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Europe-Russia:
Balance of Power Review

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Executive Summary

European countries can no longer avoid the “Russian Question” as Russia has chosen war. They have the necessary potential – that is, the economic means, military capabilities and technological expertise – to face Russia by 2030, provided they demonstrate the political will to do so.

This is the finding of this report, conducted by the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri) with the guidance of a Steering Committee composed of nine directors of European think tanks and two qualified experts to oversee the study. It provides an interdisciplinary assessment of the evolving power balance between Europe and Russia as of November 2025 and looking ahead to 2030. It concentrates on four key domains: economic underpinnings, especially energy; national defense and security; political and societal resilience; and international positioning. The findings confirm that Russia constitutes a long-term threat driven by hostile intentions and a deep-rooted dispute over the European security architecture.

The economic fronts

1. Despite the unprecedented sanctions imposed on Russia, its macroeconomic situation appeared, at first glance, robust during the 2022–2024 period: GDP growth reached 4.3% in 2024, and the decline in trade with European countries was offset by fast-expanding trade, notably with China. High commodity prices, successful sanction circumvention and disciplined fiscal spending contributed to this initial stability.

2. However, Russia’s economic momentum culminated by the end of 2024, and the country is now drifting into stagflation. This decline is evidenced by widening imbalances, including rising inflation (the Central Bank rate reached 21% for almost three quarters), a growing budget deficit (expected at -2.6% in 2025), and the rapid shrinkage of the liquid portion of the National Wealth Fund (down to $31.5 billion in June 2025).

3. The long-term outlook for Russia is bleak. Its modernization potential is curtailed, and its economy is expected to slow down severely, becoming increasingly reliant on China. Crucially, Russia’s gas sector will not recover from the loss of the European market, translating into an estimated export revenue loss of €160 billion over the 2025–2030 period for Gazprom.

4. Russia’s overall economy is gradually adopting features comparable to those of the Iranian economy, combining limited modernization with long-term stagnation. Although Russia's ability to sustain the war effort is by no means exhausted, particularly if oil prices remain stable, lower prices or additional strict sanctions would make the situation more precarious.

5. Europe, for its part, has absorbed the shock of the energy decoupling. Fossil-fuel import bills have halved compared to 2022 levels, representing over €250 billion in annual savings for European countries. Europe is implementing an unprecedented paradigm shift in industrial policy (e.g. Critical Raw Material Act, Net Zero Industries Act, Clean Industrial Act), strengthening both its resilience and its competitiveness. By 2030, Europe is positioned to become the world's most electrified economy and a global climate frontrunner.

> *"Overall, Russia's aggression against Ukraine and Europe has been met by strong resolve and unity on the European side and accelerated the geoeconomic transformation of the EU."*

Defense and security

6. The confrontation rests on a profound asymmetry in the perception of threats and strategic intentions. Europe's posture is essentially defensive and deterrent, based on respect for international law. While Russia presents itself as a fortress besieged by a hostile West, it simultaneously seeks to reaffirm its domination over its former sphere of influence and build a new European security architecture.

7. While not excluding the possibility of a large-scale offensive against NATO, Russia has adopted an expanded conception of warfare. When indirect measures fail to subdue its opponents, they are intended to prepare the ground for an open military campaign, designed to be brief, intense and decisive. The Russian strategy, which is permanent, cross-domain and coercive, aims to influence the West's risk assessment and paralyze its decision-making by instilling the fear of escalation. Up to now, two major factors have contributed to deterring Russia from open military aggression against the Euro-Atlantic area: first, NATO cohesion, in which Washington's commitment is a key factor, and secondly, the continued resistance of Ukraine, which is mobilizing the major part of Russian military power. Should either of these two factors weaken, the risk of an open armed confrontation between Russia and Europe, whatever the scale, would increase considerably.

8. Analysis of the balance of power shows that the land domain remains Europe's weak point. Even though Europe maintains a qualitative advantage in training, command and combined arms tactics, Russia has a decisive advantage in terms of mass, firepower, mobilization capacity and tolerance for attrition. In the air domain, Europe benefits from a clear quantitative and qualitative superiority. However, without massive support from the United States, maintaining European air superiority would require addressing deficits in terms of stocks, integrated air and missile defense, and capabilities to neutralize enemy air defenses. At sea, in space and in cyberspace, Europe also holds the advantage, provided it exploits this by shifting the confrontation into these domains, where Russia's ability to deny or obscure its actions is more limited.

9. The nuclear factor remains central to Moscow's escalation strategy. Faced with various failures since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Russia has adapted its posture by supplementing its nuclear rhetoric with more tangible deterrent measures, as demonstrated by the decision to deploy tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus. Furthermore, in its new nuclear doctrine, Russia has reduced the conditions required to justify nuclear use, extending them to conventional conflicts against non-nuclear states – especially when those states are allied with, or supported by, nuclear powers. Currently, the American, French and British deterrent postures have the effect of protecting Europe from Russian nuclear intimidation and blackmail. However, should the credibility of the United States' extended deterrence be seriously undermined or fail, Europe would suffer from a strategic imbalance with Russia.

10. Europe is a magnet for all forms of exchange and movement. While its "strategic rear" is highly diversified due to its integration into the global economy, it is also more exposed. Europe depends heavily on supply chains that are vulnerable to geopolitical disruption and on increasingly uncertain transatlantic support. Meanwhile, Russia relies on an anti-Western axis that is rapidly disengaging from networks dominated by the West.

11. While Russian strategists rely on the cumulative effects of indirect actions, the most important role is assigned to the psychological-informational component. Considered potentially comparable to the effects of large-scale troop deployment, the psychological-informational impact is not limited to opportunistic manipulation or disinformation operations but aims to transform individuals and societies over the long term, on both emotional and psychological levels. Although Europe's responses so far have been defensive and fragmented, there is now a growing recognition of the need to address this psychological and informational front more coherently.

"Europe's assets could clearly prevail over those of Russia, but it is its ability to convert them into concrete power that will determine the maintenance of its deterrent posture."

Political systems and societal resilience

12. The Russian state functions based on a consolidated authoritarian system, centralizing decision-making among a circle of individuals, many of whom originate from the security services (*siloviki*). The consequence of this is the extreme weakness of institutions and the absence of clear prospects for alternation in power. Europe relies on pluralism, supranational and national institutions, and open public debate; although slower in its responses, this diversity guarantees its legitimacy and long-term capacity for adaptation.

13. Russian society demonstrates endurance in the face of war. Social stability is ensured by intense propaganda, severe repression and generous payments to recruits, originating mainly from peripheral regions. However, while 70–80% of the population claims to support the "special military operation", fatigue is gaining ground, particularly among the younger generations. Europe has managed to strengthen its solidarity, and, despite economic sacrifices, benefits from strong attachment to the democratic model.

14. Russia faces accelerated aging and demographic decline, worsened by war and exile, poorly integrated immigration, and hostility toward migrants. Europe, although also experiencing demographic stagnation, remains more attractive and open to immigration, despite the rise of populism.

15. The Russian regime appears stable in the short term thanks to the total control of elites and society, but remains exposed to risks of chaotic transition should power change hands. Europe, meanwhile, is vulnerable to internal crises but benefits from democratic resilience and an attractive way of life, with a limited risk of short and medium-term implosion thanks to the capacity to overcome crises collectively.

> *"Paradoxically, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the clash of models with Russia have allowed Europe to rediscover its raison d'être (peace and democracy) and to demonstrate democratic innovations to reinforce this model in the face of its competitors."*

Alliances and international positioning

16. Russia has an international network whose core consists of bilateral partnerships with anti-Western regimes. Iran and North Korea supply it with crucial military equipment, while China remains its principal political and economic backer. Numerous facilitating countries help it circumvent sanctions, and it has multiple sympathizers in the “Global South” and even within Europe (Hungary, Slovakia). However, many of these relationships are transactional and fragile.

17. The European Union relies primarily on its core strategic alliances: NATO, numerous economic and strategic agreements with over seventy partners, and a strong presence in multilateral organizations. Europe reinforces its collective security through new formats for rapid integration (E5, Weimar, NB8), the multiplication of coordinated initiatives, and superior attractiveness for investment and economic, scientific and regulatory cooperation.

18. Moscow is positioning itself as the pillar of a “post-Western” order, challenging established international norms. It is successfully instrumentalizing a post-colonial discourse to gain traction in certain regions of Africa, the Middle East and Asia. However, the EU remains the largest global public aid donor (over €95 billion/year, compared to €1.2 billion for Russia) and offers a credible, stable and sustainable alternative.

19. While Russia retains a capacity for disruption and deal-making that appeals to certain opportunistic partners, it remains unable to offer major, sustainable economic projects. Europe asserts its influence through its stability and its capacity for enlargement, which remain powerful drivers of transformation.

“The EU stands out for its diverse network of alliances, its economic attractiveness, and its ability to forge new partnerships.”

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Introduction

Thomas Gomart

The "Russian question" belongs to the past as much as to the future. European countries can no longer evade it, as Russia's attack on Ukraine directly threatens them. Given the evolving transatlantic configuration, they will increasingly have to confront it on their own. Russia is at war; they are not. As a political, military, economic and social phenomenon, the war has so far spared them, even as it remains consubstantial to Vladimir Putin's regime. This fundamental difference, reflected in Russia's losses and Europe's potential, is made possible by Ukraine's resistance.

A long-term confrontation

In Ukraine, the "special military operation", designed to bring about a swift regime change, has turned into a war of attrition that engages the entire state apparatus of the Russian Federation, shapes public opinion, and steers foreign policy. Russia exercises power by mobilizing its resources, taking decisive action, and undermining its adversaries. Its willingness to bear heavy losses speaks to its unwavering resolve. After decades of peace, European countries face a renewed Russian imperialism, with Ukraine cast as its sacrificial victim. They are providing support to Ukraine, coordinating their efforts and preparing defensively, while minimizing their own exposure to risk. Yet it is Ukraine alone that bears the brunt of the losses while fighting to defend its integrity.

Through this conflict, the Russian regime has locked Europe into a confrontation that is set to endure, regardless of the military outcome on the ground. While Vladimir Putin has long prepared for it, European leaders have mostly been forced to react. Russia holds the initiative while Europe scrambles to organize. Enmeshed in the web of globalization, the European continent has lost its main global comparative advantage: strategic stability. It has entered fully into a new era of insecurity, with the Russo-Ukrainian war as its center of gravity. Outside Europe, most diplomatic actors regard the conflict as peripheral. By contrast, Russia and Europe continue to pour resources into a struggle that marginalizes them both. Yet, they cannot turn away, since its short-, medium- and long-term consequences will shape Europe's trajectory and its internal balance of power. Indeed, Russia compels us to assess and anticipate in terms of power relations rather than legal norms.

What objectives?

The Russian question must therefore be reframed in terms of both time and space, taking into account our understanding of Russia's objectives, as expressed by Vladimir Putin, and those of European countries, which are frequently reduced to the lowest common denominator in the name of maintaining unity. First, Putin seeks to subjugate Ukraine and dismantle the state and military structures that uphold its independence and sovereignty. Second, he aims to shift the balance of power in Europe by contesting the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) enlargement. Russia's objective is to be recognized as the continent's dominant power, using fear as a tool to achieve this. Third, Putin – alone, as he stresses – is fighting against the so-called "collective West", seeking to accelerate the advent of a multipolar world, which would represent less a redistribution of power than a symbolic defeat for the West. In practice, Russia's conception of multipolarity revolves around the establishment of "spheres of influence" around China, the United States (US) and Russia. Finally, the war has created a state of permanent mobilization within Russia, legitimizing Putin's personal authority.

As for European countries, their objectives are clearly of a different nature. Their primary goal is to prevent a Russian victory in Ukraine. Second, they seek to uphold – at all costs – the US security guarantee through NATO and bilateral agreements. Third, they strive to maintain unity, particularly in the enforcement of sanctions. Fourth, they wish to limit the economic costs of their support for Ukraine. Finally, they consider the prospect of EU accession for Ukraine, Moldova and, should political conditions change, Georgia, as a means of stabilizing their neighborhood.

The Russian question in a new time and space

In terms of time, "the Russian question" has been shaped since the modern era through the intertwining of imperialism and despotism, which has profoundly influenced Russian identity. The Bolshevik Revolution marked a turning point, granting Ukraine a brief period of independence between 1917 and 1921. While revolutionary Lenin condemned "Great-Russian chauvinism", which oppressed the nations of the Empire, once in power, he issued precise orders to suppress Ukrainian nationalism. Stalin then set out to destroy it by orchestrating the Holodomor, the great famine of the 1930s, which is still etched in the memory of Ukrainians. The 1945 victory over Nazi Germany permanently shielded the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) from any accusations of imperialism. Appointed successor by a weakened Boris Yeltsin in 2000, and re-elected in 2004, 2012, 2018 and 2024 within an increasingly controlled political system, Vladimir Putin is continuing the "Great Patriotic War", claiming to "denazify" and "demilitarize" Ukraine. The next presidential election in Russia is scheduled for 2030 and, under the constitution, Putin could stand for another term until 2036, at which point he will be 84 years old.

In terms of space, the Russian question directly concerns the countries covered by the EU's Neighbourhood Policy – Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan – as well as, to varying degrees, the member states that joined in 1995, 2004, 2007 and 2013.[1] Its scope also extends into central Asia and the Asia-Pacific. The conflict in Ukraine began in February 2014 with the annexation of Crimea. The Russian question acquired a new dimension with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, preceded by the declaration of a "no-limits friendship" between China and Russia. The phase that began in February 2022 internationalized the conflict, with Moscow receiving direct support from Beijing, Tehran and Pyongyang, while Kyiv was backed by Tokyo, Seoul and Ottawa. At the United Nations (UN), most countries condemned Russia's violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity, yet only a minority followed through with sanctions. This shows that the Russian question now reaches well beyond Europe. The Kremlin is pursuing a Eurasian project aimed at reshaping the international system around the notion of a "global majority", implying a symbolic defeat for the West. Putin, in turn, lashes out at those who believe they can impose a "strategic defeat" on Russia.

The rationale behind this report

The idea for this report originated in March 2025, when the chiefs of the defense staff of the countries committed to supporting Ukraine convened at the Musée national de la Marine under the chairmanship of General Thierry Burkhard, Chief of the French Defense Staff, and Admiral Sir Tony Radakin, Chief of the British Defense Staff. It was grounded in three key observations.

First, European countries were ill-prepared for the war in Ukraine and have struggled to grasp the magnitude of the disruption Russia has caused at their expense. Put simply, many European leaders still seem to hope for a seamless return to the pre-February 2022 order. In reality, they are confronted with abrupt shocks and difficult adjustments. Decisions taken by the Trump administration – particularly in trade – have directly affected them, while efforts to normalize US–Russian relations, notably at the Anchorage summit (August 15, 2025), have once again tilted the balance of power to their disadvantage.

Second, European countries exhibit clear weaknesses in assessing and predicting the balance of power with Russia. Faulty analyses on their part have led them to misjudge the trajectory of Vladimir Putin's Russia, underestimating his ambitions, capabilities and determination. These errors stem from biases present not only in expert and business circles but also in

1. Croatia in 2013; Romania and Bulgaria in 2007; Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia in 2004; and Austria, Finland and Sweden in 1995.

political, strategic and media spheres. Consequently, it is essential to rebuild an analytical framework grounded in verified facts and available data.

Finally, it has become necessary to develop a more widely shared understanding of the strategic situation among European experts. Differences in approach and analysis can be both a vulnerability, when confronting a monolithic strategic actor, and an asset, enabling a fuller understanding of the multiple dimensions of the confrontation, which cannot be reduced to a mere military standoff. This approach helps reinforce the European pillar of transatlantic expertise.

The methodology adopted

The net assessment method was used, providing an analytical framework to compare the positions of European countries and Russia by linking their respective resources, strategies, organizations and capabilities over a medium-term horizon. The analysis focuses on four dimensions: economic foundations, particularly energy; strategic postures and military means; political and social resilience; and international positioning and alliances.[2] For each dimension, the strengths and weaknesses of Russia and European countries are compared over the medium term. The study covers European NATO members. Looking forward, the report identifies factors likely to alter the balance of power over the next five years. Crucially, Ukraine's potential is deliberately excluded from this analysis, even though it now represents a moral, military and industrial force capable of resisting and containing the bulk of Russia's deployment. Ukraine is treated as a separate subject.

Barring unforeseen circumstances, as already mentioned, Russia's next presidential election will take place in 2030. The same year is cited in France's *National Strategic Review 2025*, published on July 14, which states that Russia "poses the most direct threat today and for the years to come to the interests of France, those of its partners and allies, and the very stability of the European continent and the Euro-Atlantic area". It adds that "it is now clear that we are entering a new era, one in which there is a particularly high risk of a major high-intensity war in Europe, outside our national territory, involving France and its allies, particularly European ones, by 2030, and which would see our territory targeted at the same time by massive hybrid actions".[3]

Relying exclusively on open sources, this report is also conditioned by the context in which it was drafted, between June 18 and October 20, 2025. This period saw the NATO summit in The Hague in June, the Turnberry trade deal in July, the Anchorage summit in August, the subsequent visit of European leaders to Washington alongside the Ukrainian president, the

2. E. A. Cohen, "Net Assessment: An American Approach", *JCSS Memorandum*, No. 29, April 1990.
3. *National Strategic Review 2025*, Secrétariat général de la Défense et de la Sécurité nationale (SGDSN), p. 6.

latter's visit to the White House in October, and the announcement of a new Trump-Putin meeting in Budapest. The report was prepared based on a strategic survey addressed to the members of the steering committee, made up of nine European think-tank directors and two qualified experts. Their responses guided the research and writing, carried out by Ifri researchers. All four chapters were presented, discussed and revised by the committee together with experts. The report also draws on Russian publications and data, noting that an increasing number of statistical indicators are now shrouded in secrecy.

What is to be done?

Lenin's famous question remains relevant for all actors involved. From an analytical perspective, this report could naturally be updated and revised through regularly organized discussions, which are crucial for monitoring political developments. At present, Russia appears likely to continue exerting pressure on Ukraine, betting on a sudden collapse, US disengagement, and European weariness. In this context, European countries must demonstrate their ability to ensure security on their own continent. They possess the required potential – economic resources, military expertise and technological know-how – to confront Russia by 2030, provided they find the political will. The key question remains implementation, for political will is precisely what a net assessment cannot evaluate – in Europe as in Russia.

Thomas Gomart, October 17, 2025

The Economic Fronts

Marc-Antoine Eyl-Mazzega

Amidst unprecedented waves of sanctions, Russia's macroeconomic situation looked stabilized at first sight in the period 2022–2024: Russian gross domestic product (GDP) grew 4.3% in 2024, according to Rosstat data,[4] after 4.1% in 2023 and 1.4% in 2022; the current account was in surplus, the budget deficit in check, and unemployment was at a historical low. Moreover, Russia has been successfully replacing the shrinking trade with the EU and the United Kingdom (UK) with fast-expanding trade with China.[5] Hydrocarbon exports are continuing while agricultural exports have seen a 10 billion dollars ($) value rise in 2022–2024, topping $43 billion in 2023 (103 million tonnes of products). The government managed to finance the war effort, which ultimately reached about 8–10% of GDP in 2025, up from around 6% in 2023 (exact figures are unknown as numbers are hidden). Last but not least, Russia has managed to develop alternative supply routes and schemes for imports of sanctioned goods and to lower the related transaction costs.

Western companies have lost $167 billion since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine due to write-offs, unfair court decisions, and business seizures, including $57 billion in confiscated assets.[6] More than a thousand companies have curtailed operations in Russia.[7] Meanwhile, the West sanctioned 275 billion euros (€) of Russian central bank deposits and about $30 billion of assets from Russian oligarchs and elites. The EU and the UK overpaid almost €650 billion in energy imports in the period from June 2021, when Gazprom started reducing gas flows, to the end of 2024 as a

4. These numbers can be questioned, given that Rosstat publishes less and less data and is a governmental organization unlikely to show the full extent of any major imbalance. Overall, however, there has been growth.

5. EU + UK trade amounted to about €270 billion in 2021 or 38% of Russia's external trade, and fell to about €80 billion in 2024, while Russia's trade with China increased from $147 billion in 2021 to $244 billion in 2024, representing 32% of Russia's external trade that year.

6. N. Shapoval, A. Onoprienko, O. Gribanovskiy, et al., "Assessing Foreign Companies' Direct Losses in Russia: Financial Impact, Market Consequences, and Strategic Adjustments", Kyiv School of Economics (KSE), March 2025, available at: https://kse.ua.

7. See the account by Yale's CELI: "Over 1,000 Companies Have Curtailed Operations in Russia—But Some Remain", Yale School of Management, January 28, 2024, available at: https://som.yale.edu.

consequence of Russia's aggression.[8] Russia's destructions in Ukraine are now reaching the €500 billion mark, including €170 billion in direct damage.[9]

These numbers mask different sequences and realities as Russia's economy has finally peaked by the end of 2024, and the country has been drifting into stagflation. Russia's economic position is rapidly deteriorating as imbalances widen, with rising budget spending, inflation, lower export revenues and a shortfall in investment. Meanwhile, Europe is about to succeed in largely decoupling from Russia's energy supplies and is accelerating its energy transformation. Lower global energy prices are a daunting challenge for Russia, and a blessing for Europe. Toward 2030, Russia's economy is expected to slow down severely, largely leaning on China, while its modernization potential is curtailed. Europe, in turn, will have advanced its decarbonization and strengthened its security of energy supplies and will remain a strong contender in the global technological race in which Russia, apart from the nuclear, space and digital industries, is totally absent.

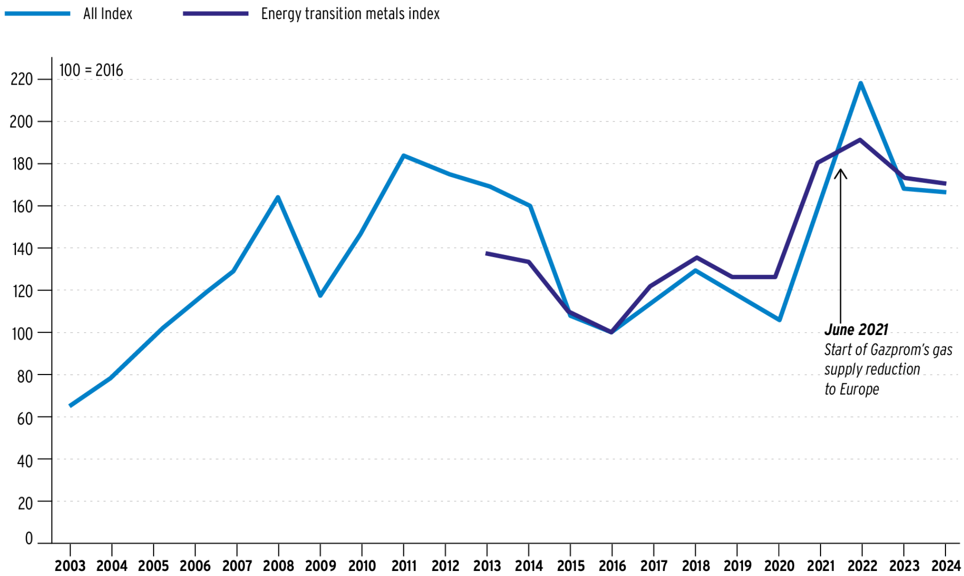
Explaining Russia's initial resilience and economic adjustment

Russia's war has led to most commodity prices soaring over the June 2021 to end 2023 period. Hence, as a large commodity producer and exporter, Russia largely benefited in 2021–2023 as it was still exporting large oil volumes to Europe, and then increasingly to Asia, at high market prices. When global prices then declined, Russian exporters' revenues in rubles remained elevated due to the ruble depreciation.

In 2022, Russia's export revenues were approximately €1 billion per day for oil, gas and coal, including €600 million for oil and products. Revenues then decreased to around €730 million/day in 2023, €670 million/day in 2024 and €585 million/day in July 2025; Q2 2025 export revenues are estimated to show an 18% decrease year on year[10] and H2 2025 average exports can be estimated at around €500 million per day, a 50% decrease from 2022.

8. Calculations by Ifri based on EU and UK energy statistics.
9. Joint Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment RDNA4, data from February 24, 2022, to December 31, 2024.
10. See Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA)'s monthly analysis of Russian fossil-fuel exports and sanctions, available at: https://energyandcleanair.org.

Figure 1: Commodity price index & energy transition metals (2003–2024)



Source: International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The oil and gas sectors have been thriving temporarily

Russia's oil industry has been under sanctions since 2014, when high-cost joint ventures with Western partners were abandoned, but has adapted remarkably well. Russia's membership in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC+) alliance helped establish a price floor for oil, fostering budget stability. Faced with the West's oil price cap, embargo and sanctions, Russia's oil industry spent billions on buying up a fleet of ageing tankers, building up a huge ghost fleet that could circumvent financial restrictions and handle the bulk of its oil exports. Trading operations were moved mainly to Dubai-registered entities, away from Switzerland.[11] While it faced higher logistics costs, it benefited from still high prices on international markets, high volumes, and new customers, notably in India and China, but also elsewhere through key transshipment hubs. With high oil prices and initially incomplete sanctions,[12] 2022 saw Russian fiscal reserves actually increasing. When oil exports and prices then progressively decreased from late 2022 (with periodic fluctuations), the industry benefited from ruble depreciation – lower dollar revenues but similar ruble income

11. See, for example, J. Bouissou, R. Pravettoni and F. Fattori, "Russia's Ghost Fleet: Moscow's New Oil Routes", *Le Monde*, August 6, 2023, available at: www.lemonde.fr.

12. The oil embargo took effect in early 2023, but the price cap level was not sharpened until the end of 2025, by which time it had become largely ineffective because global oil prices had dropped. Several European countries were slow to curtail fossil-fuel imports, which remained highly profitable for Russian entities. Bulgaria and the Czech Republic eventually phased out oil imports, while Hungary and Slovakia did not. In addition, some Russian crude oil re-entered Europe in the form of refined products processed in third countries.

overall. The Russian budget was safe and discounts on Russian oil exports were significant from time to time in dollar terms, though less so in terms of rubles (Urals vs Brent discounts rose, but that was offset partly by the ruble depreciation).[13] The Russian Ministry of Finance then managed to move the tax pressure to the extraction segment. Western governments, concerned about the risks of a major global oil supply disruption, did not manage to significantly curtail the Kremlin's fiscal revenues.

The bottom line is that Russia remains a relatively low-cost oil producer despite inflation. Legacy production costs average around $20/barrel (excluding taxes), well below US levels, while new fields – though more expensive – often receive tax exemptions. Russia's largely domestic and diversified equipment industry, increasingly supplemented by Asian equipment, supports continued operations in conventional fields. While Russia's oil industry experienced a surge in drilling, well productivity has likely declined, as more water must be pumped from legacy fields, increasing production costs. Nonetheless, Russia's oil producers have been able to continue pumping oil at a profit, even if crude production is down by 1 million of barrels per day (mbd) since the war began, to 9 mbd in Q1 2025, with condensates also reportedly down (Russia has not submitted data to the Joint Organizations Data Initiative [JODI] since March 2023, and there has been repeated friction with OPEC over Russian data). Ukraine's drone strikes on several refineries have disrupted logistics and probably also strained some refiners' finances. Still, oil is taxed at the extraction stage, and spare parts could be sourced despite sanctions, albeit probably at higher prices and potentially lower quality. Exports have adapted, with more crude and fewer products. All in all, if Western sanctions and the price cap have reduced Russia's budget revenues from oil exports by roughly 10–15% in the period 2022–2024,[14] this was obviously not enough to stop the war effort, and the fiscal loss was quite easily offset by higher taxes elsewhere – which is why the share of oil and gas budget revenues decreased from 35% in 2021 to 27% in 2024.

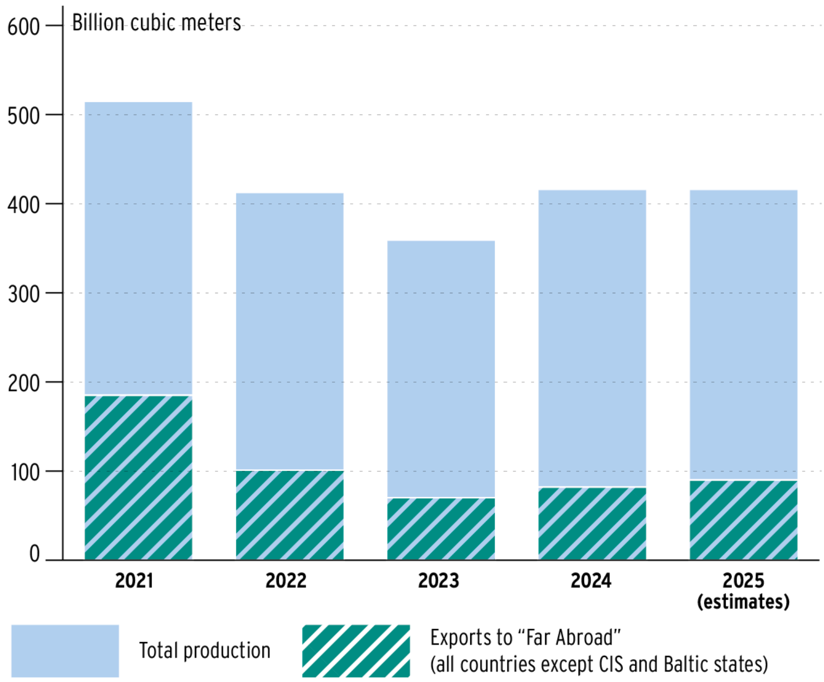
With respect to gas, Russia curtailed exports of pipeline gas to various European customers in the first months of 2022 before largely halting them from September 2022. At first, higher prices offset the reduced volumes. But then, in 2023 and 2024, Gazprom was not able to offset the volumes and revenues it had lost in Europe through higher revenues from its domestic market and diversifying exports mainly to China, while also facing higher taxes. In fact, the only winner in Russia was at first Novatek, which saw rising

13. See: "Brent/Urals Differential 2022-2025", Incorrys, September 2, 2025, available at: https://incorrys.com.

14. This assessment draws on estimates from various Russian and Western analysts and traders, shared in discussions with the author. Traders generally stressed that only the ultimate buyer of a cargo knows the actual price, and that market participants lack precise information on discounts. Overall, they noted that discounts mentioned in the press in 2022 and 2023 of up to 30% hardly materialized or were exceptional. Not included in this assessment is the fact that some Indian buyers, for example, paid for cargoes in rupees, which have been accumulating in Russia.

Liquified Natural Gas (LNG) exports to Europe and higher sales prices. This has triggered much attention, but in fact, the fiscal value of these exports is much less important than Gazprom's pipeline gas exports, and Russian LNG helped ease the overall increase in European gas prices and import costs during these very difficult months. Europe was for a long time Gazprom's best customer, with over 150 billion cubic meters per year (bcm/year) supplied to various EU buyers. This has dropped sharply to a few bcm in early 2025 following the halt of the transit through Ukraine. China is now the first buyer of Gazprom's gas at rather non-advantageous oil-indexed prices (40 bcm expected in 2025), followed by Turkey (around 20 bcm/year) and Central Asia (about 12 bcm in 2025). Gazprom's production plummeted from 516 bcm in 2021 to 355 bcm in 2023 before rebounding to 416 bcm in 2024, yet significant volumes were put in storage and not sold that year.[15] Gazprom has not paid dividends again, has pushed for, and partly obtained, a rise in domestic gas prices, and has been trying to develop new export outlets to China, India and Central Asia. Its financial situation has been recovering partly from the significant losses of 2023 (629 billion rubles [RR] or $7 billion), not least due to the very profitable oil segment.[16]

Figure 2: Gazprom's gas production and exports to "Far Abroad" (2021–2024)



Source: Gazprom, Ifri estimates.

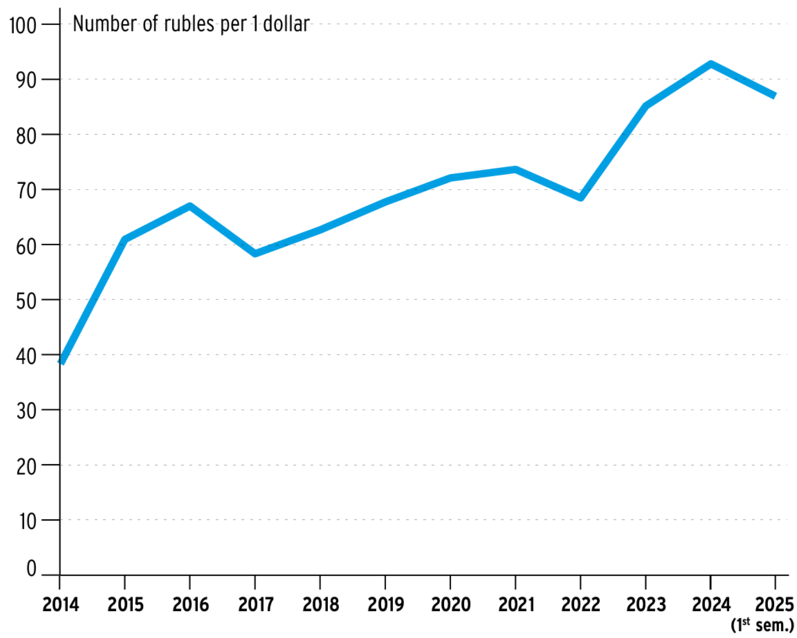
15. O. Kobzeva, "Russia Faces Gas Surplus as European Exports Collapse, Eyes Data Centres", Reuters, June 24, 2025, available at: www.reuters.com.

16. Sources for this overview include Sergey Vakulenko's regular reports for Carnegie and the *Financial Times*, Tatiana Mitrova's papers for CEPA, Ifri's analyses, and in-depth reporting by Public Eye.

Current account surplus and no major fiscal imbalance at first

With fossil-fuel exports largely unaffected and supplemented by agricultural product exports, Russia has maintained a continued export revenue stream. Meanwhile, higher-cost imports have stagnated or slightly decreased due to ruble depreciation. Thus, a large trade surplus has been maintained, and a dramatic depreciation of the ruble has been avoided despite the ruble weakening to 115 RR/$ in November 2024 before recovering somewhat. These outcomes have also been supported by measures to preserve substantial foreign currency reserves and increase gold holdings.

Figure 3: USD/Ruble exchange rate, yearly average (2014–2025)



Source: Russian Central Bank, World Bank.

Sanction circumvention attempts led at first to growing trade transaction costs, but a parallel system was progressively established, and these costs went down after around 18 months. A lot of external trade has taken place abroad without ruble conversion, using dollar-pegged currencies, barter schemes, or informal "hawala-type" transactions, which bypass currency conversion.[17] Several well-identified countries, such as China, have become hubs for importing sanction-hit goods. In addition, Russian authorities have been developing de-Westernized trade and international payment schemes, notably within the BRICS format, such as alternatives to

17. See D. Nekrasov's reports, Center for Analysis and Strategies in Europe (CASE), available at: https://case-center.org.

SWIFT (SPFS), the Mir card payment system, and payments in local currencies.[18]

As the government has cut public spending for non-war-related sectors, increased taxation of the corporate sector as well as personal income, alongside regulated tariffs and excise taxes (such as on tobacco and alcohol), there has been a constant inflow of fiscal revenues to finance the growing war effort. Last but not least, Russia's very cautious spending rules over the past years – with a very limited budget deficit permitted and part of the oil-related revenues channeled into a fiscal reserve fund instead of being spent – have enabled the authorities to expand military spending.

However, inflation has been a major challenge. The Central Bank of Russia (CBR) has progressively increased its key rate from 7.5% at the end of 2021 to 21% from October 2024 to May 2025, thus hampering long-term investment in the economy. Despite initially effective support measures, civilian activities such as construction have been progressively hit. This prompted a push toward immediate consumption as the value of savings rapidly decreased. However, higher interest rates later reversed this trend, with savings beginning to increase again. Military equipment spending has been preserved from inflation by large prepayments from the government and preferential credit rates. Consumption has also been supported by higher real wages (at least in the private, military and energy sectors), payments for soldiers, and various social support measures. The domestic tourism industry did well (except in Crimea), with higher tourist numbers from Russia, China and India. The workforce challenge has been partly addressed through longer working hours, measures to retain Russians living abroad within the Russian economy, and salary-driven workforce transfers from the civilian economy to the war industry. Russia's banking sector (Sberbank, at least) has posted strong profits in spite of sanctions, not least due to profitable lending operations at rates higher than the CBR, and due to state-of-the-art services and operations. Meanwhile, the glimpse of Moscow has been sustained by ongoing infrastructure investment and visibly full restaurants.

These factors have enabled Russia to rapidly transition to a semi-militarized economy since 2022 (although some parts of the budget were classified for some years before that). However, military spending in the period 2022-2024 remained below Soviet-era and Cold War levels (estimated at up to 16–20% of GDP) and only slightly exceeded peak US Cold War expenditures.[19]

18. V. L. Inozemtsev, "The Rise of an 'Alternative Globalization'", Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), December 16, 2024, www.memri.org.

19. Sources for this section include regular analyses provided by Alexander Gabuev for Carnegie and for the *Financial Times*, by Alexandra Prokopenko for Carnegie and The Bell, and by Vladislav Inozemtsev, expert of the CASE Center – CASE.

The Russian economy heading into stagflation since fall 2024

Imbalances develop fast

The 2022–2024 economic growth figures have been a smokescreen for more fundamental problems. Russia's economy had already slowed down since the early 2010s, when, in spite of oil and gas export revenues being at their highest levels, GDP growth rates were weak and even negative at times due to poor governance, poor diversification, capital evasion and lack of growth in productivity. Also, apparent economic growth is largely driven by inflation and military-industrial value addition backed by state spending, which is then rapidly destroyed on the battlefield, generating no lasting benefit for the Russian economy or society. Moreover, there is no more foreign direct investment, the capacity to expand civilian services and industries is severely constrained, and the productivity of capital and workforce is inevitably declining. As a consequence, increasing amounts of money are needed to produce the same goods (which are also likely to be of lower quality).[20]

Figure 4: Main economic indicators for the Russian economy, 2021 and 2024

	2021	2024
GDP Growth Price of a barrel of Brent	 4.7 % 71 $	 4.1 % 81 $
Inflation	8.4 %	9.5 %
Unemployment	4.8 %	2.5 %
Budget balance	+ 0.4 %	- 1.7 % (3,500 billion RR)
Budget revenues Billion RR	 25,286	 36,700
Budget revenues of oil and gas Billion RR %	 9,057 33 %	 9,800 31 %
Budget revenues of non oil and gas Billion RR	 16,230	 26,900
National Wealthfare Fund (Billion RR)	13,565	11,900
Liquid part of National Wealthfare Fund Billion RR Share of GDP	 8,453 6.5 %	 3,800 1.9 %
Total public debt Billion RR Share of GDP	 23,773 18.2 %	 32,700 16.4 %
Corporate tax profit	20 %	25 %

Source: Russian Central Bank

20. See the very weighted analyses by Sergey Guriev, such as for the *Financial Times*' podcast "Economic Show": M. Sandbu, "Transcript: The Real Russian Economy. With Sergei Guriev", *Financial Times*, February 18, 2025, available at: www.ft.com.

Three indicators, all rapidly deteriorating, show the depth of the problem as the economy is already nearing stagflation: inflation, the budget deficit, and the shrinking welfare fund. This prompted Central Bank Governor Elvira Nabiullina in July 2024 to warn that labor and production capacity reserves were "practically exhausted" and that a "shortage in these resources could lead to a situation where the rate of economic growth would slow down despite all attempts to stimulate demand, and the entire stimulus would go into accelerating inflation".[21] Economic Development Minister Maxim Reshednikov recognized in July 2025 that the "economy was on the brink of recession".[22]

Russian authorities have clearly failed, for several months, to bring inflation under control, with official rates of around 10% widely regarded as underestimated, particularly for daily consumer goods purchased by average Russians. CBR rates of 21% during almost three quarters testify to the extent to which everything has been inflationary in the economy: labor shortages, higher wages, sanctions and, decisively, higher import costs. Real incomes are decreasing in several regions and retired people have been losing purchasing power. ECB rates were lowered to 20% in June, 18% in July and 17% in September and 16.5% in Octobre 2025 as inflationary pressure temporarily eased. Impoverishment of part of the "civilian" middle class is unfolding. While Turkey's economic imbalances involve even higher inflation and central bank rates, the situations are not comparable; unlike Russia, Turkey is not sanctioned or isolated and remains open to the world and global financial markets. The slight inflation reduction recorded in mid-2025, which prompted the rate cuts demanded by part of the elites, does not change these fundamentals.

The National Wealth Fund (NWF), a fiscal reserve fund managed by the Finance Ministry, hasn't been replenished since 2023, yet it could be further tapped into and hence its liquid part could shrink further. By January 2025, this had fallen to $116.8 billion (6.2% of GDP)[23] with only 45% of the fund being liquid – that is, $31.5 billion in June 2025, down from over $100 billion just before the February 2022 invasion. The Ministry of Finance has also started to sell some gold reserves.

The problem of the shrinking reserve fund is aggravated by the growing budget deficit (1.7% already for H1 2025 alone), which itself is now fueled by lower oil revenues (lower export volumes, lower dollar prices and a less depreciated ruble since March 2025) and higher military spending. The budget deficit is expected to be 2.6% in 2025, while initially planned to be

21. "CBR Governor Nabiullina Says Russia's Economy Still Overheating 'Significantly'", *Interfax*, July 2024, available at: https://interfax.com.

22. "Russia's Economy Minister Warns of Looming Recession", AFP/*The Moscow Times*, June 2025, available at: www.themoscowtimes.com.

23. Performance of the Wealthfare Fund, Ministry of Finance of the Russian Federation, latest date available on August 1, 2025 (last consulted on October 6, 2025), available at: https://minfin.gov.ru or https://ru.wikipedia.org.

0.5%, which has prompted the authorities to increase the value-added tax (VAT) from 20% to 22% in 2026. Russia filled its budget deficit both with the fiscal reserves and by borrowing at high interest rates. The deficit is now growing as oil prices decrease, meaning lower oil and gas export revenues to China and Turkey (due to oil indexation), even if pipeline exports to China reach 40 bcm in 2025. Spending on government bond interest payments will increase, forcing Russia to raise fiscal revenues through higher taxes and expanded bond issuances, which will also incur additional costs. Partial privatization could also be considered. However, this would create a vicious circle whereby Russia might ultimately have to reduce funding for both remaining social spending and the military.

If oil prices remain around $66/barrel on average for 2025 so far (for Brent until September 2025), Russia's ability to sustain the war effort is by no means exhausted and it remains profitable to produce and export. But a lower price cap level will add to pressures, reducing the Kremlin's options further. Ukraine's larger and more frequent strikes on Russia's oil infrastructure, if confirmed, will also cause increasing disruption and inflation. US sanctions on Rosneft and Lukoil, and their subsidies, from October 22, 2025, will add additional difficulties for the Russian budget and notably pressure Indian and Chinese importers to reduce imports of Russian oil and to give up any plan to invest in key Russian upstream projects. Socio-economic problems in various regions will worsen, notably in coal-producing regions as coal export revenues are in sharp decline, and in regions affected by climate disasters, such as flooding. A bad harvest, another downward oil price shock or additional sanctions would make this imbalanced situation even more precarious.

Russia remains highly dependent on two export outlets controlled by NATO: the Baltic Sea (Primorsk, Ust Luga) and the Black Sea (Novorossirsk), which together handle about 2 mbd of shipments. Russia cannot replace this capacity, or could do so only at extraordinary cost over roughly a decade. Its Eastern-bound oil exports – ESPO, 1 mbd; Kuzmino, 900 kbd, and Kazakhstan, about 300 kbd – make up about 50% of total exports, but have failed to expand further. Total hydrocarbon export revenues have already decreased below €600 million/day, nearly half of the peak in 2022. There is still room to increase domestic fiscal pressure (VAT, income tax, excise taxes), reduce pensions and salaries in the army, and privatize state assets or force Russians to lend money to the state, but these measures would further strain the social situation.

As a consequence of these imbalances, the ruble depreciated against the dollar until February 2025, when expectations of a Trump-brokered end to the conflict temporarily strengthened the currency, making imports more expensive and thus fueling inflation. Meanwhile, the production of Russian goods – increasingly of a military nature and technologically lagging – has gained no competitiveness boost from the weaker ruble. Additional inflationary pressures come from the VAT increase and rising domestic gasoline prices in 2025.

Russia's capacity to adjust to the evolving economic reality of the war it launched has now peaked. Trade with China cannot expand much further, and Russia has imposed tariffs on some Chinese goods (such as cars). Africa and the rest of Asia, such as India, are no alternative; they offer very limited trade growth potential and are already contending with Chinese overcapacity in their domestic markets. A resumption of trade, even in an extreme geopolitical scenario, with the US would not alter this picture much, as the US does not need Russian oil, gas or coal, and possible metals exports would be insufficient to change the outlook. However, such a resumption could temporarily strengthen the ruble.

