



Thinking Ahead: Russia Beyond 2024



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Content

Introduction 4

Golden Eagle

Scenario 1: High social stability and cooperative relations with the West 10

Stressed Eagle

Scenario 2: High social stability and confrontational relations with the West 16

Wounded Eagle

Scenario 3: Low social stability and cooperative relations with the West 22

Screaming Eagle

Scenario 4: Low social stability and confrontational relations with the West 28

Members of the Scenario Group..... 33

Introduction

In the thirty years of transformation since 1989–90, Russia has been reborn as an important player shaping European security. Some argue that Russia acts mainly like a spoiler: it has recognised the independence of territories that officially still belong to Georgia; it has annexed Crimea, a part of Ukraine; it supports the war in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine through military and political backing for separatists; and it intervenes in the domestic politics of Western democracies. Others say that Russia is only doing what the United States (US) was doing during its unipolar moment in world affairs after 1991: looking after its own interests in different international theatres and ignoring the interests of others.

Either way, concerned decision makers, experts, and observers should already start thinking today about Russia's path and development after the next presidential election, due in 2024. As the Russian constitution currently prevents incumbent president Vladimir Putin from being re-elected, the poll will most likely determine the country's next head of state. Different outcomes could mean different futures for European security. Opportunities and challenges

should be thought about now, before the reality kicks in. What conditions will shape the run-up to the 2024 election? What type of leader is likely to emerge—if, indeed, a leadership change takes place? These are the questions at the heart of the scenarios presented here. Our aim is not to speculate about Putin's successor, and we have settled on only four basic scenarios out of a much wider range of potential outcomes. This scenario exercise deliberately selects and excludes possible factors and constellations. The logic of each scenario—and of the foursome taken together—is meant to provide a basis for forward-looking discussion.

Shortly before this publication went to press, Putin announced constitutional changes and the Russian government resigned. We tweaked our scenarios in places but believe that the pathways they map still hold. The discussion they are meant to encourage has become even more topical.

THE REASONING BEHIND THE SCENARIOS

Imagining alternative futures is a useful exercise when a situation is too complex or the outcomes too uncertain for analysts to trust a single possible scenario. This exercise requires participants to explore a range of out-

comes and not remain fixated on any one possible avenue. In particular, the approach:

- provides an effective means of weighing up multiple unknown or unknowable factors;
- helps bound a problem by identifying plausible combinations of uncertain factors;
- may provide a new analytical framework for assessing costs, risks, and opportunities to policymakers;
- helps analysts anticipate otherwise surprising developments by forcing them to challenge assumptions and consider discontinuous events; and
- generates indicators to monitor for signs of a particular future becoming more or less likely.

The advantage of drafting scenarios over thinking about a grand strategy is that scenarios might provide more clarity to decision makers and experts about a subject—in this case, Russia's alternatives and the impact of those alternatives. The aim is to provide an impetus to continue, or seriously

begin, a discussion of domestic and foreign policy in and vis-à-vis Russia. This type of exercise is desirable not only in the case of Russia but for any country trying to position itself in a fast-changing economic and political environment.

METHODOLOGY

We built the scenarios in three stages. First, we identified and ranked the key factors that may determine the type of the next Russian leader. Second, we created 2x2 matrices based on the certainty and importance of each factor, and selected two primary variables to drive the scenarios. Third, we drafted a narrative to capture the gist of each scenario.

Using this scenario-building technique, we first created a list of key factors—subdivided into uncertainties and driving forces—that are likely to influence what type of leader could follow Putin after 2024, and under what conditions. We identified a broad range of variables, including domestic and international politics, institutional competition, jockeying among elite factions, public mobilisation, the effects of events abroad, and the health of the incumbent head of state.

