly effective in supporting Ukraine's defence efforts, accounting for two thirds of Russian casualties in 2024⁽¹⁵⁾. Notably, ammunition and drones have *not* been the target of Russian red lines – which reinforces the idea that the playbook has been used for highly visible, publicly debated platforms.

Hence, from Russia's perspective, the red line playbook has had both positive and negative results. Moscow's military and defence establishment is studying these lessons and readapting its coercive deterrence arsenal for future confrontation with Europe – to make future threats more credible⁽¹⁶⁾.

COUNTERING THE PLAYBOOK

The strategic environment surrounding the war in Ukraine is, at the current point in time, dramatically changing. The new US administration has changed its position from supporting Ukraine's defence to seeking a quick resolution of the conflict. President Donald Trump's pressures for a swiftly negotiated settlement to the war are ongoing. In an effort to open negotiations with Russia, the

new president has signalled he believes in Russia's red line threats: for instance, Trump criticised the Biden administration's decision to remove restrictions on long-range strikes into Russia, and has accused President Zelensky of 'gambling with World War III', echoing the Kremlin's talking points⁽¹⁷⁾. As the US appears poised to end its assistance to Ukraine, Kyiv will become more reliant on the EU as its main external supporter.

As long as EU support stands in Moscow's way, Kremlin will use red line tactics to continue to influence, delay and disrupt the bloc's aid to Ukraine. Russia and Ukraine will likely continue to fight even as negotiations proceed, and sustained EU backing will be a decisive factor in strengthening Kyiv's bargaining position – further incentivising Moscow to use the playbook. Future European initiatives to support Ukraine, such as patrolling the skies of Western Ukraine or placing forces on the ground, have already been the subject of new red line threats⁽¹⁸⁾. Russia will likely continue to exploit the public's fear of escalation as a negotiation tactic to extract concessions, or to refuse to bring the conflict to an end⁽¹⁹⁾. Even if open hostilities end, Russia could set its sights on another country – including an EU Member State – and use the red line discourse to deter other countries from coming to the aid of the new victim.

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- (15) Watling, J. and Reynolds, N., *Tactical Developments During the Third Year of the Russo-Ukrainian War*, RUSI report, 14 February 2025 (<https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/special-resources/tactical-developments-during-third-year-russo-ukrainian-war>).
 - (16) 'Quo vadis, Russian deterrence?', op.cit., p. 63–72; Lukianov, F., 'Pochemy u nas ne poluchitsia 'otrezvit' Zapad' s pomoschiu iadernoi bomby. Otvet na statiju Sergeia Karaganova' [Why we cannot sober up the West with the nuclear bomb. Response to Sergei Karaganov's article], *Rossia v Global'noi Politike*, 19 June 2023 (<https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/otrezvit-zapad/>).
 - (17) Al-Yahyai, O., 'Trump criticises Biden for allowing Ukraine to fire US missiles deep into Russia', Euronews, 17 December 2024 (<https://www.euronews.com/2024/12/17/trump-criticises-biden-for-allowing-ukraine-to-fire-us-missiles-deep-into-russia>); McArthur, T. and Lukiv, J., 'Trump accuses Zelensky of "gambling with World War Three"', BBC News, 1 March 2025 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c9dejdyynngo>).
 - (18) 'Russia's Lavrov rejects compromise on European troops in Ukraine', Bloomberg News, 5 March 2025 (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-03-06/russia-s-lavrov-rejects-compromise-on-european-troops-in-ukraine>).
 - (19) Ditrych, O., 'Of good and bad deals: The need for strategic clarity in negotiations on a ceasefire in Ukraine', EUISS Commentary, 18 December 2024 (<https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/commentary/good-and-bad-deals-need-strategic-clarity-negotiations-ceasefire-ukraine>).

Hence, red line tactics will remain relevant in all likely scenarios. It is imperative for the EU to develop a strategy to counter Russia's red line tactics. 'Un-powering' Russia in this domain means reducing the threat's effectiveness as well as actively countering it. Since the Kremlin's main success has been the disruption of weapons flows, the EU must focus on making future decisions immune to threats. This can be done in two ways:

> **Shift debates to confidential settings:**

While Ukraine should remain a central topic in the EU's public debates, discussions on specific weapons should be held in discreet, confidential settings. Public debate adds little value to these decisions, which can be quite technical. Conducting such deliberations behind closed doors and maintaining tight operational security would make it harder for the Kremlin to influence them.

- > **Shift the focus:** Despite the degree of attention they have received, major weapons platforms have not been decisive in the war. The focus on expensive weapons has limited relevance in an industrial war with high attrition rates. Instead, the EU should focus on providing the items which have proven essential for Ukraine's defence and combat style, such as artillery ammunition, air defences, demining equipment and drones – and emphasise the need to provide these systems at the necessary speed and scale, including through direct support for arms production within Ukraine itself.

In its future relationship with Russia, the EU must be more proactive in calling out

Putin's empty threats and imposing costs on Moscow.

- > **Call Russia's bluff:** So far, reactions to Russian red lines have been uncoordinated and ineffective. The EU should be more active in calling Putin's bluff. This could be achieved through a coordinated strategic communications campaign between the EU and its Member States, highlighting how the Kremlin has repeatedly issued the same threats without following through. Stressing the emptiness of these threats will help erode Russia's informational capital and will facilitate bolder and faster decision-making to counter the Kremlin.

