

# Charting a Transatlantic Approach to Russia: A Working Paper of the Transatlantic Forum on Russia

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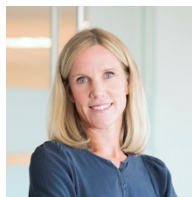


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## About the Author



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## About the Transatlantic Security Program

The mission of the Transatlantic Security Program is to strengthen transatlantic relations and help decision-makers understand, anticipate, and respond to challenges in Europe and Russia. Key among these challenges is the rise of China, a revisionist Russia, threats to democracy, and other changes in Europe's security landscape that will require NATO to adapt. The Transatlantic Security Program addresses these issues by working closely with CNAS' network of current and former U.S. and European government officials, private-sector partners, and academic experts to translate cutting-edge research into policy solutions. The program fosters high-level U.S.-European dialogue, convenes seminars and public forums, and engages with media and citizens to shape the context in which policies are made.

## About the Transatlantic Forum on Russia

[The Transatlantic Forum on Russia](#) (TFR) facilitates dialogue between experts from the United States and Europe on Russia, the challenges it poses, and the necessary responses. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine prompted significant changes in Europe and inside Russia, and caused ripple effects that are reverberating much farther afield. Through its working groups and flagship biannual symposiums, the TFR helps forge a shared understanding of these changes and the nature of the Russian threat the allies now confront. By sharing assessments on current and future challenges posed by the Kremlin and generating

creative strategies for how to address them, the Forum seeks to support the sustained transatlantic cohesion and coordination that is necessary for dealing with the evolving but persistent Russia challenge.

## Acknowledgments

This working paper reflects two years of dialogue and research that CNAS has conducted through its TFR. It brings together and builds on previous work facilitated by the TFR, including TFR policy papers, op-eds, articles, and congressional testimony, which are cited in this working paper. An earlier version of this paper was submitted to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations for a full committee [hearing](#) on "What Comes Next for U.S. Policy Towards Russia."

The author is grateful to all the experts who provided input and participated in the roundtables and dialogues that informed this paper. The views expressed in this white paper are those of the author alone, and any errors that remain are the responsibility of the author alone.

The Transatlantic Forum on Russia was made possible with the generous support of the Bertelsmann Foundation, BP America, Canadian Department of National Defense, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany, Embassy of the Republic of Finland, Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Estonian Ministry of Defence, Federal Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany, Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Latvian Ministry of Defense, Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Lithuania, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Royal Norwegian Ministry of Defence.

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## Table of Contents

<b><i>Introduction .....</i></b>	<b><i>5</i></b>
<b><i>Expectations for Future Relations with Russia .....</i></b>	<b><i>6</i></b>
<b><i>Objectives for Transatlantic Russia Policy .....</i></b>	<b><i>9</i></b>

## Introduction

Although the United States and Europe are not directly engaged in the war with Russia in Ukraine, Moscow clearly sees itself as being at war with the West. The United States and Europe, therefore, must be prepared for a period of what is likely to be prolonged confrontation with Russia, with the war for Ukraine at the center of that confrontation.

Successfully navigating this period of sustained confrontation requires continued cohesion and coordination between the United States and Europe to ensure they share a common picture of the challenge that Russia poses and the necessary response. Russia's war in Ukraine has precipitated rapid and major changes in Europe and broader ripple effects that are altering political dynamics much farther afield. Because of the war in Ukraine, Russia itself is changing in still unknowable ways. Russian President Vladimir Putin is taking the country in a more authoritarian direction, Russian society is shifting, and the Russian military's degradation in Ukraine means that the nature of the Russian threat is evolving. Russia's war, therefore, requires the allies to re-examine long-held assumptions and understandings about Russia and its intentions and capacity, and it is those updated assessments that should guide the transatlantic partners' future policy approach toward Moscow.

There is no going back to the way things were with Russia prior to its invasion of Ukraine. Instead, Western allies must build on ongoing efforts to constrict and constrain the Kremlin's ability to sustain aggression in Ukraine and more broadly beyond Russia's borders. It also will require the development of a long-term and sustainable approach to restoring peace and stability to Europe, increasing resilience to the Kremlin's tools and tactics, and planting the seeds for a less confrontational relationship with a future Russia. In many ways, such an approach will resemble the containment strategy first set out in the 1940s, a strategy designed to apply steady and forceful counterpressure to a regime whose paranoia and insecurities represented a clear danger to the West, just as the Putin regime does today.