The identified factors fell into the following categories:

- **indicators linked to Putin:** health, level of oligarchic support;
- **political indicators:** elite diversity, the president's popularity, perceptions of the situation in Donbas;
- **economic indicators:** the cost of conflicts, progress or stagnation, oil prices;
- **technological indicators:** renewable energy prospects, new information and communication technology, artificial intelligence, social media;
- **social indicators:** emigration, demographic trends, social polarisation, youth expectations; and
- **wild cards:** natural disasters, technology shocks, revolutions.

We defined, sorted, and ranked more than 100 factors using simple preference aggregation to determine the critical uncertainties. The goal was to begin distinguishing the forces

that seem inevitable or predetermined—and unlikely to vary much in any succession—from those most likely to define or significantly change the sort of leader produced by a handover. We measured the factors by two criteria: the certainty of the outcome and the importance of the factor for determining the type of the next leader. On this basis, we classified the factors as primary, secondary, or tertiary scenario drivers (see table 1).

Table 1: Matrix of factors according to certainty and importance

	Most certain	Least certain
Most important	Secondary scenario drivers	Primary scenario drivers
Least important	Tertiary scenario drivers	Secondary scenario drivers

In group brainstorming sessions, we then discussed the key factors in relation to the following questions:

- What domestic, foreign, and economic forces are likely to have the strongest effects on the Russian leadership beyond 2024?
- How would top-down or bottom-up regime change come about, and what would it look like?
- To what extent may Russia without Putin descend into a spiral of disorder as its elites struggle for dominance and its people feel more economic strain?
- What is the possible path to constitutional change and a prolongation of the Putin era?
- What are the domestic and foreign policy factors shaping these scenarios, and what are the domestic and foreign policy implications?

After discussions in Berlin and Vienna, we selected the following two primary variables to drive our scenarios:

- **the nature of Russian relations with the European Union (EU) and the US:** cooperative vs. confrontational; and
- **the level of social stability in Russia:** high vs. low.

We then produced the skeletons of four scenarios by populating a 2x2 matrix, considering winners and losers, crises and responses, wild cards, catalytic events, and possible leadership types for each combination of the primary scenario drivers (see table 2).

Table 2: Four post-2024 scenarios

	Cooperative relations with the West	Confrontational relations with the West
High social stability	Scenario 1: Golden eagle	Scenario 2: Stressed eagle
Low social stability	Scenario 3: Wounded eagle	Scenario 4: Screaming eagle

THE CONTRIBUTORS

We brought together a select, high-level group of experts from the EU, Russia, and the US to develop four scenarios for Russia up to the 2024 presidential election and beyond. In April 2019, a core group of eight participants, with additional inputs from policymakers, met in Berlin to identify the most important factors determining the situation in Russia beyond 2024. The group then tried and tested different combinations of these factors to decide on the two key dimensions for the scenarios.

During a second workshop in Vienna in September 2019, the participants discussed the primary scenario drivers again, reconsidered the key dimensions, and started to draft the four scenarios.

The intellectual endeavour was to agree on a range of plausible outcomes of the 2024 election as an analytical, not a normative, exercise. These scenarios address domestic politics and the international context by looking not only at the roles of the state and society but also at geopolitical and geo-economic challenges. For each scenario, the group crafted a

descriptive narrative, including the path towards 2024, and some implications. The brief scenarios are deliberately stylised; they can only capture the gist of the discussions during the two sessions.

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Golden Eagle

SCENARIO 1: HIGH SOCIAL STABILITY AND COOPERATIVE RELATIONS WITH THE WEST

The state of affairs after 2024

On 9 May 2025, the leaders of France, the United States, Germany, and Poland stand next to the newly elected Russian president, Petr Preobrazhensky, watching the victory parade for the eightieth anniversary of the end of World War II. Russian soldiers march shoulder to shoulder with French and American troops to commemorate the war. The deaths of the last veterans have accelerated Russia's shift away from previous displays of military might; the emphasis now is on the shared effort and the victims it took on all sides to liberate Europe from fascism.