- > **Make its own (credible) threats:** So far, Putin has been able to make red line threats with impunity. This should no longer be allowed. The EU and Member States should extend deterrence to this realm. Putting together a 'counter-red line playbook' could be a good strategy: its aim would be to persuade Moscow that future threats, especially when these take the form of nuclear sabre-rattling, will have consequences. Unlike

Russian red lines, the EU's deterrent threats must be credible. The playbook should contain measures that are easy to implement once Russia makes new threats. For example, the EU should be ready to impose new sanctions or carry out asymmetric responses (effectively turning Russia's own hybrid tactics back against it).

- > **Build alliances against Moscow's nuclear rhetoric:** When Russia threatened nuclear action against Ukraine in September 2022, countries such as India and China conveyed to Moscow

Unlike Russian red lines, the EU's deterrent threats must be credible.

that they would not tolerate a nuclear attack on Ukraine ⁽²⁰⁾. Their position, alongside with that of many countries across the world – even those who maintain ties with Russia – is that nuclear threats are unacceptable. Hence, the EU should exploit the widespread consensus on this issue to build alliances at the United Nations and in other settings. If Russia threatens to use nuclear weapons again, the EU could call on this coalition to publicly state their opposition to this tactic. This would reduce the Kremlin's incentives to resort to nuclear intimidation.

(20) Manley, C., 'US asked China and India for help to prevent Russia from carrying out a nuclear strike in 2022, report says', *Business Insider*, 9 March 2024 (<https://www.businessinsider.com/us-asked-non-allies-prevent-russia-using-nuclear-weapons-report-2024-3>).

CHAPTER 8

THE SHADOW FLEET

Time for action not reaction

by
CASPAR HOBHOUSE

Russia's shadow fleet is an environmental disaster waiting to happen and a form of hybrid warfare against EU states. It also serves as a vital lifeline for sustaining Russia's war effort and must therefore be actively constrained and curtailed. It is imperative that the EU seize the strategic initiative in confronting Russian aggression. This chapter urges comprehensive and active policing of all EU territorial waters and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). Shadow fleet vessels that fail to comply with international insurance requirements or that are engaged in non-civilian activity should be intercepted, boarded and, where necessary, seized. The principal justification for such measures relates to the environmental and security threats posed by shadow fleets

which are not operating under 'innocent passage'⁽¹⁾. While enforcement should be prioritised in areas where the EU has the greatest strategic leverage – most notably the Baltic and North Seas – a unified approach across all territorial waters is essential.

The Russian shadow fleet goes under many names, but this chapter adopts a broad and inclusive definition⁽²⁾. It is also huge, including upward of 800 oil tankers⁽³⁾ which amounts to roughly 10% of the global tanker fleet and half of all shadow tankers worldwide⁽⁴⁾. While not the primary focus of this chapter, the shadow fleet has also been implicated in smuggling illicit goods and stolen Ukrainian grain.

(1) United Nations. 'Convention of the Laws of the Sea', 10 December 1982 (https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf).

(2) The Russian shadow fleet deliberately exploits legal loopholes and grey areas, operating under multiple names, flags and ownership structures. For the sake of clarity, this chapter defines the shadow fleet as including all Russian vessels that sail under flags of convenience, operate with limited or no insurance coverage, have obfuscated ownership, operate out of Russian ports or consistently tamper with their automatic identification systems (AIS). For more information see: Caprile, A. and Leclerc, G., 'Russia's Shadow Fleet', EPRS, 8 November 2024 ([https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2024\)766242](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2024)766242)).

(3) 'Russia faces higher costs on sea-borne oil exports due to new US sanctions', Reuters, 13 January 2025 (<https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/russia-faces-higher-costs-sea-borne-oil-exports-due-new-us-sanctions-2025-01-13/>).

(4) Calculations based on 7 500 global tankers and 1 600 shadow vessels: Congressional Research Service, 'The Global oil tanker market', 18 March 2024 (https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47962#:~:text=rapid%20market%20adjustments.,The%20Global%20Tanker%20Fleet,%2C%20according%20to%20one%20source.)).

WHY THE SHADOW FLEET?

The shadow fleet is vital to Russia in at least two ways. First and foremost, it was assembled to maintain a vital life-line of revenue to the Kremlin to sustain everything from the war to social stability. Its growth accelerated in direct response to restrictions imposed by the West, most notably the G7 price cap. Throughout 2024, fossil fuel exports accounted for between a third and a half of the Russian federal budget, providing direct financial support for Russia's war in Ukraine and other hostile activities⁽⁵⁾. In January 2025 alone, seaborne oil exports earned the Kremlin a staggering €231 million per day⁽⁶⁾.

Propelled by the shadow fleet, Russia continues to be a major oil exporter with volumes exceeding 5 million barrels per day (roughly 5% of global demand). While prices it sells for are still lower than Brent crude, they have narrowed gradually since 2022 with only a \$6 discount per barrel in November 2024 as opposed to a near \$30 discount for some varieties in 2022⁽⁷⁾. As of November 2024, however, all Russia crude oil grades were trading above the current G7 price cap of \$60 per barrel⁽⁸⁾. The shadow fleet has become a central

mechanism in facilitating this parallel oil trading system, operating outside the traditional, Western-dominated global market structure.