Each of the transatlantic allies' preferred policy approaches will reflect their own proximity to and history with Russia, as well as current political realities within their own borders. Nonetheless, there is broad consensus within the alliance that the unprecedented cohesion and coordination among allies in the wake of Russia's invasion must hold. To that end, this working paper provides a starting point for the development of a transatlantic approach to Russia. It articulates expectations for relations with Russia that should guide the allies' approach, outlines the broad objectives that a transatlantic Russia policy should seek to accomplish, and in some cases more specific near-term actions the allies can take. The analysis reflects two years of dialogue that CNAS has conducted through its TFR. It brings together and builds on previous work facilitated by the Forum, including policy papers, op-eds, articles, a Senate Foreign Relations Committee testimony, "What Comes Next for U.S. Policy Toward Russia," and other cited publications.<sup>1</sup> The paper aims to provide fodder for policymakers and experts on both side of the Atlantic to debate and refine through continued dialogue, including through the future work of the TFR.

## Expectations for Future Relations with Russia

A transatlantic approach to Russia must reflect realistic expectations of Russia, its intentions, and its evolving tactics. Looking forward, a transatlantic approach to Russia should be informed by the following expectations:

**Relations with Russia will remain confrontational so long as the war continues, and the conflict is likely to be protracted.**

Though most wars end within a few months, those that last more than a year tend to drag on for over a decade.<sup>2</sup> Putin's ideological commitment to the war and the incentives shaping his decision-making calculus suggest the Russo-Ukraine war may very well fit this historical precedent. The reasons that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky keeps fighting are clear: if he doesn't, Ukraine as it was ceases to exist. That sentiment has been well articulated by Western leaders who highlight that, if Russia stops fighting, there will be no more war; if Ukraine stops fighting, there will be no more Ukraine. Even a decision by Zelensky to pursue a negotiated settlement that cedes territory to Russia carries the risk that, having learned that might makes right, Moscow might attack again in the future. In the jargon of political scientists, Zelensky faces a credible commitment problem in which Kyiv cannot be confident that Putin will commit to a settlement and then not simply regroup and attack again in the future. By agreeing to a settled peace now, Ukraine could find itself in a worse position later, especially if the country remains outside of NATO.<sup>3</sup>

For Russia, even though the Russian military struggles to make gains on the battlefield, Putin remains confident he can achieve his objectives. Moscow is confident that the West will tire of its support for Ukraine or that political changes in the United States and Europe will result in less support for Kyiv. But even more, continuing the war benefits Putin personally.<sup>4</sup> The invasion of Ukraine has significantly complicated Putin's ability to rule, not least because his image as a competent leader has been irreparably damaged. Sustaining the conflict is in his interest because it makes Putin more resilient to the domestic challenges that have mounted since the invasion. Using data from Sarah Croco and Jessica Weeks, research conducted by Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Erica Frantz finds that since the end of World War II, only rarely have personalist authoritarians like Putin been unseated while an interstate conflict is ongoing.<sup>5</sup> Other data similarly show that leaders that initiate war are especially unlikely to be ousted amid war.<sup>6</sup> This is because the execution of the war creates dynamics that make it more difficult to orchestrate an autocrat's removal.

The same does not hold true for dictators who lose wars; they become more vulnerable to ejection. Once Putin ends the war, there will be a political reckoning inside Russia. He therefore has strong incentive to stay in the war, especially if there is risk that Russians will perceive the outcome as a defeat. Research by Giacomo Chiozza and Hein Goemans found that about 80-percent of the leaders in power at the end of a conflict remained in power afterwards. However, of those leaders who were ousted, all had experienced a military defeat. Overall, when leaders are defeated in war, about half end up losing power.<sup>7</sup>