In the medium term, an inevitable backsliding

Vladimir Putin's ambition of creating globally operating state-controlled or state-backed giants (Gazprom, Rosneft, Rosatom, Sovcomflot, Rostec, Sibur, Sberbank, InterRAO, Novatek) has been undermined by Western sanctions imposed since 2014. Rosatom is likely to remain the only champion, albeit diminished by reduced state financing, sanctions and reputational risks. Rosatom could serve as Russia's primary bridge to the West and its main vehicle for participation in the clean-tech industry, but upcoming European restrictions on imports of nuclear fuel and technologies from Russia will further reduce Rosatom's presence in Europe (as also in the US).

Russia's oil industry will not develop all its potential, and substantial foreign investment, including Chinese or Indian, is unlikely. Oil production will continue to decline, possibly in line with what the Paris Agreement requires. Fiscal pressure on the sector will increase further, posing a major risk for future potential investors, alongside logistics costs and bottlenecks. In 2021, the IEA estimated that Russia would produce about 11.7 mbd of liquids by 2026 and 11–11.3 mbd up to 2030.[24] These projections have since been reduced by around 20% due to sanctions and OPEC+ commitments. Additionally, oil transport costs have increased substantially as the lucrative Baltic–Rotterdam oil route has been closed.

Russia's gas sector will not be able to recover from the loss of the European market, which is a tremendous hit for Gazprom and the Russian state budget. China will not replace Europe in terms of volumes and revenues, not least because China wants to keep its import portfolio diversified. Gazprom is in a weakened position to negotiate with its customers, notably the China National Petroleum Corporation, on projects like the Power of Siberia 2 pipeline. Russian steel mills and companies in the building sector are suffering from lower orders. At the same time, Gazprom's

24. *World Energy Outlook 2021*, International Energy Agency (IEA), October 2021, available at: www.iea.org.

gas export infrastructure to Europe is now effectively worthless. Building new infrastructure for new and more difficult markets while lacking free cash flow is challenging but not inconceivable, as the Russian government could decide that these are strategic projects where the rate of return does not matter and priorities instead include, for instance, ensuring that steel mills receive orders, or reviving patronage ties.

Russia could have become one of the world's top-5 LNG exporters and played a decisive role in phasing down coal, especially in emerging economies. Instead, it will at best export 50% of its potential by 2030 – which the Russian Energy Ministry estimates at 142 bcm (100 Mt), up from about 45 bcm currently[25] – leaving room for others such as Qatar and the US to fill the gap (unless the US lifts some of its sanctions on Russia). So far, China has shown no willingness to develop a new large energy import infrastructure from Russia, although the Gazprom-CNPC declaration signed in Shanghai in September 2025 might indicate some renewed interest. Russia's gas sector will not be able to recover from the loss of the European market. Gazprom's 2021 strategy estimated it would export 270 bcm by pipeline by 2030, up from 200 bcm. In 2024 and 2025, it will export a total of just 100 bcm, and, in an optimistic scenario, be able to export 120 bcm by pipeline by 2030. That amounts to a 150 bcm/year loss in exports. Assuming a price of €250 per 1,000 cm^3 means an export revenue loss of €37.5 billion per year by 2030, totaling around €160 billion over 2025–2030. With a 30% tax take, this would translate into roughly €50 billion in lost budget revenues.

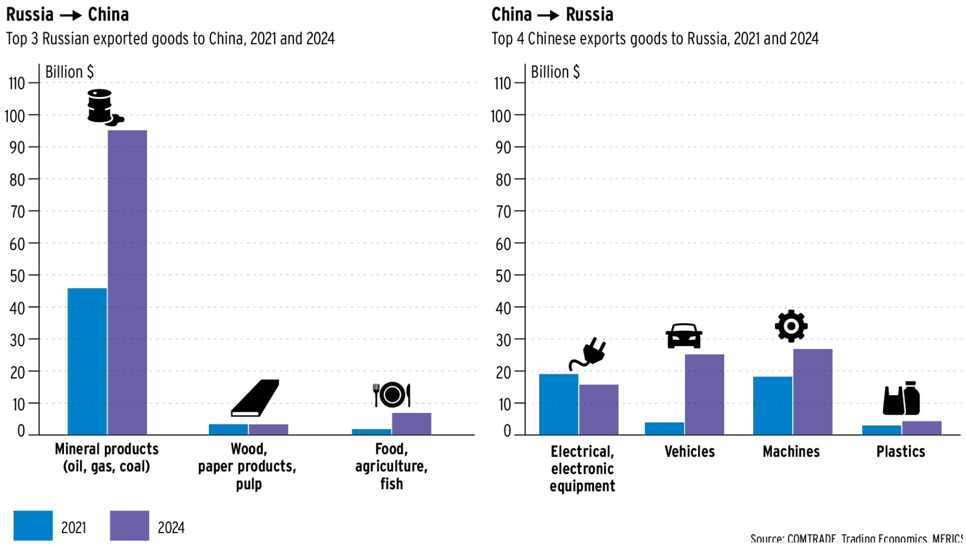
Russia's external trade now largely depends on China (34% in 2024 versus 14% in 2021) while Russia represents 3.3% of China's external trade, at a similar level to India or Germany. China's economy is far more advanced than heretofore, and the technological gaps that once justified joint projects with Russia – such as in civil aviation – are rapidly narrowing. Russian imports of Chinese vehicles increased from $4 billion in 2021 to over $25 billion in 2024, while Russia's own car production fell by almost a half, from 1,566,000 a year to 982,000 a year over the same period (according to the OICA data).[26] Meanwhile, Russia's exports to China are heavily concentrated on mineral products, which made up 74.37% in 2021 and 73% in 2024, while their value doubled over the period to $95 billion.

For China, the Russian economy serves as both a dumping ground for its industrial overcapacity and a strategically positioned supplier of key resources – gas, oil, metals, coal, fertilizers, and potentially food products – that bypass contested sea routes. However, nothing that Russia provides is critical to China, which could manage without Russian supplies, with the possible exception of potash. Decision-makers in Beijing have been careful not to become too dependent on, and hence vulnerable to Russia. Only

25. Government of the Russian Federation, Energy Strategy for the period to 2050, April 2025, available at: https://minenergo.gov.ru.
26. International Organization of Motor Vehicle Manufacturers, available at: www.oica.net.

Western companies could invest the billions of dollars needed to modernize the Russian economy, as they did in previous years. The Chinese will hardly replace European investors as they do not want to empower a competitor, especially at a time of oversupply and trade conflicts. This explains why Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) in Russia remains low.

Figure 5: Russian exports to China; Chinese exports to Russia (2021–2024)



Source: COMTRADE, Trading Economics, MERICS.

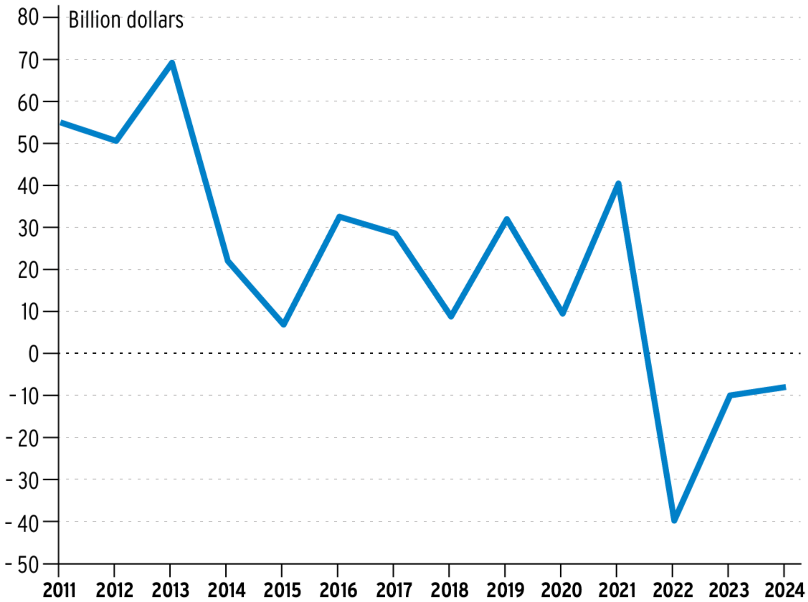
Workforce and skills problems will also continue to fuel inflation and limit Russia's economic potential. Russia builds little microelectronics, and 80% of its exports consist of commodities like hydrocarbons, petrochemicals and minerals. Its domestic aviation industry will increasingly be affected by grounded planes; around 500 Boeing and Airbus planes are flying less and less after three years of sanctions. Russian-made aircraft can hardly replace them when they are needed, although this is the official objective.[27] Much as with the Russian Sputnik vaccine or the attempts to revive the car industry, the reality is that Russian goods are outdated. Russia's weapons industry, with a few exceptions, has largely lost customer confidence, and in any case, advanced equipment is no longer available for export.

Foreign direct investment into Russia has fallen to its lowest level since 2001, reaching just $3.35 billion in 2024, a 91% decline from 2021. Cyprus (representing the Russian capital that initially exited the country) accounts for the predominant share.[28] Russia ranks 59th out of 133 economies on the

27. In the short term, this includes an injection of 175 billion rubles from the National Wealth Fund into a state-subsidized leasing program that aims to supply the nation's airlines with domestically produced aircrafts, which are yet to be seen.
28. *World Investment Report 2025*, UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), July 2025, available at: https://unctad.org.

2024 Global Innovation Index (WIPO) and 154th out of 180 on the 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index 2024 of Transparency International.

Figure 6: Net foreign direct investment inflows into Russia, current $ (2011–2024)



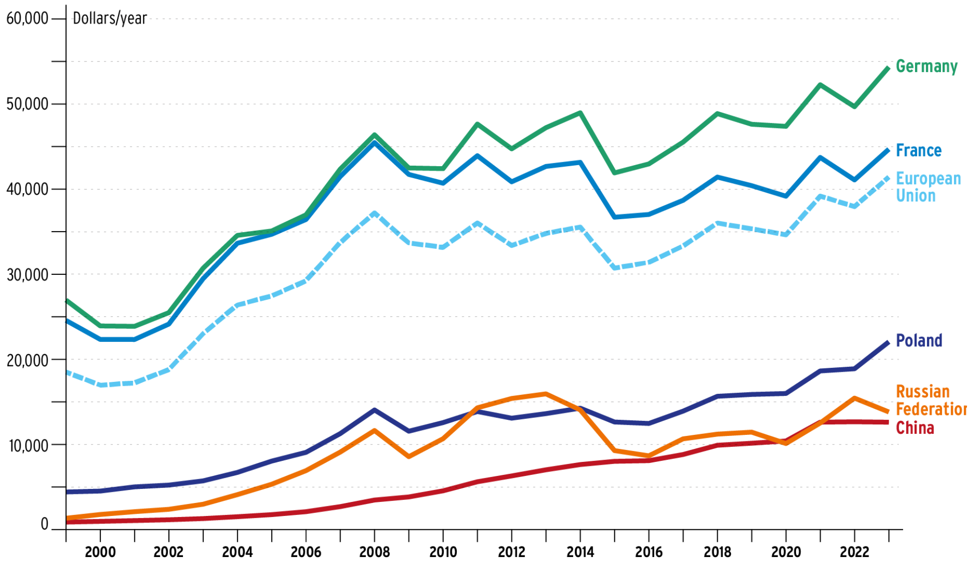
Source: The World Bank.

Meanwhile, Russia will be increasingly affected by extreme climate events leading to social and economic destruction; ultimately, permafrost thaw could lead to massive infrastructure destruction and capital loss. The notion that Russia's agricultural production would benefit thanks to expanding arable land is likely unfounded. Extreme weather events are expected to inflict greater crop damage around the Black Sea region, while Russia's capacity to fund adaptation investments will remain limited.[29] Beyond civilian nuclear power and the 30% fall in emissions due to the post-Soviet Union industrial collapse, Russia has no effective climate strategy. Nonetheless, its agricultural production is set to expand further in coming years, notably for maize, wheat and soybeans, due to area expansion and yield gains. This will enable Russia to help meet additional global demand, 94% of which will come from low- and middle-income countries, notably in Africa, where population growth is stronger than food production growth, and where the fertilizer rate is the world's lowest.[30] And Rosatom, the world's largest external nuclear plant constructor, can play a key role in showcasing that nuclear energy is not limited to developed economies, but can be deployed in emerging ones, provided it maintains its access to state funding and is not sanctioned.

29. See a good summary of the issues: F. Schierhorn, "Will Russian Agriculture Benefit from Climate Change?", *Russian Analytical Digest*, No. 272, 2021, available at: www.ssoar.info.
30. *Agriculture Outlook 2024–2033*, Paris: OECD-FAO, 2024.

Against this backdrop, Russia faces the painful realities of geography and geopolitics. Before the invasion of Ukraine, it was deeply integrated into the European economy; its GDP and exports were concentrated in the European part of the country and depended on infrastructure oriented toward Europe. Pivoting east and to the rest of the world has been the priority since then, but it requires three key elements that Russia is desperately short of: money, time and a capacity for innovation and industrial scaling-up. And Russia will hardly manage to catch up with other nations in terms of GDP per capita. This is why the Russian authorities repeatedly stress that sanctions must be lifted as part of any settlement – clearly, they are having a strong impact.

Figure 7: Comparison of GDP per capita data for selected countries (1999–2023)



Source: The World Bank.

The Iranization of the Russian economy

Russia's whole economy is gradually showing features that characterize the Iranian economy, such as: continued dependence on hydrocarbons (even if in slight decline) and ability to circumvent sanctions; Western isolation but trade with the rest of the world, increasingly outside the traditional system; loss of key export markets in the West; domestic sub-optimal and sub-quality production of previously imported goods; an impoverished middle class and declining social services outside the main cities; a well-educated workforce and some companies capable of producing a small number of high-tech industrial components (nuclear, space, weapons, digital); dangerous airlines; a severely depreciated currency, replaced by barter, gold, and other currencies; diversification from fossil-fuels exports into petrochemicals and an expansion of state-controlled companies; corruption, embezzlement and state capture. Finally, the control of the Russian economy by President Putin's entourage is similar to the Revolutionary Guard's control of the Iranian economy.

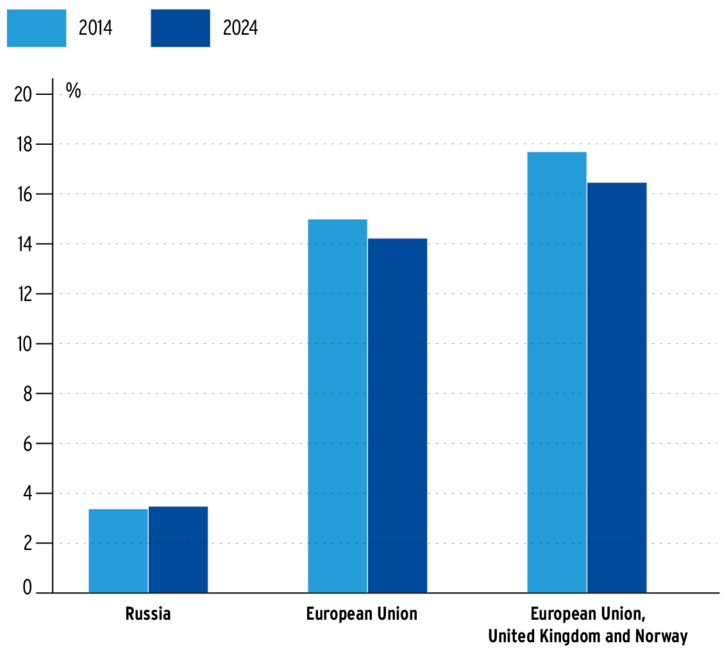
Differences include: Russia sits on the UN Security Council and maintains a much larger global presence than Iran; it exports nuclear power plants; its agriculture sector has become robust following a decade-long strategic modernization effort; it plays a major role in global food security (notably for wheat), and holds substantial influence through its control over fertilizers, seeds and various agri-food value chains. In turn, Iran does not rely on a neighbor to survive to the extent that Russia relies on China.

EU's pivot to geoeconomic power: European economies have accelerated the energy transition and aligned with a strategic autonomy agenda

Europe's economies combined are five times bigger than Russia's. Although an emerging economy, Russia has not managed to expand its share in the global economy over the past ten years beyond 3.5% (see Figure 8). After the brutal energy decoupling shocks, European resilience has been rapidly improving, while Russia's invasion of Ukraine has prompted the EU to accelerate its energy transition, as reducing fossil-fuel imports has become a security issue. Facing in addition to Russia the pressures from China's powerful manufacturing capacities and the US tariff and regulatory pressures, the EU has also relaunched an ambitious industrial policy and has been exploring ways to reinvigorate trade relations with the UK and other trade partners (Mercosur, Indonesia, others to come). There will be strains, as highlighted by the tense EU–China summit in July 2025 and the US–EU "trade deal" sealed in Scotland, as well as challenges in maintaining EU unity. However, the EU is strengthening its geoeconomic integration. It is already demonstrating greater unity, for example on the sanctions front and in the tariff negotiations with the US.

The energy prices crisis is over. Fossil-fuel import bills are down 50%, inflation has been reduced, unemployment is very low, and several member states have posted strong growth figures. Energy supplies have been diversified and decarbonized, and have become more resilient. The EU has started a paradigm change from favoring *laissez-faire* policies, open trade and investment, and goal-driven energy and climate strategies, toward stronger industrial policy instruments, cost-effective and technologically neutral approaches, and a focus on building resilience. The fundamental question now is whether Europe can stay united and integrate and coordinate further in the face of challenges from Vladimir Putin's hybrid pressures, Donald Trump's tariffs and deregulation, and President Xi's industrial overcapacity and export restrictions.

Figure 8: Comparison of the Russian and the European share of GDP in the world economy, current international $ (PPP), 2014 and 2024



Source: The World Bank.

Reinforced energy security thanks to diversification and low-carbon solutions

Europe's energy decoupling from Russia in 2022–2023 was painful. Sacrosanct supply contracts were broken, decades-long trade relations and investments were wiped out, and dependencies were weaponized. The pain was also economic: gas prices spiked, driving up electricity costs, leading to soaring bills for industry and households, and fueling higher inflation. And interest rates rose, slowing down investment and also fueling inflation. Governments had to massively subsidize consumers to ease the economic pain, leading to surging debt levels. Yet President Putin's economic aggression has not succeeded. Europe has been hit, but did not collapse. Gas, oil and electricity supplies were not interrupted. Societies did not break down. The tensions did not lead to chaos. The EU did not implode. Member states (with one or two exceptions out of 27) did not rush to Moscow for concessions. Europeans worked hard to stay united, take joint action, reinforce policies, diversify energy supplies, and massively and collectively sanction Russia and support Ukraine. There will, however, be lasting challenges, notably in competitiveness and public finances.

Oil: Thanks to strategic stocks, flexible markets and strong infrastructure, European market operators managed to substitute Russian imports with other crude and product imports, even if some volumes still entered directly or indirectly. Russian companies sold some of their refineries, and countries such as Bulgaria and the Czech Republic finally managed to cope without Russian supplies. Markets are well supplied, and Europeans felt confident enough to join the US efforts to target Russia's ghost fleet with sanctions. Against the backdrop of lower oil prices, there is space to coordinate further so as to tighten the oil price cap in order to further limit Russia's revenues and to phase out the remaining Russian oil supplies. With Europe's and China's push for electrification of the transport sectors, diesel consumption is expected to peak, challenging Russia's specialization in diesel product exports. Further policy action to enlist refineries as strategic European assets and avoid further closures or murky asset takeovers will be required. While the rollout of EVs is continuing (15% of new sales in 2024 in the EU) and progressively reducing oil demand and import requirements, oil will remain strategic, and demand levels will be significant in the medium term.

Natural gas: Europe was quick and effective in developing a flexible LNG import infrastructure, and market players supported by governments managed to quickly source alternative gas supplies. The center of gravity of Europe's energy imports moved from the eastern flank to the western and southern ports. Again, market forces, strong infrastructure, eased regulation, and cooperation have enabled the development of a virtual transatlantic pipeline, with the US becoming Europe's largest LNG supplier. The economic cost was high; refilling storage was expensive, and consumption fell sharply due to mild weather, energy efficiency and demand destruction in industry. Still, the crisis came to an end in 2024. Europe has been relying more on Norway and LNG, and supplies from Algeria have been partly redirected from Spain to Italy, which was more at risk.

Russian gas supplies have decreased from roughly 160 bcm to 40 bcm in 2024 and are expected to fall to 30 bcm in 2025 with the closure of the Ukraine route. If the EU's phase-out policy is agreed and implemented, volumes shipped to Europe could drop to below 10 bcm/year in 2027. There is plenty of lower-priced LNG available to replace these supplies. This is also required to halt speculation about a return of supposedly "competitive, reliable" Russian gas, which creates market uncertainty, and to prevent Russia from trying to regain a foothold in Eastern Europe – which in any case would require resolving ongoing arbitration rulings.

Europe will need additional gas-fired capacity, particularly for peak hours and days without sun and wind. Nevertheless, overall, gas demand can be expected to continue declining slightly (estimated at -100 bcm/year if the Affordable Energy Action Plan is implemented by 2030), unless there are delays in rolling out nuclear, renewables, energy storage and grids. The EU's growing dependency on US supplies means more secure energy, but climate, economic or policy decisions could still affect future reliability. The EU should continue to reduce overall demand (without deindustrializing), for example, through heat pumps and electrification of industry, while engaging with

Norway as a strategic partner. Norway's gas production is expected to gradually decline unless substantial new investments are made and additional offshore pipeline infrastructure is constructed. Norway could become Europe's long-term gas safety net, but it needs long-term contracts and confidence that its gas will be purchased. Europe, in turn, needs competitive gas and much greater Norwegian sovereign fund investment into Europe in return for longer-term, predictably priced gas supplies. Last but not least, Algeria's exports to Europe should be maintained, backed up by a genuine investment partnership, also aimed at limiting domestic gas use in power generation to free up resources for exports.

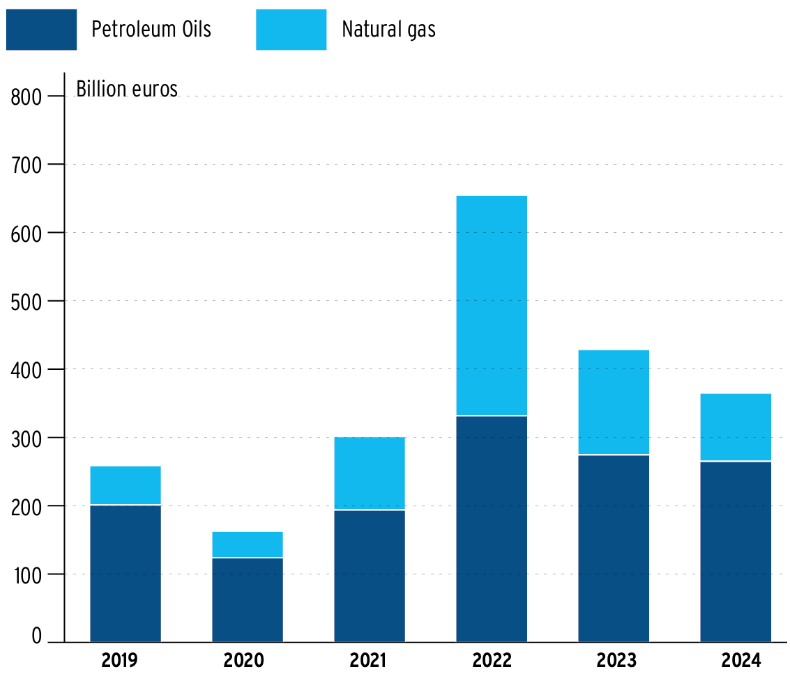
Electricity: Market tensions eased as the French nuclear fleet recovered (with 89 terawatt-hours [TWh] of exports in 2024) and record volumes of additional solar PV capacity were installed in 2023 and 2024, totaling over 60 gigawatts (GW) per year. The drive of renewables, better hydro and nuclear availability has boosted clean power generation to 70% of the EU's and 75% of the UK's electricity mix, and enabled the reduction of coal and gas demand in power generation to historical low levels. Battery deployment has also been advancing to provide short-term flexibility, while comprehensive demand- and supply-side flexibility measures are being considered or have already been implemented, alongside a major effort to boost transmission and distribution-grid investment. By 2030, the EU could be very close to meeting its target of over 65% of power generation from renewables, with fossil-fuel generation reduced to around 15%.

The nuclear revival in Europe has been accelerated by the crises. There is major new nuclear plant investment, notably in France, the UK, Poland, the Czech Republic and Sweden, while several member states, including the Netherlands and Italy, are also considering newbuilds. Regarding nuclear fuels, dependency on Rosatom – particularly for Soviet-built reactors in Central Europe – is being addressed through an unprecedented investment effort to develop a Western supply chain, which is expected to deliver results in the coming years. Last but not least, the 37.5% reduction in EU greenhouse-gas emissions in 2023 compared to 1990 levels (and 54% in the UK) is notable. At a minimum, a 50% reduction across the EU by 2030 is within reach, making Europe a global climate frontrunner, while Russia's war is increasingly seen as both a global energy security and climate spoiler.

Energy import costs can be expected to be halved in 2025 versus 2022, representing well over €250 billion in annual savings for the EU and the UK combined. Europe remains highly attractive for global foreign direct investment (FDI) flows, thanks to its large, rich and integrated market, efficient infrastructure, innovation, rule of law and quality workforce. About 8–10% of global FDIs go to Europe (although twice as much goes to North

America). European FDI totaled $182 billion in 2024, down sharply from $439 billion in 2023, but still some 60 times higher than Russia's.[31]

Figure 9: EU's oil and gas import costs (2019–2024)



Source: Eurostat.

Industrial policies and economic security are now central

The Russia triggered crises triggered a paradigm shift in European energy and climate policies; a missing step of the decarbonization effort has been added: an industrial policy to foster competitiveness and resilience.

The EU made decisions to dramatically improve permitting conditions and timelines for industrial investment, renewable energy and grid deployment, and critical raw-material supply chains. In addition, major adjustments were made to the EU electricity market design. While retaining the merit order and short-term market signals, new provisions were introduced to encourage longer-term investments via power purchase agreements and contracts for difference, while also protecting consumers from price volatility.

EU support tools for industries were expanded, including the Temporary Crisis Framework mechanism, Important Projects of Common European Interest (IPCEIs), and the Innovation and Modernisation Funds. The EIB plays a central role and has been encouraged to evolve from a "climate bank" into a bank for industrialization and resilience, notably through the €70 billion TechEU program. And competition policy is being

31. *World Investment Report 2025*, op. cit.

adjusted to allow for dedicated support measures for clean technologies and energy-intensive industries.

With EU policy frameworks such as the Net Zero Industry Act and the Clean Industrial Deal, decisions were taken to develop lead markets for low-carbon products and to reinforce "Made in Europe" criteria across sectors and industries.

To ensure a level-playing field for EU industries facing higher carbon costs and the need to invest in order to reduce emissions, the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism was introduced and simplified. It could be further expanded, and specific measures for export-oriented industries are also being considered.

EU action on critical raw materials has also been central. With the Critical Raw Materials Act, the EU has created conditions for ramping up domestic mining and recycling of raw materials and created support for external investment. Building on the Battery Alliance and gigafactory ecosystem established across European industrial clusters, these efforts will be further streamlined. Countries such as France, Sweden and Finland have taken a lead in boosting domestic industries. However, additional funding, a waste policy and export restrictions supportive of EU recycling industries and effective "Made in Europe" criteria are urgently needed.[32]

Economic security tools have been reinforced and enlarged (in particular, foreign subsidies regulation, investment screening, anti-dumping provisions, export controls) but have yet to be strategically implemented.

Last but not least, in 2025, the European Commission adopted electrification as a new priority, with several policy initiatives underway to address a fundamental imbalance in the European electricity system: stagnant electricity demand.

All in all, these measures are a paradigm shift. Once implemented, they can make the EU more resilient. Competitiveness remains a persistent challenge for the EU's energy-intensive industries. Pressure stems from higher energy prices, global overcapacity and slowing economic growth, which reduce both demand and margins, as well as from skill and labor shortages, bureaucratic red tape and fiscal pressures. While the US will continue to offer more competitive energy in oil and gas-producing states, its energy costs are also rising for consumers. The EU has other cards it can build on to improve its competitiveness, such as taxation, water availability, infrastructure, "Made in Europe" criteria and a skilled labor force. Russia could, in principle, also try to position itself as a low-cost base for energy-intensive manufacturing, building on cheap energy and a weak ruble, but sanctions, a shortage of finance and competition from China may be fatal

32. D. Gherasim and T. Michel, "Europe's Black Mass Evasion: From Black Box to Strategic Recycling", *Ifri Studies*, Ifri, December 2024, available at: www.ifri.org.

obstacles. Europe will need to reduce its trade deficit with China via tariffs, Made in Europe criteria and attraction of Chinese investment.

Europe has strong cards to play: a predictable investment framework; a robust infrastructure (Germany's ageing one will be revamped from 2026 on), skills, rule of law, and decarbonized and electrified markets. But it needs to develop its production base to ensure large-scale operations that reduce unit costs, and to facilitate access to electricity at predictable, long-term prices. It will also need to lower financing costs and strengthen capital market integration. Electrification and low-carbon electricity are strategic assets for Europe in global competition, provided that industries are less exposed to higher system costs and can fully benefit from the lower operational costs of renewables.

By 2030, Europe could become the world's most electrified economy, drawing finance and investment thanks to its large, attractive market. It is also well-positioned to become the world's most circular economy, which will make it more resilient to external supply shocks. Realizing this potential will also depend on the current debates over the 2028–2034 multiannual financial framework for the EU, and on whether greater common spending – notably for the energy transition, which goes hand in hand with overall defense and security interests – can be obtained.

Toward an open and vigilant Citadel Europe

The 2025 EU-US trade negotiations have shown that unity makes strength, since the EU got one of the best deals among the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) economies. Provided the EU stays united, by 2030, Europeans could well be the world's climate frontrunners with a reduction in emissions of at least 50%. Europe's industrial policies could well have delivered, and the erosion of energy-intensive industries could have been stopped thanks to economic security provisions, while clean techs would have expanded further. Key conditions include upholding predictable policies, implementing and streamlining current policies and creating a strategic narrative of mobilization around an open and protective European citadel. What is also indispensable is to remove prescriptive provisions in EU policies and adopt a systematic technological neutrality, cost-efficient approach. Decisively, developing an ambitious multiannual financial framework for 2028-2034 is indispensable as now is more than ever the time to invest in a secure, resilient and decarbonized Europe. European governments could reduce costs by providing low-cost capital (low interest rates on loans or guarantees) to grid companies. Discussions over existing EU funding mechanisms (in terms of simplification, making them more agile and quicker to deliver) and ad hoc funds (competition funds, resilience funds) need to be continued, especially if frugal positions prevail in future Multiyear Financial Framework (MFF) negotiations. Competitiveness or Resilience Fund-type initiatives are needed, also for high-risk projects.

Rethinking immediate priorities for the energy transition in terms of how to jointly foster Europe's security and decarbonization is required. Raw materials are a priority area as they are needed for defense, energy, and digital transition, yet the pace and scope of EU policy actions are too slow and limited when compared to the challenges. Ramping up finance for riskier activities or technologies is urgently needed as part of a stronger capital market integration. Cyber, drone and hybrid resilience of infrastructure is another. The EU should also transform to be able to make faster and easier decisions in times of crisis, such as through the equivalent of the US Defense Protection Act.[33] Decisively, addressing the skills and workforce gap so that Europe can compete with China's extraordinary efforts for clean and digital technologies.[34]

Moreover, Europe will also need to double down on the digital and agricultural sectors, which are now central both globally and in the Russia–Europe confrontation.

Several European countries have been mobilizing to attract semiconductor value-chain factories, offering tens of billions in subsidies for foundries costing up to €30–40 billion each. Europe represents roughly 10% of the global semiconductor market, valued at €600 billion in 2024 and rapidly expanding (Russia is totally absent from this industry). Europe's main asset is the Dutch-based ASML, a high-precision lithography leader, supported by materials and chemical suppliers, and research and technology organizations (RTOs). Yet, unlike the US or Asian players, the EU has little or no presence in other segments of the value chain, such as design and packaging. Semiconductors are critical for all economic sectors (especially for the defense and automotive industries, and telecommunications) and also for gaining an edge in AI and quantum computing. However, several planned investments in foundries to produce chips below 5 nanometers (nm) have been stalled or are uncertain, as industries chose to prioritize other locations, such as the US, or because they are financially weakened or face insufficient projected demand in Europe. Dependency on Taiwan, Japan, the US and South Korea, and possibly China in the future, is growing and may well lead to vulnerabilities if left unaddressed. The European Chips Act has had limited industrial impact so far, and the target of a 20% market share by 2030 is out of reach. A notable push to deploy data centers in Europe is underway, however, with substantial investments announced, particularly in France.

The difficulties in building Intel semiconductor plants in Germany and Poland, or in progressing with STMicroelectronics, require a strategic reaction. Europeans should team up with Japanese companies, seek to persuade the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) to

33. L. Boone and N. Popescu, "Better Firefighting: Readying Europe for an Age Between War and Peace", *Policy Brief*, No. 558, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), November 2024, available at: https://ecfr.eu.

34. D.-P. Gherasim, "The Strategic Dimension of Skills in the Clean Industrial Deal", *Ifri Papers*, Ifri, September 2025, available at: www.ifri.org.

expand investment in Europe, and foster a booming microchip market by championing AI and quantum computing – in partnership with the UK, which has a vibrant R&D ecosystem. Europeans should also invest in alternatives such as chiplets, as time and money are running short, and develop contingency plans for a possible semiconductor crisis. It's time to reinvest in building a European cloud through regulation, taxation and financial incentives, to implement an effective EU Quantum Chips Plan, and to strengthen the InvestAI initiative.

Europe's agricultural and fishery sector was valued at €900 billion in 2022 and employs 15% of the EU workforce. Agriculture must not only become climate-resilient but also reduce dependence on imports of cheap Russian urea fertilizers (worth €1 billion in 2024), with import taxes progressively introduced from 2025. The sector should also maintain a strong global export presence to prevent Russia from strengthening its crop and fertilizer ties, and to support global food security. Amid a major policy reshuffle proposed by the European Commission for 2028–2034, productivity gains and agri-tech will be critical, including improvements in seed performance, continued reduction of fertilizer use (already -15.9% in 2023 versus 2017), and the development of new fertilizers, such as those derived from algae or urine. Europe can decisively boost its exports by reducing food waste, as one-third of products are lost or wasted. This waste represents €132 billion in losses, with households accounting for 50% of the total. Strategic partnerships with Norway, Saudi Arabia, Canada and Morocco need to be considered to diversify fertilizer imports further.

Overall, the trends show the EU posting €235 billion in agri-food exports in 2024, with a surplus of €46 billion despite higher production costs.[35] However, continued efforts are needed, particularly in addressing food waste.

Conclusion

European countries have embarked on a strong, historic paradigm shift, emphasizing domestic preference and local content criteria, fostering resilience in both low-carbon technologies and legacy industries, strengthening trade defense tools, enhancing economic security, and managing transition shocks through simplification. Speed, implementation, coordination and predictability are now essential for success. Europe's assets are infrastructure, predictable regulatory frameworks, large, integrated markets, secure and decarbonized electricity systems, and the potential to rapidly unleash electrification of end uses. Should Russia's aggression continue or tradeoffs between defense spending and the energy transition

35. *Agricultural Outlook 2024–2033*, op. cit.; "A Vision for Agriculture and Food Shaping Together an Attractive Farming and Agri-food Sector for Future Generations", COM/2025/75 final, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, European Commission.

become too problematic, it would then be necessary to reconsider certain funding mechanisms. The EU is actually understating its macro-financial power and attractiveness, particularly in the wake of a weakening dollar and turmoil around the Fed, as financial investors look for alternatives to the dollar and US Treasuries.

Last but not least, Europe is part of a larger geoeconomic ring encompassing around 1.25 billion people across Eastern Europe, the Balkans, Turkey and the southern and eastern Mediterranean. Countries in this ring form a nexus of diverse cultures with shared economic interests, anchored by strong internal connectivity, as the bulk of their trade and links occur within the region. The European Political Community (EPC) holds potential to foster a sense of shared long-term interests, despite historic differences and short-term divergences. It is also essential to boost ties with Latin America (the Mercosur free-trade area), India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam and other south-east Asian nations, and also deepen ties with allies such as Canada and Australia, particularly on critical raw materials, clean-tech supply chains, and the promotion of multilateralism. Europe can also develop win-win partnerships in Sub-Saharan Africa and reinforce relations in the Middle East.

All in all, Russia's aggression against Ukraine and Europe has been met by strong resolve and unity on the European side and has accelerated the geoeconomic integration of European countries. The shocks caused by Russia have been absorbed.

	Russia	Europe
Strengths	• Very high oil production, third largest producer worldwide, second largest exporter • Robust agricultural production • Significant production of steel, aluminum, extraction of key metals • China is partially replacing Europe as a trading partner • Ability to circumvent sanctions • Prudential budget management and fiscal reserves • High-performing civil nuclear industry	• Ability to borrow on international capital markets, stronger role for the Euro • Diversification of gas and oil supplies and falling import bills • Strong growth in renewable energy sources and the start of electrification • Robust industrial policies that need to be implemented • High level of FDIs, investment sustained by ECB rate at 2% and strong infrastructures • Legal and regulatory stability, rule of law • Strong internal market that can be further integrated • Ability to address the skills challenge
Weaknesses	• High inflation and very high CBR interest rates (17-21%) • Depreciated exchange rate, essential imports becoming more expensive • Insufficient labor force leading to inflationary pressure and lower productivity • Corruption and predatory practices • Country with infrastructure geared towards Europe • Sharp & permanent decline in gas exports via pipeline • Sanctions hamper banks & state companies • No more FDIs outside Cyprus • Budget deficit increasingly high and costly • Vulnerability to fall in oil prices and drone attacks on oil infrastructure.	• Still high dependence on imported hydrocarbons, almost no domestic production • Populist pressures due to migration and effectiveness of policies • Competitiveness gap, not only linked to energy prices • Some Member States no longer have fiscal leeway • Low economic growth in key Member State Germany and France • Competition for spending: defense, decarbonization, debt repayment, adaptation to climate change, welfare state • Growing trade deficit with China, automotive & clean tech sectors fragilized

Defense and National Security: Looking for a European Offset Strategy

Élie Tenenbaum and Dimitri Minic

The geopolitical threat that Russia poses to Europe is multidimensional. The ongoing confrontation between the two sides has a strategic dimension encompassing the overall security order, deterrence, escalation dominance, and the complex balance of power. While other dimensions (political, economic, and informational) all play critical roles, the political will and operational ability to use military force and endure armed conflict remain, in the end, the decisive factor in this confrontation. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, its ambitions to reassert control over its former sphere of influence, and its persistent attempts to test, subvert or attack NATO's internal cohesion have made that military balance a central concern for Europe. In this perspective, assessing how Russia and Europe compare in terms of military power is not just a technical exercise—it is a prerequisite for understanding the conditions in which conflict may be deterred, contained, or engaged in.

In this context, the United States, which has been the central piece of the defense of Europe since the Second World War, has made it clear it intends to review and reduce its share in the "conventional security of the continent"[36] – whether as a result of overall "restraint policy" or in the context of shifting military resources to the Indo-Pacific. While the prospect of America leaving NATO altogether remains far-fetched, the upcoming National Defense Strategy and Force Posture Review run by the Department of Defense may result in a substantially altered military balance between Europe and Russia.[37]

Likewise, Ukraine has emerged since Russia's full-scale invasion of February 2022 as another formidable bulwark in Europe's security. As of 2025, Ukraine has by far the most massive and capable conventional ground force in Europe, holding off Russian military might with its own combat power, backed up by the material and financial support of other Western countries.

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36. "Opening Remarks by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at Ukraine Defense Contact Group, Brussels", U.S. Department of War, February 12, 2025, available at: www.war.gov.
37. *Defending Europe Without the United States: Costs and Consequences*, London: International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), May 2025.

Taking stock of these "known unknowns" – the US military contribution and Ukraine's future status and contribution to the fight – this chapter attempts to take a closer look at the Russia-Europe military power balance, factoring in minimalist contributions from both these key actors. This pessimistic assumption stems from a worst-case scenario that may not materialize if Europe stands firm in its support for Ukraine and succeeds in mitigating the effects of US burden shifting. Following the net assessment methodology, it looks not only at brute force ratios, but also at doctrine, training, technology, terrain and other aspects that may offer in-context asymmetrical advantage to be guarded against as well as to be exploited.

General strategies

Threat perception and political-strategic objectives

Russia traditionally believes it is the victim of a (fanciful) war waged by the West to subjugate it. According to this belief, the West, frightened by Russia's nuclear weapons, has embarked on an indirect strategy of subversion, containment and "hybrid warfare" against it.[38] The alleged launching by the West of a proxy war in Ukraine against Russia is widely regarded as the most recent stage of this strategy.[39] Despite its faith in its "strategic deterrence", Moscow also continues to consider the possibility of a sudden, large-scale aerospace attack designed to disarm and paralyze Russia, which could, if necessary, constitute a final step.[40]

Alongside this defensive perception of its strategic environment, Russia harbors aggressive and imperial ambitions for the former Eastern Bloc and

38. D. Minic, *Pensée et culture stratégiques russes*, Paris: Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 2023.
39. See for example S. V. Afanas′ev, "Itogi ûbilejnogo Vašingtonskogo sammita NATO v 2024 godu v novyh geopolitičeskih realiâh" [Results of the Jubilee Washington NATO Summit in 2024 in the New Geopolitical Realities], *Voennaâ Mysl'* (VM), No. 11, 2024, pp. 54-55; D. S. Belen′kov, A. S. Borisenko and V. V. Suhorutčenko, "Aktual′nye voprosy avtomatizacii ocenki strategičeskoj obstanovki pri rešenii zadač strategičeskogo sderživaniâ" [Current Issues in the Automation of Strategic Situation Assessment for Strategic Deterrence Operations] , VM, No. 8, 2024, pp. 67-68; I. A. Kolesnikov and V. V. Kruglov, "O novyh voennyh opasnostâh i ugrozah dlâ Rossijskoj Federacii" [On New Military Dangers and Threats to the Russian Federation], VM, No. 6, 2024, pp. 14-16; A. N. Kostenko, "Nacional′naâ bezopasnost′ Rossii i vyzovy novogo vremeni" [Russia's National Security and the Challenges of the New Era], VM, No. 1 2024, pp. 6-8, 12; A. N. Kostenko and V. A. Vahrušev, "Geopolitika Rossijskoj Federacii v sovremennom mire" [The Geopolitics of the Russian Federation in the Contemporary World], VM, No. 2, 2024, pp. 19-20; I. O. Kostûkov, "Deâtel′nost′ NATO kak glavnyj istočnik voennyh ugroz Rossii" [NATO's Activity as the Main Source of Military Threats to Russia], VM, No. 5, 2024, p. 24; S. V. Lazarev, V. V. Rumâncev and K. V. Lipatov, "Obespečenie voennoj bezopasnosti Rossijskoj Federacii v sovremennyh usloviâh: aktual′nye problemy i puti ih rešeniâ" [Ensuring the Military Security of the Russian Federation in Contemporary Conditions: Current Problems and Ways to Solve Them], VM, No. 11, 2024, pp. 63-65; V. A. Vahrušev and V. V. Vylugin, "Analiz sovremennyh geopolitičeskih tendencij i ih vliâniâ na nacional′nuû bezopasnost′ Rossijskoj Federacii" [Analysis of Contemporary Geopolitical Trends and Their Impact on the National Security of the Russian Federation], VM, No. 9, 2024, pp. 23-26.
40. I. O. Kostûkov, "Deâtel′nost′ NATO kak glavnyj istočnik voennyh ugroz Rossii" [NATO's Activity as the Main Source of Military Threats to Russia], VM, No. 5, 2024, pp. 24-25, 28, 30-31.

Czarist sphere of influence, where it claims historical rights of dominance. It also keeps a close eye on Western Europe and North America, which it believes has a mission to regenerate to better protect itself from its supposed harmful influences and values. In short, when Moscow refers to a direct threat to its security, it is primarily referring to an obstacle to its actions and potential capabilities for domination and/or aggression, which is the only framework in which Russia conceives of its security. This offense-defense dialectic rests on the paradoxical dual belief in the radical hostility of an omnipotent West and the ontological weakness of a hedonistic one, which fuels Moscow's expectation that the status quo can be altered. Divisions within the West over Ukraine (aid, security guarantees, etc.) are interpreted by senior Russian military elites as signs of "fear,"[41] while the current situation in Western Europe is taken to show the low likelihood of a "direct aggression" by NATO against Russia.[42]

In the short term, Ukraine is Moscow's paramount objective. The Kremlin wants to isolate it from any Western support and achieve a clear victory, one that would translate into political control and annexation of territories. Some members of the Russian military elites have spoken out on these issues since February 24, 2022. According to them, time is of the essence, for fear of an awakening of the Western defense industry, protests in Russia,[43] or a change in behavior by "hesitant" partners,[44] for whom Russia's prestige rests first and foremost on its "military status".[45] The "main task" is therefore to boost its military capabilities and subordinate everything to this goal[46] so as not to "drag out" this war for years, a scenario deemed

41. S. V. Afanas′ev, "Itogi ûbilejnogo Vašingtonskogo sammita NATO v 2024 godu v novyh geopolitičeskih realiâh" [Results of the Jubilee Washington NATO Summit in 2024 in the New Geopolitical Realities], op. cit., pp. 55-56.