The shadow fleet has a secondary purpose: serving as a tool of hybrid warfare against Western powers. Russia is weaponising the fleet's operations to undermine the EU and NATO, using it to inflict environmental damage and degrade or destroy critical maritime infrastructure.

Shadow fleet vessels are typically old, leaky and uninsured. Many use Automatic Identification System (AIS) manipulation to conceal their location and movements, all while carrying thousands of gallons of toxic oil products through European waters. They are able to do this by exploiting 'innocent passage' clauses in the United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea (UNCLOS). The risk of accidents is high and the resultant damage to littoral states would be severe – something of which the Russian government is well aware⁽⁹⁾. According to Norwegian authorities, there has been a 'significant change' in crude oil shipments since 2022, with tankers transiting the Baltic Sea increasing in both size and length⁽¹⁰⁾. The Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA) reports that between January and July 2024 Europe experienced a 277% increase in shadow

(5) 'Russian oil and gas revenues jump 26% in 2024 to \$108 billion', Reuters, 13 January 2025 (<https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/russian-oil-gas-revenues-jump-26-2024-108-bln-2025-01-13/#:~:text=Russian%20oil%20and%20gas%20revenues,2024%20to%20%24108%20billion%20%7C%20>Reuter).

(6) Raghunandan, V., 'January 2025 – Monthly analysis of Russian fossil fuel exports and sanctions', CREA, 11 February 2025 (<https://energyandcleanair.org/january-2025-monthly-analysis-of-russian-fossil-fuel-exports-and-sanctions/>).

(7) Raghunandan, V., 'November 2024 – Monthly analysis of Russian fossil fuel exports and sanctions', CREA, 10 December 2024 (<https://energyandcleanair.org/november-2024-monthly-analysis-of-russian-fossil-fuel-exports-and-sanctions/>).

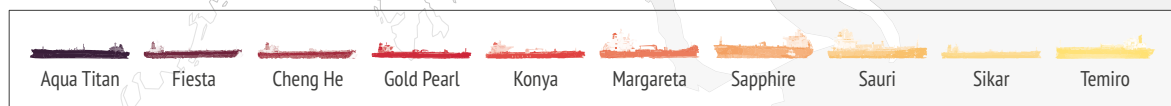
(8) Ibid.

(9) Braw, E., 'Russia's growing dark fleet', Atlantic Council, 11 January 2025 (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/russias-growing-dark-fleet-risks-for-the-global-maritime-order/>).

(10) Norwegian official quoted in *ibid*.

Breaking the noose

Russia's shadow fleet circling Europe



Routes taken by vessels suspected of being part of the shadow fleet in March 2025

Murmansk

Primorsk
Ust-Luga

RUSSIA

Suspected interchange points for shadow fleet vessels

Novorossiysk

Dardanelles Strait
TÜRKİYE

Temiro
Sauri

Sapphire

ALGERIA

Gold Pearl
Konya

EGYPT

to the Indian Ocean

Data: Marine Traffic, 2025;
European Commission,
GISCO, 2025

fleet tanker traffic through the Danish Strait⁽¹¹⁾.

Recent incidents have made it clear that the shadow fleet poses a real and escalating environmental threat. In the second half of 2024 alone, a shadow fleet tanker crashed in the Danish Strait while two others sank during a storm in the Sea of Azov⁽¹²⁾. A catastrophic oil spill in the former was miraculously avoided, while in the latter incident ‘tens of kilometres’ of Russia’s Black Sea coast were covered in oil. 2025 began with news that a further shadow fleet tanker had become stranded off Germany’s Baltic coast with 99 000 tonnes of oil drifting toward the island of Rügen⁽¹³⁾. It now appears only a matter of time before a major environmental disaster occurs in European waters as a direct consequence of Russia’s shadow fleet. Previous incidents have shown that the cost of such accidents fall heavily on European taxpayers, who bear not only the environmental impact of a major oil spill but also the financial burden of cleanup operations⁽¹⁴⁾. Initial estimates suggest that the sinking of the two shadow fleet tankers in the Sea of Azov will cost upwards of \$14 billion⁽¹⁵⁾.

Recent incidents have made it clear that the shadow fleet poses a real and escalating environmental threat.

Furthermore, Russia uses the fleet to carry out direct hybrid attacks, as demonstrated by the severing of energy and telecommunications cables in the Baltic Sea⁽¹⁶⁾. These ‘accidents’ amount to a series of coordinated attacks on European critical infrastructure. By exploiting opaque legal ownership structures and lack of proper insurance, Russia is able to instrumentalise the shadow fleet to accomplish these goals while minimising accountability⁽¹⁷⁾.

The shadow fleet thus serves a dual purpose: not only does it sustain Russia’s economic lifeline, but it also enables asymmetric, unconventional warfare against European states.

However, Russia faces two major vulnerabilities related to the shadow fleet.