Although personalist autocrats like Putin tend to be among the most resilient to military defeats, leaders' expectations of what might happen if they are ousted also shape their calculus. Those who worry that they will be jailed, exiled, or killed—a fate most common among personalist autocrats—will be sensitive to even small increases in their risk. Moreover, Putin's very clear responsibility for the invasion makes him particularly vulnerable.<sup>8</sup> Research by Sarah Croco suggests that such culpable leaders are motivated to continue fighting wars, even in the face of hardship, because domestic actors will want to punish them if they fail in a war that they played a role in starting.<sup>9</sup> Even if Ukraine is wildly successful in its

counteroffensive, Putin has every incentive to fight through the hardship, meaning that this war will go on for a long time, significantly constraining the scope of relations with Russia.<sup>10</sup>

**Not only is Putin poised to maintain power, but the confrontational nature of relations with Russia likely will persist past his departure.**

Putin's ability to hold onto power for as long as he has increases the prospects that he will continue to do so. According to research by Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Erica Frantz, not all autocrats are so durable; just a quarter of post–Cold War autocrats have governed for 20 years or more.<sup>11</sup> Over his long tenure, Putin has created in Russia what political scientist Milan Svoilik calls an established autocracy wherein regime officials and elite are fully dependent on the leader and invested in maintaining the status quo from which they benefit.<sup>12</sup> The longer that such established autocrats are in power, the less likely they are to be removed at the hands of the elite. Strong consensus about the use of repression, on full display in Putin's Russia, further reduces the likelihood that he will be forcibly removed. Research by Kendall-Taylor and Frantz finds that the typical post–Cold War autocrat who had governed for 20 years (Putin has been in power for 23 years) ended up ruling for a total of about 36 years.<sup>13</sup> It is plausible that Putin will remain in power for several years to come.

What's more, the changes he is orchestrating inside Russia make the future of transatlantic relations with Russia more problematic. Putin already is taking Russia in a more authoritarian direction. If anything, Putin is moving Russia in a more totalitarian direction as he attempts to mobilize Russian society in support of his war not just on Ukraine, but also on the West with the United States at its center. Society is being militarized, public acts of support are growing, as are incidents of Russians reporting on the “anti-patriotic” activities of their fellow citizens.<sup>14</sup> Putin is proffering what Andrei Kolesnikov describes as, “an older strain of nationalist ideology in which the decadent West is the enemy and Russia has a messianic destiny to oppose its harmful influence.”<sup>15</sup> There also likely will be deep Russian resentment over Western sanctions and the role that U.S. and European weapons have played in the high number of Russian casualties. Amid the Kremlin's propaganda, many Russians appear to feel besieged and, often, just as embittered as Putin himself. The longer Putin remains in power, the deeper these ideas' roots will grow, raising the likelihood that relations with Russia will remain confrontational even after Putin departs.

Given the societal changes taking place inside Russia, the expectation in Western capitals must be that authoritarianism and the contours of Russian foreign policy will outlast Putin. The historical record shows that for all post–Cold War autocrats (except monarchs) in power 20 years or more, authoritarianism persists past the leader's departure in 76 percent of cases. When such leaders are also older personalist autocrats, authoritarianism endures—either with the same regime or with the establishment of a new one—92 percent of the time.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the same regime group of regime insiders often remains intact after longtime leaders leave office—a prospect that would be made more likely if Putin exits on account of natural death or an elite-led coup.<sup>17</sup>

Such continuity likely would extend to the nature of the Russian regime and its external relations. Successors that deviate from the status quo are likely to provoke fierce resistance from the “old guard” who have considerable control over the levers of power in the system. Beyond sidelining (if they can) individuals who pose a serious threat to them, new leaders who inherit office this way tend to adhere to the previous program. In countries such as Syria and Uzbekistan, for example, the successors of longtime leaders Bashar al-Assad and Shavkat Mirziyoyev respectively showed early signs of liberalization through actions such as the release of political prisoners, only to revert to traditionally more repressive practices. In part for these reasons, research by Sarah Croco finds that when successors come from the same regime as leaders involved with the initiation of a war, they are likely to continue the conflicts they inherit.<sup>18</sup> By invading Ukraine, Putin has created problems that will be difficult for future leaders to navigate—for example, how to end the war including resolving the status of Crimea and the other territories Russia has illegally annexed, wartime reparations, and accountability for war crimes that

will open future leaders up to accusation of capitulating to the West and therefore long complicate Russia's relations with the United States and Europe. Although a new leader could change the tone of Russia's external relations—just as the transition from Putin to Medvedev created an opening for U.S.-Russia cooperation that did not exist with Putin as President—the broad contours of Russian foreign policy likely would endure.<sup>19</sup>