42. See: Ibid.; V. A. Vahrušev and V. V. Vylugin, "Analiz sovremennyh geopolitičeskih tendencij i ih vliâniâ na nacional′nuû bezopasnost′ Rossijskoj Federacii" [Analysis of Contemporary Geopolitical Trends and Their Impact on the National Security of the Russian Federation], op. cit., pp. 25-26; I. O. Kostûkov, "Deâtel′nost′ NATO kak glavnyj istočnik voennyh ugroz Rossii", [NATO's Activity as the Main Source of Military Threats to Russia], op. cit., pp. 34-35.

43. A. D. Gavrilov, I. V. Grudinin and V. A. Novikov, "Transformaciâ sistemy ugroz nacional′noj bezopasnosti Rossii i special′naâ voennaâ operaciâ" [Transformation of the System of Threats to Russia's National Security and the Special Military Operation], *Vestnik akademii voennyh nauk* (VAVN), No. 1, 2023, pp. 14-16.

44. A. F. Klimenko, "Šanhajskaâ organizaciâ sotrudničestva v usloviâh transformacii voenno-političeskoj obstanovki v Vostočnoj Evrazii" [The Shanghai Cooperation Organization under the Conditions of the Transformation of the Military-Political Situation in Eastern Eurasia], VM, No. 7, 2024, pp. 12.

45. S. A. Žmurin, "Prodviženie interesov Rossii v otdel′nyh regionah mira (Afrika)" [Promoting Russia's Interests in Certain Regions of the World (Africa)], VM, No. 2, 2025, pp. 90.

46. Voir S. V. Afanas′ev, "Itogi ûbilejnogo Vašingtonskogo sammita NATO v 2024 godu v novyh geopolitičeskih realiâh" [Results of the Jubilee Washington NATO Summit in 2024 in the New Geopolitical Realities], op. cit., pp. 61; A. F. Klimenko, "Šanhajskaâ organizaciâ sotrudničestva v usloviâh transformacii voenno-političeskoj obstanovki v Vostočnoj Evrazii" [The Shanghai Cooperation Organization under the Conditions of the Transformation of the Military-Political Situation in Eastern Eurasia], op. cit., pp. 12-13.

"irrational".[47] At the same time, the Russian military elite is calling for continued provocation of division and chaos in the West through hybrid actions, by "creating" and "supporting" forces capable of opposing it, including militarily.[48]

In the medium term, the Baltic states, Moldova and Georgia are considered as countries that should return to Russia's sphere of influence,[49] while Finland, Poland and Romania are seen as potential future Western proxy opponents of Russia.[50] Moreover, it is considered that Russian expansion would be facilitated by a victory in Ukraine, which would make the West "much more compliant" to Russia.[51] The Kremlin's minimum expectation of the US is that it ceases all military assistance to Kyiv. While Moscow showed a more constructive than threatening stance toward the new US administration, it also quickly shifted its tone when Washington hinted that it might continue supplying arms to Ukraine. Moscow wants to isolate Ukraine from the West, and Europe from the United States.

In the long term, Russia aims to be in a position to influence the fate of Europe, either on an equal basis with Washington or in its place. That's why it aims to provoke the collapse of the EU and NATO. Although in the confrontation it has engaged in with Europe and the West, Russia considers a wide range of options, and direct military confrontation remains a basic working hypothesis. To achieve its strategic goals, Moscow can think of several intermediate objectives, some involving military confrontation. In most of those scenarios (see below), Russia's prerequisite would be to fracture Western unity, prove NATO's Article 5 – and therefore the Alliance – irrelevant, weaken the most resolute of the Central and Eastern European

47. A. D. Gavrilov, et al., "Transformaciâ sistemy ugroz nacional′noj bezopasnosti Rossii i special′naâ voennaâ operaciâ" [Transformation of the System of Threats to Russia's National Security and the Special Military Operation], op. cit., pp. 14-16; S. A. Modestov, "Osnovopolagaûŝee ponâtie 'vojna' v tvorčeskom nasledii M. A. Gareev" [The Fundamental Concept of 'War' in the Creative Legacy of M. A. Gareev], op. cit., 2023, pp. 52.

48. V. B. Zarudnickij, "Tendencii izmeneniâ sistemy obespečeniâ voennoj bezopasnosti gosudarstva v usloviâh novoj geopolitičeskoj karty mira" [Trends in the Transformation of the System for Ensuring the Military Security of the State under the Conditions of the New Geopolitical Map of the World], VM, No. 2, 2024, pp. 13-14; A. I. Podberëzkin, "Razvitie strategičeskoj obstanovki posle fevralâ 2022 goda i politika Rossii" [The Development of the Strategic Situation after February 2022 and Russia's Policy], VAVN, No. 3, 2022, pp. 95 ; A. A. Bartoš, "Modeli èskalacii sovremennyh voennyh konfliktov" [Models of Escalation of Contemporary Military Conflicts], VM, No. 1, 2024, pp. 34; A. V. Seržantov and D. A. Pavlov, "Sniženie voennoèkonomičeskogo potenciala protivostoâŝej storony v kontekste razvitiâ teorii operacij" [The Reduction of the Military-Economic Potential of the Opposing Side in the Context of the Development of the Theory of Operations], VM, No. 11, 2023, pp. 26-29.

49. A. D. Gavrilov, et al., "Transformaciâ sistemy ugroz nacional′noj bezopasnosti Rossii i special′naâ voennaâ operaciâ" [Transformation of the System of Threats to Russia's National Security and the Special Military Operation], op. cit., pp. 14-16; S. N. Mažuga, "Razvitie otečestvennoj geostrategii v interesah nacional′noj bezopasnosti Rossii" [The Development of Domestic Geostrategy in the Interests of Russia's National Security], VM, No. 3, 2024, pp. 16-17.

50. I. A. Kolesnikov and V. V. Kruglov, "O novyh voennyh opasnostâh i ugrozah dlâ Rossijskoj Federacii" [On New Military Dangers and Threats to the Russian Federation], op. cit., pp. 14-15.

51. A. D. Gavrilov, et al., "Transformaciâ sistemy ugroz nacional′noj bezopasnosti Rossii i special′naâ voennaâ operaciâ" [Transformation of the System of Threats to Russia's National Security and the Special Military Operation], op. cit., pp. 14-16.

governments, and promote pro-Russian or at least hedging policies among Western and other Central Europeans.

Since February 24, 2022, Western Europe has made clear progress in its understanding of the Russian threat after years of underestimation and of considering Moscow as manageable through diplomacy and economics alone. This has resulted in greater attention being paid to Central, Eastern and Northern Europe's reading of Russia and in a relative strengthening of European unity, which poses a challenge to Moscow. However, divergences among Europeans persist; security threat perceptions differ considerably based not only on geographic proximity to Russia but also on the political orientations of European governments.[52]

Despite these divergences, there is broad agreement that the overall objectives of the vast majority of Europeans — whether expressed by the EU, NATO or individual nations in their defense and security strategies — remain clear; they are primarily defensive in nature and aim to preserve territorial integrity, national sovereignty and independence, particularly in ensuring that European peoples retain the ability to decide their own future through democratic processes in both foreign and domestic policy. These objectives are generally rooted in an attachment to democratic forms of government and respect for individual rights, even if some governments in Europe adopt political orientations that occasionally challenge these principles.[53]

In terms of Europe's security and defense objectives, these are mostly centered on NATO's deterrence and defense posture. Europeans aim to favor deterrence against any form of Russian aggression (hybrid, conventional, nuclear) through posture adaptation measures and strategic signaling aimed at showing cross-alliance solidarity and the resolve to defend every inch of territory. Should this conventional deterrence fail to deter Russia, NATO, which has primary responsibility for collective defense in the area, would enforce operational defense plans that have been updated to fit the threat status. As of 2025, these plans continue to rely heavily on the decisive contribution of the US, highlighting that European defense remains closely intertwined with transatlantic support.

Finally, many European countries now consider the preservation of a free and sovereign Ukraine as a key strategic objective, closely linked to their own security and that of wider Europe. While full territorial integrity remains a stated goal, several European capitals acknowledge that recovering all Ukrainian territories currently occupied by Russia may not be immediately

52. See chapter 3 of this study: "Political Systems and Societal Resilience", p. 72.
53. *Strategic Concept*, NATO, June 29, 2022; *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, European Council of the European Union, External Action Service, March 2022; *White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030,* European Commission, European Council, European Parliament, March 2025; *National Security Strategy: Robust. Resilient. Sustainable. Integrated Security for Germany*, Federal Foreign Office, Federal Government of Germany, June 2023; *Strategic Defence Review 2024–2025: Making Britain Safer, Secure at Home & Strong Abroad*, Ministry of Defence, UK Government, June 2025; *Revue nationale stratégique 2025*, SGDSN, France, July 14, 2025.

feasible, either politically or militarily. This recognition, however, does not diminish ongoing assistance to Kyiv or the commitment of members of the self-styled Coalition of the Willing to uphold and, if necessary, enforce security guarantees, at this stage exclusively in the event of a ceasefire.

War theorization and strategic culture

Russian military thought has dedicated a large part of the last thirty years to theorizing how to bypass armed struggle and to broadening its interpretation of war, whose nature was no longer considered as armed violence or armed struggle, but as violence.[54] The latter can be direct armed violence or indirect armed violence, while violence can also be unarmed (nonmilitary). The main content of war is deemed to be the direct use of armed forces (in the form of armed struggle) *or* the threat to use them (which constitutes of type of indirect use, according to Russian terminology). The full-scale invasion of Ukraine, dubbed a "Special Military Operation" (SVO) in Russia, and its initial failure were partly a consequence of this flexible theorization, which stated that, if indirect confrontation failed to subdue the target state, a final, short, limited and mainly contactless direct armed struggle could be launched. Thus, indirect confrontation is also conceived as a potential preparation (for months and even years) for any transition to direct and overt use of armed violence. To Russian strategists, sheer advantage in military hard power, including but not limited to nuclear weapons, remains key to their view of "escalation dominance" and therefore of their trust in the efficiency of nonmilitary and indirect military means and methods. In other words, according to the Russian military, direct confrontation and the fear it should inspire in any adversary is the bedrock that allows any indirect strategy to succeed. The problem is that Russia's political-military elites not only overestimated the effectiveness of nonmilitary and indirect military means to achieve political objectives, but also their own ability to employ them effectively.

Far from questioning the foundations of the theorization of bypassing armed struggle, whose superiority over the massive, destructive, costly, and bloody use of direct armed force continues to be praised,[55] military elites have

54. D. Minic, *Pensée et culture stratégiques russes*, op. cit.; D. Minic, "Russian Strategic Thinking and Culture Before and After February 24, 2022: Political-Strategic Aspects" *in* P. Forsström, "Russia's War Against Ukraine: Complexity of Contemporary Clausewitzian War", Helsinki: Université Nationale de Défense, *Research Reports*, No. 33, September 2024, pp. 21-34; D. Minic, "How the Russian Army Changed Its Concept of War, 1993–2022", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, May 2023; D. Minic, "What Does the Russian Army Think About its War in Ukraine? Criticisms, Recommendations, Adaptations", *Russia.Eurasia.Reports*, No. 44, Ifri, September 2023.

55. Ibid. See also: A. V. Smolovyj, "Voennye konflikty budušego: sovremennyj vzglâd" [Military Conflicts of the Future: A Contemporary View], VAVN, No. 3, 2022, pp. 82; A. V. Seržantov and D. A. Pavlov, "Gibridnyj harakter opasnostej i ugroz, ih vliânie na sistemu obespečeniâ voennoj bezopasnosti Rossijskoj Federacii" [The Hybrid Nature of Dangers and Threats, Their Impact on the Russian Federation's Military Security System], VM, No. 5, 2022, pp. 7 ; A. V. Seržantov, A. V. Smolovyj and I. A. Terent'ev,

instead criticized the way Russian actions were conducted. Their criticism ranges from the "strategic deterrence" (*strategičeskoe sderživanie*) maneuver that preceded the SVO (2021-2022) – which should have made it possible to subdue the target without the direct use of armed forces[56] – to the huge failure

"Transformaciâ soderžaniâ vojny: kontury voennyh konfliktov buduŝego" [The Transformation of the Nature of the War: The Outlines of Future Military Conflicts], VM, No. 6, 2022, pp. 21-30; S. N. Petrunâ, "O razvitii teoretičeskih osnov ocenki strategičeskoj obstanovki v interesah obespečeniâ voennoj bezopasnosti Rossii" [On the Development of Theoretical Foundations for Assessing the Strategic Situation in the Interests of Ensuring Russia's Military Security], VM, No. 4, 2023, pp. 35-36; A. V. Seržantov, et al., "Transformaciâ soderžaniâ vojny: kontury voennyh konfliktov buduŝego" [The Transformation of the Nature of the War: The Outlines of Future Military Conflicts], op. cit., pp. 21-30; V. B. Zarudnickij, "Sovremennye voennye konflikty v kontekste formirovaniâ novoj geopolitičeskoj kartiny mira" [Modern Military Conflicts In the Context of the Formation of a New Geopolitical Map of the World], VM, No. 11, 2023, pp. 9-10, 14-15; V. B. Zarudnickij, "Tendencii izmeneniâ sistemy obespečeniâ voennoj bezopasnosti gosudarstva v usloviâh novoj geopolitičeskoj karty mira" [Trends in the Transformation of the System for Ensuring the Military Security of the State under the Conditions of the New Geopolitical Map of the World], op. cit., pp. 8-11; V. V. Kruglov, V. G. Voskresenskij and V. Â. Mursametov, "Tendencii razvitiâ vooružennoj bor′by v XXI veke i ih vliânie na voennoe iskusstvo veduŝih zarubežnyh stran" [Trends in the Development of Armed Struggle in the 21st Century and Their Influence on the Military Art of Leading Foreign Countries], VM, No. 4, 2023, pp. 125; A. S. Korževskij and I. V. Solov′ëv, "Mental′noe protivoborstvo i problemy formirovaniâ celostnoj sistemy nastupatel′nyh i oboronitel′nyh dejstvij v nem" [Mental Confrontation and the Problems of Forming an Integrated System of Offensive and Defensive Actions Within It], VM, No. 11, 2022, pp. 32-33; P. K. Loginov, "Informacionno-psihologičeskoe vozdejstvie v sovremennyh operaciâh" [Information and Psychological Influence in Modern Operations], VM, No. 5, 2022, pp. 61; L. A. Prudnikov and A. V. Kuz′menko, "Primenenie nevoennyh mer v interesah obespečeniâ voennoj bezopasnosti Rossii" [Application of Non-military Measures in the Interests of Ensuring Russia's Military Security], VM, No. 1, 2023, pp. 7-11; O. S. Tanenâ and A. V. Vdovin, "Transformaciâ vooružennogo protivoborstva: obuslovlennost′ novoj tendencii voennogo iskusstva" [Transformation of Armed Opposition: The Conditionality of New Trends in Military Art], VM, No. 3, 2024, pp. 39-43; A. V. Glebov, I. V. Grudinin, V. V. Karpov and D. M. Popov, "Podhod k klassifikacii voennyh konfliktov po priznaku naličiâ simmetrii v vozmožnostâh i dejstviâh protivoborstvuûŝih storon" [Approach to the Classification of Military Conflicts Based on the Criterion of Symmetry in the Capabilities and Actions of Opposing Sides], VAVN, No. 2, 2023, pp. 102, 104, 107, 109-110; S. A. Modestov, "Osnovopolagaûŝee ponâtie 'vojna' v tvorčeskom nasledii M. A. Gareev" [The Fundamental Concept of 'War' in the Creative Legacy of M. A. Gareev], op. cit., pp. 51-52; A. A. Bartoš, "Proksi-vojna kak opredelâûŝij faktor voennyh konfliktov XXI veka" [Proxy Wars as a Defining Factor in Military Conflicts of the 21st Century], VM, No. 5, 2023, pp. 63-64, 71-73; A. A. Bartoš, "Modeli èskalacii sovremennyh voennyh konfliktov" [Models of Escalation of Contemporary Military Conflicts], op. cit., pp. 26-28, 31-32; A. A. Bartoš, "Vzaimodejstvie v gibridnoj vojne" [Interaction in Hybrid Warfare], VM, 2022, No. 4, pp. 8, 13; A. A. Bartoš, "Zakony i principy gibridnoj vojny" [Laws and Principles of Hybrid Warfare], VM, No. 10, 2022, pp. 9-11; A. M. Il′nickij, "Strategiâ mental′noj bezopasnosti Rossii" [Russia's Mental Security Strategy], VM, No. 4, 2022, pp. 27-29; A. M. Il′nickij, "Strategiâ gegemona — strategiâ vojny" [Strategy of Hegemony — Strategy of War], VM, 2023, No. 6, pp. 18-19; I. N. Karavaev, "Koncepciâ mental′noj vojny kak sostavnaâ čast′ učeniâ o vojne i armii" [The Concept of Mental Warfare as an Integral Part of the Doctrine of War and the Army], VM, No. 3, 2022, pp. 36-39; S. V. Lazarev, V. V. Rumâncev and K. V. Lipatov, "Obespečenie voennoj bezopasnosti Rossijskoj Federacii v sovremennyh usloviâh: aktual′nye problemy i puti ih rešeniâ" [Ensuring the Military Security of the Russian Federation in Contemporary Conditions: Current Problems and Ways to Solve Them], op. cit., p. 63; A. V. Seržantov and D. A. Pavlov, "Novoe soderžanie i suŝnost′ voennyh operacij v sovremennyh usloviâh" [New Content and Essence of Military Operations in Modern Conditions], VM, No. 9, 2024, pp. 45, 48-49.

56. V. A. Kalganov, G. B. Ryžov and I. V. Solov′ëv, "Strategičeskoe sderživanie kak faktor obespečeniâ nacional′noj bezopasnosti Rossijskoj Federacii" [Strategic Deterrence as a Factor in Ensuring the National Security of the Russian Federation], VM, No. 8, 2022, pp. 9, 12; L. A. Prudnikov and A. V. Kuz′menko, "Primenenie nevoennyh mer v interesah obespečeniâ voennoj bezopasnosti Rossii" [Application of Non-military Measures in the Interests of Ensuring Russia's Military Security], op. cit., pp. 7-11; A. S. Korževskij and I. V. Solov′ëv, "Mental′noe protivoborstvo i problemy formirovaniâ celostnoj sistemy nastupatel′nyh i oboronitel′nyh dejstvij v nem" [Mental Confrontation and the Problems of Forming an

of forecasting and intelligence,[57] and to the SVO itself, with a decision "taken quickly," without any preparation of morale.[58] Neither the objectives of the SVO nor the role of the armed forces were explained, and "expectations" based on an "erroneous" assessment linked to the supposed "massive surrender" of the Ukrainian army.[59] While the performative discourse is largely oriented toward improving the implementation of the "bypassing" ideas, including their direct military dimension, a revision of the use of military force could occur.[60]

While Russia is undergoing a phase of geopolitical weakening – albeit temporary – due to the deadlock faced by its conventional forces in Ukraine, NATO enlargement, the fragility of its economic and technological development under sanctions, and the return of the possibility of a regional or large-scale war[61] against NATO,[62] the centrality of the nuclear component is growing in Russian "strategic deterrence" (*strategičeskoe sderživanie*).[63] Essentially, the recent lowering of the nuclear threshold serves Russia's

Integrated System of Offensive and Defensive Actions Within It], op. cit., p. 41; A. K. Mar'in, "Osobennosti strategičeskogo sderživaniâ v sovremennyh usloviâh" [Features of Strategic Deterrence in Contemporary Conditions], VM, No. 12, 2023, pp. 27-28.

57. V. B. Zarudnickij, "Voennaâ nauka: novye gorizonty poznaniâ" [Military Science: New Horizons of Knowledge], VM, No. 7, 2022, pp. 9-10; A. V. Smolovyj and A. V. Pavlovskij, "Metodika ocenki boevyh vozmožnostej gruppirovok vojsk (sil) na strategičeskih napravleniâh" [Methodology for Assessing the Combat Capabilities of Military Formations (Forces) in Strategic Directions], VM, No. 12, 2022, pp. 31, 36-38; A. A. Bartoš, "Zakony i principy gibridnoj vojny" [Laws and Principles of Hybrid Warfare], op. cit., pp. 9-13; A. S. Korževskij and V. L. Mahnin, "Metodologičeskie podhody k prognozirovaniû v sfere voennoj bezopasnosti gosudarstva" [Methodological Approaches to Forecasting in the Sphere of National Security], VM, No. 5, 2022, pp. 22-25; O. K. Gnilomëdov, "Osobennosti monitoringa i ocenki voennopolitičeskoj obstanovki v ramkah funkcionirovaniâ sistem podderžki prinâtiâ rešenij" [Features of Monitoring and Assessment of the Military-Political Situation within the Framework of the Functioning of the Decision Support System], VM, No. 4, 2023, pp. 74-75; L. A. Prudnikov and A. V. Kuz'menko, "Primenenie nevoennyh mer v interesah obespečeniâ voennoj bezopasnosti Rossii" [Application of Non-military Measures in the Interests of Ensuring Russia's Military Security], op. cit., pp. 15, 17.

58. O. G. Tukmakov, "Osnovnye napravleniâ soveršenstvovaniâ voenno-političeskoj raboty pr podgotovke operacij" [Main Directions for Improving Military-Political Work in Preparing for Operations], VM, No. 2, 2023, pp. 44-47. See D. Minic, "What Does the Russian Army Think About its War in Ukraine?", op. cit.

59. Ibid.

60. V. V. Trušin, "Zadači voennoj nauki v usloviâh special'noj voennoj operacii" [Military Science Tasks in the Context of Special Military Operations], VM, No. 4, 2025, pp. 17.

61. According to the Russian military terminology and doctrine: A regional war involves two or several countries (or group of countries) from the same region, pursuing significant political-military objectives. A large-scale war involves a significant number of countries from different regions across the world (including the leading world powers), pursuing radical political-military objectives and mobilizing all available material and moral resources. (*Voennaâ doktrina* 2000, *Voennaâ doktrina* 2010, *Voennaâ doktrina* 2014).

62. See for example Putin's statements: "Putin: konflikt Rossii i NATO priblizit veroâtnost' tret'ej mirovoj vojny" [Putin: Conflict Between Russia and NATO Increases Likelihood of Third World War], *Vedomosti*, March 18, 2024, available at: www.vedomosti.ru; "Putin zaâvil o gotovnosti k bor'be s NATO do pobedy" [Putin Declared Readiness to Fight NATO until Victory], *Vedomosti*, October 18, 2024, available at: www.vedomosti.ru. And Belousov's statements: "Belousov nazval zadačej voennyh podgotovku k vozmožnomu konfliktu s NATO" [Belousov Called Military Preparations for a Possible Conflict with NATO a Task], *RBC*, December 16, 2024, available at: www.rbc.ru.

63. See D. Minic, "Russian Nuclear Deterrence Under Fire in the War in Ukraine", *Russia.Eurasia.Reports*, No. 49, Ifri, October 2025; D. Minic, "Dissuasion nucléaire et dissuasion stratégique russes : théorie, doctrine, pratique et perspectives (1993-2024)", *Les Champs de Mars*, No. 2, 2022, pp. 85-128.

current and future imperialist actions in Europe, which are supposedly defensive in nature.

Europe must prepare itself to better respond to Russia's strategy (and deterrence),[64] which is permanent, cross-domain, preemptive (in fact, preventive), aggressive, coercive, and first and foremost aimed at subjugating the enemy by indirect means, which may become direct if the situation requires and/or allows it. Europe should fear less the launch of a large-scale war by Moscow or the reckless use of nuclear weapons than an intense indirect confrontation, completed punctually, if necessary and if possible — in other words, if Europe has not made the effort to build a credible conventional deterrent — by a new "SVO".

Russian strategic practice is not easy to decipher, to anticipate and to counter for Western countries, whose strategic approach — contrary to what Moscow sometimes believes — is much more reactive, volatile and less integrated. Europe should improve its understanding of the Russian ruling political and military elites' cognitive frameworks, to better exploit the beliefs, perceptions, conceptual flaws and practical mistakes that stem from Russian political and strategic culture and to better anticipate Russia's strategic actions.

The prospect of Russia-Europe military confrontation

Direct confrontation scenarios

Russia's aggressive intentions against Europe are not vain words. Russia does consider military confrontation with NATO member states as a possibility and intends to size and shape its military for this scenario.[65] While the realistic timeline required to achieve that is the subject of hot debate among intelligence and research analysts, none questions Russia's resolve to eventually get there. Nor can it be ignored that, despite the massive attrition suffered in Ukraine, Russia's force structure is already larger than it was in 2022.[66] The rebuilding of a general large-scale combat capability is also proceeding faster than initially anticipated.

Two key factors have so far effectively deterred Russia from expanding militarily in Eastern and Central Europe. First is NATO's internal cohesion, through the enduring transatlantic link with the US commitment to

64. See D. Minic, "Russian Nuclear Deterrence Under Fire in the War in Ukraine", op. cit.; D. Minic, "Dissuasion nucléaire et dissuasion stratégique russes : théorie, doctrine, pratique et perspectives (1993-2024)", op. cit.

65. "Opdateret vurdering af truslen fra Rusland mod Rigsfællesskabet" [Updated Assessment of the Threat from Russia to the Commonwealth of Denmark], Danish Defense Intelligence Service, February 9, 2025.

66. Statement of General C. G. Cavoli, United States European Command, United States House Armed Services Committee, April 10, 2024.

European security, but also through a Europe-wide entente on values and broad security interests. Such cohesion has made NATO a formidable military obstacle, intimidating even to a self-confident and assertive Kremlin. Second is the fierce Ukrainian resistance that has been tying up the best part of operationally ready Russian forces, depriving them of the extra margins needed to replenish their Western (then rebranded) Leningrad Military District, not to mention to open another front. Should one or both factors (NATO cohesion and Ukrainian resistance) be negatively altered, the Kremlin may revise its cost-benefit assessment for open aggression.

Based on those premises, foresight analysis methodology allows us to envision a wide range of scenarios of military confrontation. Here are four families of scenarios in the next ten years that do not cover all the options, but suggest their scope and range:

- a local to regional attack or "land grab" in the Nordic-Baltic or Black Sea region to create a *fait accompli*;
- an attack against a non-NATO, non-EU member such as Moldova, Armenia, or even Georgia;
- a large-scale attack on NATO countries in multiple directions;
- a local to large-scale confrontation resulting from miscalculated escalation in hybrid warfare, possibly in cyberspace, outer space or the maritime domain.

Accepted wisdom has so far discarded many of these scenarios, based on NATO's conventional and nuclear deterrence. Once again, as long as NATO unity (including but not limited to US commitment to European defense) remains solid, deterrence should do its work, and the opportunity for open military aggression may not present itself to Russia. But the inconsistent US messaging on its political resolve to defend Europe and the effective reduction in its force posture may be seen by Moscow as a window of opportunity. European cohesion and Ukrainian independence may then remain the only obstacles standing in the way. If they were to fall, Russia would have an easy play. If those stand, a closer look at the military balance is needed.

Force ratio analysis and military balance

While force ratio analysis is the bedrock of net assessment, it amounts to more than just quantitative comparison of manpower, main battle tanks, aircraft (crewed and uncrewed) or even satellites. Personnel training and equipment quality and performance must be factored in, along with their readiness and overall availability (both strategic and operational). The ammunition stocks, modular mission equipment (generators, radars, pods, electronic warfare suites, etc.), infrastructure and logistics (maintenance, strategic and operational mobility assets) of the respective forces are also key features to be looked at. Finally, offset strategies need to be considered, especially as strength in one segment or even a whole domain (land, air, sea, space, cyberspace) can, in certain conditions, compensate or nullify the weaknesses in another.[67] In the case of Europe-Russia military net assessment, three categories stand out: land power, where Russia has an apparent advantage; air power, where Europe may have the upper hand, and military "commons"[68] (sea, space, cyber) where Europe should prevail.

A Russian advantage in the land domain?

Russian strategic culture has been historically oriented toward land power. It is hence unsurprising that it is the domain in which Russian military power is the most massive, with an apparently coherent force structure comprising between fifteen and twenty Corps or Corps-level Combined Arms Armies, amounting to around 550,000 soldiers. Additional services – such as Airborne Troops (VDV) with about 45,000 personnel; Naval Infantry (Marine) with around 10,000, and the National Guard (*Rosgvardiya*) with between 340,000 and 440,000 personnel – greatly increase this total. Some estimates place the number of ground-capable personnel at between 650,000 and 950,000, although only a small portion of the Rosgvardiya – approx. 30,000-50,000 personnel – is trained and equipped for conventional combat operations. By comparison, the brute mass in European NATO (excluding Turkey) and/or EU land forces barely reaches 750,000 personnel.[69]

This gap is even more striking if one factors in political availability and combat readiness; while Russia has shown its ability to draw substantial portions of its force structure to the frontline (maybe up to 60%), there are reasons to doubt the political, strategic and operational availability of a number of European troops in the case of a confrontation scenario, given the political fragmentation and serious readiness issues (see below). As of 2025, 20 out of 30 European NATO or EU members have professional ground forces of fewer than 15,000 troops. Apart from a few frontline states that could mobilize reserves and national guards on their soil, the others would be unable to generate more than a couple of battalions to be sent away from their borders. As a result, the bulk of large unit formations would rest on the shoulders of maybe six countries (France, UK, Germany, Poland, Italy and Spain). Moreover, Russian experience in mobilization and in compensating for casualties may also make it more resilient than Europe in force generation in both a short and medium term.

Europe can still leverage the classic superiority of defense over offense in land warfare. This logic drives NATO's Eastern Flank allies – especially Poland and the Baltic states – to fortify their borders with anti-tank ditches, dragon teeth, extensive minefields, counter-drone sensors and effectors.

67. *Allied Joint Doctrine*, Allied Joint Publication (AJP)-01, Edition F, December 2022.
68. B. Posen, "Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony", *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 1, Summer 2003, pp. 5–46.
69. *Military Balance 2025*, IISS, 2025.

These defensive belts aim to compensate for local manpower inferiority by creating a "defense-in-depth" zone designed to slow and attrit a Russian offensive. Yet their effectiveness should not be overstated; static fortifications can delay but rarely stop a large, combined-arms assault. Once breached or outflanked, they lose much of their deterrent value. Their success ultimately hinges on the availability of mobile reserves, resilient logistics, and integrated command-and-control – turning fortified borders into the first layer of a broader, maneuver-capable defense posture.[70]

Although it is more difficult to quantify, European forces should, on the other hand, benefit from a qualitative edge in combined arms tactics and skilled personnel at all levels. Average Russian conscript soldiers undergo a minimal 1–2-month basic training, while the NATO standards typically involve a six-month initial course.[71] Similarly, Russia expects to turn civil-degree graduates into junior commissioned officers within six months, while the comparable curriculum would typically be one to two years in most European armies.[72] To add to this, the Russian leadership ratio is chronically low, at with around 25% of officers and NCOs, while European standards would be closer to 40-50%.[73] Moreover, the Russian army estimates that it suffers from an annual shortage of about 2,000–2,500 officers in its ground-combat troops.[74]

Another less visible factor is that critical land enablers bring a given unit its consistency and effective fighting power. European armies suffer from a shortage of several key capabilities that have been contributed by the US in recent military operations. The first is firepower, especially artillery, rocket launchers and short to mid-range strike drones in large supplies. Deep fires remain a critical capability gap in Europe. As of 2025, only a handful of countries – such as Poland, Romania and, to the extent they are able, the Baltic states – are addressing it seriously. Not only are these artillery and strike systems lacking in numbers compared to Russia, but the associated European Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance and Target Acquisition (ISTAR) capabilities, are now also lagging behind due to the massive influx of drones in Russian ground forces. Another key element is a strong Russian edge in ground-based air defense and especially short and mid-range surface-to-air missiles, which provide a dense and highly lethal environment to Western aircraft, especially helicopters.

70. J. C. Daly, "Poland to Build Fortifications on Eastern Border by 2028", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 21, No. 153, October 22, 2024.

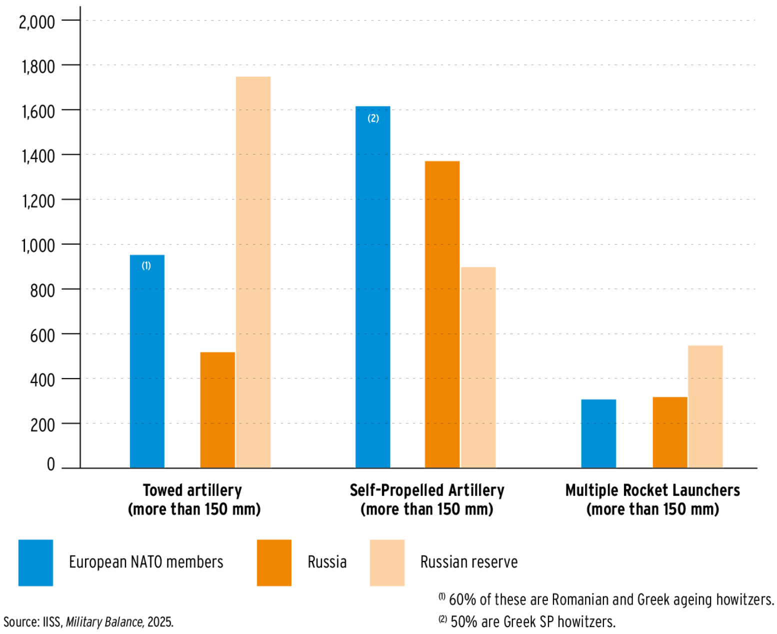
71. M. Connell, B. Lennox and P. Schwartz, "Training in the Russian Armed Forces: An Assessment of Recent Reforms and their Impact on Russian Operations in Ukraine", Center for Naval Analyses, 2023.

72. P. Luzin, "Russia Faces Significant Future Deficit in Officers Corps", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 21, No. 135, September 19, 2024; interviews with French army officers.

73. J. Van Bladel, "The Russian Soldiers' Question Revisited", Egmont Papers, Egmont Institute, May 19, 2022.

74. Y. E. Fedorov, Russian Military Manpower After Two and a Half Years of War in Ukraine, *Russia.Eurasia.Reports*, No. 48, Ifri, November 2024.

Figure 10: Europe/Russia ground forces' firepower ratio



Source: IISS, Military Balance 2025.

Among the other key land enablers that European armies have been lacking is electronic warfare capability, which is widely distributed down to the brigade or even battalion level in the Russian army, whereas it remains a scarce and precious asset in European land forces – usually limited to one regiment per corps, if any. Military mobility is another key enabler, all the way from strategic to tactical. Overall, Russia has good strategic mobility through an often-underestimated military railroad command with few administrative constraints on its use, while Europe has been struggling with both infrastructure and regulatory limitations to moving troops across the continent[75]. At the tactical level, on the other hand, Russia has been struggling with terrain obstacles and suffering from insufficient engineering capability such as gap bridging, mine-clearing capacity and tactical supply movement. These capabilities, however, are also in short supply in European armies – although comparably better in quality. Finally, general combat service support, including medical support and maintenance, are seriously under-resourced in European armies. While Russia's ground forces are also struggling with poor medical support, and low technical readiness levels, and systemic material breakdown, they have a radically different approach to both men and equipment – neglecting medical care and machine repair, while compensating for their lack of spare parts with the sheer volume of stockpiled equipment.

To sum up, European land forces suffer from a disadvantage in firepower and mass that may only be partially compensated for by the quality

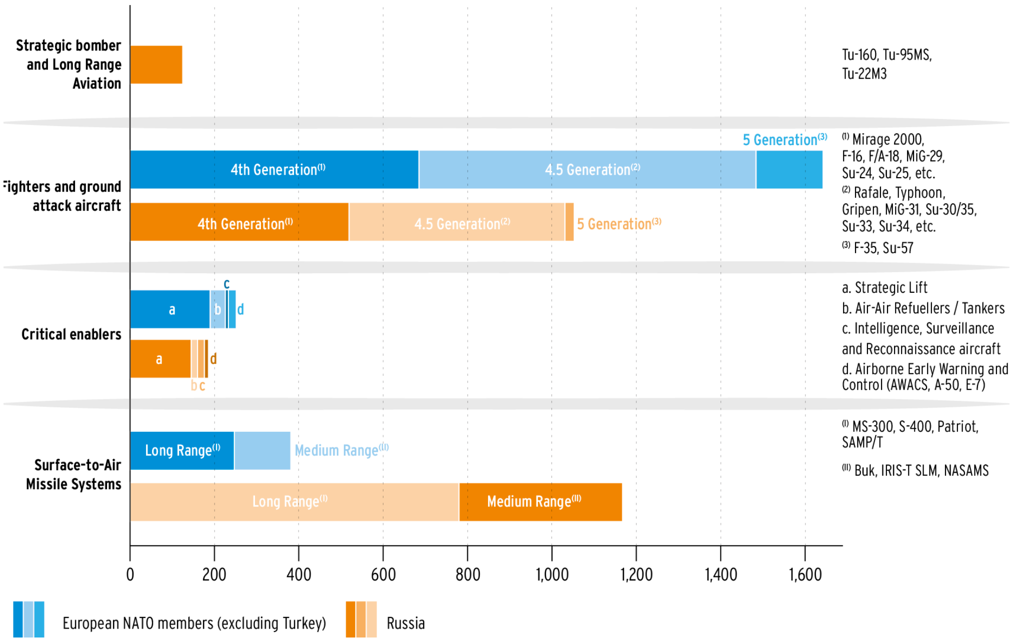
75. É. Tenenbaum with the collaboration of A. Zima, "Return to the East: the Russian Threat and the French Pivot to Europe's Eastern Flank", *Focus stratégique*, No. 119, Ifri, June 2024.

of their training. A partial catch-up in firepower could be advantageously paired with their significant head start in air power.

European superiority in aerospace power?

As far as air power is concerned, the tables are turned. NATO allies, even when considering only the Europeans, show a clear superiority over Russia, both in quantity and quality, with over 1,500 fighter aircraft against fewer than 1,000 for Russia. This discrepancy is even more spectacular in terms of combat readiness and technological performance. While the European fighter fleet is going to decrease by at least 20% in the coming decade, its technological upper hand should greatly increase with the replacement of aging 4th generation fighters (F-16s, Su-27, etc.) with 4.5 and 5th generation (modernized tranches of the Eurofighter, *Rafale* and Gripen for the former and F-35s for the latter). In contrast, Russia is unlikely to be able to field many of its 4.5 (MiG-31, Su-35) and even more so 5th-generation Su-57s in the coming years. The only apparent advantage held by the Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) hinges on its fleet of long-range strategic bombers, but a significant portion (Tu-95s, Tu-160s) is reserved for nuclear missions. Finally, both Europe and Russia suffer from a relative shortage of Airborne Early Warning assets (A-50, E-3 Sentry/AWACS, E-7 Wedgetail, S-100 GlobalEye). Although this is often stressed as a key European capability gap, this gap needs to be nuanced, considering the dense land-based radar coverage in both Europe and Russia, which helps to provide reasonably reliable coverage over their territories.

Figure 11: European/Russian air assets



Source: Military Balance 2025.

European air forces also enjoy a qualitative edge in air combat skills, at both the tactical and operational level. Basic Combat Air Patrol (CAP), and more complex Composite Air Operations (COMAO) are practiced regularly by almost all European air forces, but only very occasionally by the VKS. Moreover, the VKS inability to gain air superiority over Ukraine after three and half years despite overwhelming qualitative and quantitative advantage, is a clear demonstration of a failure to grasp the nature and military potential of an air campaign.[76] The main reason for this is a Russian military doctrine that, for many decades, has taken for granted the (Western) enemy's superiority in the air, and therefore has devoted more resources to denying the sky than to controlling it. The corollary is Russian expertise in Ground-Based Air Defense and especially Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM) systems, more or less successfully integrated in a multi-layer integrated air and missile defense (IADS), with limited sensor-to-shooter loops.

In a military confrontation, dealing with the dense and highly capable Russian IADS would therefore be the European air forces' priority mission. In a scenario where US commitment was limited to background support, this might prove extremely challenging, as Europeans are used to relying on US air power for Suppression of Enemy Air Defenses (SEAD). Although SEAD missions have returned to the main exercises, they have been under-practiced by European air forces. For non-stealth platforms, SEAD usually involves suppressive use of anti-radiation weapons (which few Europeans air forces have, in very limited quantity) and airborne electronic attack capability (almost absent from European air forces). Alternatives exist, such as the massive use of long-range cruise missiles, supported by decoys and cheap one-way attack (OWA) drones to deplete enemy SAMs, or high-risk low altitude penetration, but none of these tactics is widely spread in European air forces so far. Progressive fielding of Low Observable F-35s in Europe might significantly increase aircraft survivability in a dense SAM threat environment and allow stand-in Destructive SEAD with more basic guided munition, but one should not underestimate Russian efforts to counter X-band stealth by exploiting other parts of the electromagnetic spectrum (EMS).

Beyond specific SEAD-related capabilities, European air forces tend to be less formidable than what they appear at first glance – after a closer look at their missile and mission equipment condition. Ammunition stockpiles tend to be at the bare minimum, often just enough for a few days of high-intensity engagement. A European ability to gain temporary air superiority over Russia might therefore prove easier than the ability to maintain and exploit it to its full extent. Given the massive format of Russian land power, European air forces may find themselves running out of munitions to target and systematically degrade advancing forces beyond a couple of weeks of high intensity combat.

76. J. Bronk, N. Reynolds and J. Watling, "The Russian Air War and Ukrainian Requirements for Air Defence", RUSI, November 2022.

Some European air forces also suffer from excessive mutualization of mission equipment (radars, optronics, ISR pods, self-defense jammers), so that out of 100 aircraft it is not uncommon that only fifty fewer to be fully equipped at a given time. This might considerably constrain the benefits that Europe could reap from its superiority in air power.

A final caution stems from Russia's recent adaptation to air-denied environment, which has prompted the VKS to make a massive use of mixed salvos of cheap one-way attack (OWA) vehicles, cruise missiles and ballistic missiles. Backed by a full-throttle defense industry, these would, in a military confrontation scenario, pose a very serious challenge to European air bases and any strategic asset within Russian ranges. Indeed, NATO's notoriously under-resourced Integrated Air and Missile Defense (IAMD) would not be able to afford a sustainable "Sky Shield" in the event of a long-range campaign. As interceptor systems tend to cost at least twice as much as attack vehicles, a "salvo competition"[77] would be extremely challenging for Europe.

In brief, Europe does have the upper hand in air power, even without massive US support provided it addresses key shortcomings in SEAD, munitions and affordable air defense.

Global commons: sea and space

In terms of sea power, Europe enjoys an overwhelming advantage in quantity, with over 100 large surface combatants against around 30 for the Russian navy. It also has a clear qualitative edge in both readiness and warship performance, as well as crew morale and training. However, the geography of the Europe-Russia theatre would make it difficult to turn this superiority into a decisive advantage. Russia is surrounded by a few narrow seas that it can be barred from exploiting but that may also be dangerous for its opponent to approach; should there be a military confrontation, the Baltic, Black and Barents seas are all deadly alleys vulnerable to anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) strategies from the shores.

As in the air domain, Russian doctrine is focused on denial rather than control. Hence, the Russian navy strength lies in its submarines rather than its surface fleet. Those may present a real challenge to a limited set of European Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) assets. Still, between maritime patrols along the Norwegian, Icelandic and Scottish coasts, and niche ASW expertise in some European navies (French, British, German, Italian), the West should prove able to retain sea control (if not supremacy) over the North Atlantic and therefore to safeguard transatlantic support lines. Finally, seabed warfare, especially against undersea cables infrastructure, is also an increasingly worrying trend where Russia has taken some advance and European navies will need to catch up (see hybrid warfare section).

77. A. Gorremans, "Économie des échanges de salves : vers la fin de la polyvalence des munitions ?", *Notes de l'Ifri*, Ifri, May 2025.

In the space domain, the picture is more nuanced. Russia enjoys an apparent quantitative edge in military satellites over Europe (100 against 60), but this head start may not be as strong as it appears.[78] Indeed, Russia's space sector has greatly suffered from Western sanctions, and most of its satellite fleet is aging and obsolete, while it struggles to develop new capabilities. Civilian-grade satellite communication (SATCOM) is a fast-developing field, with space-based broadband internet access democratizing through Starlink, which has proven a key military advantage in Ukraine. While Europe has often been said to lag behind in that area, Russia is even further behind. In fact, the only other satellite broadband constellation in use in Ukraine is One Web, a European initiative. In the coming years, the EU Commission-backed program Iris² may also offer an advantageous alternative to Starlink.