First, the Kremlin’s dependence on fossil fuel exports leaves it exposed to fluctuations in global prices, supply and demand. The Russian state budget is structurally dependent on oil revenues – with the 2022 price spike effectively financing the initial stages of the war. The EU should not forget that Russia needs to keep exporting oil at the highest price possible in order to keep its war economy

- (11) Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air, ‘Ensuring an ecological disaster: “Shadow” tanker spill could cost coastal states USD 1.6 bn’, 10 October 2024, (<https://energyandcleanair.org/publication/ensuring-an-ecological-disaster-shadow-tanker-spill-could-cost-coastal-states-usd-1-6-bn/>).
- (12) Bloomberg, ‘Shadow fleet tanker damaged in collision near Denmark’, 19 May 2024, (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-03-19/russian-shadow-fleet-oil-tanker-damaged-in-collision-near-denmark>); Al Jazeera, ‘The Russian tanker disaster and an oil leak in the Kerch Strait’, 19 December 2024, (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/19/the-russian-tanker-disaster-and-an-oil-leak-in-kerch-strait-what-it-means>).
- (13) Cursino, M., ‘Germany says Russian “shadow” ship stuck in the Baltic Sea’, BBC News, 11 January 2025 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/czdlp67rvd10>).
- (14) ‘Russia’s growing dark fleet’, op.cit.
- (15) Business Insurance, ‘Major oil spill in Kerch Strait cleanup costs estimated at \$14B’, 24 January 2025 (<https://www.businessinsurance.com/major-oil-spill-in-kerch-strait-cleanup-costs-estimated-at-14b/>).
- (16) Smith, C., ‘Finland investigates Russian “shadow fleet” ship after cable damage’, BBC News, 26 December 2024 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cr56l7prj2mo>).
- (17) Besch, S. and Brown, E., ‘Securing Europe’s sub-sea data cables’, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 16 December 2024 (<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/12/securing-europes-subsea-data-cables?lang=en>).

afloat. Roughly 60% of all Russia's sea-borne oil exports transit the Baltic Sea, making it a key bottleneck⁽¹⁸⁾. Imposing restrictions on the shadow fleet's operations in this region, even in the short term, would offer the EU a direct means of hitting Russia where it hurts.

Secondly, Russia's weaponisation of the international trading system carries significant risks, particularly if it backfires. One problem is reputational. If Russia can be convincingly portrayed as deliberately causing or even recklessly risking significant environmental damage, it could harm its standing with third countries. Shadow fleet vessels have already caused oil spills in the waters of states such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Türkiye. A second problem is Kaliningrad. The exclave is now entirely dependent on energy imports following the disconnection of the Baltic states from Russia's electricity grid. It also relies on the Baltic Sea for the delivery of essential consumer goods. This vulnerability should be actively leveraged to compel Russia to abide by international shipping regulations.

FIGHTING FIRE WITH FIRE

The EU should fight fire with fire. Resilience is not enough when dealing with Russia's hybrid activities. The seaborne

export of oil through EU waters is a vital lifeline for the Russian state – and a critical vulnerability which the EU can and should target decisively. In response to Russian hybrid aggression, it must shift from reacting to acting.

Russia's weaponisation of the international trading system carries significant risks.

An active policy approach turns the tables on Russia's shadow fleet network. If a vessel is intercepted due to inadequate insurance or suspicious activities, the burden of proof should lie with the ship's owner to prove that it is not acting against the interests of the littoral state – not the other way around. Opaque

networks of shadow ownership will be forced to reveal their true face in efforts to justify claims of 'innocent passage'. This approach is considerably more efficient than the current 'whack-a-mole' sanctions strategy aimed at tracking down and penalising vessel owners and flags of convenience. The EU could also actively enforce the G7 price cap should ship owners demand compensation for seized cargos.

> The first priority must be the active policing of territorial waters and EEZs to confront, deter and contain Russia's shadow fleet. The deliberate environmental and security risks posed by the shadow fleet demonstrate that Russia is acting in bad faith and abusing the principle of 'innocent passage'⁽¹⁹⁾. Under UNCLOS it is legitimate for coastal states to stop and search vessels transiting through their territorial waters⁽²⁰⁾. EU Member

(18) The Maritime Executive, 'Denmark may begin checking Russian tankers' insurance in the Baltic', 11 November 2023 (<https://maritime-executive.com/article/denmark-may-begin-checking-russian-tankers-insurance-in-baltic>).

(19) Bajarūnas, E., 'Choking Russia's shadow fleet in the Baltic', Centre for European Policy Analysis, 15 January 2025 (<https://cepa.org/article/choking-russias-shadow-fleet-in-the-baltic/>).

(20) Navy Lookout, 'Shadow fleet showdown', 13 January 2025 (<https://www.navylookout.com/shadow-fleet-showdown-nato-responds-to-grey-zone-threats-in-the-baltic/>).

States should all utilise this power with regard to Russian vessels and especially shadow fleet vessels⁽²¹⁾. Inadequate insurance or reckless disregard for the environmental wellbeing of coastal states is a valid reason for a vessel to be stopped, apprehended or prevented from sailing through coastal waters⁽²²⁾. This is especially relevant in the Baltic Sea, but enforcement should extend across all European waters, also in coordination with non-EU NATO partners. Vulnerabilities off the Irish coast and North Sea are especially urgent.