**Along with the intent, Russia will retain significant capacity to challenge the United States and Europe, although the nature of the threat is evolving.**

Russia's war in Ukraine not only has exposed the deficiencies of the Russian military, but U.S. and Western responses to the invasion have accelerated long-standing trends pushing Russia toward decline. Europe has reduced its energy dependence on Russia, diminishing both the country's leverage over Europe and government revenues that depend heavily on energy exports. Unprecedented international sanctions and export controls are limiting Russia's access to capital and technology, which will cause Moscow to fall even farther behind in innovation. If before the war Russia was already facing serious challenges, its outlook now is decidedly dimmer.<sup>20</sup>

Given Russia's outlook, there will be a strong temptation in the United States and Europe to downgrade Russia as a future threat. Rising U.S. tensions with China only will increase the allure of such arguments, especially in Washington, as the imperative to focus limited resources on Beijing grows. But that would be a mistake. Russia may be down, but it's almost certainly not out. Moscow sees itself at war with the United States in Ukraine and will seek reprisal. Putin will remain intent on restoring a sphere of control over the post-Soviet states, including the destruction of Ukraine and its national identity. He will look for opportunities to demonstrate that Russia is still a power to be feared. Moreover, the Russian military may be wounded, but it retains many of the capabilities that most concern NATO. Although Russia has expended thousands of precision-guided weapons, it retains significant capabilities in integrated air defense, electronic warfare, anti-satellite, and other advanced systems, particularly in the undersea domain.

Moreover, the more vulnerable Moscow perceives itself to be given the destruction of its conventional military forces in Ukraine, the more it will look to offset those vulnerabilities by resorting to nonconventional tools, including cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, covert operations, and most ominously, increasing reliance on nuclear weapons. A weakened Russian conventional force is more likely to rely on the prospect of nuclear escalation to offset NATO conventional superiority in Europe. A future crisis or conflict with NATO would leave the Kremlin with few options prior to threatening or potentially using nuclear weapons, shortening the pathway to nuclear war. In sum, Moscow is poised to remain a good enough power—one with significant remaining capacity and intent to challenge U.S. and European interests.<sup>21</sup>



## Objectives for Transatlantic Russia Policy

Given these expectations for future relations with Russia, the transatlantic allies should pursue a policy that aims to accomplish the following objectives:

### **Ensure Ukraine's victory.**

The United States and Europe have little ability to directly shape the trajectory of relations with Russia. Given the hardened environment Putin now operates in, significant political change is unlikely to occur absent a seismic shift. A Ukrainian victory in the war could provide such a catalyst. A Ukrainian victory raises the prospect, even if only slightly, that Putin would be ousted as a result. The most probable path to political change in Russia, then, runs through Ukraine.<sup>22</sup>

Translating a military defeat into political change is far from guaranteed. Research by the political scientists Giacomo Chiozza and Hein Goemans has found that roughly 80 percent of all leaders in power at the end of a conflict remained in power afterward. The personalist nature of Putin's regime creates particularly strong headwinds to change. Research shows that because personalist dictatorships have few institutional mechanisms to facilitate coordination and their elite view their fates as being tied to that of the leader, personalist leaders are the most able to withstand military losses.<sup>23</sup>

Yet even personalist authoritarians are not immune to the aftermath of a poor military performance. The same research by Chiozza and Goemans shows that of those leaders who were ousted as a result of a war, all had experienced a military defeat. In fact, approximately half of all leaders who lose a war also lose power.<sup>24</sup> As with other seismic events—like economic or natural disasters—military defeats can expose leaders as incompetent, making visible cracks in the autocrat's shield that shatter their aura of invincibility. Such shocks also create a focal point for mobilization, facilitating the collective action that is necessary to dislodge entrenched regimes. A Ukrainian victory, then, raises the prospects for more meaningful political change in Russia and, critically, could provide future Russian elites and the Russian public with a valuable lesson about the limits of military power.<sup>25</sup>

The allies can do much more to support Ukraine's victory, including by providing Ukraine with decisive weapons in greater numbers to enable Kyiv to liberate as much of its territory as possible. The transatlantic partners also should commit now to codified assurances to provide Ukraine with military support over the long term. Such a security commitment, while critical, will not be enough to ensure Ukraine's security. The allies also must firmly anchor Ukraine in Euro-Atlantic institutions, including by issuing a clear and unequivocal invitation to Ukraine to join NATO at the Washington Summit in 2024. The United States and Europe too must work to hold Russia accountable for war crimes—a necessary step both for supporting Ukraine's democratic development and breaking Russia's chain of impunity.