With the advent of Galileo, Europe now has an operational military positioning, navigation and timing (PNT) system on a par with the Global Positioning System (GPS), and certainly better than Russia's GLONASS.[79] European shortcomings are more acute in space-based intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), particularly in radar coverage, electronic intelligence (ELINT) and early-warning capabilities (the latter being totally absent from European inventories). Here again, Europe depends on what the US may agree to share. Finally, Russia has been moving fast on ground-based anti-satellite capabilities as well as on space rendezvous and proximity operations with its Nivelir and Luch/Olymp K2 maneuvering satellites, a field that Europe is only now timidly stepping into.

Nuclear threshold and deterrence

Any military confrontation scenarios need to cover the nuclear factor, which could radically alter the course of a conflict. Russia is keen on stressing its status as a nuclear great power, with approximately 1,700 deployed strategic warheads and about 2,600 in reserve, of which roughly 1,100 are considered strategic and about 1,500 "non-strategic".[80] It intends to leverage this status to maintain "escalation dominance" at every level of the strategic spectrum, from competition to gray zone conflict and local, regional and large-scale conventional war.

The first year of the war in Ukraine put the Russian style of deterrence to the test. This approach, based on highly aggressive nuclear rhetoric but limited concrete actions, aimed to maximize the effect of threats against a West perceived as weak and divided, while avoiding uncontrolled nuclear escalation.

78. *Military Balance 2025*, op. cit.

79. A problem that the Russian army is aware of and is calling for to be addressed: A. N. Zaliznûk and A. A. Volkov, "Problemy postroeniâ sistemy nazemnogo navigacionnogo obespečeniâ Vooružennyh Sil Rossijskoj Federacii v usloviâh novyh vyzovov i ugroz" [Problems in Building a Ground-Based Navigation Support System for the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in the Context of New Challenges and Threats], VM, No. 6, 2024, pp. 54.

80. H. M. Kristensen, M. Korda, E. Johns and M. Knight-Boyle, "Russian Nuclear Weapons", *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, May 13, 2025.

However, NATO's demonstrated solidarity and Ukraine's resilience undermined the effectiveness of this strategy. Moscow gradually adjusted its posture by complementing its nuclear rhetoric with more tangible deterrence measures, as illustrated, for instance, by the March 2023 announcement of the deployment of tactical nuclear warheads in Belarus in response to the growing level of Western military assistance to Ukraine.[81] Russia's declaratory policy also evolved with its new 2024 nuclear doctrine, which lowers the threshold of use in order to more explicitly integrate scenarios of conventional confrontations against non-nuclear states, potentially supported by nuclear-armed states. Drafted and published in a context now increasingly distant, the new doctrine primarily serves the current and future Kremlin's aggressions in the post-Soviet space and in Eastern Europe. Washington's ambiguity and Europe's hesitations fuel the aggressiveness of Russian deterrence, particularly its conventional component, whose concrete actions are becoming increasingly bold and assertive.

The experience of the war in Ukraine, particularly the effectiveness of Western IAMD and ISR, has confirmed the Russian military's concerns about the vulnerability of its platforms and the credibility of a strategy of limited nuclear strikes, notably through non-strategic nuclear weapons. However, Russia is already developing solutions – such as the development of the S-500 and anti-satellite weapons, as well as the multiplication of transporter erector launchers (TELs) – and can rely on its hypersonic systems (such as the Kinzhal or Tsirkon) or intermediate-range weapons (such as the Oreshnik), despite their cost and technical complexity.[82]

So far, most of Europe has benefitted from US extended nuclear deterrence, illustrated by – but not limited to – specific postures such as the nuclear sharing arrangements that include dual-capable aircraft (DCA) and the stationing of around 100 B61-12 tactical nuclear bombs, NATO's Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), and the declaratory policy reaffirming its coverage of US allies. This US nuclear posture and policy is augmented by the two European nuclear powers – the United Kingdom, which participates in the NPG, and France, which stresses the "European dimension" of its deterrent coverage.[83] The recent Northwood Declaration by the French and British governments emphasized that nuclear weapons "deter the most extreme threats" to Europe rather than being limited solely to the protection of their "vital interests". It also stated that, while the French and British nuclear forces remained independent, they could be coordinated to contribute to the overall security of the Alliance.[84]

81. See D. Minic, "Russian Nuclear Deterrence Under Fire in the War in Ukraine", op. cit.
82. S. Kaushal and D. Dolzikova, "The Evolution of Russian Nuclear Doctrine", RUSI, August 12, 2025.
83. H. Fayet, A. Futter and U. Kühn, "Towards a European Nuclear Deterrent", *Survival*, Vol. 66, No. 5, 2024, pp. 67-98.
84. Statement by the United Kingdom and the French Republic on Nuclear Policy and Cooperation, July 2025.

The US, French and British nuclear deterrents were intended to protect Europe against Russian strategic aggressiveness. Should the credibility of the extended US deterrence be seriously challenged or proven faulty, Europe would suffer from a strategic imbalance with Russia. Even so, the French and British deterrents could still dissuade the most direct attacks on their vital interests – interests that, due to their interdependence, cover much of Europe's security as well. To credibly cover every inch of the European NATO allies' territory, additional efforts would probably be needed, both in terms of declaratory policy, posture (including exercises and deployment) and possibly an increase in warheads and delivery systems.

Reforms and possible adaptation in the future

The 2008 reforms aimed to transform the Russian army into a smaller, more mobile, more professional, and more modern force capable of responding to changing perceptions of threats, and primarily focused on armed conflicts, local wars, and hybrid threats. The army was therefore unprepared for the unexpected war that resulted from the SVO,[85] where the battalion tactical groups (BTGs) proved unsuitable and suffered massive material and human losses — at least 700,000 Russian casualties, including 200,000 deaths.[86]

The organic adaptation of the Russian army will depend on at least three factors: the perception of threats, the military lessons learned from the SVO — massive use of drones; small, dispersed, autonomous, and mobile tactical formations; long-range tactical aviation; indirect fire with tanks; and electronic warfare, with the idea of defeating the enemy from a distance to guarantee its defeat in close combat[87] — and Russia's capacity limitations (economic, technological, logistical, human, and industrial). Leading members of the military elite have also urged caution in overestimating military threats and warned that Russia's limited resources and the hybrid nature of modern warfare make it irrelevant to focus "excessively" on military action.[88] Similarly, while Putin has approved a "significant" increase in arms

85. This is well understood by the Russian military elites: see A. D. Gavrilov, et al., "Transformaciâ sistemy ugroz nacional′noj bezopasnosti Rossii i special′naâ voennaâ operaciâ" [Transformation of the System of Threats to Russia's National Security and the Special Military Operation], op. cit., pp. 14-15.
86. P. Luzin, "Russia's Year of Truth: The Soldier Shortage", CEPA, January 22, 2025, available at: https://cepa.org; "Russia's War in Ukraine and the Prospects for Peace", CSIS, February 24, 2025, available at: www.csis.org; "Russian Losses in the War with Ukraine, Mediazona Count", checked in June 2025, available at: https://en.zona.media.
87. V. V. Trušin, "Zadači voennoj nauki v usloviâh special′noj voennoj operacii" [Military Science Tasks in the Context of Special Military Operations], op. cit., pp. 9-10, 12-15; A. V. Seržantov and D. A. Pavlov, "Novoe soderžanie i suŝnost′ voennyh operacij v sovremennyh usloviâh" [New Content and Essence of Military Operations in Modern Conditions], op. cit., pp. 46-47, 49-50. See also D. Minic, "What Does the Russian Army Think About Its War in Ukraine?", op. cit.
88. V. B. Zarudnickij, "Tendencii izmeneniâ sistemy obespečeniâ voennoj bezopasnosti gosudarstva v usloviâh novoj geopolitičeskoj karty mira" [Trends in the Transformation of the System for Ensuring the Military Security of the State under the Conditions of the New Geopolitical Map of the World], op. cit., pp. 8-11.

requirements, he believes that the new state arms program (scheduled for 2025) will have to "take into account" the state's economic capabilities.[89]

A return to the pre-2008 reform army model is unlikely, if only because it was based on a large number of stocks, reserves, personnel, and logistical and training structures that Russia no longer has at its disposal.[90] A continuation of the 2008 reforms is also unlikely, given the desire to drastically increase personnel numbers, the needs of the SVO, NATO enlargement, and Russia's economic and technological limitations. The continuation of the reforms announced by then Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu as early as 2022 – consisting of massification (returning to a largely divisional structure) combined with selective qualitative developments (ASU, integration of Artificial Intelligence [AI], advanced weapons production) – seems more likely, although there are strong doubts about Russia's ability to implement them.[91]

The increase in personnel to around 1.5 million troops (Putin decree, fall 2024) would require the recruitment of 350,000 to 400,000 additional troops and would double the size of the armed forces compared to the start of the conflict.[92] While the ongoing covert mobilization of *mobiki* and *kontraktniki*[93] is making it possible to hold position and even advance in Ukraine, the quantitative objectives of the reforms and the levels of attrition[94] and recruitment[95] could force the Kremlin to resort to a new official mobilization if it wants to both defeat the Ukrainian army and build up a sufficient combat force in its northwestern region to respond to NATO's enlargement.[96]

As far as Europe is concerned, future military adaptation raises three challenges: operational planning, country specialization, and capability strategy. Operational planning has already undergone dramatic changes since 2019 with the Area Strategic Plan of the Supreme Allied Commander

89. V. V. Putin, "Zasedanie Voenno-promyšlennoj komissii" [Meeting of the Military Industrial Commission], September 19, 2023, available at: http://kremlin.ru.

90. M. Grisé, M. Cozad, A. Dowd, et al., "How Will Russia Reconstitute Its Military After the Ukraine Conflict?", RAND Corporation, March 27, 2025, pp. 62-89; D. Massicot and R. Connelly, "Russian Military Reconstitution: 2030 Pathways and Prospects 2024", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2024, pp. 29-32. See also A. M. Dyner, "The Next Reform of Russia's Armed Forces: Is It a New Threat or Just for Appearances?", The Polish Institute of International Affairs (PRISM), March 1st, 2023, available at: www.pism.pl.

91. Ibid., M. Grisé, et al., "How Will Russia Reconstitute Its Military After the Ukraine Conflict?", op. cit., pp. 51-53, 57-64; D. Massicot and R. Connelly, "Russian Military Reconstitution: 2030 Pathways and Prospects 2024", op. cit., pp. 22-23.

92. Y. E. Fedorov, "Russian Military Manpower After Two and a Half Years of War in Ukraine", op. cit, pp. 7-8, 21.

93. M. Klein, "How Russia Is Recruiting for the Long War", German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), June 27, 2024, available at: www.swp-berlin.org.

94. X Account of the British Ministry of Defence, available at: https://x.com and https://x.com.

95. "Russian Force Generation and Technological Adaptations Update April 15, 2025", Institute for the Study of War (ISW), April 15, 2025, available at: www.understandingwar.org.

96. Y. E. Fedorov, "Russian Military Manpower After Two and a Half Years of War in Ukraine", op. cit., pp. 6, 20.

Europe (SACEUR) and the reintroduction of Cold War-style regional plans after 2022. These plans must now be integrated with the US request that Europeans "take ownership of conventional security on the continent".[97] Should the US contribution be downgraded by a substantial number of capabilities, Europeans may need to more fundamentally rethink the overall plan as replacing each US withdrawn capability with a European equivalent would prove impossible in the medium term.

The second axis of transformation is the emerging country specialization in Europe. Frontline states in Northern and Central Europe are already orienting their force construct toward conscription-based territorial defense that would be neither practical nor necessary for Western and Southern Europe. If the latter may take advantage of some aspects of the former's total "total defense" models, they priority should be to ensure an operational ability to project eastbound and northbound reinforcement forces, with nations such as Germany becoming a logistical military hub for the mobility. These changes are underway but may cause friction as frontline states feel they are carrying the bulk of the effort, and the Western European "cavalry" takes its time.

Third, European military adaptation will need to be more creative in terms of capability asymmetry with Russia, and to leverage more systematically its advantage in air power, sea power, space and possibly cyber. A successful military strategy would need to displace the battlefield away from Russia's strengths – firepower, attritional warfare on land, etc. – and move it to domains where it has less escalation dominance. On the other hand, Europe should not take it for granted that it has systemic technological advantage; AI-enabled warfare may be an example of that as Russia, building from its Ukraine experience, may prove much less reluctant than Europe to integrate new autonomous weapons on the battlefield.

Resource strategy and defense industry

Defense budget

War is a costly business, and Russia has been experiencing this reality more than any other country barring Ukraine since the start of its full-scale invasion. Defense expenditures have risen consistently, from 3.5% of GDP in 2021 to more than 6.6% in 2025, amounting to more than a third of the total federal budget. In absolute terms, the expenditure was estimated at around 13 trillion rubles, i.e. 145 billion US dollars in 2024, but in purchasing-power-parity terms with the West, it amounted rather to 460 billion US dollars, a figure roughly similar to that of the European NATO allies aggregated defense

97. "Opening Remarks by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at Ukraine Defense Contact Group, Brussels", op. cit.

spending that same year.[98] Although these figures are impressive, they are still far from the 12-13% of GDP at the end of the Soviet era. With a budget deficit of 3% of GDP despite the war, Russia remains largely capable of financing itself with its own resources, thanks to its continued high hydrocarbon exports and tax revenues due to inflation. However, this comes at the cost of significant sacrifices for the population.[99] In any case, the Kremlin's grip on Russian politics and society is strong enough for the economy, quality of life and public welfare to be, as so often in Russian history, sacrificed on the altar of Moscow's political ambitions. In comparison with Europe, all this represents a clear political and philosophical.

Except for Ukraine, Europe has retained a peacetime economy, despite declarations to the contrary. The shock caused by Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 has prompted many European governments to announce dramatic increase in defense spending and vow to move beyond the minimum 2% of GDP agreed a decade earlier at the NATO Wales Summit. While some countries in Central Europe have moved toward 2.5%, 3% or even 4%, Western and Southern parts of Europe have moved at a slower pace. Despite calls for a "*Zeitenwende*" (turning point) in Germany and "*économie de guerre*" (war economy) in France, these two countries only reached around 2% in 2024, while Italy, Spain and Portugal remain well below the 2% threshold. Meanwhile, the 2025 NATO Summit in The Hague agreed on a new investment pledge of 5%, broken down into 3.5% on core defense (personnel, equipment, infrastructure) and 1.5% on "resilience". If such a pledge is implemented, it would likely be transformative for European defense – even though the underlying industrial policies remain to be discussed (see below) – and certainly enough to match future Russian double-down.

Despite calls for even greater defense spending in Europe, the prospect of a general increase remains pending. Indeed, as Europe's population declines and social demand for welfare (especially healthcare and pensions) rises, alongside commitments to higher environmental standards, the question of fiscal space for greater defense spending needs serious consideration. The framework of the ReARM Europe plan announced in 2025, the European Commission has begun exploring ways to leverage national bonds for defense by invoking the Stability and Growth Pact's escape clause, but not all member states are supportive. Countries with already high debt ratios like France, Italy and Spain will find it difficult, unless strict fiscal reforms are undertaken and/or fresh EU-issued bonds (not traditional Eurobonds) are introduced to support defense spending.

98. *Military Balance 2025*, op. cit., pp. 161.
99. R. Conolly, "Russia's Wartime Economy Isn't as Weak as it Looks", RUSI, January 22, 2025, available at: www.rusi.org.

The defense industry

Faced with high attrition levels in Ukraine and the prospect of Western defense industrial support for Ukraine, Russia took measures as early as 2022 to move to a war economy and increase its defense-industrial production,[100] focusing on mass, power and lower costs, particularly through the restoration and modernization of its vast stocks, which constitute the wide majority (80-90%) of the weapons supplied to the Russian armed forces in Ukraine.[101] At the same time, Russia has managed to greatly increase its production of shells (from 250,000 152 mm shells in 2022 to more than 1.3 million in 2024) and drones (more than one million in 2024). The missile industry is, arguably, the most impressive: Kh-101 cruise missile production rose from 420 in 2023 to 500 in 2024. Even more dramatic is the increase in 9M723 Iskander ballistic missile production, from 250 in 2023 to 700 in 2024. Russia's defense industry also reportedly managed to triple its hypersonic Kinzhal production between 2024 and 2025.[102] All this was made possible by decisive decisions taken by Moscow in 2022 in the defense industrial sector, which recruited at least 500,000 employees and benefited from 90% of the newly imported machine tools.

However, the Russian industry is also facing severe chokepoints and limitations. In the field of armored vehicles for instance, the depletion of stocks is likely to pose a major challenge by 2026 at the current rate of attrition as most vehicles so far have been refurbished from Cold War stocks, while Russia's Military Industrial Company, the VPK, had only limited capacity to produce new equipment (approx. 200 infantry fighting vehicles – IFVs, 50 artillery guns, and 200 main battle tanks per year).[103] In anticipation, the Russian army has already reduced its consumption of artillery shells[104] and limited its use of main battle tanks. An increase in Russian arms production would require another wave of conversion of civilian factories, the building of new factories, or an increase in the capacities of existing factories, which would, in turn, lower the current

100. O. Danylyuk and J. Watling, "Winning the Industrial War Comparing Russia, Europe and Ukraine, 2022–24", RUSI, April 2025, pp. 21, 26; D. Massicot and R. Connelly, "Russian Military Reconstitution", op. cit., pp. 39-40

101. O. Danylyuk and J. Watling, "Winning the Industrial War Comparing Russia, Europe and Ukraine, 2022–24", op. cit., pp. 22-23; D. Massicot and R. Connelly, "Russian Military Reconstitution", op. cit., pp. 38-40.

102. O. Danylyuk and J. Watling, "Winning the Industrial War Comparing Russia, Europe and Ukraine, 2022–24", op. cit., p. 24-25; Û. Ovčinnikova, "Putin zaâvil o planah narastit′ v 10 raz vypusk dronov v 2024 godu" [Putin Announced Plans to Increase Drone Production Tenfold by 2024], *RBC*, September 19, 2024, available at: www.rbc.ru; "Russian Force Generation and Technological Adaptations Update April 15, 2025", op. cit.; D. Massicot and R. Connelly, "Russian Military Reconstitution", op. cit., p. 41; K. Post, "Exclusive: Russia's Ballistic Missile Production Up at Least 66% Over Past Year, According to Ukrainian Intel Figures", *Kyiv Independent*, June 3, 2025, available at: https://kyivindependent.com.

103. P. Luzin, "Russia's Year of Truth: The Missing Military Hardware", CEPA, January 22, 2025, available at: https://cepa.org; "Russia's Weakness Offers Leverage", February 19, 2025, available at: https://understandingwar.org; D. Massicot and R. Connelly, "Russian Military Reconstitution", op. cit., pp. 41-42.

104. Ibid.; "Russia's Weakness Offers Leverage", op. cit.

production and repair capacity that is vital for coping with the attrition rates in Ukraine.[105] Another option would be to rely more on imports of military equipment from friendly states. Only the People's Republic of China (PRC) may have industrial pockets deep enough to undertake such a task, and, while its support to the Russian war effort has increased, it remains short of fully assembled main combat platforms.

Europe for its part has struggled to translate increased spending into a tangible industrial surge. After decades of low orders following the post-Cold War peace dividend, the European Defense Technological and Industrial base (EDTIB) has adapted its production infrastructure to a low-rate operating rhythm. As a result, production capacity remains limited and is unlikely to accommodate a sudden surge in demand. A good example can be found in the missile sector where average annual orders (both domestic national and foreign) placed with European defense firms have typically been in the low hundreds for offensive weapons, and in the low thousands for air and missile defense interceptors. Such orders paint a dire picture of European missile production capacity (which logically aims to fit market demand). It is vastly inferior to what a military confrontation with Russia would require. The economics of the so-called "salvo[106] competition" are crucial here; multiple interceptors are needed to neutralize an incoming missile, which means that annual production of 1,500 to 2,000 interceptors would be insufficient to defend Europe against potential Russian salvos of 2,000 to 3,000 long-range missiles per year.

Figure 12: Missiles and guided munitions production in 2025

Attack vehicles	Russia annual production (est. 2025)	Interceptor types	Minimal annual requirement against Russia (est. 2:1)[(1)]	Total Western production (est. 2025)[(2)]	Share available to Europe (est. 50%)[(3)]
Ballisic missiles (Iskander-M, Kinzhal, etc.)	800-1,000	Anti-Ballistic missiles (PAC-2, PAC-3, Aster30)	1,600-2,000	1,000-1,100	500-550
Cruise missiles (Kh-101, Kalibr, Kh-59, Oniks, etc.)	1,300-2,000	Surface-to-Air missiles			
		Air-Air missiles	3,000-4,000	2,000	1,000
OWA (Geran-2, Lancet, etc.)	30,000-50,000	AAA/laser-guided rockets	?		

(1) Requirement is a conservative estimate that varies according to technical and tactical features: ballistic interception usually requires more than 2, while cruise missile interception can require less than 2:1 ratio
(2) As actual numbers are classified, suggested figures are reconstructed from orders to US and European defence firms divided by contract time to final delivery.
(3) Share available to European customers is a rough and conservative estimate considering US domestic priority and European firms export commitments out of Europe.

Sources: Fabian Hoffman, Missile Matters, 2025; IISS, 2025.

Sources: Fabian Hoffman, Missile Matters, 2025; IISS, 2025.

105. D. Massicot and R. Connelly, "Russian Military Reconstitution", op. cit., pp. 41-43.
106. A. Gorremans, "Économie des échanges de salves : vers la fin de la polyvalence des munitions ?", *Notes de l'Ifri*, Ifri, May 2025, available at: www.ifri.org.

While Russia's full-scale invasion did help to speed up production in Europe, the EDTIB still struggled to overcome its lethargy. The primary reason was that the urgency of Ukrainian needs prompted European states to first draw on existing stocks (when available) and then turn to suppliers that had some stock and could deliver quickly – an option that was seldom feasible within Europe. Hence, a surge in orders to US, Korean, Turkish and Israeli defense companies. Secondly, many actors in the EDTIB were unsure of how long the war, and more generally the demand for massive, readily available, and "good-enough" equipment would last, before a return to long-term, high-tech, tailor-made weaponry in which they had developed expertise over decades. Thirdly, there were some rare but significant gaps in the European defense industry's catalogue that could not be filled easily: 5th Generation Very Low Observable aircraft, long-range air and missile defense systems (particularly in the anti-ballistic segment), mid- to long-range rocket and missile artillery (50-300 km), and short- and medium-range unmanned air vehicles (UAVs).

As they became increasingly aware of their shortcomings in 2022 and 2023, the Europeans tried to patch up their EDTIB with both short- and long-term strategies. The 2024 Europe Defense Industrial Strategy (EDIS) and its associated European Defense Industry Program (EDIP) are supposed to address Europe's fragmented defense industrial sector by incentivizing member states to embark on joint development as well as joint procurement. However, the resources that the EU appears able to mobilize under the current and future MFF remain underwhelming, amounting to less than 1% of member states' national defense budgets (i.e., covering both procurement and R&D). That is far from enough to change the game.

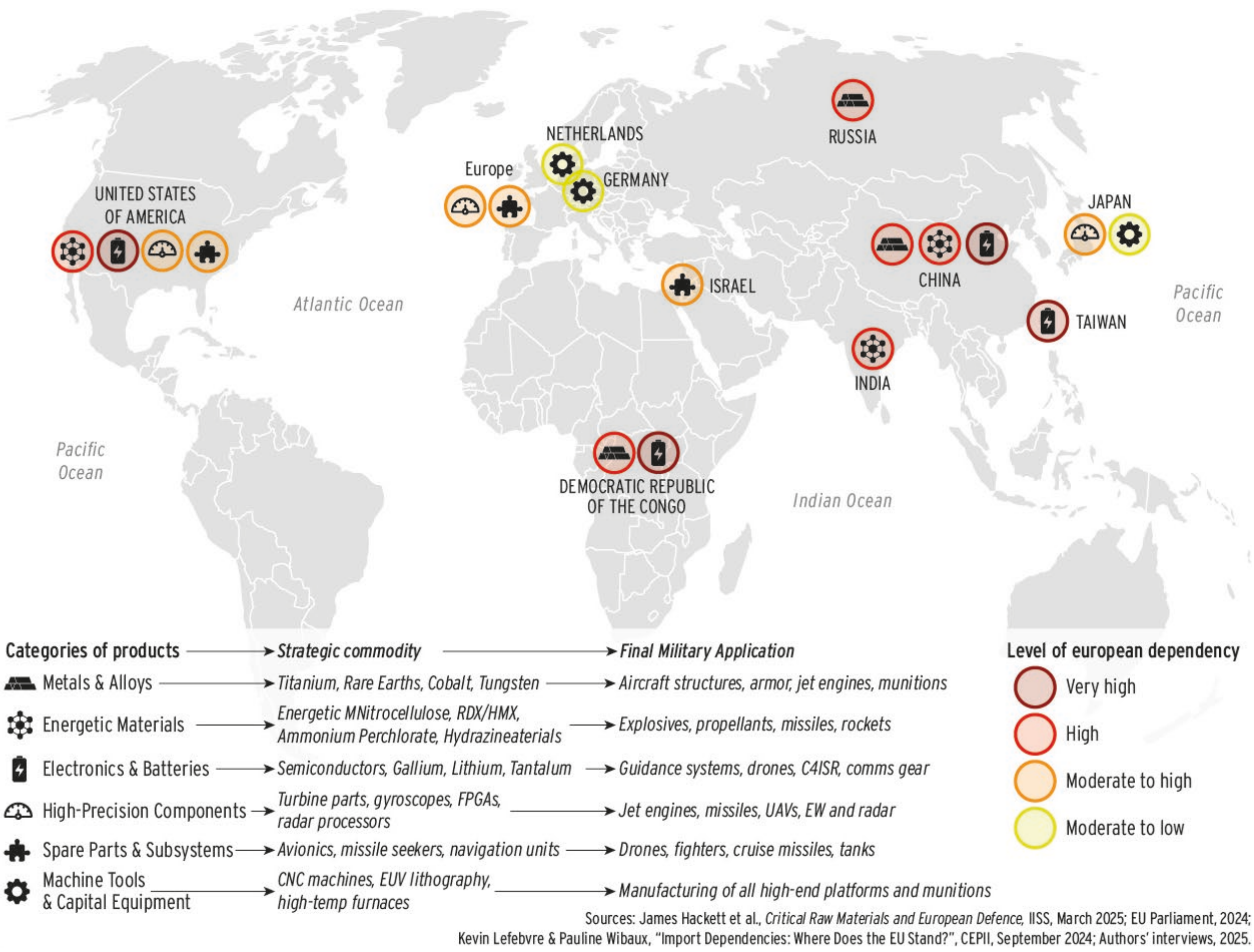
Supply chains and the "strategic rear"

In a globalized world with highly complex and internationalized supply chains, no state or group of states, however large and self-reliant, can sustain a defense industry alone without strong connections to global partners that can provide them with an industrial and technological "rear", in the strategic sense, encompassing everything from raw materials to the most advanced software solutions.

At first sight, Europe appears to benefit from a more comprehensive "strategic rear" than Russia. With almost no sanctions impeding its defense-related trade, it enjoys an almost global supply chain, with comparatively diversified suppliers. However, the other side of that coin is that the European industrial landscape is now massively dependent on all sorts of commodities critically needed to feed a war economy, with a number of source regions that may not remain as easily available in a military confrontation scenario. Furthermore, Europe's defense industrial potential also hinges on its ability to convert civilian industries into war-economy output. While Russia has repeatedly demonstrated the institutionalized capacity to repurpose automotive, machinery and other civilian manufacturing into arms production, Europe is handicapped by rampant deindustrialization, as highlighted by the 2024 Mario Draghi report.[107]

In strictly defense-related matters, Europe's most important "strategic rear" is undoubtedly the long-standing and multifaceted partnership it maintains with the US, the leading power in military technology. While Europeans do not necessarily have access to all the latest US mil-tech, they are usually among the first ones to benefit from them, either through Foreign Military Sales (FMS) or Direct Commercial Sales (DCS), both vetted by the Pentagon. This US strategic rear ranges from military hardware (platforms and ammunition) to intelligence data and access services (such as StarLink) and software solutions, increasingly enhanced by AI programs. Such back-office support is likely to prove a decisive strategic asset in any Europe-Russia confrontation scenario, even in the case of Washington refraining from direct engagement.

Figure 13: Level of European dependency



Sources: IISS; European Parliament; CEPII.

107. M. Draghi, *The Future of European Competitiveness: A Competitiveness Strategy for Europe*, Brussels: European Commission, September 9, 2024.

Of course, this asset is also a double-edged sword; should policy divergence between the oldest allies increase in the future, the absence of any US support would very likely prove paralyzing for Europe, considering the degree of transatlantic dependencies. So many US-designed equipment now depends on US export controls (International Traffic in Arms Regulations – ITAR), but equally use-control and even US-based maintenance – often conducted online, as with the F-35's Operational Data Integrated Network (ODIN), which connects to US-based information systems and without which the aircraft is essentially inoperable. Europe, to be sure, also benefits from other, non-US strategic partnerships such as with South Korea, Japan, Australia and to a lesser extent, Turkey, India, Brazil and Israel. But while the former are themselves dependent on US-linked technology, the latter can be no replacement for it. For the coming decades, therefore, Europe has no alternative but to keep the transatlantic link as strong as possible.

While Russia's strategic, industrial and technology rear initially looks much narrower than Europe's, it is attempting to become more independent in crucial areas (such as manufacturing nitrocellulose from wood and flax rather than cotton).[108] More significantly, it relies on partnerships with like-minded anti-Western states such as Iran, Belarus, North Korea and increasingly China, as well as more neutral, non-aligned or multi-aligned countries in the "Global South", which Russia advantageously groups under the "global majority label".[109]

As far as defense and the war economy are concerned, the more active part of Russia's rear is the so-called "Axis of Upheaval".[110] Since 2022, Iran, Belarus, and North Korea have become critical suppliers of military equipment and munitions to sustain Russia's war effort: artillery shells, ballistic missiles, main battle tanks, self-propelled guns, howitzers, aerial bombs, individual equipment, anti-tank guided missiles, trucks, drones (like the Shahed-136) and troops (10,000 North Koreans).[111] The People's Republic of China has become a crucial lifeline for Russia's defense industry during its protracted war in Ukraine.[112] As Western sanctions tightened, Beijing has remained undeterred, increasing its trade with Russia every year,

108. O. V. Danylyuk and J. Watling, "Winning the Industrial War Comparing Russia, Europe and Ukraine, 2022–24", RUSI, April 2025, p. 24-25.
109. See chapter 4 of this study: "Alliances and International Positioning, the Race for Global Strategic Support", p. 115.
110. A. Kendall-Taylor and R. Fontaine, "The Axis of Upheaval: How America's Adversaries Are Uniting to Overturn the Global Order", Center for a New American Security, April 23, 2024, available at: www.cnas.org.
111. E. Howell, "North Korea and Russia's Dangerous Partnership", Chatham House, December 4, 2024, available at: www.chathamhouse.org; J. G. Waller, E. Wishnick, M. Sparling and M. Connell, "The Evolving Russia-Iran Relationship Political, Military, and Economic Dimensions of an Improving Partnership", Center for Naval Analysis, January 2025, available at: www.cna.org; D. Massicot, M. Grisé, K. Jukneviciute, et al., "Cooperation and Dependence in Belarus-Russia Relations", RAND Corporation, June 20, 2024, available at: www.rand.org.
112. E. Wishnick, "The Sino-Russian Partnership: Cooperation without Coordination", *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 83, March 2025, available at: www.prcleader.org.

and becoming its primary supplier of dual-use equipment – such as machine tools, ball bearings, semiconductors, and nitrocellulose, a key component in ammunition manufacturing. Customs data from 2023 show that China accounted for 90% of Russia's imports of goods listed under the G7's export controls, with monthly exports of over $300 million in dual-use technologies. Machine tools alone represented nearly 40% of the annual increase in these exports, underscoring China's role in sustaining Russia's war machine.[113]

While Russia's strategic, industrial and technological rear may initially look narrower than Europe's, Moscow can count on relatively stable and determined anti-Western partners. Europe should not underestimate the ideological determination of Moscow and Beijing to build a new international order – one in which the West would play only a minor role – nor the strength of their partnership, which is neither opportunistic nor pragmatic.[114]

The uncertainties surrounding the alliance with the US combined with Moscow's parallel success in maintaining, developing, or deepening new alliances and partnerships with "the Rest" increase the risk of an asymmetrical situation for Europe that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago. Europe has no alternative but to make sure that the transatlantic link remains as strong as possible.

Indirect and hybrid strategies

The current threat: Russia's psychological-informational war

Russia deploys many non-military methods and means (political, psychological, cyber, diplomatic, economic, energy, financial, cultural, as well as manipulation of migrant flows, etc.) and indirect military means (espionage, sabotage, assassination, terrorism, use of special forces, irregular and paramilitary forces, strategic deterrence activities, covert use of armed violence, etc.) to weaken the West across all domains and on all continents. While Russian strategists have theorized (and probably overestimated) the cumulative effects of these actions – which are designed to constitute a real war and prepare the ground for possible combat operations – it is psychological-informational confrontation that is assigned the most important role. The Russian understanding of information war is psychological-subversive; cyber assets were primarily designed as vectors for

113. Y. Gaber, Y. Poita and G. Vasadze, "Support of the Sanctions Regime Against Russia by Türkiye and Countries of the South Caucasus and Central Asia", PRISM, September 2022.

114. D. Minic, "Logiques et perspectives du partenariat russo-chinois", in T. de Montbrial, D. David (eds.), *Ramses 2024. Un monde à refaire*, Paris: Dunod/Ifri, 2023; D. Minic, "La Russie a-t-elle des alliés ?", in T. de Montbrial, D. David (eds.), *Ramses 2025. Entre puissances et impuissance*, Paris: Dunod/Ifri, 2024; D. Minic, "La Russie et ses soutiens à l'heure de Trump II", in T. de Montbrial, D. David (eds.), *Ramses 2026. Un nouvel échiquier*, Paris: Dunod/Ifri, 2025.

psychological-informational impacts.[115] Drawing from Soviet experience, the siege mentality, a distorted interpretation of Western doctrines and strategies, and epistemological reflections on war after 1991, the Russian conception of information warfare assumes that it can achieve decisive political objectives, even in peacetime. More than mere subversion, this confrontation aims for the radical transformation of the targeted individuals and social groups by manipulating their emotions and psyche. Considered potentially comparable to the effects of deploying large-scale troops, the psychological and informational impact allows for victory by changing the enemy's mind without having to dominate them, by destroying the "foundations of a state" and provoking regime change.[116] Its weapons, which "do not kill but win", and its targets are broad. It aims to misinform and disorient the adversary's population, to compel or encourage opposing elites to make decisions favorable to the aggressor, to instill doubts about the correctness of the elites' policies, to urge the population towards antisocial acts, strikes, and civil disobedience, to provoke and cultivate internal political struggles, including armed ones, and to challenge the values and way of life of the adversary.[117]

Moscow, which seeks the weakening and fragmentation of the West and the submission of part of Europe to its influence, conducts a permanent informational warfare against it. It promotes anti-EU, anti-NATO, anti-American, and populist discourses on one side, and discourses that valorize Russian politics, power, elites, and society on the other. The war in Ukraine has led to the intensification of this confrontation, one of the main objectives of which is to isolate Ukraine from any Western aid and to support Russian combat actions by cultivating fear and pacifism. Russia, like the USSR before it, knows how to exploit to its advantage the conditions inherent in European liberal democratic regimes: media independence, political pluralism, freedom of thought and expression, elections, the rule of law, and the separation of powers. Democracy is complex, demanding, and relatively transparent, exposing social fractures, economic inequalities, identity tensions, and political divides to public scrutiny through often performative debates.

Actions range from opportunistic and autonomous operations to carefully planned and coordinated campaigns within organized networks

115. D. Minic, *Pensée et culture stratégiques russes*, op. cit., pp. 40-47.

116. V. V. Gerasimov, "Organizaciâ oborony Rossijskoj Federacii v usloviâh primeneniâ protivnikom "tradicionnyh" i "gibridnyh" metodov vedeniâ vojny" [Organization of the Defense of the Russian Federation in Conditions of the Use of "Traditional" and "Hybrid" Methods of Warfare by the Adversary], VAVN, Vol. 55, No. 2, 2016, pp. 20-22; A. V. Kartapolov, "Uroki voennyh konfliktov, perspektivy razvitiâ sredstv i sposobov ih vedeniâ. Prâmye i neprâmye dejstviâ v sovremennyh meždunarodnyh konfliktah" [Lessons from Military Conflicts, Prospects for Developing Means and Methods of Conducting Them. Direct and Indirect Actions in Contemporary International Conflicts, VAVN, Vol. 51, No. 2, 2015, p. 29. Statement of Gerasimov at the General Staff Academy, February 2, 2017 (quoted in A. M. Il'nickij, "Mental'naâ vojna Rossii" [Russia's Mental War], VM, No. 8, 2021, p. 24).

117. D. Minic, *Pensée et culture stratégiques russes*, op. cit., pp. 34-61.

such as Portal Kombat, RRN, Mriya, Lakhta, Copy Cop, or Storm-1516, a recently discovered network specialized in discrediting the Ukrainian government in Western public opinions. Blending photos and videos, fake reports, deepfakes, staged events, and even attempts to poison LLMs, all designed to spread disinformation and cultivate conspiracy theories, the informational operations conducted by Moscow are becoming more sophisticated and are implemented in a sequenced and integrated way with the help of many heterogeneous actors. This involves actors directly (GRU, FSB, diplomats, politicians and state media) and indirectly (the ex-Prigozhin and Dugin networks, media linked to Russian intelligence services, Belarusian media) connected to the Russian government, as well as pro-Russian intermediaries, whether they are aware or not of being instrumentalized or of serving the interests of the Kremlin (media, influencers, politicians, academics, retired military, associations).[118]

Russia's proactive, coercive strategic approach, which is impervious to moral dilemmas, amounts to a considerable asymmetrical advantage over European democratic regimes, whose very nature amplifies the effects of Russia's indirect strategies and undermines Europe's ability to defend itself and respond without compromising its values.

The European response

Europeans, whether through EU or NATO or as national governments, have not remained idle in the face of Russia's relentless campaign below the threshold for triggering Article 5. They have started to develop defensive instruments in the four main domains of hybrid threats: FIMI (propaganda, disinformation, etc.), covert actions (espionage, sabotage, subversion, corruption, compromission, targeted killing, etc.), weaponization of flows (energy, trade, migrations), and military intimidation (nuclear rhetoric, aggressive exercises, etc).

First, the EU has multiplied institutional initiatives to tackle hybrid threats, from creating a Hybrid Fusion Cell to establishing the Hybrid Toolbox in June 2022 and preparing for the deployment of Hybrid Rapid Response Teams to member states or partner countries.[119] NATO has also been trying to raise the Allies' awareness with its Centers of Excellence on Cyber-defense, Strategic Communications, Energy Security and Counter-FIMI. Security committees are sharing intelligence and good practices to fight Russian subversive influence, while resilience-related measures in both the EU and NATO aim to strengthen critical infrastructure security and

118. "Analyse du mode opératoire informationnel russe Storm-1516", Rapport technique, SGDSN, available at: www.sgdsn.gouv.fr. See also T. Constantino, "Russian Propaganda Has Now Infected Western AI Chatbots — New Study", Forbes, March 10, 2025, available at: www.forbes.com.
119. "Council Conclusions on a Framework for a Coordinated EU Response to Hybrid Campaigns", Press Release 603/22, June 21, 2022; "Hybrid Threats: Council Paves the Way for Deploying Hybrid Rapid Response Teams", Press release, May 21, 2024.

diversify supply.[120] Complementing regional organization, member-state initiatives strengthen societal resilience and counter disinformation at home; for example, France's anti-FIMI agency VIGINUM and Finland and Sweden's Total Defense concepts.[121]

While Europe's response has been warranted, it has remained reactive and somewhat overly cautious, focusing largely on defensive measures. It could adopt a more assertive approach across the four lines of hybrid operations. On FIMI, it could move from rebuttal to shutting down Kremlin-aligned media outlets and amplify its own messaging through offensives akin to Radio Free Europe, now weakened by US funding cuts. Against Russian covert action, Europe might intensify judicial action, widen deterrent sanctions, and emulate its post-2015 counter-terror playbook – while letting the most daring member states conduct clandestine operations in Russia, inspired by Ukrainian intelligence work. Regarding weaponization of flows, enforcement of the EU's 19 sanctions packages could be more imaginative and stringent — especially in the case of energy exports, frozen Russian assets, and dual-use goods — without compromising legal norms. Finally, in response to military intimidation, Europe has ramped up peacetime force posture and large-scale exercises, but it could go further — expanding readiness levels, increasing exercise frequency, and projecting a more visible deterrence posture.

Conclusion

Russia constitutes a long-term military threat to Europe, not just in its intentions, but also in its capabilities. Its leadership has clearly expressed both the will and strategic rationale to challenge European sovereignty and security through coercive means, including the use of military force. Despite the massive losses endured in Ukraine, underfunded R&D and degraded industrial capacity, Russia's defense apparatus remains strong and capable. It has shown its capacity to endure the hardships associated with protracted conflict and can still mobilize resources in men and treasury, backed by a relatively supportive "strategic rear", including but not limited to the People's Republic of China. Its nuclear status and arsenal contribute to Russia's perception of escalation dominance over non-nuclear European states.

What has so far hindered Russia from taking its open aggression beyond the borders of Ukraine lies in two key factors: the enduring commitment of the US to the defense of Europe through NATO, and Ukraine's fierce resistance, which has tied up the better part of Russian armed forces, barring

120. "Joint Staff Working Document – 8th Progress report on the implementation of the 2016 Joint framework on countering hybrid threats", SWD (2024) 233, Brussels: European External Action Service, October 10, 2024.

121. "New Total Defence Resolution for a Stronger Sweden", MoD Sweden Press release, October 15, 2024; "Service de vigilance et protection contre les ingérences numériques étrangères", SGDSN, November 22, 2022.

them from embarking on another military campaign. Should either of these pillars falter – be it due to announced shifts in US posture and policy, the US getting engaged in a major war elsewhere, or a breakdown in Ukrainian resilience because of wavering European support – the prospects for direct confrontation between Russia and Europe would grow significantly.

From a strict military perspective, Europe's posture remains far from optimal. Its land forces still lack critical enablers, especially long-range fires, air defense and mobility. They also struggle to increase their ammunition stockpile, equipment readiness and overall troop availability due to human resources tensions and European political fragmentation. However, these shortcomings can be partly offset by Europe's comparative advantages in the air, provided it addresses its ammunition shortage. Superiority in the maritime, space and possibly cyber domains could also be leveraged if Europe proves willing to use these domains more offensively.

Unlike Russia, Europe's economic and technological potential is largely intact, and, while the continent struggles with competitiveness, it still enjoys deeper geoeconomic depth and is better integrated into the international system. Net assessment, therefore, compels a European strategy aimed at bridging capability and capacity gaps in the domain while leveraging superiority in the Global Commons to shape the theatre and achieve multi-domain effects. To achieve this requires more than increased budgets; it demands a coherent defense economic strategy capable of sustaining high-intensity operations, reconstituting stockpiles, consolidating force generation and rebuilding industrial capacity. All of this is well within the reach of Europe's economic resources, military competence and industrial know-how. What has been missing so far is the political will to make the hard choices in public spending consistent with these stated objectives. Fulfilling these requirements will most likely involve and may even only be achieved by integrating Ukraine closely into the wider European security order. As Ukraine succeeds in resisting the Russian threat to its very existence, it shows the way to the rest of Europe, which now depends on it for its security almost as much as the other way around.

Regardless of whether a large-scale conflict breaks out, Europe will continue to face sustained Russian hybrid warfare—through disinformation, covert action, cyberattacks, and the weaponization of energy, trade and migration flows. These operations are not harmless; they aim to undermine societies from within, weaken the will to resist, and would potentially allow Moscow to achieve its objectives without risking another direct military confrontation. So far, Europe's response has been largely defensive and overly cautious. It must now get tougher, more creative, and more forward-leaning in its countermeasures. When looking at the escalation risks, one should remember that Russia's choice to remain below the threshold of open aggression means that deterrence is still functioning. To preserve this deterrence credibility, Europe must not only hold the line in the shadows of hybrid conflict but also get ready for the day when it may have to fight in the open.