- > Within the EEZ, littoral states also have the authority to act against vessels that have violated national laws applicable within these maritime zones⁽²³⁾. A lack of valid insurance or activities that directly endanger the environmental wellbeing of a littoral state provide a legitimate basis for more active policing of these waters on economic grounds. Furthermore, while international laws are less permissive in EEZs, they do allow for interpretation of rights especially in the context of aggressive action by a hostile state⁽²⁴⁾. Given that Russian shadow fleet vessels have previously been seized with explicit military hardware

onboard, a reasonable suspicion of military activity can be assumed – especially in proximity to critical infrastructure⁽²⁵⁾. All enforcement actions should be accompanied by targeted strategic communication efforts to highlight the security threats and covert military activities being carried out by Russia under the guise of global trade.

- > The EU needs to establish robust information-sharing platforms to accurately track the movements of shadow fleet vessels and prioritise limited enforcement resources for especially suspicious behaviours. This should be coordinated not just at the EU level but also through existing intelligence-sharing platforms such as the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF)⁽²⁶⁾. Publicly sharing information on Russian naval activities also presents an advantage, helping to counter any accusations of hypocrisy likely to be levelled against the EU in such a scenario.
- > In the age of information warfare, the EU must clearly and explicitly communicate the rationale behind its actions, distinguishing its response from efforts undertaken in unrelated

(21) 'Western Nations agree to disrupt and deter Russian shadow fleet, Estonia says', Reuters, 16 December 2024 (<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/western-nations-agree-disrupt-deter-russia-shadow-fleet-estonia-says-2024-12-16/>).

(22) Postimees, 'Not even a shadow of the shadow fleet', 13 January 2025 (<https://news.postimees.ee/8171726/editorial-not-even-a-shadow-of-the-shadow-fleet>).

(23) Schaller, C., 'Critical Maritime infrastructure and the regime of the EEZ', *EJIL*, 11 July 2024 (<https://www.ejiltalk.org/critical-maritime-infrastructure-and-the-regime-of-the-eez-a-blank-cheque-for-saboteurs/>).

(24) Szymański, P. and Rudnik, F., 'Denmark and Sweden: how to stop the "shadow fleet"', Centre for Eastern Studies, 19 June 2024 (<https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2024-06-19/denmark-and-sweden-how-to-stop-shadow-fleet>); National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), 'Jurisdiction over vessels' (last updated 22 October 2022) (<https://www.noaa.gov/jurisdiction-over-vessels>).

(25) Perepechko, I., 'Spy equipment found on Russian shadow fleet tanker, which Finland suspects of cable breakage', *Babel*, 28 December 2024 (<https://babel.ua/en/news/114038-spy-equipment-found-on-russian-shadow-fleet-tanker-which-finland-suspects-of-cable-breakage#:~:text=The%20equipment%20was%20stored%20on,%2C%E2%80%9D%20sources%20told%20Lloyd's%20List>).

(26) UK Government, 'Joint Expeditionary Force activates UK-led reaction system to track threats to undersea infrastructure and monitor Russian shadow fleet', 6 January 2025 ([https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-expeditionary-force-activates-uk-led-reaction-system-to-track-threats-to-undersea-infrastructure-and-monitor-russian-shadow-fleet#:~:text=The%20Joint%20Expeditionary%20Force%20\(JEF,cable%20in%20the%20Baltic%20Sea\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-expeditionary-force-activates-uk-led-reaction-system-to-track-threats-to-undersea-infrastructure-and-monitor-russian-shadow-fleet#:~:text=The%20Joint%20Expeditionary%20Force%20(JEF,cable%20in%20the%20Baltic%20Sea))).

situations, such as those in the very different circumstances of the Taiwan Strait. This also presents the opportunity to inflict reputational damage on Russia, which could be actively publicised, especially in countries directly affected by the harmful activities of the Russian shadow fleet.

- > The EU would need to develop capacity for handling seized vessels, which is currently inadequate. Measures should include temporary secure berthing facilities for detained shadow fleet vessels, as well as procedures for the safe offloading of cargo and the scrapping of vessels that are not reclaimed by their owners. Fortunately, a decisive and coordinated strike against the shadow fleet would likely force Russia to change tactics, meaning such measures may only need to be temporary.
- > A strong international coalition is essential to support the activities of all littoral states confronting the shadow fleet. One significant risk is the danger of unilateral retaliation from Russia⁽²⁷⁾. Such retaliation for policing of shadow fleet vessels could include the deployment of military escorts for Russian shadow fleet tankers. While such actions would expose Russia's underlying nefarious intentions and force it to expend valuable resources, they also demonstrate the need to provide military and logistical support to engaged Member States and prevent intimidation.
- > Coordinated action across regional, EU and NATO platforms cooperation platforms would also be highly effective in enhancing the policing of Russian shadow fleet vessels. The model of the JEF from NATO in the

Baltic Sea could be extended to other affected theatres including the North Sea, Mediterranean, and Black Sea. Surveillance alone is proving to be a useful deterrent, highlighting the potential for enlisting non-military assets, such as fishing and coastguard vessels, for monitoring operations where military assets are unavailable.

(27) Danish official quoted in 'Putin's Fleet – Russian espionage in the Baltic Sea', *Deutsche Welle*, 22 October 2024 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Br3K93-z6PI>).

CONCLUSION

UNPOWERING RUSSIA

How to do it

by
STEVEN EVERTS

The EU faces a Russian threat that goes well beyond Moscow's war against Ukraine. Every day, Russia is acting to harm EU interests – and does so in key regions and domains.