### **Undermine Russia's capacity for aggression beyond its borders more broadly.**

Russia under Putin never will be a stakeholder in European security—a reality that likely will persist past Putin's departure. Transatlantic policy, therefore, should continue to aim at undermining Moscow's capacity to sustain aggression in Ukraine and more broadly beyond Russia's borders. The unprecedented sanctions and export control regime have been critical in this regard. But there already is evidence that Russia is circumventing many of the Western measures. The allies must work to prevent it.

Additional steps to undermine Russia's capacity for aggression include:

- ***Strengthening the oil price cap.*** The transatlantic allies should advocate more strongly for measures that raise the costs of violating the price cap. More specifically, the allies should advocate that the G7 impose sanctions on any service provider—whether it is a commodities trading firm, a vessel, a shipping company, or an insurance provider—that knowingly participates in a transaction for Russian oil that exceeds the price cap.<sup>26</sup>
- ***Sanctioning additional entities.*** There are several opportunities for expanding existing sanctions on Russia. In particular, the allies should implement additional sanctions to stymie the flow of oil money into Russia's economy and limit how the Kremlin can use it. More specifically, the allies should impose blocking sanctions on all key nodes of Russia's energy sector, including big production companies such as Rosneft and Gazprom and financial institutions such as Gazprombank. Even though the two largest banks in Russia, Sberbank and VTB (as well as Rostec, the biggest Russian defense conglomerate) are under blocking sanctions, the energy sector retains free access to the global financial system.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, the technology control regime should be expanded to target some important blind spots. Rosatom, Russia's largest and best-equipped manufacturer of high-tech goods, stands out. Its importance in the global nuclear supply chain should not prevent allies from taking action to hinder its manufacturing operations. Rosatom is at the forefront of efforts to mitigate sanctions. It already was Russia's leading producer of advanced materials and precision machine tools but is now leading efforts to produce microchips. More needs to be done to disrupt its component manufacturing activities and those of its subsidiaries.<sup>28</sup>

- ***Strengthening sanctions enforcement.*** Enforcing those sanctions already in place will require cracking down on illicit trade networks operating in allied countries and greater surveillance--and ultimately cessation—of supplies to third countries that are profiting by reselling equipment to Russia. While China might be more difficult to dissuade, the likes of Turkey, Kazakhstan, and Vietnam might prove more amenable given their own interests in maintaining warm relations with allied countries.<sup>29</sup>

### **Strengthen deterrence of Russian conventional threats.**

Russia is not in a position to widen the war to draw in NATO. But Western policymakers should not be complacent. It may take Russia the better part of a decade to recapitalize its conventional forces in the aftermath of its attack on Ukraine, but NATO has its own recapitalization woes. NATO will take years to replenish the weapons and ammunition it has sent, to say nothing of the toll on stocks the longer the war continues. The United States, in cooperation with its NATO allies, must address shortcomings in the defense industrial base to ensure sustained supply to Ukraine over the long term, and to ensure preparedness for future conflicts. Moreover, this war has underscored just how dependent Europe is on the United States for its security. Although it is tempting to argue that the United States should offload responsibility for deterring Russia to Europe given rising tensions with China, that is an unrealistic and dangerous proposition. It will take Europe decades to be ready. The United States, therefore, must remain committed to strengthening NATO, while European capitals implement plans that will strengthen the European pillar within NATO over time.<sup>30</sup>

NATO already has taken significant steps to strengthen deterrence. At the NATO summit in Vilnius in July 2023, the alliance adopted new regional defense plans for countering the Russian threat. These ambitious plans provide member states with guidance on how to upgrade their defense and direct military spending.<sup>31</sup> It is now incumbent on the allies to make the investments and commitments needed to fulfill NATO plans.