	Russia	Europe
Strengths	• A structured military force, backed by a solid mobilization system and a defense industrial and technological base supported by first-rank partners (China) • Firepower advantage, particularly in the land domain • Combat endurance, political and social resilience to high casualty levels • Perceived escalation dominance linked to its superior nuclear stockpile • Disinhibition in the use of hybrid attacks and indirect warfare	• Superior training and personnel quality in every military service and at all levels of command • Superiority in the aerospace and maritime domains • High level of cooperation and interoperability between forces through to NATO standards • Stronger R&D investment and defence technological base backed by a superior strategic rear (United States, Asia-Pacific partnerships)
Weaknesses	• Quality of command at various levels is generally poor and suffers from numerous shortcomings • A lack of tactical, operational and even doctrinal agility • Eroding technological edge due to defense R&D under-investment • Inferiority in the aerospace and maritime domains	• Political fragmentation impeding efficient force generation, resulting in uncertain military resources • Fragmented and incoherent industrial and technological investment, resulting in under-efficient production capacity • Relative inferiority in the land domain due to firepower shortage • Overall lack of capacity in ammunition, M&R and some niche capabilities • Increased dependence on the United States for C2 and ISR, as well as nuclear escalation management

Political Systems and Societal Resilience

Tatiana Kastouéva-Jean and Paul Maurice

The term "resilience" is aptly applied to Ukrainian society, which has demonstrated a capacity to collectively withstand the violence of war by maintaining social cohesion, bonds of solidarity and the continuity of essential activities for over three years. For the majority of the Russian population, it is more a question of resignation, adaptation and, for some, adherence to the policy of the Kremlin, which has, moreover, skillfully cushioned several financial and psychological shocks, starting with talk of a "special military operation" (SVO) rather than a war, even if, paradoxically, the main discourse surrounding the SVO exploits the memory of the USSR's victory in World War II.

Focused on the glory of the past, this narrative plays on nationalist sentiment, dressed up as patriotism, and exacerbates anti-Western discourse with apparently effective results; according to opinion polls, support for the SVO has fluctuated between 70% and 80% throughout more than three years of the war, as has Putin's popularity.[122] Although direct polls in an authoritarian regime should be interpreted with caution, with the absence of political alternatives, even the answers to indirect questions indicate that the majority of Russians think the country is heading in the right direction, feel mainly pride for the country, are not afraid of sanctions, and look to the future with confidence.[123] After the departure of hundreds of thousands of people (who fled the outbreak of war, repressions or partial mobilization), the rate of people wishing to emigrate is at an all-time low.[124] The war has allowed the Kremlin to prioritize geopolitical issues at the expense of socio-economic development goals. It can pursue its strategic goals without immediate concern for human or economic costs, but the main question is the sustainability in the mid and long term of this policy and the ability to finance simultaneously recruitment and equipment for the front, macro-economic stability and social peace under sanctions.

Traditionally, the EU promoted its model (social market economy, environmental standards, democratic rights) as exemplary and to be

122. Levada Center poll, May 6, 2025, available at: www.levada.ru.

123. Various Levada Center polls since the beginning of the war.

124. Levada Center poll, May 27, 2025, available at: www.levada.ru. The same poll notes the negative attitude of those who remain toward those who have left, which is likely to be a dividing line in Russian society in the post-Putin era if exiled people take the path of return.

disseminated through its enlargement policy or normative influence, a dynamic often referred to as the "Brussels effect[125]". Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the proliferation of crises, the European model is no longer just promoted, but defended. The emphasis is on strategic autonomy, reindustrialization, protection of the single market, and the democratic shield. Europe's resilience *vis-à-vis* Russia rests on two fundamental pillars, which are opening the way for a broader range of factors: first, the sustained commitment to supporting Ukraine, both within public opinion and among political decision-makers, notwithstanding some political opposition; and second, a structural adherence to the democratic model, reinforced when positioned in opposition to Russian authoritarianism, and observable even within pro-Russian constituencies and currents of opinion.

Europe is marked by political and economic diversity and seems, at first glance, to struggle to unify its states (whether EU members or not) around a coherent strategy. Although European populations are accustomed to a high standard of living and are generally less tolerant of protracted disruptions, such as economic or energy crises induced by conflict, they have in their majority since 2022, albeit amid considerable economic, political and social challenges, accepted the sacrifices necessitated by the reduction of dependence on Russian hydrocarbons, the substantial reinforcement of defense capabilities, and increased investment in military technologies. Nevertheless, even if there is no unified and uniform "narrative", the determination of Europe at the level of a very large majority of its political decision-makers (national and European leaders, parliamentarians) reflects a high level of acceptance and understanding among a large majority of the European population of the need for European solidarity, both internally and toward Ukraine, in the face of Russia, whose model is widely perceived as contrary to the European way of life and values enshrined in the past and future (peace, democracy, the rule of law, economic prosperity, political alternance, individual and political freedom).

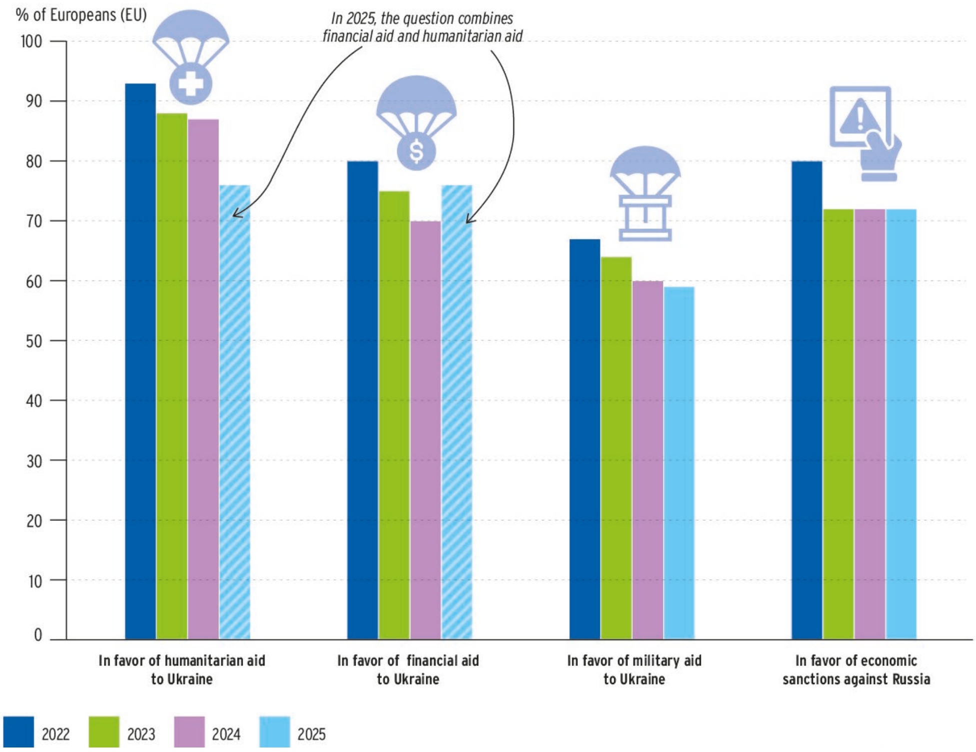
The motivations for supporting Ukraine vary across European countries and according to the political orientation of citizens.[126] Nevertheless, despite these differences, support remains strong and convergent, demonstrating Europe's ability to build society within a democratic framework and over the long term, with public debate enabling the formation of public opinion over time. Paradoxically, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the clash of models with Russia have allowed Europe to rediscover its *raison d'être* (peace and

125. A. Bradford, *The Brussels Effect: How the European Union Rules the World*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

126. Destin Commun/More in Common France, "Ukraine : le soutien des Européens se renforce dans l'adversité", Multi-country survey (US, UK, Germany, Poland, France), More in Common France, March 2025, available at: www.destincommun.fr.

democracy)[127] and to demonstrate democratic innovations to reinforce this model in the face of its competitors.

Figure 14: Europeans (EU27) in favor of providing aid to Ukraine or imposing economic sanctions on Russia



Source: Eurobarometer.

Russian population and elites are conditioned for lengthy confrontation, Europe is not

Centralized authoritarian system versus pluralism and democratic institutions

The war in Ukraine is a direct consequence of the authoritarian evolution of the Putin regime over the past 25 years. The state has been captured, and the most lucrative sectors are controlled by competing clans, with Putin acting as the ultimate arbiter. Each ordeal (the Chechen wars, terrorist acts such as Beslan in 2004, social protests throughout the country as in 2011–2012, etc.) has been an opportunity to tighten the screws, subjecting institutions and society to ever-tighter control to eliminate risks to the system, which does not tolerate any prospect of an alternative and is not preparing for the

127. C. Lequesne, "Ukraine : l'Europe retrouve-t-elle sa raison d'être ?", CERI, Sciences Po, April 2022, available at: www.sciencespo.fr.

transition of power. The change to the Constitution in 2020 at the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, which gave Putin the option of staying in power until 2036, met no serious obstacles and probably served as a litmus test that convinced the Kremlin that it could impose any decision because it has enough sticks (repressions) and carrots (money) to manage potential mass protests, especially in the context of a strategic environment depicted as hostile since the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Strategic decision-making in Russia is centralized, rapid and unconstrained. Parliament, political parties, the media, the judiciary and civil society cannot act as safeguards. The war reinforced these characteristics, transforming the regime into a fully autocratic one. The decision-making core is made up of a very narrow circle[128] of relatively elderly people (the average age of the Russian Security Council is almost 65), many of whom come from the force structures (*siloviki*) that share the same Soviet experience, allegedly criminal or mafia connections from the 1990s,[129] and the same vision of the world – and often of conspiracy ideas, as evidenced by the public speeches of Nikolai Patrushev, former chairman of the Russian Security Council – and of the West. This first-tier elites have every interest in perpetuating the Putin regime to guarantee their impunity and secure their income and the future of their offspring. A question thus arises about the quality of information that Putin receives: Is he locked in an echo chamber in which various institutions and individuals compete to tell him what he wants to hear? The decision to launch the SVO aiming at regime change in Kyiv was the clear result of Putin's misinformation, his misjudgment of Ukrainians' capacity to resist, and his underestimation of Europe's willingness to support them.

Almost no major representative of the second-tier political, economic or military elites has resigned or denounced Putin's policies. Even if they were shocked by the decision to invade Ukraine, remaining loyal is the best way to guarantee their place in the system whereas protesting can raise serious risks. Their priority of self-preservation would be best served by a Russian victory in Ukraine, as defeat could potentially provoke destabilization and call their positioning into question. Other factors that push them to stay loyal are fear of repression, the meagre choices left by Western sanctions, the possibility of gaining additional profits and new assets, and a feeling of resentment against the West, which is obviously more widespread than before the invasion.[130]

128. The filmed meeting of the Security Council on February 21, 2022 showed that the majority of its members were unaware of the invasion that was being prepared.
129. G. Ackerman and S. Courtois (eds.), *Le Livre noir de Vladimir Poutine*, Paris: Perrin/Robert Laffont, 2022; C. Belton, *Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took on the West*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020; F. Thom, *Comprendre le poutinisme*, Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2018.
130. Various reports and articles by journalists A. Pertzev and F. Roustamova, and political analyst T. Stanovaya, who regularly talk to the elites, and author's [authors' – there are two authors of this chapter] regular personal conversations with them.

Figure 15: Permanent members of the Security Council of the Russian Federation

Source: Kremlin.

However, the risks and pressures faced by the elites have increased since the start of the war, as evidenced by the many arrests of governors and other officials, a series of murders of former officials and top-level managers in Russia and abroad,[131] the suicide of the former governor of the Kursk region, Roman Starovoit, the departure of Deputy Kremlin Chief of Staff Dmitry Kozak, etc. Prigozhin's mutiny in June 2023 was a moment of uncertainty for

131. Shortlist published by *Meduza*, July 7, 2025, available at: https://meduza.io.

the system, raising the question of whether the elites are loyal to the leader just as long as he is able to control the system or seek to perpetuate the regime he embodies. Putin managed the situation in a demonstratively violent way (killing Prigozhin) and regained the loyalty of the elites.

Donald Trump's arrival in power seemed to fuel hope within the elites;[132] some saw it as a window of opportunity that would allow an acceptable solution to end the war, but this opportunity is likely to be missed due to Putin's personal involvement and intransigence.[133] These groups have no power to influence decisions and are usually afraid to speak out publicly, except for criticism – which can be very sharp – relating to the country's bleak economic prospects. A recent interview with Zaporojie (occupied Ukrainian region) senator and former Roskosmos director, involved in drones operations at the front, Dmitry Rogozin[134] – in which this Putin loyalist publicly acknowledged that the front was at a stalemate and there were "no signs of achieving objectives" in the war against Ukraine – was an exception and a clear sign of doubts and discontent among these elites, which may become increasingly visible. The question is whether they will incite Putin to initiate a new "partial mobilization" (as urged by many Z-patriotic Telegram channels) to ensure a breakthrough at the front, to engage in negotiations, or to continue the war of attrition as long as possible in the hope that Ukraine will collapse internally or that Europe will change its stance and reduce its support for Kyiv. The last option is the most plausible as long as the Russian war economy permits it.

So far, Putin's system has shown stability in war conditions. Unlike Ukraine, Russia has declared neither war nor martial law, and regional, municipal and even presidential elections (March 2024) have been held on schedule. However, the next parliamentary elections in 2026 already seem to be of concern to the presidential administration, which does not know whether it will have to prepare for them in conditions of war or of peace.[135] It is unlikely that these elections will be contested, unless there is a severe economic crisis or a major natural or man-made disaster occurs shortly before the elections. The regional and municipal elections in September 2025 were rather reassuring for the authorities. As the last test before the 2026 parliamentary elections, these elections indicated that there is currently little potential for protest and that the system under Kremlin control remains stable; the dominance of the United Russia party was confirmed and even strengthened in several regional parliaments, voter turnout was respectable (46–47% on average, 8% higher compared to a similar campaign in 2022) thanks to the usual mobilization of state-funded employees and pensioners, while the other parliamentary parties (Communist Party, LDPR, Fair Russia)

132. *Eurasia Daily*, January 22, 2025, available at: https://eadaily.com.
133. J. Kruse, "2025 Worldwide Threat Assessment", Washington, D.C.: Defense Intelligence Agency, May 2025, available at: https://armedservices.house.gov.
134. September 19, 2025, available at: https://vk.com.
135. A. Pertzev, "Hope for a Successor", Riddl, May 9, 2025, available at: https://ridl.io.

saw their electorate progressively eroded and the New People party struggled to take off despite a few local successes. In 2025, approximately 1,000 participants and veterans of SVO were elected at various levels (2.6 times more than in 2024), or about 62% of all registered SVO candidates, most of them representing the ruling United Russia party. Nevertheless, they represent 1.4% of all candidates.[136] If there is no sudden accident before then (which is by definition difficult to predict), for the next presidential elections (2030), the scenario of transferring power to an appointed successor cannot be completely ruled out, especially if the aging Russian president's health deteriorates. But transferring all the powers accumulated over several decades to a successor could put the system at risk, at the same time as Putin's own security. A partial transfer (a scenario in which Putin would remain, for example, as head of the State Council, which was widely discussed in 2018) could fracture loyalties, as during the Putin–Medvedev tandem, a situation that Putin would certainly prefer to avoid. Discussions on the transition are still theoretical at this stage, because Putin is not planning to leave anytime soon, as reflected in his conversation about longevity and immortality with the Chinese president, which was overheard in early September 2025 in Beijing.[137] The option of Putin remaining as president until 2036 (when he will be 84), as authorized by the 2020 revision of the Constitution, is plausible, although the 2030 elections will, nevertheless, be a critical moment, depending on the outcome of the war and the evolution of the socio-economic situation. This complete lack of horizon for post-Putin Russia is the regime's long-term vulnerability; in the absence of functional institutions and clear transition rules, a chaotic outcome of a potential struggle between different factions would leave the door open to destabilizing scenarios. Neither a peaceful transition nor the perpetuation of the regime in its current state is guaranteed.

Europe, and more specifically the EU, draws its strength, but at the same time its weakness, from its pluralistic democratic system, its robust supranational institutions, and its societal appeal, which contrast with Russia's authoritarian and centralized model. The democratic political system – even if it is increasingly criticized – allows even the most critical voices to plan for the short or medium term. Even when citizens hope for political change led by Eurosceptic or populist parties, they still act within the democratic framework and place their hopes in it – which, paradoxically, ends up reinforcing the system's legitimacy.

The EU's decision-making mechanisms, although slow (particularly when unanimous decisions are required), allows for a collective response that Russia, dependent on centralized leadership, cannot match. While this is presented in Russian propaganda and its outlets in Europe (particularly on

136. *Novaya Gazeta*, September 10, 2025, available at: https://novayagazeta.eu.
137. L. Kent, A. Chernova and N. Kennedy, "Xi and Putin Overheard Talking About Immortality and Organ Transplants", CNN, September 3, 2025, available at: https://edition.cnn.com.

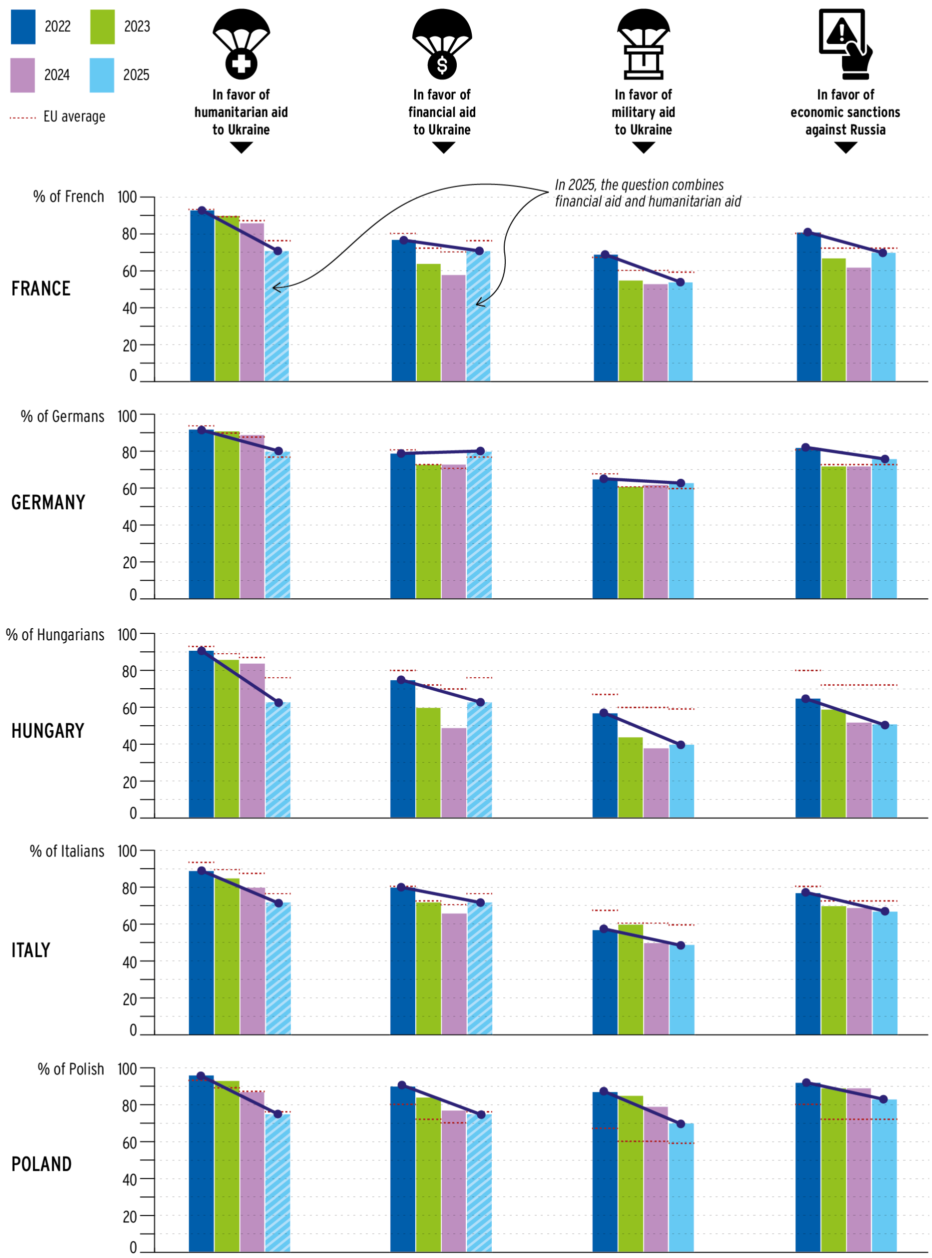
social media) as the EU's main weakness, this collective response gives it much stronger legitimacy, enabling it to stand the test of time. Furthermore, with the exceptions of Slovakia and Hungary, the political changes inherent in democracy (which have sometimes brought populist parties to power, e.g. in the Netherlands and Italy) have not undermined European states' support for Ukraine; motivations and arguments differ and evolve, but political determination and public acceptance are growing stronger.

The change in public opinion figures since February 2022 should not be interpreted as a decline in support for Ukraine, but rather as a long-term strengthening of resilient European public opinion, which considers that its European way of life must be preserved. Support was very high in February 2022 due to the emotions provoked by the violence at the start of the war. It has certainly declined as the conflict has evolved, but it has remained largely in the majority in Europe and has even experienced phases of positive recovery. It is true that attitudes vary across different European societies, notably due to their specific historical relationships with Russia. Some societies (Poland, the Baltic states) are willing to accept a reduction in their standard of living to support Ukraine and, ultimately, the security of the entire European continent. Others, to preserve their accustomed standard of living, signal that they would be ready to negotiate with Moscow at the expense of Ukraine (Hungary, Slovakia, Austria, eastern Germany) and, ultimately, at the expense of Europe's security. But this is a sign of the vitality of a democracy in which public opinion evolves and fluctuates due to cyclical and structural factors.

An overwhelming majority of Europeans agree that Russia is responsible for the conflict and that Vladimir Putin is a dictator (82% in Poland, 73% in the UK, 64% in Germany, 63% in France). In the face of adversity, European support for Ukraine has grown stronger; 57% of French people are in favor of it, even without the US. This is also the case for 54% of Germans, and even two-thirds of Poles and Britons. French support for Ukraine's possible accession to the European Union has increased significantly over the past year: 46% are now in favor, compared to only 34% in February 2024, while 43% of Germans share this opinion (+3 points since early 2024).[138]

138. "Ukraine: European Support Grows Stronger in the Face of Adversity", Multi-country survey (US, UK, Germany, Poland, France), More in Common France, March 2025, available at: www.destincommun.fr.

Figure 16: Support of European public opinion for Ukraine



Source: Eurobarometer.

However, in spite of the EU's democratic legitimacy and collective strengths, it is at a disadvantage compared to Russia when it comes to endurance. To bridge this gap, Europe should strengthen its cohesion, invest in its strategic autonomy, and raise awareness among its populations of the need for long-term resilience.

Russia: social adaptations to war, but with strong polarization

"Sticks": the tools of social control

To control society, the Russian regime uses a variety of tools, including three essential types: 1) propaganda and control of constantly adapted narratives; 2) targeted repression and elimination of opposition; 3) co-optation and loyalty rewards.

In a May 2025 documentary,[139] Putin acknowledged that it would have been "unrealistic to start the special military operation in 2014, as the country was not ready for confrontation with the collective West". Indeed, the eight years prior to the full-scale invasion were effectively used to prepare public opinion by relentlessly painting Ukraine as a state under a "Nazi regime" manipulated by the aggressive, Russophobic "Collective West". The war put any criticism of power (arbitrariness, social injustice, corruption) on hold and brought the state and the population closer together through the grand national narrative conveyed by propaganda, taking advantage of the fertile ground created by the collapse of the USSR, the loss of control of the former sphere of influence, and international strategic downgrading. This gradual, long-term conditioning largely prepared the ground for acceptance of the "special military operation", presented as a defensive, forced but necessary act. Spending on state propaganda (media, federal television channels, promotion of pro-Kremlin content on the internet) has reached new heights according to the latest draft budget (146.3 billion rubles or $1,77 billion – up 6.6% from last year and up 28% from 2021[140]), even though some of these outlets (television channels) are gradually losing their audience.[141] About 25.96 billion rubles ($317 million) of this will go to the Institute for Internet Development, one of the Kremlin's main vehicles for producing youth-oriented propaganda.

With Alexey Navalny's death in prison (in February 2024) and forced exile or prison for other leaders, the liberal opposition was decapitated. An arsenal of repressive laws threatening the exercise of several professions, liberty and physical integrity, silenced dissenting voices within the country. In September 2025, the Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation, Mariana Katzarova,[142] listed 3,850 criminal prosecutions (including of minors) for political reasons;

139. P. Zarubin, documentary "Rossiâ.Kreml.Putin. 25 ans" [Russia.Kremlin.Putin. 25 Years], Rossia 1, May 4, 2025.

140. "More Taxes for More War: Unpacking Russia's 2026 Budget", *Moscow Times*, October 7, 2025, available at: www.themoscowtimes.com.

141. Levada Center poll, September 11, 2025, available at: www.levada.ru.

142. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation, Mariana Katzarova "Situation of Human Rights in the Russian Federation Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Russian Federation", Human Rights Council Sixtieth Session September 8–October 3, 2025, available at: www.ohchr.org.

1,040 people and entities had been labelled "foreign agents" and 245 foreign and international organizations had been declared "undesirable". Between 2024 and 2025, at least 258 cases of torture were documented, with almost total impunity for law enforcement agencies. Political prisoners accounted for between 20% and 30% of all people in pretrial detention, illustrating the extent to which the criminal justice system is being used to repress dissent. The report concludes that the level of ideological control is now comparable to that at the end of the Soviet era, but with much harsher methods. Since the start of the war, cases of discrimination, violence, media and digital censorship (in 2025, more than 1.2 million Internet resources were blocked in Russia) are not simply abuses, but constitute a deliberate state policy. They have become part of an established system of political violence, integrated into the very model of power.

Discreet civil resistance still exists, however, in the country, with different communities (journalists, human rights defenders, artists, writers and ordinary citizens) working at their peril to maintain horizontal links between themselves and with those in exile. The minority (around 15% if we cross-reference various polls) of war opponents made themselves known in the early days of the war through spontaneous street protests, signed anti-war petitions and even engaged in acts of sabotage. They were visible at the funeral of Navalny and at the collection of signatures for the aborted anti-war candidate in the 2024 presidential elections, Boris Nadejdine. They use virtual private networks (VPNs) to access uncensored information and opposition YouTube channels. We could see them re-emerge publicly if the regime weakens or if the repression is eased. Meanwhile, the space for silent and clandestine resistance that was still possible at the beginning of the war (anti-war exhibitions or poetry readings in private apartments, books or plays by anti-war authors, semi-clandestine activities by a few regional associations such as the Revolt Center in Syktyvkar, etc.) is steadily shrinking with arrests, the criminalization of all unauthorized activity, the weekly labeling of "foreign agents" and the exile of the most committed and educated, as well as younger, people. Social exchanges are increasingly strained by fear of denunciation, and while civil society that shares democratic and liberal values remains alive, it is being rendered almost invisible in the public sphere.[143]

"Carrots": cushioned shocks and "rewards"

In 2025, it has become increasingly difficult for Russians to ignore various direct and indirect shocks and tensions of the war (Ukrainian drone strikes, fuel shortages at gas stations, travel difficulties, inability to make calls on WhatsApp, inflation, tax increases, etc.), which require constant adaptation. But for a long time, the majority of Russians have not been directly

143. *The Invisible Voices of the Russian Protest*, Report of the Association "D'Est", November 2023, available at: https://mcusercontent.com.

confronted with the military, economic and social consequences of the war. In August 2025, 40% of Russians said they were not personally affected by the war at all, compared to 22% who said they were very strongly affected (16% in January 2023).[144] From the beginning, the government has cushioned some of the shocks; it made it easy for Russian entrepreneurs to circumvent sanctions by allowing "parallel imports" from the start of the war, and turns a blind eye to, or even encourages, the infringement of property rights on Western products.[145] Together, these measures have addressed various shortcomings and frustrations and preserved a sense of normalcy.

While the major urban centers have remained relatively unscathed, the Russian periphery, which has been sending more people to the front, has even found economic and social opportunities in the war thanks to generous payments and bonuses, which are several times higher than average salaries in economically depressed regions. Putin's regime of "Deathnomics"[146] has turned death into a rational choice for Russian men, with money becoming the primary motivation for enlistment.[147] The Russian authorities claim that up to 35,000 contracts are signed every month, and the prospect of negotiations that arose with the arrival of Trump even temporarily encouraged enlistment by creating a sense that the risks were lower while the financial rewards remained high.[148] In addition to salaries and bonuses for volunteers, social benefits are offered to wives and children. The war thus became a "social elevator" for several categories of people.[149] The question is whether there will still be enough volunteers if salaries and payments can no longer be paid or increased at the same rate – a trend of dual decline that is already beginning to emerge in some regions. Two shocks greatly destabilized Russians but they were ultimately absorbed. The first was the "partial mobilization" in September 2022, which sparked off a few local riots that were quickly brought under control and caused thousands of people to flee abroad. Since then, the government has sought to avoid a similar occurrence by favoring generous payments to volunteers recruited essentially in peripheral regions or in prisons (the prison population fell from 433,000 before the war to 313,000 at the beginning of 2025),[150] offering those under criminal prosecution the chance to atone by going to the front. But there is no doubt that, if the Kremlin decides that a new mobilization is needed, everything has been prepared for this scenario. The registers of

144. Sondage du Centre Levada, August 9, 2025, available at: www.levada.ru.
145. V. Inozemtsev, "The Rise of an 'Alternative Globalization'", Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), December 16, 2024, available at: www.memri.org.
146. A term coined by political analyst Vladislav Inozemtsev in "Putinskaya 'smertonomika'" [Putin's "Deathonomics"], Riddle Russia, July 10, 2023, available at: https://ridl.io.
147. Cf. O. Gerassimenko's report from a contract recruitment point, *Verstka*, October 15, 2024, available at: https://verstka.media.
148. Ya. Kluge, "Treacherous Hope: 'Peace Talks' and Payouts Boost Russian Recruitment", Substack, April 13, 2025, available at: https://janiskluge.substack.com.
149. M. Laruelle, "War as Social Elevator: The Socioeconomic Impact of Russian Military Keynesianism", *Russie.Eurasie.Visions*, No. 139, Ifri, June 2025, available at: www.ifri.org.
150. *Nezavissimaya Gazeta*, February 26, 2025, available at: www.ng.ru.

people eligible for mobilization have been digitized, the law has been tightened for those who can seek to escape it, and the lists of people in companies exempt from mobilization have been reduced. At the same time, a new provision in Russian law allows reservists to be recruited throughout the year, without waiting for an official declaration of mobilization or a state of war. The second shock was the invasion of the Kursk region by the Ukrainians; to avoid weakening the front line in the Donbass, its liberation required recourse to North Korean forces. As with the drones that strike Russian territory, this shock was eventually turned in the Kremlin's favor to fuel resentment against the Ukrainians.

Generous payments to soldiers, combined with an emphasis on men's patriotic duty, also promoted by Russia's highly macho society, have influenced the population's perception of the high losses at the front – making them more acceptable. The official figures are concealed by the authorities, but the level of losses is visible in every Russian cemetery. The political situation is very different from the wars in Afghanistan (15,000 dead between 1979 and 1889) and Chechnya (officially, 11,000 Russian soldiers dead in 1995–1996 and 1999–2000), when committees of soldiers' mothers were free to take political action to influence the government, with the support of both society and the media. The women's movement mobilized against the SVO was made invisible, intimidated or coopted. Loyalist, pro-war associations have emerged; voluntary activities ranging from collecting money and items[151] for the front to women's courses in drone guidance are supported by the state. This form of activism in an autocracy is not a threat to power, but an asset.[152]

Between the anti-war and pro-war groups, the majority of Russians opted for strategies of avoidance, withdrawing into their professional and personal lives and distancing themselves as far as possible from the state, politics and war. The risk of denunciation and a certain psychological fatigue mean that Russians talk very little about war among themselves, convinced that "the little people don't decide anything" and "the state knows best what to do". However, the hidden turmoil of Russian society can be seen in the increasing use of anti-depressants[153] and of the number of consultations with psychotherapists, especially among educated people in urban centers.[154] Many make contradictory judgments; some critics of Putin and his domestic policy may support his foreign policy and the war; those who claim to be anti-war may enjoy the benefits it offers (by going, for example, to rebuild the occupied

151. In 2025, four out of ten respondents collected money and items to help participants in the special operation. Almost half of the respondents were willing to donate 1,000–2,000 rubles per month for the needs of the army and to increase payments to military personnel participating in the SVO. See Levada Center poll, October 21, 2025, available at: www.levada.ru.

152. V. Bederson, "Gorizontalnye iskrivleniâ: ucastue a deâtelnisti obsestvennyh organisatsiy i podderzka regima" [Horizontal Distortions: Participation and Activities of Associations and Support for the Regime], 14e Chroniki project, Riddle, April 22, 2025, available at: https://ridl.io.

153. *The Moscow Times*, January 17, 2025, available at: www.moscowtimes.ru.

154. *Kommersant*, February 16, 2025, available at: www.kommersant.ru.

Ukrainian territories). The share of those who support the SVO falls when it comes to sending a loved one to war; conversely, among those who favor negotiations, few would agree to return the occupied territories to Ukraine or pay reparations.[155] The idea of Russian collective responsibility for the war is rejected by the vast majority. Some Russians feel that the war has caused more harm (human losses) while others, while regretting the losses, see gains ("liberation" of territories and Russian speakers, strengthening Russia's sovereignty and international prestige, import substitution favoring national producers. The majority (73%) support Putin's position: no ceasefire until the roots of the conflict have been eliminated. However, war fatigue is steadily increasing; in the latest Levada poll, 66% of respondents now say it is time to move to peace talks, the highest percentage recorded so far, while only 27% believe military action should continue, the lowest level since polling began. Moreover, among younger cohorts the support for peace talks was 80%, with only 13% for continuing the war. However, this attitude does not translate into political protest, because of extremely high risks.

Low potential of protests

Generally speaking, large-scale protests in post-Soviet Russia have remained limited and localized, even if they took place during a period of greater political freedom and less repression. For example, the major demonstrations of 2011–2012, triggered by protests against the December 2011 parliamentary elections, saw peak participation in Moscow reaching around 150,000 people during the rallies in December 2011. Social protests such as those in defense of the Khimki forest, against the Shies landfills, or in support of Sergey Furgal, the arrested governor of the Khabarovsk region (which lasted a record several months), remained strictly regional.

The loyalty of the *siloviki,* the main force of repression, is important. They are generously rewarded by the Kremlin, and their powers and impunity seem unlimited. The draft of Russia's federal budget for 2026 allocates approximately 3.5 trillion rubles ($43 billion) to law enforcement agencies (including funding for the police, the Russian Guard, special services, the prosecutor's office, and others). This makes up around 8% of the federal budget. In 2027, spending on law enforcement agencies is expected to increase to 4 trillion rubles ($49 billion). By comparison, planned spending on education and healthcare in 2026 is just 1.7 trillion ($20.9 billion) and 1.9 trillion rubles ($23.4 billion), respectively.[156] In the current conditions of propaganda and repression, it is highly unlikely that the Russian population can be the driving force for political changes in the country. Even military action beyond Ukraine (against a NATO country)

155. Levada Center Poll, June 2, 2025, available at: www.levada.ru.
156. *Budget dlâ grazdan 2025-2027* [Budget for Citizens 2025–2027], available at: http://government.ru.

would probably not bring Russians out into the streets; from the beginning, Putin has framed the war as a righteous fight against NATO.

In addition to the repressions, long-term conditioning and "learned helplessness" (a phrase coined for the Russian case by political analyst and journalist A. Kolesnikov) bolster the Kremlin's hard line. This loyalty to the state, whatever the regime, and the ability to stand firm and adapt to changing discourse from above is part of the resilience of the aging Russian population (29.8 million retirees in 2000 and 34.5 million in 2023, according to the federal statistics service Rosstat), still very much conditioned by Soviet reflexes. Russians are very likely to remain loyal to the Kremlin for as long as the SVO continues – although that loyalty may gradually erode once the war ends, especially if the postwar period brings economic or social hardship.

Finally, Russia is already confronted with the challenge of integrating veterans into civilian life. With the memory of veterans of the war in Afghanistan in the 1990s, the Kremlin is fully aware of the problems this can pose – from prosthetics and employment support to social integration, symbolic recognition and potential criminalization. These are being addressed at both regional and federal levels. However, their real impact will be difficult to assess before the war ends. The presence of veterans in society, depending on the reality of Putin's desire to turn them into "new elites", may harden intolerance of dissenting political voices at home and rejection of the West, but new social tensions are also likely to emerge as the combatants will return in huge numbers to their homes after the end of the war. The Russian Ministry of Labor has ordered more than 1.5 million certificates for combat veterans[157] (by way of comparison, in the 1980s, veterans of the Afghan war numbered 620,000, and their communities experienced a high rate of criminalization). The poorest regions that paid the highest price in the war (Tyva, Buryatia, Altai, Krasnoyarsk Krai, and others) will not accept being less well treated than the major urban centers that provided fewer soldiers for the front. Violence and crime are likely to increase if the state does not provide sufficient funding for rehabilitation and integration programs for veterans.[158] Economic difficulties and the probable return to low wages for those who were well paid during the war, along with the allocation of considerable funds to any newly annexed territories at the expense of other Russian regions, could provoke social and infra/intra-regional tensions. Meanwhile, Western sanctions designed for long-term impact could undermine the possibility of financing the war, as well as macroeconomic stability and social peace. The "social contract" is holding for now, but economic problems are gradually accumulating, while anxieties among the

157. *Verstka*, May 27, 2025, available at: https://verstka.media.

158. Since 2022, the number of cases of domestic violence involving military personnel has almost doubled. According to journalistic investigations, war veterans in Russia have committed crimes against civilians, resulting in more than 750 deaths or injuries. Quoted in the Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation, Mariana Katzarova, op. cit.

public and tensions among the elites are manifold and may eventually combine and weaken the regime.

Europe: Institutional reactions and strengthening of solidarity

The anti-Cassandra: limited risk of EU implosion

Currently, the main risk is not that of the EU imploding in the face of the war in Ukraine, but rather a change in the EU's DNA with the arrival or strengthening of populist forces that have toned down their pro-Russian rhetoric and been emboldened by the change of administration in the US. Pro-Russian or Eurosceptic populist parties in Europe (RN and LFI in France, AfD and BSW in Germany, FPÖ in Austria, Liga in Italy, Fidesz in Hungary) are exploiting economic and migration frustrations, which could erode the cohesion of the EU. These populist forces share a rejection of "Brussels elitism" and, prior to Donald Trump's election, a distrust of Atlanticist alliances (NATO, US). Their political weight throughout Europe shapes both the political debate and the policy agendas of traditional parties. Nevertheless, despite their alignment with Trump, a question of consistency persists, as he disrupts the political landscape by, for instance, praising Emmanuel Macron, much to the frustration of the French president's populist opponents in France.

Despite internal tensions (which are inherent in a democratic system) and the rise of populist parties, some of which have paradoxically and often contradictorily asserted their pro-Russian affinities since the start of the war in Ukraine, the risk of the EU imploding remains very limited in the short and medium term. In the short term (2025–2027), the risk of implosion is low given that the EU has demonstrated its capacity to overcome major crises (Brexit, the 2015 migration crisis with 1.3 million asylum seekers, the war in Ukraine) and because mechanisms such as Article 7 of the TFEU (suspension of voting rights for Hungary in 2024) and the conditionality of European funds (€12 billion suspended for Hungary) help to contain authoritarian tendencies. In the medium term (2027–2035), however, the risk increases slightly.

We can identify four main scenarios of EU implosion, even though the estimated risk remains very low for each of them. First, a scenario of eurozone breakup, which remains unlikely in the immediate term; recent economic studies highlight the vulnerability of several economies, particularly the French, Italian and Greek, due to high debt levels and low growth. The immediate risk of a systemic collapse is considered limited, but exposure to a debt crisis remains a factor to monitor. Experts do not provide quantified probabilities of implosion, but they emphasize that "excessive debt, sluggish growth, and market volatility" create high uncertainty.[159] Second, a scenario of political implosion linked to the rise of nationalism; the accumulation of democratic, economic or migratory crises increases this risk, especially with the rise to power of far-right or populist parties in Central and Southern Europe (Hungary, Poland, Italy, etc.). With the historic surge of the far right in the June 2024 European elections, around 25% of European Parliament seats are held by nationalist or populist parties (in France, the RN exceeds 30%, with record figures also in Germany, Austria and the Netherlands). This wave has intensified tensions in European governance, but these parties tend to favor "change from within". The risk of implosion would therefore depend on a political crisis triggered by the victory of an extreme party on the national level.[160] Third, a scenario of institutional collapse (disengagement, decision-making gridlock); this is unlikely but could occur if "every state for itself" tendencies increase, and solidarity recedes. This is a plausible "catastrophic scenario" in the medium term, though unlikely in the short term, as strong economic interdependence continues to act as a stabilizing factor. Fourth, a geopolitical scenario in which the EU becomes divided on major issues such as Ukraine or Russia. This could happen if the EU loses unity on key strategic matters due to internal or external political shifts (e.g., American disengagement, Russian pressure, etc.). The probability currently appears very low, but it depends on national factors and the evolving positions of other actors.

The risk of a creeping discrediting of the EU, and more specifically of the Commission, is growing as its initiatives are increasingly perceived as encroaching on national competences. Several factors fuel this resentment. First, certain proposals for common policies – particularly in the social and energy fields – are seen as an expansion of EU powers beyond the principle of conferral set out in Article 5 of the Treaty on European Union, sparking criticism of excessive centralization in Brussels. This sense of encroachment is reinforced by the proliferation of cross-cutting initiatives such as the "Union of Skills", which, although designed as a tool of economic resilience, blurs the line between coordination and mandatory harmonization.[161]

In response, some member states seek to highlight the limits of the Commission's mandate and vigorously defend subsidiarity, thereby increasing the likelihood of blocking minorities in the Council, especially on issues still requiring a high qualified majority. This dynamic fosters a climate of mutual mistrust; on the one hand, a Commission accused of legislative "hyperactivity" to compensate for decision-making paralysis; on the other, national governments are quick to wield the veto as a political instrument.

159. "Economic Forecast: A Gradual Rebound in an Adverse Environment, Autumn 2024", European Commission, November 2024, available at: https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu; *Études économiques de l'OCDE : Union européenne et zone euro 2025*, Paris: OECD Publishing, available at: www.oecd.org.
160. "Montée de l'extrême droite en Europe – Faits et chiffres", Statista Research Department, May 6, 2024, available at: https://fr.statista.com.
161. "Union of Skills: Investing in People for a Competitive European Union", European Commission, March 5, 2025, available at: https://commission.europa.eu.

The slowness and complexity of early-warning procedures against Commission overreach further undermine trust in the democratic functioning of the EU. This vicious circle of institutional mistrust and political deadlock could ultimately threaten the credibility of European integration itself.

Moscow relies on political allies in Europe, particularly on the far right and within the conspiracist sphere, to spread these hostile narratives against the Commission and against the very idea of shared European sovereignty. Content influenced by this propaganda often surfaces in national debates around enlargement or common energy policies, deepening skepticism toward Brussels.[162]

In August 2025, for example, Russian intelligence services (SVR) fabricated a campaign claiming that Brussels was preparing a "regime change" in Hungary, accusing the Commission of plotting to overthrow Viktor Orbán's government – a claim subsequently amplified across Telegram and X by pro-Kremlin networks.[163] This strategy seeks to bolster Euroscepticism in Central and Eastern Europe and to encourage the emergence of blocking minorities within the Council.

Finally, these methods are designed to test the EU's overall political resilience, to condemn it to slow decision-making, and to divert attention from the war in Ukraine. The instrumentalization of institutional discredit thus becomes a central tool of Russia's strategy of European fragmentation.[164]

An implosion scenario would require a convergence of electoral victories by populist parties, a prolonged economic crisis, and a weakening of European institutions. In the medium term, the risk of implosion will depend on the EU's ability to maintain economic growth and meet citizens' expectations on immigration and security. The EU has shown great resilience, but a succession of major crises could increase the risk of fragmentation.

Conversely, another scenario for 2030 would be a weakening of populist influence in Europe. In the Polish elections on October 15, 2023, Donald Tusk's center-right Civic Platform, the Third Way party, and the Left together won more than 53.52% of the vote, compared to 35.58% for the Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość – PiS). Although it won the presidential election in June 2025, the election of Karol Nawrocki will paradoxically enable Donald Tusk's government to renew its legitimacy at home (a confidence vote has strengthened the internal cohesion of the pro-

162. L. Warlouzet, "Changement de régime : le texte intégral du rapport soutenu par les cercles pro-Trump pour subvertir l'Union", *Le Grand Continent*, March 25, 2025, available at: https://legrandcontinent.eu.
163. "'Fake news': Moscou affirme que l'UE préparerait un 'changement de régime' en Hongrie", Euronews, August 18, 2025, available at: https://fr.euronews.com.
164. C. A. Kostov, "L'Europe face à la 'mise à l'épreuve permanente' imposée par la Russie", The Conversation, October 17, 2025, available at: https://theconversation.com.