To counter the Kremlin, the EU first needs an accurate understanding of Russia's strengths, weaknesses and playbook. This exercise should avoid two pitfalls. First, the tendency to exaggerate Russia's capabilities, the extent of its global support, or to ascribe to Moscow a level of strategic ingenuity it does not have. But equally, we should not be blind to Russia's determination to hurt the EU, which it can do successfully with modest material means. The EU needs to 'right-size' the Russian threat and be clear about the way it operates. Only on this basis can it formulate a successful counter-strategy of 'unpowering' Russia.

This *Chaillot Paper* has mapped in detail Russia's global assets and footprint. It has offered a realistic assessment of

where and how Moscow has leveraged its strengths or compensated cleverly for its weaknesses. This side of the ledger tends to receive most attention in policy debates. But it is equally important to document all the ways in which Russia is vulnerable and losing ground. And that is why this dimension also features prominently in this publication.

As ever, the key question is what EU policymakers should do. This *Chaillot Paper* offers a set of ideas and suggestions, covering both hard and soft power, and ranging from short-term 'quick wins' to longer-term, structural reforms.

Unpowering Russia is especially challenging amid today's dramatic geopolitical upheavals. As the US global role under Trump 2.0 shifts in dramatic ways, and with Washington moving closer to Moscow on certain issues, Europeans will need to demonstrate greater strategic agility. Everything points to the need to invest in European strength: only the

Unpowering
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strong can remain free to make their own strategic choices⁽¹⁾; only the strong can successfully ‘unpower’ Russia.

From this overarching maxim, a three-pronged strategy emerges. The EU and its Member States must act in three ‘clusters.

1. RAISING THE COSTS OF HARMING THE EU AND TIGHTENING ECONOMIC PRESSURE

A common thread running through this *Chaillot Paper* is the need to raise the costs for Russia of harming the EU. This means going beyond the familiar refrain of ‘strengthening resilience’ and placing greater emphasis on sanctions enforcement and others forms of proactive defence. This publication recommends measures that flip Russia’s apparent strengths – such as its hold over energy markets and fearmongering – and turn them into vulnerabilities.

Confronting the shadow fleet

Caspar Hobhouse argues that the EU must shed its cautious and defensive stance when it comes to Russia’s shadow fleet of oil tankers. Instead, it should actively **police territorial waters and exclusive economic zones (EEZs)**, detaining vessels on grounds such as inadequate insurance cover, environmental risk, or suspicious ownership. He proposes shifting the burden of proof onto ship owners to justify passage. The strategy includes

seizing cargo, scrapping non-reclaimed vessels, and investing in shared maritime surveillance tools. This more assertive stance would not only constrain Russia’s war economy but also damage its global reputation.

A smarter approach on deterrence and red lines

Giuseppe Spatafora stresses the need to **call Russia out on its empty threats, especially its nuclear bluffs.** The EU should make decisions on future weapons support for Ukraine behind closed doors to avoid public debate which Moscow can easily exploit. And instead of fixating on high-cost platforms, the focus should be on scalable systems like artillery and drones. He also recommends building a **‘counter-red line playbook’** with credible responses, including sanctions and asymmetric measures, and using international forums to rally opposition to Russian nuclear threats.

Upping the pressure on Russia via China

Tim Rühlig recommends using China’s growing ties with Russia as leverage. The **EU should threaten to freeze exports of dual-use items to China and broaden investment screening mechanisms.** On the diplomatic front, the EU should continue to highlight China’s professed commitment to territorial integrity and draw attention to how supporting Russia contradicts these principles. He also suggests **active outreach to the ‘Plural South’.** Finally, he recommends that the EU continue to **remind the US of the strategic cost of closer China-Russia alignment**

(1) Everts, S., ‘Only if you are strong can you remain free’, *EUISS Commentary*, 7 February 2025 (<https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/commentary/only-if-you-are-strong-can-you-remain-free>).

and caution against the illusions of a ‘reverse Nixon’ scenario (whereby the US would seek to drive a wedge between Moscow and Beijing).

2. WINNING THE ‘BATTLE OF NARRATIVES’

A second cluster of recommendations centres on countering Russia’s aggressive – and unfortunately effective – efforts in winning the global information war. With modest financial means, Moscow is achieving strategic effects – destabilising democratic societies and gaining influence in key regions and constituencies. Thus far the EU’s response has been reactive, disjointed and conventional in nature. The EU does many things on strategic communications, but its efforts are often delivered in homeopathic doses, as the former HR/VP Josep Borrell used to say⁽²⁾. It is time to scale up and be more creative.

A truly coordinated information strategy

The EU needs a real step change in its strategic communications. This means expanding programmes like EUvsDisinfo, greater efforts to counter disinformation in local languages, and more systematic sharing of best practices across institutions. **This includes shifting to ‘pre-bunking’ to avoid staying on the defensive. And it certainly entails greater funding for independent media, along with increased EU presence on and**

more creative use of social media. On the substance of the EU’s international messaging, the authors of this paper plead for a continued strategy of leveraging core principles and values — democracy, the rule of law, sovereignty and self-determination — while underlining that these are not just EU ideals but universal norms with global relevance and resonance.