**Deter and increase resilience to Russia's use of hybrid tactics.**

An effective transatlantic approach to Russia strategy will require a long-term and sustainable approach to lessen the impact of the tools and tactics Moscow will rely on most, which, given the degradation of its conventional forces in Ukraine, will likely heavily feature nonconventional methods such as disinformation, sabotage, and cyber-attacks, including on critical infrastructure. Addressing these threats will require the allies to continue to work on greater coordination between the EU and NATO. The allies also should consider building a collective response mechanism for sub-conventional actions, especially election interference. Given the sustained and likely growing threat of tactics aimed at disrupting democratic institutions and processes coming from Russia—but also other authoritarian actors like China and Iran—the United States and Europe, along with like-minded partners, must band together to put in place a collective defense mechanism—akin to NATO's Article 5—to raise the costs to Russia and others for their efforts to undermine democracy.

**Strengthen nuclear deterrence while shaping the environment for an eventual return to arms control.**

As Russian capabilities are degraded and NATO conventional and other capabilities are enhanced, the new deterrence and stability balance is being fundamentally affected in still unknown ways. The continued injection of nuclear threats by Putin and other senior Russian officials—along with a growing sense of vulnerability given the degradation of Russia's conventional forces—will require the United States and its NATO partners to consider its defense and deterrence concepts and gain greater confidence in its policies designed to reduce and, if necessary, respond to nuclear threats to the alliance more thoroughly. Despite the darkening prospects of arms control with Russia, the imperative to maintain unity with NATO allies remains. NATO cannot wait to consider what steps it seeks and might pursue with Russia until a better geostrategic reality emerges: NATO must act to shape and encourage what the future environment will look like, and how nuclear and other strategic risks will be mitigated and reduced. Shaping the strategic landscape in Europe, both through NATO action and, when possible, engagement with Russia will be key to enhancing European unity and security.

**Disrupt and create headwinds to Russia's relationships with other malign authoritarian actors.**

Russia's deepening partnership with other authoritarian actors, especially China, Iran, and North Korea amplifies the threats they collectively pose to the United States and Europe. Although there have been limits to what Beijing has been willing to do for Russia, China in particular has served as a vital lifeline for the Kremlin—parroting Russian talking points about the war, increasing purchases of Russian oil and gas, and continuing to export to Moscow microchips and other component parts that have been cut off by the West.<sup>32</sup> Not only are these countries diluting Western pressure on Russia and facilitating its efforts to sustain the war in Ukraine, but the more dependent Moscow becomes on these countries, the more the Kremlin is likely to give away to ensure their continued support. In this way Russia is amplifying the threat that these other malign authoritarian actors pose to the United States and Europe.

**Grow the coalitions of countries more closely aligned with the United States.**

The unity and coordination between the United States and its allies in the wake of Putin's invasion has been extraordinary, but Russia is far from isolated internationally. Putin has doubled down on the information domain, effectively framing NATO and the West as responsible for the war; his narratives continue to resonate with many in the Global South. Only 34 countries have imposed sanctions on Russia since the war started. Russia continues to build ties in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. China, India, and other states in the Global South have abstained on votes in favor of Ukraine at the United Nations. Trade between Russia and these countries has increased. Eighty-seven countries still offer Russian citizens visa-free entry, including Argentina, Egypt, Israel, Mexico, Thailand, Turkey, and

Venezuela. The United States and Europe must continue to work to grow the coalition of countries willing to stand against Russian aggression.<sup>33</sup>

One such opportunity exists through Washington's and some European countries' efforts to exploit Russia's difficulties in sustaining arms sales. The Kremlin's need to replace its own weapons destroyed in Ukraine and the sanctions and exports controls the West has implemented in the aftermath of Russia's invasion will make it harder and more expensive for Russia to produce many of the systems it exports. A decline in arms sales has the potential to decrease Russian revenue that it uses to sustain the war in Ukraine, but also to diminish Russian influence in several countries where the Kremlin has used these deliveries to encourage compliance with its policy preferences.

### **Support a more liberal and democratic Russia.**

The United States and its European allies should not pursue regime change in Russia—decisions about Russian leadership only can be made by Russians themselves. However, the United States and its allies should help create conditions that are more conducive to reformers inside Russia working for a more liberal and less hostile Russia. The United States and its allies should not shy away from actions that facilitate such political change out of fear of what comes after Putin. Political change in Russia carries risks—of violence, chaos, and internal conflict—but it also opens the possibility of a more hopeful future for Russia and for its relations with its neighbors and the West.