European government) – although challenges remain due to internal divisions within the government. In Hungary, a change of government could take place in the 2026 elections. Péter Magyar's TISZA party (the main opponent to Orbán from within the system) is currently credited with 51% in the polls, compared to 36–37% for Fidesz.[165] The Romanian presidential elections on May 18, 2025, despite being marked by instability, saw the victory of the liberal and pro-European mayor of Bucharest, Nicuşor Dan, over George Simion, a nationalist and Eurosceptic candidate. The mobilization of the electorate, particularly Romanians living abroad or with dual nationality (Moldovans), demonstrated the resilience of pro-European societies in terms of their commitment to Europe.

Populists: strong symbolic power, but limited power to cause harm

At the European Council level, only Orbán's Hungary (Fidesz) and Fico's Slovakia (Smer) consistently block EU decisions, such as Hungary's veto of €6.5 billion in aid to Ukraine in 2024. In response, the EU has developed countermeasures, forming ad hoc coalitions, using off-budget financing or intergovernmental mechanisms (e.g., €50 billion for Ukraine in 2023), thus bypassing Hungarian obstruction.

Although it seems to encompass parties from across the ideological spectrum, including both the far left and the far right, a genuine populist "common front" is unlikely to emerge, even though individually, at the national level (and therefore within the Council of the EU), they represent potential allies of Putin's Russia, and vice versa. These parties share Euroscepticism and some sympathy for Russia's anti-liberal rhetoric but diverge on priorities:

Within *the far-right spectrum*, France's RN and Germany's AfD emphasize immigration and "Islamization" and capitalize on economic decline, while Fidesz focuses on sovereignty and traditional values. However, the AfD emphasizes economic sovereignty, skepticism toward NATO and historical closeness to Russia, whereas the RN has adopted a more identity-focused stance that increasingly distances it from its earlier "sovereignist" position, and since 2022 has maintained a more ambivalent approach toward Russia. After the 2024 European Parliament elections, far-right populists hold 25% of the European Parliament – European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR): 78 seats; Patriots: 84; Europe of Sovereign Nations Group (ENS): 25 – but divisions persist.

Although it is difficult to categorize inside the far-right spectrum due to the presence of clearly far-right parties that performed well in the last presidential election ("Konfederacja" – "Confederation Liberty and

165. "Hungarian Opposition Party Has 15-point lead Ahead of Orban's Fidesz, Poll Says," Reuters, June 18, 2025, available at: www.reuters.com.

Independence", and "Konfederacja Korony Polskiej" – "Confederation of the Polish Crown"), the Polish PiS (ECR) represents, for its voters, a strong form of Euroscepticism, which it leverages in its electoral rhetoric.[166] The PiS is strongly anti-Russian, in contrast to Hungary's Fidesz.

The electoral strength of the far right depends mainly on national contexts. European coordination remains unlikely despite backing from figures like Elon Musk or MAGA, since electorates prioritize domestic issues. This is reflected notably in the mutual admiration between Giorgia Meloni and her party, Fratelli d'Italia, and Elon Musk, who is seen as an idealized libertarian-conservative figure.

European far-left parties often combine anti-imperialism, anti-NATO sentiment and criticism of Western capitalism, which shapes their positions on Russia. They tend to reject assigning exclusive responsibility for conflicts to Moscow, while denouncing NATO expansion and Western interventions. Their average electoral weight is relatively low (between 5% and 15% depending on the country), although support is stronger in former Soviet bloc countries with a communist or post-communist tradition, where voters are more skeptical of NATO. The group that unites them in the European Parliament, The Left, is relatively small, with 46 MEPs (some parties are not members, such as Germany's BSW and Slovakia's SMER).

Regarding Russia, most far-left parties advocate the lifting of sanctions. Russia is often seen as a counterbalance to American and European influence, but support is usually limited or indirect and is mainly symbolic rather than political. Substantial differences exist, however. Germany's BSW, and to a lesser extent Die Linke, criticize sanctions on Russia and favor a diplomatic solution to the war in Ukraine. Some parties display a historical sympathy for both the Soviet Union and contemporary Russia, grounded in anti-NATO reasoning. France's LFI condemns the Russian invasion but adopts a more nuanced discourse on responsibilities, also criticizing NATO and Western policies. While their primary foreign policy appeal rests more on strong criticism of Israel and support for Palestinians in the Gaza conflict than on the Ukraine–Russia debate, the LFI's underlying ideological tendency remains strongly favorable to Russia. In his text published on August 14 regarding the meeting between Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump in Alaska, Jean-Luc Mélenchon framed the war in Ukraine through a Cold War and anti-imperialist lens. He argued that the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest was a key factor leading to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and demanded the removal of "Zelenski" [sic] as a condition for a peace agreement, thereby echoing the Russian narrative.[167]

166. "Poland Says Berlin and Paris Running EU as an 'Oligarchy'", *Deutsche Welle*, August 16, 2022, available at: www.dw.com.
167. J.-L. Mélenchon, "En Alaska, le début cruel d'un nouvel ordre du monde", August 14, 2025, available at: https://melenchon.fr.

Russian influence exists but is limited. Moscow has supported populists via loans (e.g., FN/RN in the 2010s) and disinformation, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe. In Hungary, pro-Russian narratives benefit from old Soviet networks, as can be observed in eastern Germany. Recent accusations – such as that France manipulated Romania's election – likely reflect Russian frustration after failed disinformation campaigns. Yet mistrust of Russia has grown since Ukraine, and EU countermeasures further restrict its impact. Public opinion at the European level also constrains the populists: 65% of Europeans support NATO (88% in Estonia, 82% in Poland), thus limiting pro-Russian narratives.

Identity fractures running through European societies today provide fertile ground for populist movements, even though their ability to durably destabilize states remains limited. These divisions – between cultures of belonging rooted in national identity and cultures of autonomy grounded in liberal values – shape voting behavior and heighten political polarization in several eastern and southern EU countries. According to the European Parliamentary Research Service, culture remains both a dividing factor and a unifying force; while shared heritage can foster common European values, fragmented governance and inconsistent cultural policies have left identity politics vulnerable to external exploitation.[168]

Identity-based populisms exploit these tensions by opposing a supposedly "rooted" Europe to a cosmopolitan elite portrayed as disconnected – a narrative amplified by Russian disinformation networks to undermine European cohesion. Russia deliberately targets these cultural and socio-economic divides through digital campaigns that manipulate fears linked to immigration, gender or historical memory, in the hope of weakening popular support for Ukraine and the EU.

Moscow has sought to instrumentalize these divisions through targeted disinformation campaigns, amplifying narratives of national betrayal and cultural loss, particularly in central and eastern Europe. However, even if it has fueled distrust toward Brussels, its influence remains limited as democratic resilience and civic awareness have contained the broader societal impact.[169]

The difficulties faced by EU decision-making in adapting to the Russian threat

European institutions, notably the European Parliament, are calling for reforms of decision-making processes in order to improve the EU's effectiveness and responsiveness to geopolitical crises, including the Russian threat. The proposals include increased use of qualified majority voting

168. A.-A. Georgescu, "A New Culture Compass for Europe", European Parliamentary Research Service, European Parliament, June 27, 2025, available at: www.europarl.europa.eu.
169. "The Ipsos Populism Report 2025. A 31-Country Ipsos Global Advisor Survey", Ipsos, June 2025, available at: www.ipsos.com.

rather than unanimity for sensitive areas such as sanctions, foreign policy, and the defense of fundamental values. This would prevent blockages by a single member state and speed up decision-making.[170] Parliament wants to be placed on an equal footing with the Council, thereby gaining the right to initiate legislation and gain greater control over EU policies. This would aim to increase the democratic legitimacy and transparency of European decisions, while strengthening the EU's ability to respond coherently to external threats.[171] The next multiannual financial framework (2028–2034) will need to be sufficiently funded to enable the EU to achieve its strategic objectives, including security, defense and reducing dependence on Russia. Budgetary governance reforms are being considered to better allocate resources and support resilience policies.[172] The European Commission is proposing to simplify EU law, in particular through "Omnibus" packages aimed at reducing administrative burdens and speeding up decision-making. This concerns green finance, investment and economic security.[173]

The coalition agreement of the German government, which will remain in power until the 2029 elections, provides for strengthening the EU's capacity for action by using "passerelle clauses"[174] to extend the scope of qualified majority decisions, particularly in the areas of foreign policy (the Common Foreign and Security Policy – CFSP) and defense (the Common Security and Defence Policy – CSDP), with the aim of restoring Germany's European leadership role.[175] To overcome the resistance of certain member states, the government is advocating a "multi-speed Europe" – an aggressive approach reminiscent of the idea of a "European core" put forward by Karl Lamers and Wolfgang Schäuble in 1994.[176] Germany does not rule out reforming the treaties (Treaty on European Union, Treaty on the Functioning of the EU), nor intergovernmental cooperation (with the UK and France).

To enable further enlargement of the European Union between 2023 and 2035, experts and the institutions themselves believe that several major reforms are necessary. First, a reform of the decision-making process. The current system, which requires unanimity at many stages of the enlargement process (more than 70 unanimous votes are required), makes the accession of new countries difficult and prone to deadlock. It is proposed that this process be streamlined; only the opening and closing of negotiations should

170. "Union européenne : quelles réformes pour rendre possibles de futurs élargissements?", Vie publique, March 26, 2024, available at: www.vie-publique.fr.
171. S. Gozi, "Draft Report on the Institutional Consequences of the Union's Enlargement Negotiations", 2025/2041(INI)", European Parliament 2024-2029, Committee on Constitutional Affairs, June 6, 2025, available at: www.europarl.europa.eu.
172. Ibid.
173. "Commission Proposes to Cut Red Tape and Simplify the Business Environment", European Commission, February 26, 20255, available at: https://commission.europa.eu.
174. "Koalitionsvertrag zwischen CDU, CSU und SPD", p. 138, available at: www.bundesregierung.de.
175. J. Puglierin and J. Cliffe, "From Fence-sitter to Pace-setter: How Merz's Germany Can Lead Europe", European Council of Foreign Relations (ECFR), May 6, 2025, available at: https://ecfr.eu.
176. K. Lamers and W. Schäuble, "Überlegungen zur europäischen Politik", September 1, 1994, available at: www.cvce.eu.

require unanimity, with the rest of the technical work being handled by a qualified majority. This would speed up and secure the accession process.[177] The EU's major policies, in particular the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and cohesion policy, should be reformed to take account of the arrival of new member states with different economic and agricultural structures. This will require budgetary adjustments and a rethink of how European funds are distributed.[178] A new MFF will be needed to support enlargement. The budget will need to be simpler, more flexible and better aligned with the EU's strategic priorities, including security, competitiveness and the green transition. Budget negotiations will need to take enlargement prospects into account and ensure sustainable support for candidate countries.[179] Candidate countries must receive increased support to carry out the reforms necessary for accession, particularly in the areas of the rule of law, democracy and the economy. And the EU must continue to promote its fundamental values throughout the process ("Enlargement is a merit-based process").[180]

In the face of these challenges, the EU is trying to respond effectively and pragmatically. The distribution of key positions in the new European Commission finally reflects the EU's strategic desire to strengthen its defense capabilities in the face of the Russian threat.[181] The appointment of officials from the Baltic states, which are particularly exposed to Russian pressure, reflects a greater awareness of the security challenges facing the eastern part of the EU. Commission Vice-President and High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Kaja Kallas (Estonia) and Commissioner for Defence and Space Andrius Kubilius (Lithuania) bring to the table their in-depth knowledge of the challenges posed by Russia and their national political experience. This will help to foster a more robust European response that is better suited to the realities on the ground.[182] The presence of Kubilius and Kallas in key positions sends a clear signal to Russia: Europe takes the security threat seriously and is organizing itself to respond in a united and determined manner. Their experience and commitment to stronger European defense make it possible to overcome internal divisions and mobilize the resources necessary to guarantee the continent's security. The Commission has launched several major initiatives under the impetus of this new team. The White Paper on European Defense, a document presented jointly by Ursula von der Leyen and Kaja Kallas, sets ambitious goals to fill capability gaps, support the defense industry, accelerate innovation, and

177. O. Bulana and M. Holubytska, "Le chemin de l'Ukraine vers l'Union européenne : réforme, résilience et politique d'élargissement", Robert Schuman Foundation, June 23, 2025, available at: www.robert-schuman.eu.
178. S. Saurel, "Le budget de l'Union européenne à l'épreuve des élargissements", *Le Grand Continent*, May 17, 2025, available at: https://legrandcontinent.eu.
179. Ibid.
180. "2024 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy", European Commission, October 30, 2024, available at: https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu.
181. Ł. Maślanka, "The New European Commission: Security and Defence in the Hands of a Baltic Duo", OSW, September 18, 2024, available at: www.osw.waw.pl.
182. Ibid.

strengthen preparedness for crisis scenarios.[183] The €800 billion "Rearm Europe" plan aims to strengthen European defense and support Ukraine in response to the Russian threat and uncertainty over US support.[184]

In the long term, Europe's model is more attractive than Russia's

Demographic challenges and migrations

Vladimir Putin has failed to improve Russia's demographic trends, even though the issue appeared to be a genuine concern and stated priority since he came to power.[185] A number of policies were put in place to boost the birth rate. The flagship pro-natalist measure, "maternal capital" (a large sum of money paid at the time of birth, first for the second child and later extended to the first child) led to a small increase in the birth rate in the mid-2010s. However, it primarily encouraged women to have children closer together rather than increasing the total number of children they had. Russia's fertility rate is currently 1.41, comparable to that of European countries, and is being driven upwards by peripheral or ethnic regions such as Tuva (2.4) and Chechnya (2.66).

The number of births has been falling steadily for the past decade and is unlikely to rise in the foreseeable future. According to Ministry of Labor projections, the number of women of childbearing age will fall from 34.2 million in 2024 to 33.2 million in 2030, and 27.4 million by 2046.[186] Russia has one of the highest mortality rates in Europe, especially among men. In 2023, average life expectancy in Russia reached about 73.4 years (the highest figure in the country's history), but the gap in life expectancy between women and men remains considerable; women live on average about 78.7 years, while men live to about 68. For comparison, the average life expectancy in Europe in 2023 was 81.5 years – 84.2 years for women and 78.9 for men. Russia is the country most affected by AIDS in Europe (1,215,145 patients at the end of 2024, with 56,000 new cases recorded in 2023 and 52,000 in 2024).[187] Cases of AIDS (and hepatitis) are also skyrocketing in the trenches at the front,[188] where soldiers are, moreover,

183. "European Commission Unveils White Paper for a European Defense", SGAE, March 20, 2025, available at: https://sgae.gouv.fr.

184. "The Commission Unveils the White Paper for a European Defense and the 'ReArm Europe'/Preparing for 2030 Plan", European Commission, March 19, 2025, available at: https://ec.europa.eu.

185. On January 15, 2000, Putin began his speech to the Federal Assembly by declaring that "Russia's destiny and prospects depend directly on the birth rate" and that "preserving and increasing the population is a supreme national priority".

186. TASS, July 8, 2025, available at: https://tass.ru.

187. Report presented at the XVII Annual All-Russian Congress on Infectious Diseases named after Academician V.I. Pokrovsky, quoted by the Russian AIDS Information Center, March 25, 2025, available at: https://spid.center.

188. *Novaya Gazeta*, September 9, 2025, available at: https://novayagazeta.eu.

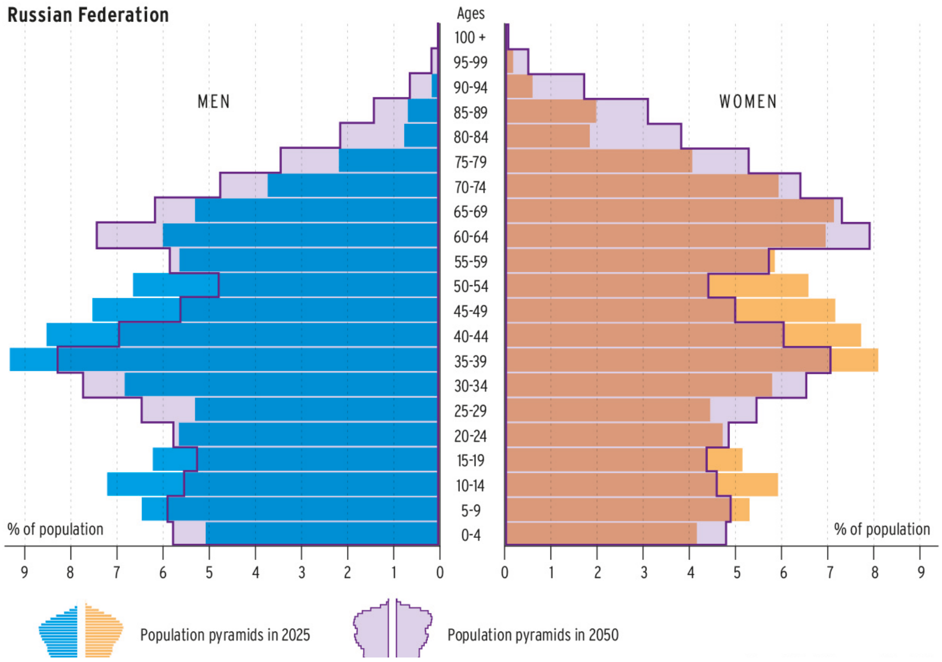
increasingly demoralized due to service conditions, the low value placed on human life, the lack of visibility regarding the end of their contracts, the treatment of their superiors, corruption, etc.[189]

The population of working age fell from 88 to 84.7 million between 2000 and 2023. With hundreds of thousands of Russians killed at the front[190] and forced into exile, the war has exacerbated Russia's structural demographic problem,[191] creating labor shortages on the job market. By the end of 2024, more than 80% of Russian companies reported difficulties in recruiting in a labor market where the unemployment rate fell to an all-time low of 2.4% in March 2025. The situation has been changing in 2025; the current economic slowdown is causing an increase in hidden unemployment (unpaid leave, shorter working weeks, etc.).

According to UN median forecasts, if the current demographic trend continues in Russia, its population (146.1 million in 2024) will shrink to 140 million by 2035 (excluding the annexed regions) and will continue to decline to 136 million in 2050.[192] The issue is clearly of concern to the Russian authorities; in May 2025, the federal statistics agency Rosstat stopped publishing detailed data on births and causes of death, after publishing in March the lowest birth figure for 200 years,[193] and in September, the last draft of the federal budget for 2026–2028 provides additional funding for pro-natalist measures.[194] However, traditional birth promotion measures – funding, social benefits, easier access to housing, tax reductions – have been in force for several years in Russia but have not brought the expected results. It is legitimate to doubt the success in wartime of measures that did not bring the expected results in peacetime.

189. Various Telegram channels of military bloggers September/October 2025.
190. Nearly one million Russian troops have been killed or wounded in the country's war against Ukraine, according to a study by CSIS, Seth G. Jones and Riley McCabe, "Russia's Battlefield Woes in Ukraine", CSIS, June 3, 2025, available at: www.csis.org.
191. T. Kastouéva-Jean, "En Russie, l'impact démographique de la guerre en Ukraine s'ajoute au déclin structurel de la population depuis la chute de l'URSS", *Le Monde*, April 12, 2025, available at: www.lemonde.fr.
192. United Nations, Population Division, *2024 Revision of World Population Prospects*.
193. The Bell, May 18, 2025, available at: https://thebell.io.
194. *Budget dlâ grazdan 2025-2027* [Budget for Citizens 2025-2027], available at: http://government.ru.

Figure 17: Russia's age structure



Source: United Nations, Population Division.

Lacking effective national solutions, regional governors (whose performance indicators include population numbers, birth rates and life expectancy at birth) seek solutions ranging from prosecuting abortion clinics to providing financial aid for pregnant minors to encourage them to keep their children. The subject of demographics is closely linked to ideology. The Russian president promotes the large family as the new norm. Russia has banned the dissemination of childfree ideas and LGBTQ+ content, citing both the defense of conservative values and demographic concerns. The debate on banning abortion is regularly rekindled, but the idea remains unpopular in Russian society, whose behavior in reality is no more conservative than in the West and which does not welcome state interference in this private domain. Another solution is being explored in which robotization and automation could compensate for demographic decline and labor shortages in the future. This would require a major technological leap that is difficult in the current economic and financial conditions, even if, as in the last draft budget for 2026–2028, funding for the development of robotization in Russia is to be substantially increased.

Immigration is not seen as an appropriate solution. The arrival of foreign workers – mainly from Central Asian countries such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan – is viewed with suspicion by the Russian population, which is openly migrantophobic.[195] Since the mid-2000s, Europe's problems with migrants have served as a real deterrent. Russian policy does little to integrate migrants, instead driving them into isolated

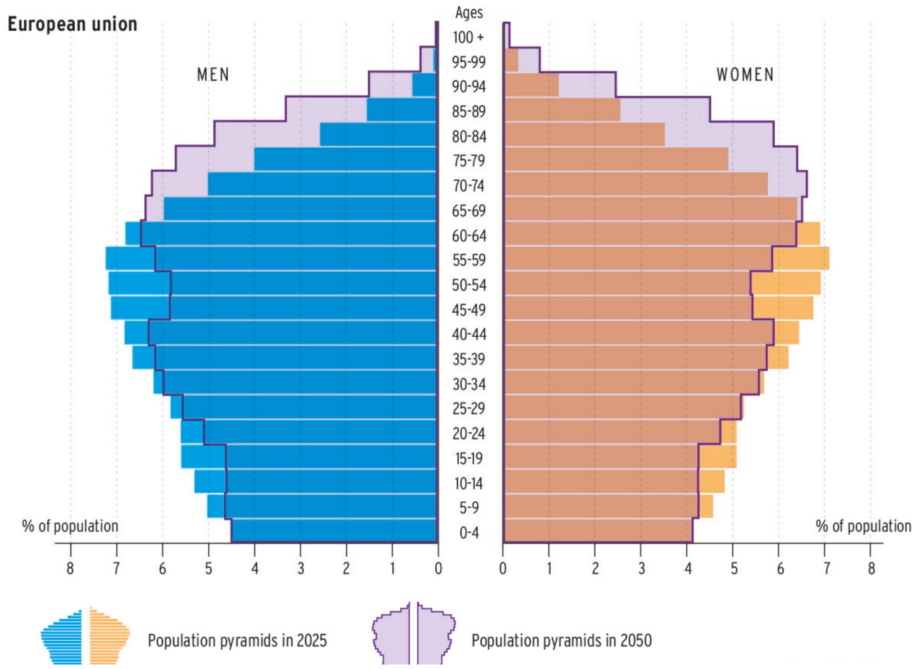
195. Levada Center Survey, May 16, 2025, available at: www.levada.ru.

ethnic and religious communities, which in turn fosters religious radicalization. After the bloody attack on the Crocus City Hall in March 2024, committed by Tajik nationals, over 80,000 illegal migrants were deported from Russia – twice as many as in 2023. Despite these problems, the Russian labor market has remained economically attractive to neighboring post-Soviet countries. Russia ranks 4th in the world for the number of migrants (after the US, Germany and Saudi Arabia), with 11.6 million. Despite the tightening of migration policies in 2024, migrant inflows (565,000 people) reached a thirty-year high, partially offsetting Russia's natural population decline (1.2 million births versus 1.8 million deaths).[196]

The population of Europe is expected to increase slightly in the coming years, reaching its peak at around 453.3 million in 2026, before gradually starting to decline and falling back to 447.9 million by 2050. By 2035, the projected population would be around 450 million, with a trend toward stagnation or decline depending on the country, mainly due to a negative natural balance (more deaths than births), partially offset by immigration.[197] The proportion of the working population would fall from 58.6% to 49.7%, a drop of nine points, while the share of those aged over 65 would rise from 21% to 32.5%. Even though immigration remains a politically sensitive issue and a risk factor for destabilization – particularly in a context of rising populism – populist and anti-immigration governments, such as those in Hungary and Italy, also resort to "selective" immigration out of necessity. This tension between economic needs and political debate makes labor immigration difficult to predict, complicating demographic projections. Immigration is often denounced by Russia as a weakness of Europe. Mass immigration would lead to a "great replacement" of the "native" European populations, according to political forces supporting Russia, and Europe would thus lose its traditional values, which are touted by Russia and its allies within populist governments (Hungary) and in the conspiracy theory sphere. For Russia, this is a strategic narrative. Russia denounces European immigration in order to polarize societies and support populists. However, this criticism masks its own difficulties: an inability to attract skilled talent and dependence on a poorly integrated workforce. These attacks and this Russian "narrative" may suggest that, paradoxically, this is a key asset for the EU, while Russia is struggling to respond to its own demographic challenges.

196. "Esli byt' totchnym" [To Be Precise] project, May 27, 2025, available at: https://tochno.st.
197. "Population Projections in the EU", Eurostat, data extracted in March 2023, available at: https://ec.europa.eu.

Figure 18: The EU's age structure



Source: United Nations, Population Division.

The rise of anti-immigration parties complicates the establishment of European cooperation on reception and integration, exacerbating divisions between member states and within societies. The success of integration policies is seen both as a test of EU cohesion and values, and as an opportunity for economic and social renewal if implemented in an inclusive and ambitious manner.[198] The increase in migratory movements poses challenges for reception and rapid integration policies, particularly in access to housing, healthcare and education.[199] With the 2024 Pact on Migration and Asylum, the EU is attempting a collective response to distribute asylum-seekers more fairly, accelerate procedures, and strengthen solidarity among member states in the face of migratory pressure. The reform also aims to combat irregular migration while respecting the rights of asylum seekers.[200] The current implementation difficulties, however, could put it into question.

198. K. Occansey and F. Sivignon, "Migrations et Union européenne : vers une nouvelle vision des politiques migratoires", Avis du Conseil économique, social et environnemental sur proposition de la commission des affaires européennes et internationales, November 28, 2023, available at: www.lecese.fr.
199. "The EU Response to Migration and Asylum", European Parliament, April 16, 2024, available at: www.europarl.europa.eu.
200. "Pact on Migration and Asylum: A Common EU System to Manage Migration", European Commission, May 21, 2024, available at: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu.

Dynamism of innovation and entrepreneurship

In the 2000s, the Russian state showed a strong political will to invest in R&D, stimulate innovation and improve Russia's positioning in several international rankings (getting five Russian universities into the world's Top-100; World Bank's Doing Business, Global Competitiveness Index, etc.). Under the presidency of Dimitri Medvedev, Russia announced a modernization agenda, broken down into several state-funded programs (support for university research and cooperation with business, creation of technoparks, launch of the Skolkovo Innovation Center, etc.), but the momentum was quickly broken with Putin's return as president.

The doctrines and strategies adopted after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine continue to set ambitious targets as if the national and international contexts were still favorable, but the failure of the policies pursued previously is difficult to conceal. According to the Russian Doctrine of Technological Development to 2030, less than 12% of Russian companies were innovative in 2023, compared with 68.8% in Germany, 55.7% in Italy and 54.8% in France.[201] The same doctrine details the shortcomings of the national innovation system, including the lack of venture capital, which is 43 times lower than the OECD average. Capital for research and innovation comes mainly from the federal budget rather than from companies. Although Russia has some major digital companies (Yandex, Mail.ru), the five largest by capitalization are all in the raw-materials extraction or state banking sectors (Sberbank). Between 2000 and 2023, the share of entrepreneurial activity in the overall financial income structure of Russian households fell from 15.4% to 6.9% (while that of social benefits rose from 13.8% to 17.9% over the same period).[202]

According to the World Intellectual Property Organization, Russia filed 26,692 patents in 2023 (national and international filings combined); the corresponding figures for European countries were much higher (58,861 for Germany, 15,566 for France), not to mention the three world leaders: China (1,642,582), the US (518,791) and Japan (300,133).[203] However, Russia recorded a notable increase of 31.6% on the previous year, making it one of the countries with the highest increase. Internal direct investment in R&D in Russia represents less than 1% of GDP, compared with 2.5% for China, 3.6% for the US, 2.18% for France and 3.13% for Germany.[204] The number of researchers in Russia fell from 425,954 in 2000 to 338,900 in 2023 (79,000 of whom are over 60). The number of PhDs written in Russia in 2023

201. Концепция технологического развития на период до 2030 года [Concept of Technological Development of Russia Federation until 2030], Government of Russia Federation, 2023, available at: http://static.government.ru.

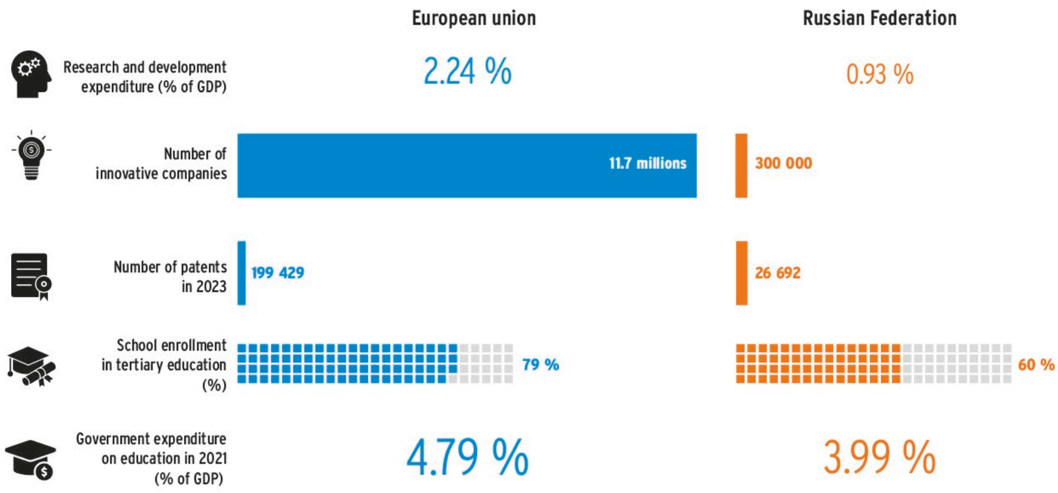
202. *Rossijskij statisticeski ezedodnik 2024* [Russian Statistical Yearbook 2024], Rosstat, table 66, p. 150.

203. *World Intellectual Property Indicators 2024*, available at: www.wipo.int.

204. *Rossijskij statisticheskij ezhegodnik 2024* [Russian Statistical Yearbook 2024), Rosstat, tables 26.43 and 26.44, pp. 717-619.

decreased by 22% compared to the previous year (from 10,200 to 8,000).[205] There is no longer any question of public policy favoring student mobility to Western countries or attractive conditions for European researchers. It is difficult to see these trends being rapidly corrected in the context of the sanctions, and the Doctrine of Technological Development even frankly notes the worsening of certain trends.

Figure 19: Comparison of education level and innovation, European Union and Russia, 2023



Source: The World Bank; Education at glance (OECD); World Intellectual Property Indicators 2024; Government of the Russian Federation, 2023; Intellectual Property Fact Sheet 2023, WIPO statistics database.

As far as Europe is concerned, between 2020 and 2022, according to INSEE, 46% of European companies with ten or more employees in the non-agricultural market sectors innovated, a rate that remained stable compared to 2018–2020. However, Europe faces obstacles. Investment in R&D (2.1% of GDP in 2025 compared to 2.8% in the US) remains insufficient, and Europe is being overtaken by China in this area. None of the world's 15 largest digital companies is European, and start-ups such as Skype and Shazam have been bought out by American giants, revealing a difficulty in moving from the start-up phase to global expansion. European venture capital, although growing (€18 billion in 2023), remains marginal compared to the US, where start-up investments are nine times higher. The fragmentation of the European market and a reluctance to adopt innovations from young companies are hampering competitiveness. Only 8% of European companies market new products in their markets, compared to a much higher rate in the United States. Europe needs to leverage its industrial and technological capabilities, build pan-European "champions" (e.g., in telecommunications) and avoid falling behind the US and China in the race for new technologies.

205. *The Insider*, February 21, 2024, available at: https://theins.ru.

Innovation in Europe, which is crucial to its competitiveness in the face of geopolitical tensions, is at the heart of recent reports and statements. In his speech at the Sorbonne in April 2024, Emmanuel Macron called for a more united Europe that invests heavily in innovation to compete with China and the US. The Letta report ("Much More Than a Market", April 2024) proposes a "fifth freedom" to strengthen research and innovation, highlighting the insufficient integration of key sectors (finance, energy, telecoms) as a barrier to competitiveness.[206] The Draghi report (September 2024) insists on an annual investment of €750 to €800 billion to close the innovation gap with the US and China, particularly in advanced technologies, and advocates coordination of European policies.[207]

The Budapest Declaration, adopted at the informal European Council meeting on November 8, 2024, commits the 27 member states to a New Competitiveness Pact, aimed at stimulating innovation through a Capital Markets Union and a Green Industrial Pact by 2026. Despite these ambitions, market fragmentation, underfunded R&D (2.2% of GDP in 2022) and political differences are hindering the translation of ideas into commercial success. To boost its dynamism, Europe must invest heavily in green innovation (14,000 patents filed in 2021, making it a world leader), harmonize its policies, encourage venture capital to support its start-ups, and counter geopolitical pressures. Immigration is now one of the key factors in meeting the challenge of innovation and competitiveness in Europe. A 10% increase in the share of skilled immigrants in total employment leads to a 4.1% rise in the number of patents filed per company, particularly in sectors where technical and IT expertise is crucial.[208] Innovation hubs such as Berlin (1,000 start-ups, 30% of founders foreign) and Amsterdam (500 start-ups) are attracting global talent. The 2025 Single Market and Competitiveness Report of the European Commission emphasizes the integration of foreign skills as a condition for resilience and growth, by enabling greater specialization and enhancing team efficiency within companies.[209]

206. "Letta Report 'Much More Than a Market' (April 2024)", European Commission, available at: https://european-research-area.ec.europa.eu.

207. "The Draghi Report on EU Competitiveness", European Commission, September 2024, available at: https://commission.europa.eu.

208. G. Orefice, "L'immigration qualifiée, moteur de l'innovation des entreprises ?", University Paris-Dauphine PSL, May 12, 2024, available at: https://dauphine.psl.eu.

209. "The 2025 Single Market and Competitiveness Report", European Commission, January 29, 2025, available at: https://ec.europa.eu.

Societal attractiveness: Freedom versus ideologization

Russia: ideological framework progressively consolidated around anti-Westernism

The ideology of Putin's Russia is not a coherent, rigid, unchanging construct offering a vision of the future, as Marxism-Leninism once did. It is a patchwork in which Eurasianism (promoted by Putin, but in reality, poorly understood and only superficially embraced by Russians), the "Russian world" (which entails the defense of compatriots abroad, as in the Donbass), "sovereign democracy" (emphasizing resistance to external interference and rejection of imposed Western values) and traditional values (social conservatism) coexist. This ensemble is fluid and evolves according to the needs of the moment (it is "a context-sensitive process of meaning-making").[210] The invasion of Ukraine, for example, was justified by the need to protect Russian speakers abroad, the fight against Nazism and the advance of NATO, with everyone free to join the cause of their choice.

Nevertheless, a few pillars of this ideological set-up were reinforced with the start of the war: the central role of the state and the national interest over and above individual interests and citizens' rights;[211] the affirmation of Russia as both a great power and a "state-civilization" (this concept has been officially incorporated into the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, approved by Presidential Decree No. 229 of March 31, 2023); its special role in the Eurasian space; opposition to Western liberalism and democratic values; the defense of traditional and conservative values (family, homeland, faith) in the face of the decadent West; sovereignty and a multipolar world; and the continuation of the fight against fascism and Nazism. Most of them have been enshrined in the Russian Constitution since 2020. All these elements feed nationalism and the idea of exceptionalism (some experts speak unabashedly of a people "chosen by God") and legitimize an imperial and expansionist policy ("Russia has no borders"; "where the foot of the Russian soldier has trod, is ours", says Putin).

The Kremlin enjoys the full support of the Russian Orthodox Church, whose few dissident priests have been banished.[212] Soviet symbols and practices have been rehabilitated, including monuments to Stalin, whose image decorates the recently restored sculptural panel at a Moscow metro station, while Volgodrad airport has been renamed Stalingrad. The destruction of all independent institutions and opposition makes Russians prisoners of this ideological straitjacket, where mere questioning is

210. M. Laruelle, *Ideology and Meaning-Making under the Putin Regime*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2025.

211. "Every citizen has understood that he is the state and the present and future of his children, his family and his country depend on him", in P. Zarubin, documentary film "Rossiâ.Kreml.Putin. 25 Years", Rossia 1, May 4, 2025.

212. K. Rousselet, *La Sainte Russie contre l'Occident*, Paris: Salvator, 2022.

tantamount to treason. Putin seeks to prove that it is perfectly possible to live without freedoms as long as the standard of living and security are guaranteed; this is exactly the idea that Margarita Simonian, director of the state-controlled broadcaster RT, was pushing in April 2022, when she extolled the Chinese model for Russia. The construction of a police state that closely monitors the entire population using cutting-edge technology is a source of inspiration for the Kremlin.

The war in Ukraine offers an opportunity to reinforce indoctrination and militarization in secondary schools and universities, while also reviving many Soviet practices such as "initial military training" in secondary schools and the creation of militarized youth organizations such as Yunarmia (1.8 million members in 2025, including 120,000 former members serving in the armed forces or law enforcement agencies).[213] The cement of Putin's ideology is the memory of victory in World War I. Victory Day, May 9, is cited as the main holiday by 82% of Russians, far ahead of New Year's Day.[214] The World War II narrative conveys a number of ideas that the narrative on the need for the SVO takes up and amplifies: "The West is the source of the threat to Russia, which is merely defending itself"; "Moscow always wins, even if the war effort demands enormous material and human sacrifices"; "The Fatherland has the right to demand these sacrifices, which citizens must accept".

The idea of a necessary official ideology is gaining ground in intellectual circles, and we can't rule out the possibility that the next revision of the Constitution (the proposal to introduce an official ideology, mooted, for example, at the last Legal Forum in St Petersburg in May 2025) will incorporate even more ideological elements than that of 2020. However, the repressive apparatus does not seek to impose a precise and clear dogma (apart from punishing direct criticism of the Russian armed forces and Putin personally) on everyone and control at all costs. The question arises as to whether the elites fully adhere to it and whether certain "ideological entrepreneurs" do so out of opportunism to please Putin and follow the official line because they hope for reward or promotion.

With the notable exception of strong homophobia, Russian society is no more conservative than many European societies, judging by divorce rates (in 2024, 644,000 divorces versus 880,000 marriages, giving Russia the world's third-highest divorce rate) or the low percentage of people who regularly attend church even though the vast majority (up to 74%, according to different Levada Center polls) declare themselves to be Orthodox. Despite fierce criticism of liberal values, Russia is struggling to establish itself as the global center of conservatism. The question remains: After Putin, what will remain of this ideological patchwork turned to the past, which has less

213. TASS, May 8, 2025, available at: https://tass.ru.
214. Levada Center Poll, April 29, 2025, available at: www.levada.ru.

coherence, roots and genuine commitment than Marxism-Leninism during the Soviet era, which itself quickly evaporated with the fall of the USSR?

Europe's societal attractiveness

Europe's open-society model is attractive because of its high standard of living (life expectancy of 81 years in the EU compared to 73.4 years in Russia, 68 for men and 78 for women) and its individual freedoms (in the 2024 Press Freedom Index, EU countries averaged 20th place out of 180, while Russia ranked 150th). Since 2014, 1.5 million Ukrainian refugees have been welcomed, reinforcing the EU's image as a refuge from Russian aggression. In response to that aggression in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova have declared their candidacy for EU membership (2024). This illustrates the attractiveness of the European model, with 70% of their populations supporting European integration (2024 polls). The integration of 4 million non-European migrants (2014–2024) and 1.5 million Ukrainian refugees reinforces the EU's image as a model of openness. Integration programs with funding of €10 billion a year) facilitate access to education and employment. The EU can position itself as a model of integration in contrast to authoritarian Russia, attracting populations from neighboring countries (the Balkans, North Africa).

The EU–UK agreement of May 2025, signed in London, marks a strategic post-Brexit "reset", reinforcing the attractiveness of the European model despite the UK's exit from the EU. By facilitating agri-food trade through an Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures, or "SPS Agreement", within the framework of the World Trade Organization (WTO), by reducing customs formalities and by integrating the UK into programs such as Erasmus+ and the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the EU is demonstrating its ability to remain an essential partner. Enhanced cooperation in defense and security, in the face of geopolitical uncertainties such as the war in Ukraine, underscores the appeal of a unified European model. British concessions, such as partial alignment with European rules, show that the EU retains its normative influence. This pragmatic partnership, hailed as a "win-win", reinforces the image of a resilient and attractive Europe.

Conclusion

After Putin, is reconciliation with Europe possible?

While Russia is unlikely to change its confrontational course as long as Putin is in power, his demise could open a small window of opportunity. The democratization of Russia does not appear to be a realistic immediate option (power would probably be taken by elite groups in a position of strength at the time, i.e., the *siloviki*), and a more repressive domestic and more aggressive foreign policy cannot be completely excluded. Pacification of relations with Europe (a kind of "peaceful coexistence", with the restoration of some trade relations) could, however, be an attractive scenario for economic reasons. The EU must prepare for a possible political transition in Russia by developing rapid-response capabilities to interact with any new leadership emerging from the succession, drawing on detailed expertise on the internal balance of power in Moscow and weak signals from the elites (particularly economic and diplomatic). It could adjust certain sanctions in response to credible gestures, while maintaining safeguards linked to international law, and propose sectoral confidence-building agreements, conditional on concrete progress on Ukraine.

While the most odious features of the Putin system, such as repression, may be mitigated, it is uncertain to what extent post-Putin Russia would adopt European values. The Russian elites and middle classes will certainly want to retain Western consumer habits and the ability to travel in Europe (in 2024, Russian tourists obtained 541,800 Schengen visas, 20.7% more than in 2023,[215] but the large majority do not travel abroad),[216] but the democratic and liberal model is perceived in Russia as hypocritical and ineffective, which will push post-Putin Russia to continue looking for its specific way between Europe and Asia. A recent poll speaks for itself; those Russians questioned would choose the Soviet regime (37%) or the current regime (41%) almost equally for the country's future, with only 6% wishing democracy and liberalism to take root in Russia.[217] Without a military defeat, which is unlikely, there is little chance of a process of reflection on historical memory, collective responsibility and a return to the European path and European values in Russia.

As said earlier, a period of post-Putin chaos cannot be completely ruled out, as the legitimacy of today's elites is conditioned by proximity and loyalty to Vladimir Putin, and no structure has the legitimacy to make decisions as did the Soviet Politburo when each of the Communist Party's general secretaries died. But, contrary to popular belief, it is highly unlikely that Russia will disintegrate; many regions are not economically viable separately, Russians are in the majority even in ethnic regions, independence movements exist but are marginal, and this scenario did not occur in post-Soviet Russia with its weakened central government under Yeltsin, who called for as much independence as possible. However, unrest in some regions is possible, notably in Chechnya, where the Kadyrov clan maintains order through repression and the redistribution of federal subsidies; otherwise, the new president will have to guarantee order similar to Putin's

215. In 2019, Russians were the top applicants for Schengen visas, with 4.1 million applications. Interfax, May 20, 2025, available at: https://ccifr.link.sendsay.ru.
216. RIA Novosti, August 14, 2025, available at: https://ria.ru.
217. Levada Center Poll, April 10, 2025, available at: www.levada.ru.

and perpetuate predation, corruption and violation of human rights in this region outside the scope of the Russian constitution.

For its part, Europe, under the impact of the war, is likely to be far less indulgent and open toward the Russians than it was toward the Soviets over 35 years ago. The "What after Putin?" debate is currently underway only in Russian opposition circles in exile, who even advocate Russia's integration into the EU.[218] This type of unpopular discourse seems completely utopian today but has the merit of calling for reflection on European policy toward Russia in the post-war period.[219] The reaction of the Duma Committee for Foreign Interference to this type of opposition proposal is very telling;[220] interpreted as an attempt to "destabilize Russian society" and "destroy the country from within", it shows the kind of scenario that the regime abhors – a Russian Maidan fueled by Europe's attractiveness for the Russian population. Misunderstood and disparaged by Russians for its nature and values, Europe is now perceived as Russia's best enemy.

	Russia	Europe
Strengths	• Centralized unconstrained decision-making: vertical and fast, with delegation of management of economic and social issues to the government and regional governors • Control of wealth (energy rent): rapid redirection of funds to priorities, with possible confiscation of corporate assets • Control of civil society: a large range of tools of repression, co-optation, and propaganda to control society and eliminate opposition • Ideological narratives without alternatives: tailored as an evolving	• Russia's invasion of Ukraine revives the EU's vocation, based on peace and democracy • The EU stands out for its pluralistic model, strong supranational institutions, and high societal appeal, in contrast to Russia's centralized authoritarianism • Despite its extensive decision-making process (unanimity), the EU maintains a collective response and limits deadlock (ad hoc coalitions): the risk of implosion remains low

218. V. Inosemtzev, *Evropeiskaya Rossia, neochevidnyi imperatif du XIX veka,* [European Russia, the non-evident imperative of the 19th Century], CASE, May 2025, available at: https://case-center.org; Iilia Navalnay, Alexei Navalny's widow, condemns Europe's responsibility for turning a blind eye to corruption and human rights violations in Russia, which has contributed to the strengthening of Putin's regime, September 24, 2025, available at: https://yulianavalnaya.com.