Countering hybrid threats and the weaponisation of narratives

Nad’a Kovalčíková focuses primarily on dismantling Russia’s manipulation of public discourse. She urges the EU to expose Russian hypocrisy and protect vulnerable groups from disinformation. She suggests that the EU creates a **European Psychological Defence Agency** modelled on Sweden’s to centralise anti-disinformation efforts. She also urges the EU to **hold online platforms accountable** for amplifying disinformation, as societal resilience hinges on a well-informed citizenry.

3. STRENGTHENING REGIONAL ENGAGEMENT AND LEVERAGING GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS

The third group of recommendations focuses on **weakening Russia’s global influence by increasing the EU’s impact**

(2) Josep Borrell, speech at Ventotene, 1 September 2024 (<https://federalists.eu/federalist-library/in-europe-we-can-say-no-representation-without-taxation/>).

'UNPOWERING' RUSSIA

A timeline for action



Quick wins/short-term recommendations

immediate to ~6 months

These measures draw on existing tools, respond to urgent needs and depend more on political will than on long-term investments or deep institutional reform.



Strategic deterrence and sanctions enforcement

Police the Russian shadow fleet

Threaten to freeze dual-use exports to China

Create a 'counter-red line playbook'

Enforce current sanctions in Libya and Mediterranean ports

Information and narrative countermeasures

Increase funding for independent local media

Expand the EU's social media presence

Expose covert Russian networks and disinformation in Africa

Reinforce narratives around Russia's betrayal of Assad

Use student exchanges and EU-backed cultural events



Mixed-timeline measures

quick start, long runway

These recommendations can be implemented quickly but require long-term follow-through to fully mature and show results.



Scale up EU visibility in the Western Balkans



Begin diplomatic outreach to like-minded powers in Africa and Asia



Invest in localised counter-narratives in Arabic, French and African languages



Start pilot programmes for anticipating and pre-bunking disinformation



Create temporary maritime enforcement taskforces with coast guards



Long-term recommendations

6 months to several years

These initiatives require capacity-building, more extensive funding, or deeper institutional or regional engagement strategies.



Structural and institutional reforms

Create a European Psychological Defence Agency

Develop more robust investment screening frameworks



Strategic regional engagement

Co-finance clean energy projects in Indo-Pacific and Africa

Support Syria's reconstruction under inclusive, human rights-focused conditions

Develop permanent educational and media cooperation in Western Balkans and Africa

Support a greater role for African countries in global institutions



Internal EU cohesion and policy synchronisation

Upgrade strategic communication coordination across the EU

Build a comprehensive sanctions enforcement hub

in key regions – from the Indo-Pacific and Africa to the Southern Mediterranean and Western Balkans. The key here is **sustained EU engagement to forge genuine partnerships**; not forcing countries to make binary choices, or engaging in shallow transactional diplomacy.

The Western Balkans: countering political opportunism

Bojana Zorić explains that in the Western Balkans Russia exploits **EU delays and internal divisions**. She argues that the EU should shift its approach by actively **rewarding reform-minded countries** and penalising obstructionist forces, including through targeted sanctions. Moreover, EU Member States should be ready to form **‘coalitions of the willing’** to impose sanctions where consensus inside the EU is lacking. Finally, she underlines the importance of expanding the EU presence at the grassroots level – through education, cultural initiatives and support for independent journalism – to **shape local narratives** and reinforce pro-EU sentiment.

The Southern Mediterranean: preventing strategic vacuums

Katarzyna Sidło identifies Syria and Libya as key areas where Russia thrives amid political instability. **In Syria, EU aid must subtly disincentivise a continued Russian presence**, without imposing unrealistic conditions on the new authorities. **In Libya, coordinated EU-Türkiye cooperation is vital to facilitate a peace process and ensure a Russian withdrawal**. She also stresses the need to invest in unity if the EU wants to be effective in any part of the region and shape events, rather than just react to them.

Africa: building trust over rivalry

Rossella Marangio argues that **the EU should avoid being dragged into overt geopolitical games and rivalries** in Africa. Instead, it should focus on countering Russian propaganda through both **debunking and pre-bunking strategies**, deploying locally resonant messaging and platforms including radio and WhatsApp, to reach target audiences effectively. In the diplomatic sphere, the EU should **promote sustained cooperation based on long-term mutual interests, rather than limiting its role to reactive crisis management – thus also drawing a contrast with Russia**. A good way of shoring up EU influence on the continent is through support to African leadership in global institutions, thereby highlighting the EU's value as a reliable partner. The EU can and must work more with countries like Türkiye, India and the Gulf states to push back against Russia and provide Africans with credible alternatives. This requires a greater focus on **job creation, infrastructure and EU visibility**, especially through scaling up the ‘Global Gateway’ initiative.

The Indo-Pacific: becoming a more credible partner

Lizza Bomassi advises against a strategy of open confrontation with Russia in the Indo-Pacific. Rather, the EU should position itself as a **long-term partner by investing more in sustainable partnerships, for instance on cyber or renewable energy**. She also underlines the need for the EU to work on longer-term strategies to strengthen its influence by **expanding ties through higher education, youth exchanges, civil society and independent media**. A more tailored approach to public diplomacy and stronger EU visibility can serve to counter Russia's sharp

power, particularly now that US media influence is declining in the region.