In particular, the United States and Europe should:

- ***Build on anti-corruption measures that have been strengthened since Russia's invasion of Ukraine.*** Corruption has been the lifeblood of Putin's regime. Longtime personalist regimes like Russia are the most corrupt type of authoritarian regime. Corrupt and illicit networks entrench regime interests and create high barriers to individuals outside the regime seeking to gain influence within the system. In this way, corruption facilitates the persistence of authoritarianism after a longtime leader's departure. Doubling down on anti-corruption—including by effectively enforcing sanctions on corrupt oligarchs and tracking down their assets, stepping up efforts to fight money laundering, reforming campaign finance, enhancing transparency of the financial and real estate markets, and increasing funding for investigative journalism—can weaken the structural support for authoritarianism in Russia and thereby create opportunities for political change in a post-Putin era.<sup>34</sup>
- ***Increase support for Russian civil society—a key ingredient needed to sustain a more liberal and democratic Russia.*** Critically, Western actions can help Russian civil society actors to sustain their work in the face of the Kremlin's crackdown. In particular, large numbers of the opposition, journalists, and other Russian civil society actors have been forced to leave the country, creating new opportunities to support their work from outside Russia. Much can be done, for example, to support journalists that now operate outside Russia, including through visa support, fellowships, increased funding, and legal assistance. Such efforts are needed now more than ever and would make for a valuable investment in a better relationship with a future, post-Putin Russia.<sup>35</sup>

### **Prepare for a potentially chaotic political transition.**

Putin's personalization of the political system makes succession fraught. The most likely scenario for leadership change in Russia is through Putin's natural death in office, which most likely would lead to the persistence of the same regime insiders and a significant degree of continuity in the Russian regime and its foreign policy. But such a scenario is far from guaranteed. Research by Kendall-Taylor and Frantz



shows that since the end of the Cold War, a third of personalist dictators who were in power for 20 years or more were toppled by popular protests or armed rebellions—pathways that bring a considerable risk of chaos and violence.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, new laws in Russia allow regional governors to form their own private military companies.<sup>37</sup> Putin’s National Guard—the Rossgvardia—can now access heavy arms.<sup>38</sup> Putin’s weakening leadership and the fragmentation of the security sector are unwinding the highly centralized system that Putin has built. Such fragmentation of the political system and seeming militarization of society raises the risk of a more violent and chaotic political transition in Russia—one that the transatlantic allies must be prepared to navigate together.

\* \* \*

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine marked a critical turning point in U.S. and European relations with Russia. Russian aggression has all but ensured that the United States and Europe will remain locked in a period of confrontation with Russia at least as long as Putin is in power and very likely beyond his departure from office. Meanwhile, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has catalyzed dramatic political changes inside Russia that create a great deal of uncertainty about political dynamics in the country. The potential for instability appears higher now than it has been in recent history. The allies therefore not only need to devise a new strategy for dealing with Russia in the aftermath of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, but they also must be prepared to navigate potentially tumultuous times. Forging an effective Russia strategy—one that both addresses the evolving challenges that Russia poses and is responsive to political change inside the country—must be based on close consultation and coordination among the transatlantic allies. To that end, this paper has provided fodder for such dialogue. It is the goal of the Transatlantic Forum on Russia to continue to build on and refine the paper’s recommendations over the course of the coming year.

<sup>1</sup> “What Comes Next for U.S. Policy Towards Russia,” U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, May 15, 2023, (statement of Dr. Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Senior Fellow and Director, Transatlantic Security Program CNAS), <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/hearings/what-comes-next-for-us-policy-towards-russia>.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Jensen, “How Does It End? What Past Wars Tell Us About How to Save Ukraine,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 4, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-does-it-end-what-past-wars-tell-us-about-how-save-ukraine>.

<sup>3</sup> Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Erica Frantz, “Putin’s Forever War: How the Invasion Empowers Russia’s President,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 23, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/putins-forever-war>.

<sup>4</sup> Kendall-Taylor and Frantz, “Putin’s Forever War.”

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