219. Russian opposition figures associated with Garry Kasparov, Mikhail Khodorkovsky and others support the idea of Russia's return to European institutions and the building of future relations between Russia and Europe based on European democratic values. In particular, in 2025, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) created a platform for dialogue with the Russian democratic opposition, with the aim of preparing for Russia's reintegration into the European legal space and institutions after the end of the current regime.

220. For the Duma's reaction, see: https://t.me.

	• patchwork based on nationalism/patriotism and a fusion of president, regime, state and people • Historical tolerance for hardship and capacity to adapt: acceptance of economic hardship and human losses, with little value placed on the individual in the face of collective causes	• The European "populist front" remains limited, while Russia exploits the migration issue to divide Europe • The EU combats disinformation, promotes selective immigration (Letta/Draghi reports), and maintains an open model of society
Weaknesses	• Negative demographics trends: aging population and intolerance toward migrants • Social and regional inequality: poor and ethnic regions suffer more from war; integration of veterans is a challenge • Elites: loyal but possible discord if the regime weakens • Personalistic regime and subordination of all institutions to executive branch: uncertainties for transition of power • Lack of trust between elites and people and constant need for expanding control, with higher costs • Negative economic trends affecting social issues: increase in taxes, stagnation/potential decline in social payments, decrease of purchasing power, low national investments and FDI, persisting corruption • Technology: low innovation, limited development of high-tech industries, except in some sectors such as defense and civil nuclear power	• The major risk for the EU is not implosion, but a corruption of its values under the influence of rising populism • Some governments (Hungary, Slovakia) regularly block European decisions • Growing demographic deficit (-3.7 million/year by 2100): immigration is necessary but politically sensitive in the context of rising populism (increasing risk of internal destabilization) • Competitiveness is hampered by market fragmentation, reluctance to innovate, and venture capital that is still much lower than in the US

Alliances and International Positioning, the Race for Global Strategic Support

Tatiana Kastouéva-Jean and Paul Maurice

In all Russian foreign policy, defense and national security doctrines and concepts, relations with the former Soviet republics, as well as within regional organizations under Moscow's umbrella (the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and the Eurasian Economic Union), are presented as a priority. However, in the context of the war against Ukraine, the post-Soviet states have not been Russia's main supporters. Only Belarus has distinguished itself by making its territory available for the invasion of Ukraine from the north and agreeing (by changing its constitution) to the deployment of Russian nuclear weapons, without controlling their use.[221] None of Russia's traditional allies officially recognized the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (officially recognized only by Venezuela, Nicaragua, Syria, Afghanistan, North Korea and Cuba), nor that of the four partly occupied Ukrainian regions in 2022. At the same time, none of them condemned Russia's actions, or sent weapons or soldiers to either Russia or Ukraine (apart from some humanitarian aid to Kyiv), probably out of fear of Russian reprisals, various dependencies on Moscow and potential risks for their own security.

How is the war redefining the alliances and partnerships of Russia and the EU?

Russia's large and sufficiently diversified network of supporters

Other partners – close in terms of regime type, ideology and anti-Western positions – such as North Korea, Iran and China, have contributed to Russia's war effort, thereby raising bilateral partnerships to an unprecedented level since the start of the war. The new quality of relations is highlighted in statements and strategic partnership agreements signed with North Korea

221. K. Pucek and B. Dee, *Belarus on Thin Ice: Future Scenarios and European Policy Dilemmas*, Clingendael Report, January 2025, available at: www.clingendael.org.

(June 2024) and Iran (January 2025). Furthermore, countries such as Turkey, Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, India and the Gulf states, without officially joining the Russian cause, are playing an important role as economic facilitators, helping Russia to circumvent Western sanctions and reaping significant benefits in return. Finally, many sympathizers and agents of influence, including within the Western camp, are helping to undermine the international influence of the United States and Europe and weaken the internal cohesion of the EU and the impact of sanctions.

These positions were not defined in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but beforehand; they are the result of ideological proximity, accumulated anti-Western disappointments and resentments, and Moscow's efforts to develop relations with these countries and, at the same time, to accentuate their divisions with the West. Since the 2000s, Russia has been relying on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (created in 2001) and the BRICS (created in 2006) as alternative centers of economic growth and demographic dynamism to the West. In 2005, Putin, seeking to regain influence in Damascus, forgave Syria about $10 billion in Soviet-era debt. He visited key capitals, from Algiers and Tehran to Ankara and Riyadh, offering to restart cooperation.

The major shift toward both the east and the south has been particularly active since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Beijing and New Delhi have become Moscow's privileged partners since the signing of major strategic military and energy contracts.[222] These agreements have ultimately enabled Moscow to partially reduce its vulnerability to Western markets – which proved crucial after the massive Western sanctions of 2022. Moscow has pursued initiatives in other regions where its policy is increasingly at odds with Western positions. In 2015, Russia intervened militarily in Syria, launching Moscow's largest military operation outside the post-Soviet space at that time in the entire post-Soviet era. This allowed Moscow to conclude long-term agreements with Damascus on military bases – an air base in Hmeimim and a naval base in Tartus. In 2019, it defended the Maduro government in Venezuela, condemning Western attempts to support the opposition. That same year, the Russia–Africa summit brought together some 40 African heads of state and of government. The Soviet African policy heritage (anti-colonialism and support for independence, granting of loans, and university training) was revived, symbolized by the reopening of new embassies on the African continent.[223]

The Kremlin's position is reinforced by contracts signed by Rosneft, Lukoil and Rosatom in target countries, as well as arms supplies and cultural and educational diplomacy (the opening of Russian Houses), which go hand in

222. The "Power of Siberia 1" gas contract between Gazprom and CNPC in 2014; contracts for the purchase of SU-35 and S-400 aircraft by China in 2015; the acquisition of the Essar Oil refinery by Rosneft in 2017; the contract for S-400s with India in 2018, etc.

223. A. Kalika, "Le 'grand retour' de la Russie en Afrique ?", *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 114, Ifri, April 2019, available at: www.ifri.org.

hand with anti-Western information campaigns. The COVID-19 pandemic was a moment that has sharpened competition for the delivery of vaccines to countries in the "Global South". Before the war began, Moscow was already seeking to present itself as an alternative model by promoting its vision of a polycentric world.[224] Current neutrality or even support in the "Global South" for the Russian war in Ukraine also has deep roots.

Direct contributors to Russia's war effort

The two countries that have provided military support for Moscow's war in Ukraine are those that no longer fear the further deterioration of their relations with the West, or for their international image: Iran and North Korea, which together with Russia form the trio of the most heavily sanctioned anti-Western countries in the world. Their bilateral cooperation with Russia has strengthened considerably since the start of the war, particularly in the field of defense. Both have supplied weapons (Iranian drones and ballistic missiles, North Korean ammunition compatible with Russian artillery systems) and, in an unprecedented move, North Korea made between 10,000 and 12,000 soldiers available to Moscow to liberate the Kursk region, allowing Russia to avoid both weakening its front in Donbass and having to initiate (for instance) another partial or general mobilization. Several reports attest to the critical importance of this aid for the Russian army; in 2023, half of the shells fired by Russian artillery had reportedly been manufactured in North Korea.[225] This gave Moscow an immediate advantage on the battlefield, while allowing Russian industries time to redeploy in anticipation of a long war. For its part, Iran went further than simply supplying equipment, providing Moscow with technology, spare parts and technical advisors to launch production lines for Shahed-type drones (Geran 1/Geran 2 in Russia) at the Elabuga plant in Tatarstan.[226]

Moscow's political relations with both countries have intensified with several high-level mutual visits since 2022 and the signing of strategic partnership agreements. The agreement with North Korea goes further, with a mutual defense clause stipulating that each partner must come to the aid of the other by any means at its disposal in the event of armed aggression. Russian officials and experts are now praising the quality of these new alliances, and some hail them as more consistent and concrete than traditional partnerships with post-Soviet countries.[227] In addition to solidarity with other countries sanctioned by the West, each partner stands

224. Vladimir Putin's multiples speeches at the Valdai Club clearly reflect particularly well his worldview. See, for example, his speech at the last Valdai Discussion Club meeting, President of Russia, October 2, 2025, available at: http://en.kremlin.ru.

225. "Half of the Shells Fired by the Russian Army in Ukraine Last Year Were Supplied by North Korea", *Le Grand Continent*, April 17, 2025, available at: https://legrandcontinent.eu.

226. "Alabuga Drone Plant: A Case Study of Key Relationships Enabling Iranian Support for Russian Military Production", *Iran Watch*, November 8, 2024, available at: www.iranwatch.org.

227. See, for example, M. Minaev, "Sistema novyh aliansov Rossii" [Russia's System of New Alliances], Aktual'nye Kommentarii, October 29, 2024, available at: https://actualcomment.ru.

to gain economic and military advantages; for example, Pyongyang is said to have received significant sums of money and could benefit from advanced Russian military technology, which is particularly worrying in relation to the field of ballistic missiles (as evidenced by the launches in October 2024).[228]

Although China has not officially sent direct military aid (suspicions remain, however, that Beijing has supplied drones or drone components),[229] its support has been vital for the Russian economy, including its military-industrial complex, which allows it to be classified as a "direct contributor". China officially declares a neutral position, but it has ensured Russia's supply of dual-use components and technologies, including microelectronics, optics, engines, turbojets, semiconductors, etc. It has increased its purchases of Russian hydrocarbons at favorable prices, ensuring regular revenues for the Russian budget. Sino-Russian relations are closer today than they have been in decades.[230] Beijing is now Russia's largest trading partner, with 30% of Russia's exports and 40% of its imports. No other country except China can provide Russia simultaneously with a huge market, convenient logistics across a long border, currency for settlements, and technology that is so necessary for a country at war and under sanctions. Public opinion in Russia is increasingly favorable to China; in 2024, 65% of Russians described China as a "friendly state", compared with just over 10% in the early 2000s.[231]

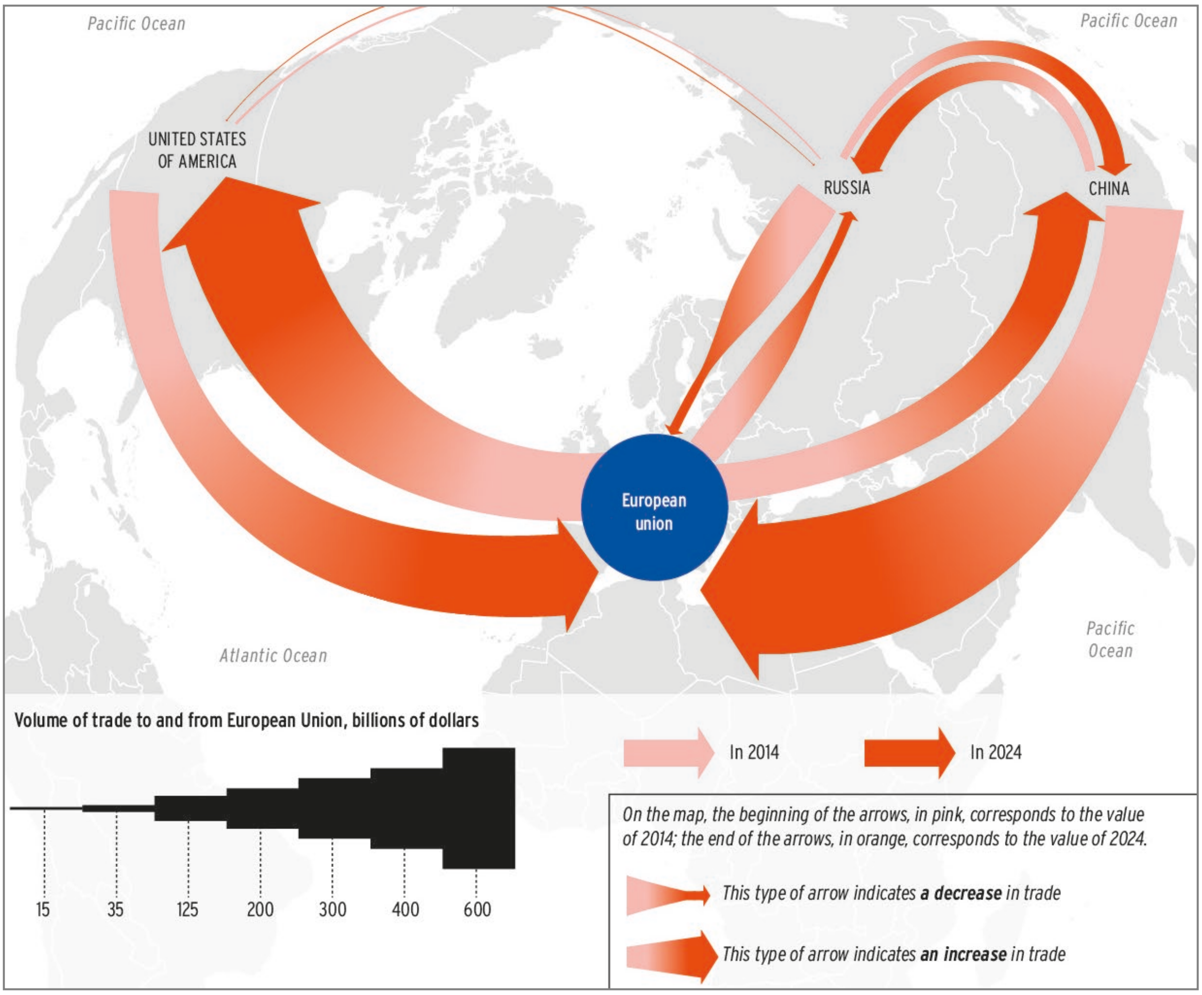
However, in the context of war and sanctions, instead of balancing relations with the West, Russia has created new dependencies on countries in the "Global South", primarily China, with which it risks having less and less room for maneuver. China has not replaced Europe. Before the war, in 2021, Russia supplied 155 billion cubic meters of natural gas to the EU market via pipelines. In 2024, it sold 31 billion cubic meters to China via the Sila Sibiri 1 pipeline, which has a maximum planned capacity of 38 billion cubic meters per year. Russia potentially aims to increase this to 45-50 billion m^3/year with Sila Sibiri 2, if it is built. If it succeeds in this, it will end up selling to China just one-third of what it sold to EU markets (where a significant portion of this trade still remains) before the war.

The relationship is highly asymmetrical (Russia accounted for only 5% of Chinese imports and 3% of exports in 2024).[232] Beijing is developing fewer hydrocarbon-intensive technologies, experiencing economic difficulties, and

228. K. Hird, D. Shats and A. O'Neil, "North Korea Joins Russia's War Against Ukraine: Operational and Strategic Implications in Ukraine and Northeast Asia", Institute for the Study of War, November 1, 2024, available at: www.understandingwar.org.
229. S. Yan, "How China Is Secretly Arming Russia", *The Telegraph*, September 3, 2025, available at: www.telegraph.co.uk.
230. Many useful graphs and figures are available at: https://merics.org.
231. "Predstavleniia o druzhestvennykh i nedruzhestvennykh stranakh, vzaimootnosheniiakh s Zapadom, otnoshenie k nekotorym stranam i napravleniia zagranichnykh poezdok" [Perceptions of Friendly and Unfriendly Countries, Relations with the West, Attitudes toward Certain Countries and Foreign Travel Destinations], Levada Center, June 5, 2025, available at: www.levada.ru.
232. A. Gabuev, "How to Howl in Chinese: What Vladimir Putin Left Beijing With", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 5, 2025, available at: https://carnegieendowment.org.

maintains far denser trade with the West than with Russia. In 2024, Chinese trade in goods reached €732 billion with the EU,[233] $582 billion with the US[234] and $245 billion with Russia.[235] These factors make Beijing much more cautious in its relations with the West than Iran or North Korea. China's annual investment in Russia has fallen by two-thirds since the start of the war (from $1.2 billion per year between 2011 and 2018 to $400 million per year in 2022-2023).[236] This can be explained by both the risk of secondary sanctions and economic and political uncertainty in Russia (including corruption, a bad business climate, the confiscation of Western assets, etc.).

Figure 20: Global trade volumes (2014–2024) – EU, US, Russia, China



Source: CNUCED.

233. "China: EU Trade Relations with China. Facts, Figures and Latest Developments", European Commission, Trade and Economic Security, available at: https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu.
234. "The People's Republic of China", Office of the United States Trade Representative, available at: https://ustr.gov.
235. "China-Russia 2024 Trade Value Hits Record High – Chinese Customs", Reuters, January 13, 2025, available at: www.reuters.com.
236. H. Simola, "Russia's Ever-Increasing Economic Dependence on China", *Policy Brief*, BOFIT, May 19, 2025, available at: https://publications.bof.fi.

To keep China on board, Moscow is even prepared to cede territories (ex. part of Bolshoy Ussuriysky Island). Despite the increasingly strategic nature of the partnership,[237] Russia has less and less to offer to China in terms of advanced weaponry, yet it is under pressure to share its most sophisticated technologies despite its previous reluctance. Their military cooperation is still a long way from true integration and effective interoperability, reflecting probably some existing mistrust. However, Russia's direct combat experience and knowledge of Western equipment are of great interest to Beijing, which is keen on joint military exercises with Moscow (at least five have taken place since the start of the war in Ukraine).

With regard to the war in Ukraine, China is still seeking to avoid the impact of Western secondary sanctions and preserve its image in the rest of the "Global South" as a responsible actor, formulating broad principles for restoring peace without proposing any concrete mechanisms for implementation and without condemning Russia.[238] This allows Moscow to tout China's "objective and impartial" position on the Ukrainian issue. The Chinese president's participation as guest of honor at the May 9 military parade on Red Square (in which Chinese soldiers took part) and Putin's presence at the military parade in Beijing in September 2025 were a clear signal to the West that any attempt to drive a wedge between Russia and China ("reverse Kissinger/Nixon") is, for now, doomed to failure, as China considers Russia an ideologically close and indispensable partner in forming a united front against the West and bringing about a new world order.[239]

In an article published in Russian in May 2025, President Xi emphasized the supposed Russian support for the reunification of mainland China with Taiwan.[240] The potential escalation of the Washington/Beijing confrontation could increase Russia's value in the eyes of China, which could then finally agree to Russia's request to build the Sila Sibiri 2 pipeline, a project that is also motivated by increased instability in the Middle East due to the conflict between Iran and Israel.[241] An important step in this direction

237. I. Facon, "La coopération militaire et de sécurité sino-russe. Des accents plus stratégiques", *Annuaire français des relations internationales*, Université Panthéon-Assas/Centre Thucydide, 2024, pp. 435-448.

238. M. Julienne, "Reconnect China Policy Brief 20 – The China-Russia Partnership and the Ukraine War: Aligned But Not Allied", *Policy Briefs*, Reconnect China, February 2025, available at: www.reconnect-china.ugent.be.

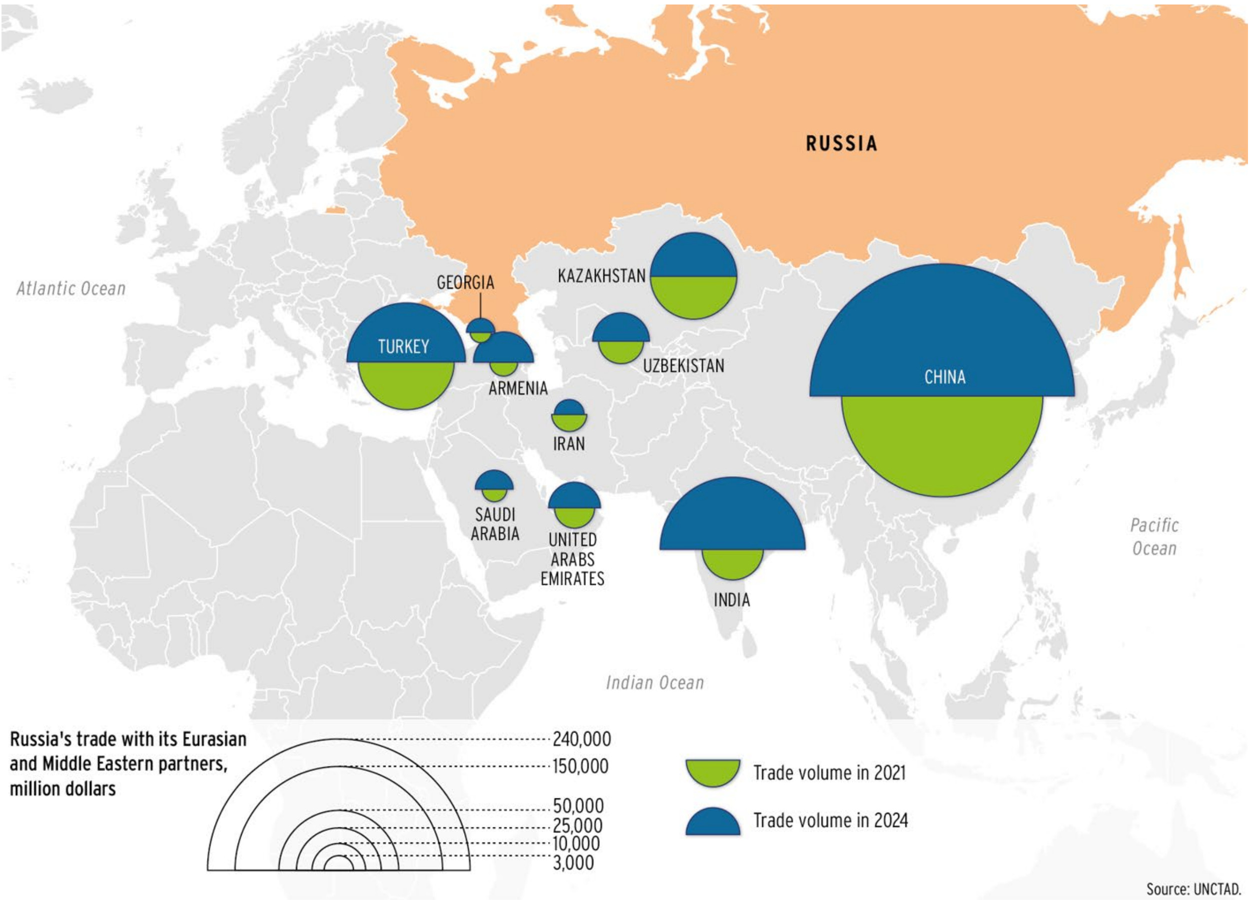
239. D. Minic, "La Russie et ses soutiens à l'heure de Trump II", in T. de Montbrial and D. David (eds.), *Ramses 2026. Un nouvel échiquier*, Paris: Ifri/Dunod, 2025; A. Ekman, *China–Russia. Le grand rapprochement*, Paris: Gallimard, 2023.

240. "Predsedatel' KNR Si Tsin'pin: 'Uroki proshlogo vo imia budushchego'" [President of the PRC Xi Jinping: 'Lessons from the Past for the Sake of the Future'], *Rossiïskaïa Gazeta*, May 7, 2025, available at: https://rg.ru.

241. At the SCO summit in September 2025, a high-profile political statement was made about the intention to promote the Power of Siberia 2 project. However, the symbolic memorandum has not yet been followed up with a full-fledged contract or agreed-upon prices. The Chinese side has demonstrated its willingness to participate exclusively on its own terms, insisting on the lowest possible price and seeking minimal commitments on purchase volumes based on the take-or-pay principle.

was taken at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in August/September 2025, although the gas agreement is still far from being finalized. The same summit revealed a new element of ideological proximity: China and Russia now share the same narrative on World War II, in which they fought together against Germany and Japan. Despite the war in Ukraine, China has signed several agreements with Russia on energy, cross-border payments, Arctic cooperation, and AI. Although not a formal alliance, this relationship is constantly expanding in scope and depth, becoming an important element of the international system.[242] But it is not without mistrust, as highlighted by the leak of Russian intelligence documents on Chinese intelligence activity inside Russia, ranging from recruiting scientists and seeking access to military technologies to gathering information on Russian operations in Ukraine.[243]

Figure 21: Russia's expanding trade with selected "Global South" countries (2021–2024)



Source: UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD).

242. B. Lo, "Convergence and divergence: China-Russia Relations in the Age of Trump", New Eurasian Strategies Center, July 3, 2025, available at: https://nestcentre.org.
243. I. van Brugen and J. Feng, "Maps Show Russian Territory China Could Annex Amid FSB 'Suspicion'", *Newsweek*, June 9, 2025, available at: www.newsweek.com.

Facilitators: nothing personal, just business

Without directly supporting Russia's cause in the war in Ukraine (and sometimes contrary to their populations' sympathies for Ukraine, as is clearly the case in Georgia), several actors are facilitating the circumvention of sanctions on the export of Western products to Russia and also loosening the economic stranglehold by buying Russian energy products. Trade between most of these countries and Russia, on the one hand, and Europe, on the other, has increased since 2022, indicating their position as intermediaries in these exchanges. In addition to China, certain countries have acquired particular economic importance for Moscow since the start of the war, with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Turkey and India leading the group.

The UAE has become an economic and financial hub, particularly for Russia's operations to and from Africa (gold and diamonds).[244] The volume of economic trade between Russia and the UAE almost tripled between 2019 and 2023 (rising from $3.5 billion to $9.5 billion). This is certainly due to parallel imports (including dual-use equipment) as well as the development of bilateral relations resulting from the growing presence of Russian businesspeople and companies in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, whose advanced infrastructure and services help them bypass the legal and logistical constraints created by sanctions. Intermediary companies registered in the UAE sell Russian oil, and Russian tankers use UAE ports. In addition to their economic and financial mediation, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are playing an unprecedented role in this war in the exchange of prisoners between Moscow and Kyiv (exchanges of more than 4,300 military personnel and civilians have been carried out with the help of the UAE).[245] These countries are gaining new credibility as discreet and effective mediators. Even if the relationship is not without tension, Saudi Arabia is an essential partner helping to maintain oil prices through OPEC+ mechanisms,[246] which are central to the stability of the Russian economic model. While the Emirates did not hesitate to join the BRICS+, Saudi Arabia signaled interest but ultimately chose not to do so.

Turkey has one of the most complex and ambiguous positions.[247] Although a member of NATO, it has not imposed sanctions on Russia and maintains constructive relations with both sides of the conflict.[248] It is both a major importer of Russian hydrocarbons and a supplier of drones to

244. T. Vircoulon, "The Contradictory Impacts of Western Sanctions on Economic Relations between Russia and Sub-Saharan Africa", *Ifri Memos*, Ifri, May 28, 2025, available at: www.ifri.org.

245. R. Valeeva, "OAE pomogli osvodit' bolee 4,3 tysiachi plennykh v khode obmenov mezhdu Rossiej I Ukrainoj" [The UAE Helped Free More than 4,300 Prisoners During Exchanges Between Russia and Ukraine], *Realnoye Vremia*, August 14, 2025, available at: https://realnoevremya.ru.

246. A. Chaddar, D. Zhdannikov and A. Lawler, "Behind OPEC+ Oil Output Hike, Saudi-Russian Tensions Simmer", Reuters, June 2, 2025, available at: www.reuters.com.

247. D. Schmid, "Le conflit russo-ukrainien : une opportunité pour la Turquie", *Politique étrangère*, Vol. 87, No. 2, Ifri, Summer 2023, pp. 11-24.

248. R. Suleymanov, "Turkey and the War in Ukraine: How Has Ankara's Foreign Policy Changed Since February 2022?", New Eurasian Strategies Centre, February 20, 2025, available at: https://nestcentre.org.

Ukraine, whose territorial integrity it strongly supports. The many reasons for tension with Russia have not hindered trade. This unique position also allowed Turkey to mediate directly between Russia and Ukraine in 2022. Turkey is primarily pursuing its own interests, and its positions have been strengthened in the Middle East since the fall of the Assad regime, which was supported by Russia and Iran, and in the South Caucasus with Azerbaijan's victory over Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

India, like China, has increased its purchases of Russian hydrocarbons since the start of the war, at bargain prices. After Trump issued an executive order strengthening tariffs against India in August 2025 and threatened further sanctions, Delhi publicly reaffirmed its intention to continue purchasing Russian oil for reasons of energy security and cost (domestic price stability).[249] Major Indian private refiners (Reliance, Nayara Energy) announced a planned 10–20% increase in Russian oil purchases for September 2025 compared to August, amounting to an additional 150,000 to 300,000 barrels per day. Russia is now India's largest supplier of crude oil, accounting for over 36% of imports in March 2025, compared to just 2% before the war in Ukraine.[250] However, the future of India's purchases of Russian gas is uncertain due to strong pressure from Trump[251] and Delhi is clearly diversifying its arms supplies by buying more from Western countries, whereas for the previous two decades 65% of its purchases came from Russia.[252]

Other countries could be mentioned here, but the common feature among the "facilitators" is that, unlike Iran and North Korea, they are not completely insensitive to pressure from the West, with which they have highly developed relations in security and economy. The strengthening of secondary sanctions can have a direct impact on their trade with Russia. Since 2024, Turkey, for example, has blocked exports to Russia of around forty US-origin products, including semiconductors. Turkish banks are refusing to carry out transactions, and exceptions have had to be negotiated for Gazprombank, which is subject to sanctions. The governments of these countries are pragmatic and opportunistic. They are primarily seeking economic benefits, diversification of dependencies, and the preservation of good relations with all key partners, including Russia, rather than forming a total ideological – and economic – front against the West.

249. "Bras de fer autour du pétrole russe : l'Inde répond sèchement à Donald Trump", *L'Express*, August 5, 2025, available at: www.lexpress.fr.

250. "La Russie devient le plus grand fournisseur de pétrole brut de l'Inde", Business AM, August 13, 2025, available at: https://fr.businessam.be.

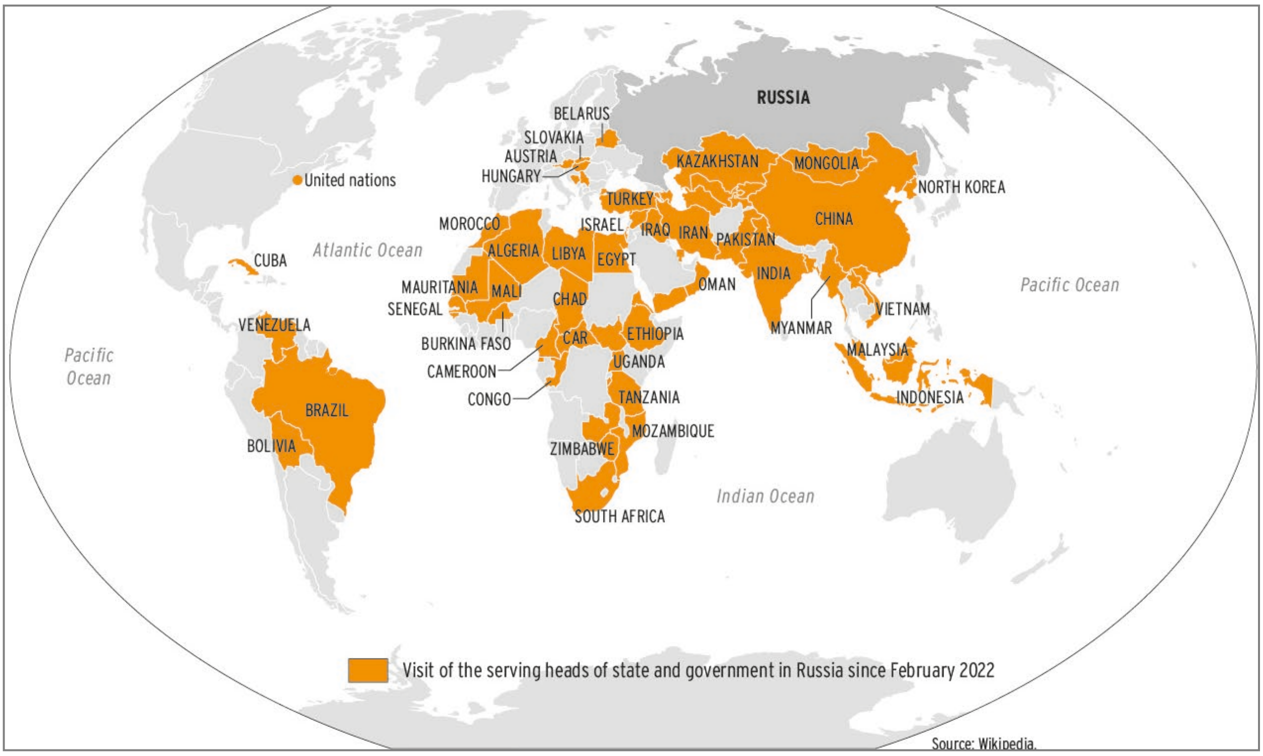
251. I. Sentner and M. Messerly, "Trump: India Will Stop Buying Russian Oil", Politico, October 15, 2025, available at: www.politico.com.

252. K. Kaushik, "India Pivots Away from Russian Arms, But Will Retain Strong Ties", Reuters, January 29, 2024, available at: www.reuters.com.

Sympathizers and agents of influence

Without providing direct military or economic aid, several countries in Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Latin America have not condemned Russia's actions, are not applying sanctions, and have voted against or abstained from UN resolutions condemning Russia, or were absent during the vote. Most of them have scores to settle with the West (colonialism for African countries, the unfair organization of the world order under US domination, dependence on the dollar, Western indifference to their conflicts and wars, etc.). All this is skillfully exploited and amplified by Moscow through local media and Russian cooperation structures, which present its war as resistance to the hypocritical and decadent West. Within the EU itself, Hungary and Slovakia show ideological proximity to the Putin regime. The leaders of both countries have visited Moscow during the war. As members of the EU and NATO, their statements and actions run counter to the policies of both organizations. This policy muddies the European message and allows Moscow to play on disagreements. Other countries, such as Austria, show some understanding of Russian concerns and may join the dissident camp if their leadership changes. Established political forces in many European countries support, to varying degrees, the Russian narrative.

Figure 22: Official visits of heads of state to Russia since the beginning of the Ukraine war



Source: Wikipedia.

Ultimately, even if these are not formal alliances (even in the case of China), Russia has a sufficiently diverse network in which it can find partners that enable it to achieve its various objectives, maintain its war effort, loosen the sanctions stranglehold, and weaken Western cohesion and influence. These relationships are generally stable, even if most of these countries are sensitive to Western pressure and international image and are reluctant to openly cross the threshold of direct aid to Russia's military effort. Most would like to see an end to the war (which has contributed to inflation, particularly of food products, in many of them), while the fate of Ukraine – its defeat, its partition, its return to Russia's orbit – seems to leave them indifferent, as is the case with US President Donald Trump, whose election was seen as a godsend by the Kremlin. Trump still could finally become the best ally to tip the balance in Russia's favor by permanently halting military aid to Ukraine and intelligence-sharing in the name of ideological proximity and "big deals" in the Arctic or Middle East, even if, for the moment, the strategy of Trump's administration, however ambivalent it may be, does not seem to be definitively moving in that direction. In this case, the major question is the capacity of Europeans to assume sole responsibility for their own security, with the defense of Ukraine as part of this.

The question remains as to the attitude of the countries of the "Global South", which do not form a monolithic bloc, in the event of a direct conflict between Russia and NATO. Most likely, their behavior would be consistent with their position on the war in Ukraine. Sensitive to the Russian narrative, many attribute responsibility for the war to NATO enlargement, thus already placing it within the framework of the Russia–West confrontation. Some actors could provide limited diplomatic or economic support (this would certainly be the case for North Korea, while Iran's support is uncertain, given that Russia did not come to the aid of the Iranian regime in the summer of 2025). Several countries in the "Global South" would favor a non-aligned stance, seeking to avoid involvement in a global conflict from which they would see no direct benefit. Given their own geopolitical, economic and strategic interests, they would probably avoid providing direct military aid to Russia but not cut political, economic and energy ties with it, not adhere to sanctions, and not condemn it within the UN. Their priority remains national stability and development, rather than supporting the wars of the major powers. The greatest uncertainty concerns China, whose attitude will depend on the evolution of the balance of power with the United States in the coming years.

The EU in the game of alliances: strengthening of core groups "derisking" strategy

Traditional alliances and "derisking" strategy

The EU stands out for its diverse network of alliances, its economic attractiveness, and its ability to forge new partnerships, contrasting with Russia's mostly opportunistic and fragile alliances. The EU maintains close ties with NATO, which accounts for and enables the presence of 100,000 American soldiers in Europe. In 2024, 65% of Europeans supported NATO, with peaks in Poland (82%) and Estonia (88%). Since 2014, NATO has strengthened its eastern flank (10,000 additional soldiers in Poland and the Baltic states). The EU has concluded agreements with 74 countries (40% of world trade), such as Japan (bilateral trade: €150 billion) and Canada (CETA: exports up 10% since 2017). These partnerships strengthen economic influence *vis-à-vis* Russia, whose exports to the EU have fallen by 90% (oil: 15 million tons in 2024 vs. 150 million in 2014). In 2023, the EU signed an agreement with Chile to secure 50% of its lithium imports, reducing its dependence on China (80% of rare earths).

However, dependence on the US and on imports of resources (rare earths, energy) limits the EU's autonomy and exposes it to strategic risk. China is exploiting European divisions and uncertainties surrounding Trump to extend its influence. A scenario of increased dependence on China could emerge if NATO weakens. In 2024, China invested €15 billion in European infrastructure (ports, 5G), exploiting internal divisions (e.g., Hungary's veto on anti-China sanctions). China accounts for 20% of European imports (€400 billion in 2024) and is investing heavily in the Balkans (€10 billion since 2014). Growing dependence could compromise the EU's strategic autonomy, especially if the United States reduces its support. To counter this risk, the EU is developing a "derisking" strategy.[253] For example, in 2023, it invested €5 billion in European 5G infrastructure, reducing Huawei's presence by 30%.[254]

The economic relationship between China and the EU is characterized by a structural deficit for the EU, while the Sino-American relationship is marked by rivalry and gradual decoupling.

As noted above, in 2024 trade in goods between China and the EU reached €732 billion, with China exporting €519 billion to the EU and importing €226 billion from it, generating a European trade deficit of €293 billion. Bilateral foreign direct investment amounts to a cumulative stock of $260 billion, but investment flows are far less dynamic than those

253. P. Anderson and F. Lindberg (eds.), "National Perspectives on Europe's De-risking from China", European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC), June 2024, available at: www.ifri.org.
254. T. Rühlig, "The 'Huawei Saga' in Europe Revisited: German Lessons for the Rollout of 6G", *Notes du Cerfa*, No. 187, Ifri, June 2025, available at: www.ifri.org.

between China and the United States. The EU is seeking to rebalance the relationship by demanding better market access and denouncing Chinese trade barriers and industrial subsidies.

With the balance of the EU's traditional alliances being called into question, it must further develop its "derisking" strategy by 1) strengthening its strategic autonomy (particularly industrial) and 2) strengthening its contacts with the "Global South" (trade and investment agreements).

The strengthening of European core groups

The shift in the transatlantic relationship and doubts about the Trump administration's support for Ukraine are leading to a diversification of formats in Europe and the strengthening of existing ones. In Germany, some observers view current US policy under Trump as driven by a personal approach and expect transatlantic relations to revert to earlier patterns once his term ends. However, this perspective represents a minority opinion. Relying on such a temporary shift is considered risky, as the next US president could pursue a similar course. At the same time, there is broad recognition that the transatlantic relationship is undergoing a long-term transformation. Germany emphasizes the importance of preparing Europeans to take greater responsibility for their own security. This will require time and a sustained effort to strengthen European capabilities.

The diversification of formats is indicative of Europe's agility in dealing with diverse situations that play on the complementarities between states. The "Core Groups" format aims to strengthen European cohesion in the face of weakening traditional alliances, particularly with the US, and to counter Russian influence – although they are perceived and presented in the Russian narrative as a point of vulnerability.

1. The Weimar Triangle, created in 1991, has played a key role in supporting Ukraine since 2014. In 2022, France, Germany and Poland coordinated the delivery of €10 billion in military aid to Ukraine, including 200 *Leopard* 2 tanks (Germany and Poland after the re-export authorization granted by Germany in January 2023), 18 *Caesar* cannons (France) and 300 armored vehicles and T-72, as well as PT-91 tanks (Poland). In 2024, these three countries accounted for 60% of the EU's GDP (€11 trillion) and 50% of its defense spending (€180 billion), giving them strategic weight. However, differences over energy (Germany dependent on US LNG, Poland being more favorable to nuclear energy) limit their economic integration.

2. In 2023, the informal E5 group, which includes the five largest European economies, launched a joint initiative to secure rare-earth supply chains, reducing dependence on China (80% of European imports). The E5 also supports PESCO, with 46 projects (budget: €8 billion, 2021–2027). However, Italy (under Giorgia Meloni) and Spain remain cautious about pursuing excessive strategic autonomy from NATO.

3. The Nordic countries (Sweden, Finland, Denmark) and the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) – united in the NB8+Weimar format – are among the most concerned about Russia, with sharply rising defense budgets (e.g., Finland: €6 billion in 2024, +50% since 2014). Their integration into NATO (Sweden and Finland in 2022–2024) strengthens the security of the EU's eastern flank. In 2024, the NB8 coordinated with Weimar on an initiative to protect critical infrastructure (submarine cables in the Baltic Sea) following alleged sabotage by Russia (e.g., the breakage of the Estonia–Finland cable in 2023). In 2024, this coalition delivered 1,500 military drones and 50,000 artillery shells to Ukraine, bypassing Hungarian vetoes.

4. The European Political Community (EPC), announced on May 9, 2022, by Emmanuel Macron, aims to respond to the consequences of Russia's aggression in Ukraine and to promote collective reflection on European challenges. It is based on four principles: equal dialogue between heads of state; open discussions without binding commitments; geographical rotation of summits (alternating between the country holding the presidency in the second half of the year, next to be Denmark, and a non-EU member country in the first half of the year); and a focus on Ukraine while addressing other regional crises. The EPC, which is flexible and has no veto, is distinguished by its lack of official communiqués and its independence from the United States and Russia. It is not linked to EU enlargement but serves as a forum for reflection for EU and non-EU countries. The Tirana Summit illustrated its success, with 52 delegations, despite the absence of Portugal and Ireland (due to scheduling constraints). Discussions focused on the war in Ukraine, transatlantic tensions with Trump's return, and the Mediterranean crises. Albania highlighted the consolidation of the EPC as a framework for synergy and a driving force for a "more powerful Europe".

Two visions for Ukraine emerged: strengthening its position to negotiate (UK) or prioritizing bringing the war to an end (Italy). In this context, the EPC must also support third countries such as Moldova in the face of Russian disinformation and interference, while avoiding becoming an international organization. Beyond the crises, the question arises of its role in building a framework for security, peace and stability at a time when the Helsinki order is in tatters and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), weakened since its failure to prevent the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, is not fulfilling its role. Even if the EU has its own ideas, the EPC sometimes extends and anticipates the debate, particularly on hybrid threats and the fight against information interference. A group of volunteers could lead the political initiative on Ukraine and its future, particularly on the issues of reconstruction challenges and the future European security architecture, for which the EPC could serve as a laboratory.

The Trump administration aims to fragment and weaken the EU, but a European political forum at the highest level beyond the EU can help forge an autonomous strategic profile in the new transatlantic relationship. This pan-European dialogue forum was created without the United States three years ago, and recent events prove that it was necessary. The EPC should not replace existing organizations such as NATO, but its future depends on its ability to contribute to Europe's security – rather than its defense – by pursuing clear strategic objectives that reinforce a weakened EU, as illustrated by initiatives like the Security Action for Europe (SAFE).

These formats allow flexibility. They allow for quick decisions, avoiding the delays caused by the EU's unanimity requirement. For example, in 2023, the Weimar Group decided within 48 hours to increase military aid to Ukraine, while the EU took three months to approve €5 billion. The Weimar and E5 countries account for 70% of EU military spending and 80% of its GDP, giving them decisive influence over a weakened Russia (GDP: $2 trillion, 8% of that of the EU).

The European presence in key multilateral structures is expressed both through member states and the EU itself. This dual approach reflects the collective alliance strategy pursued by Europeans to influence global governance.

At the UN Security Council, France and the UK are permanent members with veto power, while other EU countries regularly serve as rotating non-permanent members. Germany has served four times since the 1990s (1995–1996; 2003–2004; 2011–2012; and 2019–2020). For the 2024–2025 period, there are four European countries out of 15 (France, the UK, Denmark and Slovenia). Moreover, EU member states often defend common positions, conveyed by the EU High Representative during the annual UN–EU debates. Only states can be members of the Council, but the debate over a single seat for the EU is regularly revived.

The EU has participated in the G7 since 1977, alongside Germany, France and Italy, and is represented by the presidents of the European Council and Commission. Together with its member states, the EU also plays a major role in the G20, accounting for about a quarter of its weight.