CONCLUSION: 'UNPOWERING' RUSSIA IS BOTH URGENT AND FEASIBLE

The main conclusion of this project is that Europe is far from powerless in the face of Russian hostility – it is under-leveraged. The EU has diplomatic reach, economic weight, security tools and a track record of seeking partnerships rather than pursuing spheres of influence. But it must use these assets with purpose and strategic intent. To 'unpower' Russia, the EU must think and act in terms of power – and have the courage to use it.

Importantly, the EU does not need anyone else's permission to 'unpower' Russia. It can seize oil tankers. It can expose falsehoods. It can show up in places Russia has long taken for granted. But it must do so with speed, clarity and purpose. Some measures can be rolled out immediately; others will take time.

Unlike so many other things in Europe, 'unpowering' Russia will not start with grand summits, but with taking action. The Kremlin already plays the game. It is time the EU played it better.

ABBREVIATIONS

AI

Artificial Intelligence

AIS

Automatic Identification System

ASEAN

Association of Southeast Asian Nations

BRICS

Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa

CAR

Central African Republic

CFSP

Common Foreign and Security Policy

CHPIs

Common High Priority Items

CSDP

Common Security and Defence Policy

EEAS

European External Action Service

EEZ

Exclusive Economic Zone

FDI

Foreign direct investment

FIMI

Foreign information manipulation and interference

GDP

Gross domestic product

GRU

Russian military intelligence agency (Glavnoye Razvedyvatelnoye Upravlenie)

JEF

Joint Expeditionary Force

LAO PDR

Lao People's Democratic Republic

LNG

Liquefied Natural Gas

MENA

Middle East and North Africa

NATO

North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NGO

Non-governmental organisation

PMC

Private military company

PRC

People's Republic of China

RMB

Renminbi

SCO

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

UN

United Nations

UNCLOS

United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea

UNGA

United Nations General Assembly

UNSC

United Nations Security Council

USD

United States dollars

USSR

Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

NOTES ON THE CONTRIBUTORS

Lizza Bomassi is the Research Analyst for the Indo-Pacific at the EUISS. Her research focuses on European foreign policy towards the Indo-Pacific with a particular interest in regional geopolitical developments. She brings extensive experience from over a decade working at Carnegie Europe, where she held a senior role overseeing strategic initiatives across multiple areas and conducting research on Europe-Asia relations. Prior to working at Carnegie, she contributed to founding an International Task Force on Preventive Diplomacy and establishing a global Parliamentarians Network on Conflict Prevention.

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Steven Everts is the director of the EUISS. Prior to joining the EUISS he worked at the European External Action Service where he served as senior advisor to the HR/VP on strategy and communications. Previously, he was a Senior Advisor in the Asia-Pacific department of the EEAS. From 2009–2012 he was a Member of the Cabinet of HR/VP Catherine Ashton with responsibility for Asia and the Pacific, Türkiye and the general issue of how to frame and strengthen the EU's relations with its strategic partners. Between 2005 and 2009, he worked for SG/HR Javier Solana, both as his Personal Representative for Energy and Foreign Policy and as a Member of his Cabinet. Before his time

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Nad'a Kovalčíková is the Senior Analyst in charge of the transnational security portfolio at the EUISS and a project director of the EU-funded initiative 'Countering Foreign Interference'. She is a member of the ESPAS foresight Steering Group; an expert collaborator for Minsait's Ideas for Democracy; and a member of the Steering Committee of Women in International Security. She previously worked at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, NATO, the European Parliament, the French and Canadian embassies, and on several NGO and think tank projects across Europe and the Atlantic.

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Tim Rühlig is the Senior Analyst for Global China at the EUISS. His research focuses on China's foreign, economic and technology policy, EU-China relations, economic security, German-China policy, and Hong Kong affairs. He is also working on the politicisation of technical standard-setting and China's role as a security actor in the Pacific and beyond. Before joining the EUISS, he worked at the European Commission for DG I.D.E.A., the in-house advisor hub of President Ursula von der Leyen, with a focus on China's technology policy. Previously, he was a Senior Research Fellow at the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) and a Research Fellow at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI).

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Bojana Zorić is an Associate Analyst at the EUISS where she works on the Western Balkans. In this capacity, she covers the analysis of policy and security developments in the Western Balkans, particularly in the context of EU enlargement. Previously she held the position of Senior Policy Analyst at the Regional Cooperation Council in Sarajevo. Prior to that, she was stationed in Brussels with the European Committee of the Regions and in Sweden with the Swedish International Liberal Centre, where she worked on democracy building and promotion in Eastern Partnership countries.

This *Chaillot Paper* makes the case for a bold shift in the EU's strategic posture. In the face of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine – and its broader subversive tactics and malign influence operations – the EU must actively 'unpower' Russia by dismantling its capacity to undermine European interests. We argue that Europe needs to chart a new course to navigate what is likely to be a drawn-out confrontation. To guide the EU's policies, the paper offers a balanced assessment of Russia's strengths but, crucially, also its vulnerabilities, which the EU can exploit to disable Russia's efforts to inflict harm.

Focusing on five key regions – China, the Indo-Pacific, the Southern Mediterranean, the Western Balkans and sub-Saharan Africa – the authors also examine critical domains such as Russia's hybrid warfare tactics, the Kremlin's red line playbook, and the notorious 'shadow fleet'. The conclusion is clear: Europe is not powerless, but it has not yet converted its multiple strengths into decisive action. To unpower Russia, the EU must think and act in terms of power – and have the courage to use it.