The EU has been a full WTO member since 1995, where the European Commission negotiates on behalf of the 27. Between 1995 and 2025, the EU was involved in 211 dispute settlement cases, both as complainant and respondent.[255]

European presence in relation to the International Criminal Court (ICC) is particularly strong thanks to the commitment of all EU member states and the official support of the Union itself. The ICC is a pillar of multilateralism, and the EU is one of its leaders. All EU member states are signatories and parties to the Rome Statute, which established the ICC, thus representing 60% of the total number of parties (124 states). Even though the European Union cannot be a member formally as a non-state entity, it has had a

255. "L'Union européenne et l'Organisation mondiale du commerce", European Parliament, available at: www.europarl.europa.eu.

structured cooperation agreement with the court since 2006, as well as an action plan to promote its universality and proper functioning.

This strong European engagement illustrates the Union's commitment to a rule-based international order and to strengthening global multilateralism. In this context, Ukraine is central to Europe's credibility; Europe must show what it can offer to build mutual partnerships.

Figure 23: EU and Russian participation in international organizations

Name	Foundation date	EU participation	Russia participation
United Nations (UN)	1945	All countries	Yes
World Trade Organization (WTO)	1947	All countries and EU as an organisation	Yes
International Monetary Fund (IMF)	1945	All countries	Yes
World Bank Group (WBG)	1944	All countries	Yes
North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)	1949	23 countries	No
World Health Organization (WHO)	1948	All countries	Yes
Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)	2001	No	Yes
New Development Bank (NDB)	2014	No	Yes
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)	1961	22 countries	No
International Criminal Court (ICC)	1998	All countries	No (withdrawal in 2016)
OSCE Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)	1973	All countries	Yes
Council of Europe (CoE)	1949	All countries	No (excluded in 2022)
BRICS BRICS+	2009	No	Yes

Source: Ifri's authors.

Nevertheless, the European countries show certain limitations, such as internal divisions within the EU, dependence on NATO, and limited resources. The core groups exclude countries such as Hungary (10 million inhabitants, pro-Russian) and Slovakia (5 million, ambivalent), risking further divisions. In 2024, Hungary blocked €6.5 billion in aid to Ukraine, forcing the E5 to finance it through bilateral funds. Despite PESCO, the EU lacks autonomous capabilities (e.g., only 10% of European ammunition is produced locally). The core countries depend on the 100,000 US troops stationed in Europe (2024). The defense budgets of the NB8 countries (€20 billion combined) remain low compared to Russia's (€160 billion).

The flexibility of decision-making formats within European institutions has strengthened since 2022, with increased use of ad hoc formats that allow for faster and more flexible decisions in response to contemporary challenges. This recent institutional dynamism creates strategic uncertainty that is particularly advantageous for Europe in a volatile international context. The proliferation of specific working groups, ad hoc committees and platforms between institutions and member states facilitates targeted discussions and rapid compromises, particularly on strategic issues such as energy and defense. These ad hoc bodies are designed to bypass traditional institutional bottlenecks, which can involve lengthy negotiation phases and deadlocks, thus enabling more disruptive and urgent decision-making. The coexistence of a traditional institutional framework and a wide range of ad hoc formats creates uncertainty in decision-making; neither processes nor outcomes are fully predictable, which benefits European actors capable of rapid adaptation. This uncertainty allows the EU to leverage the flexibility of its ad hoc formats to exert greater influence in international negotiations by exploiting discontinuity and institutional pragmatism. By multiplying specialized bodies and fast-track procedures, the EU gains disruptive capacity, which is particularly crucial in a geopolitical context marked by multiple crises and the need for regulatory innovation.

Relations between European institutions and the productive sector through multinational corporations

In Europe, EU institutions maintain systematic, extensive and structured connections with the productive sector, multinational corporations, professional organizations, and the academic and innovative sectors. This "European-style" capitalism model relies on a plurality of actors and massive investment flows, unlike the Russian state-led capitalism, which is organized to manage the energy rent – a model that has been reinforced by the war and international sanctions.[256]

In 2025, around 38,000 large EU companies directly benefit from regulatory simplification measures or advantages usually reserved for SMEs, demonstrating strong interaction between institutions and major private actors.[257]

European multinational corporations participate in the European Commission. In 2024, the European Investment Bank (EIB) mobilized a record €100 billion for technological champions, providing substantial

256. "Innovation, Integration and Simplification in Europe", *EIB Investment Report 2024-25*, European Investment Bank, March 5, 2025, available at: www.eib.org.
257. "Simplification Measures to Save EU Businesses €400 Million Annually", European Commission, May 21, 2025, available at: https://commission.europa.eu.

support to large industrial companies. Mid-sized enterprises (ETIs) are gradually being absorbed into the category of large companies due to the new European directive, strengthening their institutional ties. In their 2024 reports on the Single Market and Europe's long-term competitiveness, Enrico Letta and Mario Draghi emphasized the need for better understanding and recognition of these firms.[258]

Professional federations such as BusinessEurope, Copa-Cogeca, Eurochambres, etc. engage in multiple interactions with the European Commission and regularly participate in public consultations on standards, norms and industrial policies. Social dialogue mechanisms, co-decision processes and representation within European institutions are unique in the world in terms of their scale.

European universities are increasingly filing patents. Of 100,000 applications submitted to the European Patent Office (EPO) between 2000 and 2020, half came from just 5% of universities, mainly in France, Germany, Switzerland and the UK. In 2025, the EIB doubled its funding for power grids and innovation, directing over 60% of its investments toward ecological and technological transition. The European innovation performance indicator has improved by 12.6% points since 2018, although a slight decline is observed in 2025. Technology transfer and industry collaboration remain concentrated in regions with the strongest industrial base, facilitating the translation of university discoveries into economic competitiveness.

Strengths and weaknesses of international positioning

Russia, a credible leader of the anti-Western front?

Anti-Westernism at the heart of Russia's international positioning

Since Evgeny Primakov, former foreign minister under Boris Yeltsin, Russia has been advocating the advent of a multipolar world; this stance is becoming aggressive towards the West[259] and underpins cooperation with China, Iran, North Korea and authoritarian regimes in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East. The shift toward the East so desired by Primakov is indeed taking shape under Putin, deepening the decoupling from the West. Moscow is seeking to position itself as the core of a group of non-Western countries whose interests are opposed to those of the West, in order to unite this front of opposition to the liberal international order, based on criticism of Western

258. "Letta Report 'Much More Than a Market' (April 2024)", op. cit.; "The Draghi Report on EU Competitiveness", op. cit.

259. M. Laruelle, "De-Westernizing the World: The Karaganov Doctrine", *Le Grand Continent*, April 20, 2024, available at: https://legrandcontinent.eu.

interventionism, denunciation of economic sanctions, and the defense of "traditional values". In contrast, the alternative model proposed by Russia to the US and the EU emphasizes national sovereignty, non-interference, multipolarity and respect for traditions.

The countries of the "Global South" may be attracted by elements such as the figure of a strong leader who does not hesitate to defend national interests by force or promote conservative values. Outside Europe, many people do not understand the underlying causes of the Russia-Ukraine war, considering it a "European war" that does not directly concern them, but which provides an opportunity to denounce Western indifference to other conflicts. All stand to gain from expanding their economic, diplomatic and political room for maneuver *vis-à-vis* the West through their relationship with Russia. In Africa, Russia has marginalized France by multiplying defense agreements and sending private military companies (the best known of which was the Wagner Group, partially absorbed by the Africa Corps), while relying on rhetoric about the fight against Western neocolonialism. Authoritarian regimes and unstable juntas derive immediate, concrete and pragmatic benefits from their relationship with Russia: official recognition by a UN Security Council member (Taliban in Afghanistan), security services, learning how to manipulate information and elections, loans and favorable prices for raw materials, wheat and energy without restrictive political conditions. Their political support through favorable votes or resolutions at the UN General Assembly (as revealed by mapping of UN votes on various resolutions) helps legitimize Russia's actions in Ukraine, relativizes Russia's isolation, influences perceptions of the balance of power, and weakens the West's international position.

Anti-Western rhetoric now permeates all international forums promoted by Russia, primarily the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the BRICS+. Russia plays a leading role within both, displaying a clear political ambition: to promote a multipolar world order and break free from Western domination, particularly that of the dollar. Moscow seeks to make BRICS+ a counterweight to the G7 and to strengthen the influence of the "Global South" on the international stage. The BRICS+ summit in Kazan in 2024 was a symbolic success for Russia; it brought together a record number of delegations, symbolizing Moscow's ability to unite new members and partners around an alternative vision of global governance by giving more weight to emerging countries.

However, the following summit in Rio in 2025 (which the Russian and Chinese presidents did not attend, the former due to the International Criminal Court arrest warrant) highlighted the group's weaknesses: internal differences (even rivalries) and difficulties in formulating common ambitions. The divisions between members (China and India, India and Pakistan, Egypt and Ethiopia) and Iran's singular positioning limit the group's coherence, while the desire to create a common currency or an independent payment system aimed at reducing dependence on the dollar and US institutions is stalling due to economic differences and sometimes conflicting interests. The BRICS+ have strengthened certain common institutions, but the group remains an informal platform without a strict legal framework, and its rapid expansion to include overly heterogeneous members limits its cohesion. At the last SCO summit held in Tianjin on August 31–September 1, 2025, Russia's position seemed weaker than China's, with Beijing much more credible in the role of the principal architect of a new international order and an alternative to the post-war system dominated by the US.

Tools of influence

Russia's international position is based on a combination of various tools of influence, ranging from advantageous prices for its raw materials to direct military intervention, corruption of elites, and hybrid operations on the soil of European countries, which are increasing in number.[260] Russia openly violates international law, which Europe cannot afford to do in response. After attempting to develop Western-style soft-power tools in the 2000s during Dmitry Medvedev's presidencies (aiming to improve Russia's position in international rankings, develop innovation, promote Russian culture and language, and enhance the country's image etc.),[261] with Putin's return to power, Russia has favored more coercive tools with immediate impact: direct military interventions (Crimea, Donbass, Syria), sabotage (especially against Europe's critical infrastructure),[262] cyber operations, and information manipulation, which contribute to the projection of power and the destabilization of adversaries.

The arsenal is particularly broad for action in post-Soviet countries. Russian minorities in these countries and national workers in Russia, military bases (Armenia, Tajikistan, Moldova), unresolved conflicts (Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia), and the close ties between the security services and economic dependencies are exploited and make these countries particularly vulnerable to Russian pressure. For Russia, this is the "near abroad" where Western influence must be reduced as much as possible (the growing presence of China or Turkey provokes less rejection). Interference is no longer even really hidden. Since 2025, relations with countries such as Armenia and Moldova (and previously South Ossetia and Abkhazia) have been handled by the Internal Affairs Department of the

260. S. G. Jones, "Russia's Shadow War Against the West", CSIS, March 18, 2025, available at: www.csis.org.
261. T. Kastouéva-Jean, "'*Soft power*' russe : discours, outils, impact", *Russie.Nei.Reports*, No. 5, Ifri, October 2010, available at: www.ifri.org.
262. C. Edwards and N. Seidenstein, "The Scale of Russian Sabotage Operations Against Europe's Critical Infrastructure", IISS, August 2025, available at: www.iiss.org.

Presidential Administration, headed by Sergei Kiriyenko.[263] Countries such as Kazakhstan, which had tried to distance themselves from Russia's orbit, are ending up moving even closer to it.[264] Part of the Moldovan Russian-speaking population is immersed in the information field of Russian television channels. A few countries in the post-Soviet space, like Azerbaijan, rich in hydrocarbons and with strong ties to Turkey, can afford to oppose Russia head-on (as in the cases of the Azerbaijani plane shot down in 2024 and the diplomatic crisis following the heavy-handed arrest of Russian citizens of Azerbaijani origin in Yekaterinburg in 2025).

However, the persistent mistrust of Russian policy creates resistance (discourse on Russian colonialism has been on the rise in countries such as Kazakhstan, Georgia and Moldova since the start of the war in Ukraine) in the post-Soviet space, where Russia must contend with the rise of China and other regional players such as Turkey and others. A striking example of its loss of influence is the recent agreement signed between Armenia and Azerbaijan, negotiated with the direct involvement of Donald Trump, on the US-backed TRIPP corridor (Trump's Route for International Peace and Prosperity) linking Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan via Armenia, bypassing Iran and reshaping regional power and economic dynamics. This American mediation is one element in recent developments that highlights the declining confidence of the CIS countries in Russia, which is perceived as a partner that is increasingly unable to guarantee their security and interests.

Structural weaknesses and limits to Russia's attractiveness

While Russia has succeeded in establishing itself as a key player in the anti-Western camp, it is unlikely that it can become the undisputed leader of the "Global South". Its rhetoric and actions are sometimes perceived as overly polarizing, and many countries prefer to maintain an equal distance between the West and Russia, rather than aligning themselves with Moscow. Not all the "global majority" is anti-Western and anti-European, and several countries, such as India, refuse to choose between the two camps, in the name of its policy of multi-alignment.

Unlike the USSR, which offered a global ideological project, today's Russia struggles to offer a societal or political model that appeals to most people abroad. Its authoritarian regime, marked by the concentration of power, endemic corruption, repression of opponents, and restrictions on civil liberties, arouses the mistrust of many states and civil societies in countries that are not fully on the authoritarian path. The war in Ukraine has

263. A. Pertsev, "General tekhnologij. Chto izmenit' peredacha Kirienko otnoshenuj s postsovetskimi stranami" [The Technology General: How Kiriyenko's Takeover Will Change Relations with Post-Soviet Countries], Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 3, 2025, available at: https://carnegie.ru.
264. V. Grantzeva and R. Abdrakhmanov, "Kazakhstan After the Double Shock of 2022: Political, Economic and Military Consequences", *Russie.Eurasie.Visions*, No. 140, Ifri, October 2025, available at: www.ifri.org.

accentuated this negative image, associating Russia with military aggression, violations of international law, and brutal fighting. According to the Pew Research Center's global survey published in June 2025, a median of 79% of respondents in 25 countries have an unfavorable opinion of Russia, compared to only 19% who have a favorable opinion.[265] A median of 15% of respondents in 25 countries trust Vladimir Putin, compared to 84% who do not trust him.[266] Trust in the Russian president remains very low globally, although there is a rebound in some countries and among right-wing voters. This situation limits the effectiveness of Russian influence.

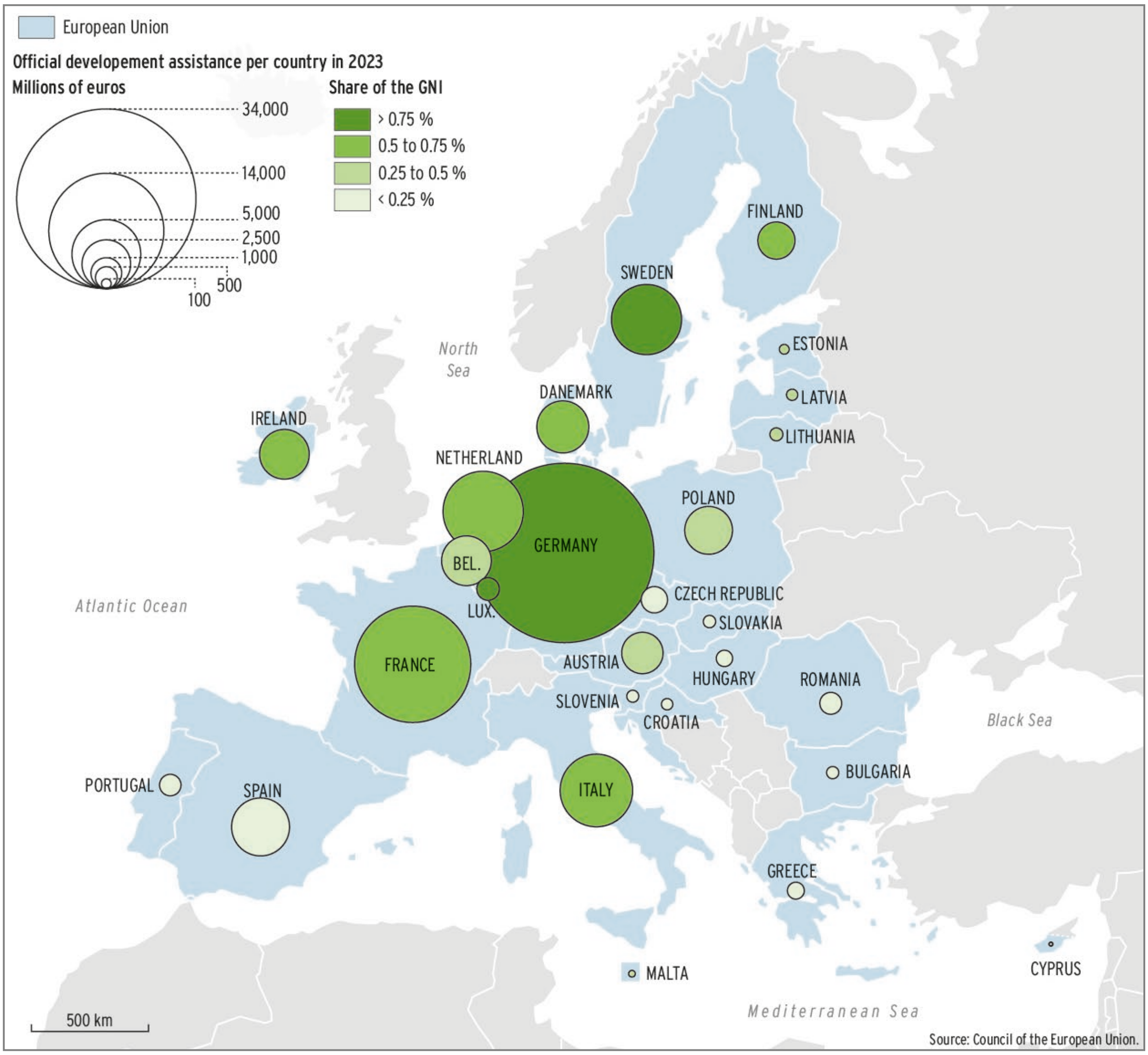
In the medium term, Russia risks a decline in its influence if it fails to modernize and diversify its economy, which is dependent on hydrocarbon exports, and if it continues to perpetuate a rigid social model and authoritarian governance based on repression and corruption. "Military Keynesianism"[267] does not help to overcome these structural weaknesses that weigh on its ability to innovate, attract talent and modernize its economy. The nature of its appeal, while real, remains limited compared to the technological and economic influence of the US and the EU. Most of its alliances are based more on pragmatic and ideological convergence of interests than on deep-rooted commitment to a common project and shared values. If the regime changes or relations with the West normalize, these countries' interest in Russia may wane.[268]

Although Russia can offer quick and tangible benefits (energy, wheat, civil nuclear power, weapons, certain technologies), its ability to finance large long-term projects abroad makes it a much less attractive partner than China with its BRI project or Europe. It has little real influence over global oil prices, which are central to its economic model, and its dependence on China (as noted above) has increased. Russian development aid is insignificant compared to that of the EU. According to the latest available data from 2017 (Russia has not reported its figures to the OECD since 2022), Russian official development aid amounted to approximately $1.2 billion, and it is unlikely to have increased since then, while the EU's collective aid in 2023 reached €95.9 billion, or 42% of global aid, confirming its status as the world's leading donor.[269] Russian contributions to multilateral programs, such as

265. M. Fagan, S. Gubbala and J. Poushter, "Views of Russia and Putin", Pew Research Center, June 23, 2025, available at: www.pewresearch.org.
266. R. Wike, J. Poushter, L. Silver and J. Fetterolf, "Comparing Confidence in Trump, Macron, Putin and Xi", Pew Research Center, June 11, 2025, available at: www.pewresearch.org.
267. V. Ishchenko, I. Matveev and O. Zhuravlev, "Military Keynesianism: Who Benefits from the War in Ukraine?", *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, No. 865, November 8, 2023, available at: www.ponarseurasia.org; S. Aleksashenko, V. Inozemtsev and D. Nekrasov, "Dictator's Reliable Rear: Russian Economy at the Time of War", CASE, November 2024, available at: https://case-center.org.
268. For example, the lifting of sanctions on Syria after the change of power immediately raised the question of Russian military bases in that country. See N. Smagin, "As the New Syrian Regime Gains Legitimacy, It Is Pushing Russia Out", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 17, 2025, available at: https://carnegieendowment.org.
269. "Official Development Assistance: the EU and Its Member States Remain the Biggest Global Provider", Council of the European Union, June 24, 2024, available at: www.consilium.europa.eu.

those of the UN, have fallen sharply, from $16.28 million in 2019 to just $0.2 million in 2024.[270] Developing countries expect Russia to provide tangible financial support for their infrastructure and economic and social development, rather than just paying lip service to an alternative to Western globalization and a multipolar world.

Figure 24: EU development aid



Source: Council of the European Union.

The New Development Bank of the BRICS, created to bypass Western financial institutions such as the IMF, is an example of an attempt to respond to these expectations, but Russian resources are currently severely constrained by internal economic pressures and the refocusing of the budget on defense and security. In short, Russia struggles to translate its geopolitical

270. I. U. K. Klyszcz, "Russia's Self-Serving Aid Policy: Influence, Opacity, and Propaganda", International Centre for Defence and Security, March 6, 2025, available at: https://icds.ee.

ambitions into effective and tangible economic and financial projects attractive to partners. Otherwise, its credibility and influence in these developing countries, already undermined by competition from other international players, risk further erosion.

No conflict involving Russia as a mediator has been resolved. Over the past decade, Russia has repeatedly acted as a mediator in various conflicts, but there are no examples of conflicts that have been fully resolved through its direct mediation. Russia has attempted to mediate in Syria (the Astana process together with Turkey and Iran), Libya, Afghanistan, and Yemen, but none of these conflicts has been definitively resolved through its efforts, although in some cases short-term truces have been signed or negotiations have been held. For example, in November 2020, Russia achieved a temporary stabilization of the line of contact between the parties to the Armenia/Azerbaijan conflict. It is also worth noting the success in maintaining President Tokayev's regime following the deployment of Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) troops (in fact, mainly Russian forces) to Kazakhstan in January 2022. However, it should be noted that the mediation successes of the EU or individual European states and leaders are also limited.

In fact, Russia has weakened its position with the war, even if the immediate sentiment may be different. The war in Ukraine and the hybrid struggle against the West are absorbing Russia to such an extent that it is less present in other theaters and unable to lend support to its allies. Engaged in a high-intensity conflict in Ukraine, Russia is now devoting most of its military, industrial and diplomatic resources to sustaining its war effort over the long term. It is thus seeing its ability to act simultaneously in several theaters erode, leading to a loss of influence in several regions of the world where Moscow had previously sought to assert itself. In the Middle East, Russia is struggling to maintain its role and is gradually leaving the field open to other players, notably China, Turkey and the US. In 2024, Russia was unable to save Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria from Islamists, which nullified Russia's strategic achievements in Syria and called into question the fate of the Russian military bases in Hmeimim and Tartus. This weakness came to light again during the "12-day war" between Israel and Iran/Hezbollah in June 2025. Russia disappointed part of the Iranian establishment by limiting itself to political support and condemnation of the US strikes, without moving on to more robust support, which Tehran expected.[271]

In October 2025, the cancellation of the summit with Arab countries in Moscow, which had been in preparation for several months, was symptomatic

271. But Tehran's international isolation limits its room for maneuver, and Russia remains a major partner even if the two countries are competitors in oil and gas. See N. Smagin, "Discontent Amid Despair," Riddle, September 5, 2025, available at: https://ridl.io.

of Moscow's loss of influence in the Middle East.[272] Its situation is likely to deteriorate further if Donald Trump manages to activate the levers of pressure at his disposal to get Russia's partners to weaken their support. His latest statements assuring that India will no longer buy oil from Russia must be closely monitored. In general, the activism of the United States, and its ability to propose unconventional solutions and impose itself as a mediator (Armenia/Azerbaijan, Israel/Hamas), undermine Moscow's revisionist discourse on the end of the international order under Western domination, the destructive interventions of the belligerent West, and the reign of chaos that justifies the use of force.[273] Faced with Trump, it will find it increasingly difficult to justify its uncompromising position on the war in Ukraine.

On the African continent, Russia is also showing its limitations. Despite its triumphalist rhetoric about its "anti-Western partnership" with the juntas in the Sahel, its ability to provide concrete support to these regimes is waning. The redeployment of Wagner forces after the failed rebellion of 2023, followed by their partial integration under the control of the Russian Ministry of Defense, has disrupted the networks of influence established in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, while China and Turkey are strengthening their influence in the region. The geopolitical cost of this stalemate is manifested less in spectacular ruptures than in a slow erosion of the channels of influence, alliances and prestige that made the Kremlin, before 2022, a global player in its own right.

The EU: What is its capacity for attraction?

Growing strategic autonomy

The PESCO, established under the Treaty of Lisbon and activated in 2017, unites EU member states to strengthen European defence through binding commitments, joint projects and increased interoperability. As of May 2023, 26 states participate (with Malta still absent). PESCO oversees 68 projects in areas such as cybersecurity, drones and military mobility, supported in part by the European Defence Fund. It allows third-country participation under certain conditions and respects national sovereignty while enhancing coordination.

Part of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), PESCO aims to boost strategic autonomy. The 2025 SAFE initiative, with €150 billion in guaranteed loans, illustrates this by financing joint arms

272. S. Konâšin, "Istoriâ otmenennogo sammita ili konec rossijskogo vliâniâ na Bližnem Vostoke" [The story of the canceled summit, or the end of Russian influence in the Middle East], October 15, 2025, available at: https://republic.ru.
273. A. Baunov, "Poriadok vmesto khaosa. Chem mir v Gaze opasen dlia Kremlia" [Order Instead of Chaos. Why Peace in Gaza Is Dangerous for the Kremlin], Carnegie Politika, October 15, 2025, available at: https://storage.googleapis.com.

purchases and projects, favoring European defence capabilities and reducing dependence on the United States, despite US objections.

European armament efforts are based on a multifaceted strategy combining increased budgets, targeted industrial support and joint governance through the CSDP, but remain constrained by national disparities and the need for unanimous consensus on major decisions. The ReArm Europe plan symbolizes the commitment to coordinated and large-scale rearmament.

Launched in March 2025, the ReArm Europe plan aims to massively increase military spending by member states, with funding of €800 billion from 2025 to 2028, including a Stability Pact waiver allowing higher public deficits for defense (SAFE). The goal is to fill capability gaps, improve army readiness and support partners such as Ukraine.

European forces remain uneven. Poland is increasing its effort most rapidly, aiming to become Europe's leading land force, with a defense budget of around 4% of GDP in 2025 and ambitious heavy equipment targets (tanks, artillery). The Baltic states follow, with defense budgets ranging from 2.9% to 3.4% of GDP.

Europe faces the challenge of harmonizing military efforts while respecting national sovereignty, which complicates coordination and pooling of capabilities. Financing is a key issue, with proposals to raise defense budgets to 3.5%, or even 5% of GDP in some countries, by 2030.

Attractiveness for the "Global South"

Europeans seek to advance globalization through an open trade system, positioning itself as a major hub of attractiveness for foreign investors in 2025, while Russia aims to undermine it. It seems that Russia may outperform Europe not due to its own strong performance but because Europe is becoming less effective. Thirteen of the 20 most attractive countries for foreign direct investment (FDI) are in Europe, with countries such as Denmark, Sweden and the United Kingdom leading the way. This demonstrates international confidence in a stable economic environment with clear rules and high-quality infrastructure. This attractiveness is largely based on the EU's commitment to maintaining a transparent and business-friendly regulatory framework, ensuring stability in a world increasingly marked by tensions.

Figure 25: Foreign direct investments (FDI) flows

Category	Europe	Russia
Inbound FDI flows (2024)	198 billion $	3.3 billion $
Outbound FDI flows (2024)	487.5 billion $	11.7 billion $
Inbound FDI stock (2024)	16,047.1 billion $	216 billion $
Outbound FDI stock (2024)	17,376 billion $	230 billion $

Source: World Investment Report 2025, UNCTAD.

This European model sharply contrasts with Russia's approach to globalization, which tends to undermine it through more closed, assertive and confrontational strategies. The EU pursues an open, rules-based and multilateral globalization framework focused on sustainable prosperity, strengthening international partnerships, and integrating global challenges such as climate change, digital transformation and security within cooperative frameworks. The EU promotes infrastructure investment, digital connectivity and capacity building with partner countries worldwide. This model prioritizes inclusiveness, human rights, democratic governance and multilateral cooperation to foster shared growth and stability. Russia's approach is characterized by a more protectionist and sovereign-centric stance that often rejects Western-led multilateral institutions and norms. Moscow favors a fragmented world order with limited integration under the pretext of respecting sovereignty, often leveraging geopolitical pressure, energy resources and military influence to assert its interests.

The Russian model emphasizes strategic autonomy and adopts confrontational tactics such as information warfare and military interventions to safeguard what it perceives as its geopolitical sphere of influence. This strategy tends to disrupt global supply chains and political consensus, fostering division rather than collaboration on transnational challenges. This fundamental divergence reflects competing visions for the future of global governance. By consolidating its partnerships, the EU is strengthening its influence by relying on the continuation of globalization.

The new types of geopolitical relations between the EU and Switzerland, the UK and Norway reflect a strategic and pragmatic diversification of alliances in response to Russia. In 2025, the EU concluded a package of bilateral agreements with Switzerland aimed at stabilizing and strengthening cooperation in key sectors such as electricity, health, food safety and participation in European programs (Erasmus+, Horizon Europe). This pragmatic partnership seeks to sustain the Swiss "bilateral track" with the EU by ensuring legal stability and enhancing exchanges despite international tensions. For the UK post-Brexit, the EU favors a pragmatic partnership focused on security, economic cooperation and managing common challenges (terrorism, cyberattacks). With Norway, the EU strengthens cooperation within the European Economic Area and in energy security, which is essential to reduce dependence on Russian imports. Norway remains a key NATO partner, contributing to collective defense resilience and promoting an open and stable trade framework.

Faced with the growing convergence of interests between Russia and China, the EU has strengthened its engagement in the Asia-Pacific region by developing strategic alliances with countries such as Japan, South Korea, India, Canada and Australia. These partnerships aim to protect the EU's economic and security interests, counter the threat posed by China's support for Russia, and guarantee the freedom of maritime routes that are essential for European trade. By getting involved in regional stabilization, the EU is expanding its network of allies and strengthening its ability to exert influence on the international stage *vis-à-vis* Russia. But some countries, like India, anticipate Russian success and adjust their policies accordingly. Most non-Western states avoid bearing costs to pressure Russia, leaving it to Europe and the US. Progress has been made, but cooperation with major powers like India is crucial. It is essential for Europe to counter the Russian narrative in the "Global South" and elsewhere, highlighting Putin's pursuit of imperialist ambitions.

The EU is stepping up negotiations and modernizing trade agreements with strategic partners such as Mexico, Mercosur, Chile and the UAE in order to reduce its economic dependence and expand its network of influence *vis-à-vis* Russia. By diversifying its trading partners, the EU is securing privileged access to new markets, strengthening its economic resilience, and limiting Russia's ability to use trade or energy as leverage. This strategy also allows the EU to offer a credible and attractive alternative to countries tempted by an exclusive partnership with Russia.

EU enlargement continues to be the primary driver of the continent's peaceful transformation. The accession of new states, notably Moldova, would strengthen the security and stability of the continent by reducing Russian influence in neighboring countries and would provide the EU with a network of strong allies that share its democratic and economic values. The enlargement of the EU responds to two main objectives. First, the logic of integration within the EU: a candidate country must meet the Copenhagen criteria (democracy, rule of law, human rights, market economy) and undergo a rigorous process. Second, the perspective of external partnership: before full accession, the EU establishes association agreements and provides gradual support to facilitate the transition, stabilize the regions involved, and strengthen economic and political cooperation with the candidates. This approach is particularly evident with the Western Balkans, which benefit from a stabilization and association process preparing for their future integration. This enlargement dynamic allows the EU to extend its political model, stabilize its borders, and marginalize Russia on the regional and international stage.

Conclusion

Europe faces multiple challenges in maintaining and strengthening its credibility and the effectiveness of its alliances; while also ensuring it does not lose ground with the countries of the Eurasian space, which now includes three candidate countries: Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. In the latter two, its influence is directly challenged by Kremlin disinformation campaigns and pro-Kremlin political parties. While the latest elections in Moldova have kept the country on its European path and can be regarded as a European success, despite the considerable resources Moscow invested in the pro-Russian campaign, in Georgia, the ruling party's authoritarianism is on the rise and the country is clearly moving away from Europe. Europe can support the countries of the former USSR by acting on several fronts: strengthening democracy, protecting against disinformation, providing economic and security support, ensuring energy resilience, and supporting civil society in these countries, whose populations are eager for greater cooperation with Europe. To achieve this, political will and the necessary means of action are key to ensuring a stable neighborhood for Europe.

As for the "Global South", regaining support there, with quick and convincing results, is not an easy task. The rhetoric describing Russia's war against Ukraine as a colonial war, espoused in particular by the Ukrainian authorities and even President Emmanuel Macron, has found little resonance. The Soviet legacy and the persistent image of the USSR as an anti-colonial power remain deeply rooted, particularly on the African continent. Direct pressure often proves counterproductive, as illustrated by the episode of sanctions imposed by the Trump administration on India for its purchases of Russian hydrocarbons. A long-term, consistent and patient strategy is therefore needed to rebuild a relationship of trust between the West and the countries of the South.

This strategy must be based on a comprehensive approach in which the war in Ukraine can be only one element. European discourse will gain credibility if it is accompanied by sincere and sustained attention to the priorities of the "Global South": economic development, investment, food security, education, climate and health. In other words, it is a question of demonstrating that Europe is capable of providing concrete responses to the structural needs of the South, where Russia offers only short-term benefits without offering any overall prospects for sustainable development. Diplomatic action must also be differentiated, tailored to the specific interests, history, memory and political sensitivities of each country. It is also important to highlight the contradictions in Russia's rhetoric; Moscow denounces neocolonialism while creating new forms of dependence – whether in terms of wheat, weapons or private military companies. Russia itself has, in reality, become dependent on the "Global South", whose markets, opportunities and diplomatic recognition it seeks.

The poor security record of the Wagner Group's presence in Mali and the Central African Republic deserves to be highlighted on the basis of solid, factual analysis. Finally, it is necessary to renew the actors, targets and methods. The message in favor of international law and sovereignty would gain in scope if it were relayed by local voices – experts, journalists and academics – or by certain Russian figures opposed to the war, in order to highlight the dissonance in Moscow's discourse.

Similarly, cooperation must be stepped up not only at the bilateral level, but also through regional organizations such as the African Union and the Arab League. Methodologically, it is essential to study and understand Russian communication strategies – free distribution of content via the Russian state-controlled international news network RT, African media partnerships, and journalist training programs – in order to respond with competing, positive and sustainable initiatives. In short, Europe should not seek to "detach" the "Global South" from Russia through confrontation, but rather to attract it in the long term through the consistency, constancy and credibility of its commitment to development and stability.

Indeed, the future challenges of Europe's relationship with the "Global South" are based on the rapid transformation of global balances, the rise of the BRICS+ countries, and the need for Europe to rebuild its partnerships on the basis of dialogue between equals, taking into account the multipolar aspirations and strategic ambitions of these new poles. Europe must contend with a world in which South-South alliances and multi-alignment are gaining ground, while remaining vigilant in the face of challenges of cohesion and internal rivalries.

The EU, often divided in its approach to state and non-state actors in the "Global South", is torn between preserving its multilateral traditions and the need to adapt its strategy to a changing world. In this context, its main challenges are to strengthen joint investments in energy transition and reindustrialization, to compete with China for access to strategic resources, and to ensure sustainable financing for climate change mitigation and local adaptation in the "Global South".

Europe is seeking to reinvent its models of cooperation, moving from development aid to the co-construction of industrial sectors, and from traditional diplomacy to shared governance, so as not to leave the field open to its global competitors, notably Russia. However, Europe's demographic and economic fragilities raise questions about its ability to remain an attractive partner for young societies in the South seeking new balances. Europe must therefore accelerate the adaptation of its strategies and strengthen the cohesion of its external policies in order to remain influential in the multipolar world and to be able to defend its interests and values.

	Russia	Europe
Strengths	• Diplomatic successes despite war. Broad and diverse support network: direct support of war effort, mitigation of sanctions and symbolic successes (UN votes, BRICS+, May 9 parade...). • Multipolar-world discourse attractive for "Global South". • Flexible strategic partnerships with quick benefits and no conditionality for partners — far removed from formal alliances. • No moral, legal or institutional limitations: any kind of support for any regime is possible. • Strong historical influence on post-Soviet countries: various channels maintained despite the war. • Strong Moscow–Beijing axis with ideological proximity: making a "reverse Kissinger" impossible. • Positive legacy of the USSR as an anti-colonial power, educational and cultural cooperation with Africa, Asia and Latin America. • Anti-Western and anti-colonialism rhetoric, successful in many countries (e.g., Africa).	• The EU plays a central role in international relations thanks to a diverse network of alliances and strong economic appeal. • Europe has a strong presence (in the form of EU member states or as an institution) in the most important and influential international organizations. • It relies on strategic partnerships (NATO, transatlantic and trade agreements) to strengthen its influence. • Weakening of traditional alliances: Europe is focusing on flexible formats (Weimar, E5, NB8, etc.). These formats provide strategic flexibility. • The EU is modernizing its trade agreements and increasing negotiations with key partners. • Enlargement towards the Western Balkans is a geopolitical lever against Russian influence.
Weaknesses	• Alliances: strong anti-Western posture promoted by Russia, but many partners are opportunistic, transactional and sensitive to Western pressure. They prefer multi-alignment/multi-dependencies rather than choosing one side. • Russian model as such lacks appeal • War/sanctions: limited support for allies (e.g., former Assad regime in Syria, Armenia, Iran...).	• Consequence of the implementation the "Global Majority" doctrine: discrediting of Western discourse in Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. • Military support for Ukraine does not prevent strong diplomatic criticism. • Dependence on the US and imports of raw materials (rare earths, energy) limits its strategic autonomy.

	• Growing dependency on China. • Decreasing influence in many post-Soviet countries (Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan…), which seek to diversify partnerships and get closer to Europe and the US. • Negative consequences of Iran's weakening and regime change in Syria for Russian influence in the Middle East.	• China exploits European divisions and uncertainties surrounding Trump to extend its influence • European influence and political weight eroded in a multipolar world. It could become less central in a world where the balance of power is shifting toward Asia and emerging countries.

Conclusion

Thomas Gomart and Lucie Mielle

The net assessment of the balance of power between Europe and Russia confirms a multidimensional confrontation that is likely to persist in the short, medium, and long term. For Moscow, the possibility of a direct military confrontation remains a fundamental assumption guiding its approach to statecraft. The Russian military elite considers the fear it seeks to instill in any adversary should be sufficient to deter support for Ukraine.

While Russia demonstrated initial macroeconomic resilience in the period 2022-2024, bolstered by rapidly expanding trade with China and the development of alternative supply routes for sanctioned goods, that momentum has now peaked. Russia is drifting toward stagflation, characterized by widening economic imbalances, labor shortages and declining investment, pointing toward a bleak long-term outlook. In contrast, Europe has demonstrated resilience, successfully absorbing the energy decoupling shock and positioning itself to become a global leader in electrification and climate action. The EU is actively seeking to reinvigorate and expand its trade partnerships, thereby strengthening its geoeconomic integration.

Europe's immediate security, however, rests precariously on two pillars: the enduring commitment of the United States to NATO and extended deterrence, and the fierce resistance of Ukraine. Since February 2022, Ukraine has been engaged in combat, acquiring unparalleled experience in conventional warfare in Europe. In this respect, it serves as the continent's advanced defensive line. Should either the US commitment waver or Ukrainian resistance break down, the prospects for a direct military confrontation would rise significantly.

Europe must now translate its potential into credible power, beginning with strengthening its deterrence. Although it holds a clear qualitative and quantitative edge in aerospace and sea domains, Europe's land forces suffer from critical shortfalls in depth and ammunition stockpiles. Europe must recognize Russia's significant advantage in conventional land power and adopt an offset strategy. This strategic shift requires systematically leveraging Europe's air, naval, space, and cyber superiority to, where appropriate, shift the center of gravity on the battlefield.

Political will is the decisive factor. Europe must strengthen its institutional framework. The major internal risk is not collapse in the medium term but the insidious erosion of Europe's democratic values under the pressure of rising populism and Russia’s persistent psychological and informational warfare, which exploits the openness of liberal societies to sow division. Against Russia's sustained hybrid aggression, Europe’s historically reactive and defensive posture is no longer sufficient. European countries must adopt a more assertive and forward-leaning stance, ensuring strict enforcement of sanctions, closing Kremlin-aligned media operations, and intensifying judicial action against covert activities.

The ultimate test of Europe's geopolitical credibility lies in its capacity to sustain Ukraine. By leveraging its powerful global network and intensifying trade exchanges, Europe must assert its vision of a rules-based international order. It possesses the industrial, economic, and military resources, as well as the technological expertise and geopolitical potential required to defend itself against Russia — provided it demonstrates the political will.

List of acronyms

A2/AD	**Anti-access/area denial systems**
AfD	Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, German political party)
AI	Artificial Intelligence
ASU	Autonomous Systems Units/Systems
ASW	Anti-Submarine Warfare
bcm	Billion cubic meters
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
BRICS+	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates
BSW	Bündnis (Alliance) Sahra Wagenknecht, German political party)
CAP	Combat Air Patrol
CBR	Central Bank of Russia
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CNPC	China National Petroleum Corporation
COMAO	Composite Air Operations
DCA	Dual-Capable Aircraft
DCS	Direct Commercial Sales
ECR	European Conservatives and Reformists Group (political group in the European Parliament)
EDIP	European Defense Industry Programme
EDIS	Europe Defence Industrial Strategy
EDTIB	European Defence Technological and Industrial Base
E5	Informal group of the five largest economies in the EU
EIB	European Investment Bank
ELINT	Electronic Intelligence
EMS	Electromagnetic Spectrum

EPC	European Political Community
EPO	European Patent Office
ESN	Europe of Sovereign Nations Group (political group in the European Parliament)
ESPO	Eastern Siberia–Pacific Ocean oil pipeline
EU	European Union
EVs	Electric Vehicles
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FIMI	Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference
FMS	Foreign Military Sales
FPÖ	Freedom Party of Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, Austrian political party)
FSB	Federal'naâ služba bezopasnosti (Federal Security Service)
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GLONASS	Global'naâ navigacionnaâ sputnikovaâ sistema (Russian satellite navigation system)
GPS	Global Positioning System
GU/GRU	Glavnoe razvedyvatel'noe upravlenie (Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff). Known as Glavnoe upravlenie (Main Directorate) since 2010.
IAMD	Integrated Air and Missile Defense
ICC	International Criminal Court
IEA	International Energy Agency
IFV	Infantry Fighting Vehicle
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IPCEI	Important Projects of Common European Interest
Iris²	European Commission satellite connectivity program
ISR	Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance
ISTAR	Intelligence, Surveillance, Target, Acquisition & Reconnaissance
ITAR	International Traffic in Arms Regulations
JODI	Joint Organizations Data Initiative
LFI	La France Insoumise (France Unbowed, French political party)
LLM	Large Language Model

LNG	Liquefied Natural Gas
mbd	Million barrels per day
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
MFF	Multiannual Financial Framework
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NB8	Nordic–Baltic Eight
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
NPG	Nuclear Planning Group
NWF	National Wealth Fund
ODIN	Operational Data Integrated Network
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
OICA	International Organization of Motor Vehicle Manufacturers
OPEC+	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries plus
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
OWA	One-Way Attack (vehicles/drones)
PESCO	Permanent Structured Cooperation
PiS	Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice, Polish political party)
PNT	Positioning, Navigation and Timing
PPP	Purchasing Power Parity
PRC	People's Republic of China
R&D	Research and Development
RN	Rassemblement National (National Rally, French political party)
Rosgvardiya	Russian National Guard
Rosstat	Russian Federal State Statistics Service
RTO	Research and Technology Organization
RR/$	Russian Ruble per Dollar
SAM	Surface-to-Air Missile
SACEUR	Supreme Allied Commander Europe
SAFE	Security Action for Europe
SATCOM	Satellite Communication
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SEAD	Suppression of Enemy Air Defenses

SPFS	Sistema peredači finansovyh soobŝenij Banka Rossii (System for Transfer of Financial Messages (Russian alternative to SWIFT)
SVO	Special'naâ voennaâ operaciâ (Special Military Operation)
TEL	Transporter Erector Launcher
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
TSMC	Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company
UAV	Unmanned Air Vehicle
UN	United Nations
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VAT	Value Added Tax
VDV	Vozdušno-desantnye vojska (Russian Airborne Troops)
VIGINUM	French Agency for Vigilance and Protection against Foreign Digital Interference
VKS	Vozdušno-kosmičeskie sily (Russian Aerospace Forces)
VPK	Voenno-promyšlennyj kompleks (Military Industrial Company)
VPN	Virtual Private Network
WIPO	World Intellectual Property Organization
WTO	World Trade Organization

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