The tone of this anniversary differs markedly from that of those past, notably the hostilities that the seventy-fifth anniversary in 2020 sparked. The gradual remaking of a social tissue linking elites and society has encouraged the

Russian leadership to focus less on the Great Patriotic War, as the conflict is known in Russia, as the pivotal source for nation-building. From a country focused on its glorious albeit controversial past, Russia has turned into one inspired by its promising future. How could this happen?

The road to 2024

Several wake-up calls in the run-up to Russia's 2024 presidential election conveyed to the country's leadership that it had to make the needs and growing concerns of its population a real priority and pursue much-needed reforms in order not to undermine stability across the country. Russia went through a number of significant crises that dented social trust and stability and prepared the ground for a reorientation from below and above. The regional and State Duma elections of 2020 and 2021, respectively, saw a further decline in support for the United Russia party and the emergence of issue-based and regional political parties that represented a range of societal interests. These opposition parties established themselves alongside the old regime-tolerated opposition of the Liberal Democrats and Communists. In early 2021, falling living standards and widely discussed

high-level corruption led to large waves of protests, with most of the criticism targeting prime minister Mikhail Mishustin. Painful but indispensable measures taken by the government included containing social spending, introducing more rigid fiscal discipline, and ending a number of ill-conceived national projects.

These steps and the prospect of greater parliamentary powers after constitutional reforms contributed to a rapid growth of the left-wing opposition led by a rejuvenated Communist Party and new, independent trade unions. A crushing defeat for United Russia in the autumn 2021 parliamentary election was prevented only by president Vladimir Putin's own popularity. His ratings had risen during the constitutional reform process in 2020, which restored his credibility as the 'father of the nation'.

The new legislature turned out to be more diverse and more persistent in its attempts to shape and control the executive than any previous parliament since the 1990s. Opposition factions in the Duma directly engaged the electorate in peaceful rallies. Among other things, the Duma started to exercise more oversight over the Russian military and the *siloviki*—politicians with a background in the security servic-

es. Former loyalists became more critical of the increasingly unpopular government.

Another important Duma initiative, which the Kremlin only reluctantly supported, was an administrative reform that revived the idea of federalism based on actual power-sharing and stronger local self-government. This reform signalled willingness to address local issues, defused some of the political tensions, and brought about a gradual revival of local communities and regional identities. Contrary to the gloomy predictions of many outside observers, decentralisation did not generate chaos and secessionism. Rather, it played a positive role in consolidating Russian society around a shared notion of local decision-making for local people. Regional decentralisation was balanced by rapidly growing horizontal links between Russia's regions, including its ethnic republics.

A delay in acknowledging and tackling a wave of forest fires across Siberia was the ultimate turning point. National and global media covered the events extensively. To cope with the fires and their political fallout, the authorities and local people had to work hand in hand. The urgency contributed to a sense of a shared mission in the face of an emergency that

could not be tackled locally and threatened to destabilise the system as a whole.

The transition in 2024 was effectively managed by a close circle within the governing elites. But the incumbent president, Vladimir Putin, understood that to secure his positive entry into future history textbooks, he would need to make room for a powerful leader who could bridge conflicting interests. Putin needed a successor who could be a credible mediator between different interests and competing expectations and a genuinely popular personality who spoke to the interests of the educated urban electorate as well as to people in more remote areas.

In these circumstances, neither the big beasts of the old order nor outsider liberals could credibly broker any kind of deal between rival forces. Instead, Preobrazhensky, a billionaire banker who had managed to remain on good terms with Putin's Kremlin while never making any secret of his concerns about the corruption and nationalism it espoused, emerged as the consensus candidate who was carefully coached by Putin to step into his role. A shared sense of the need for fundamental and urgent reforms translated into a serious programme for change. In addition to environmental

sustainability, Preobrazhensky focused on the provision of common goods, such as infrastructure and domestic and international security. A decline in defence spending allowed for the redistribution of resources and the achievement of national goals that had hardly seemed credible earlier in the Putin era. By 2024, Russia's decentralisation had begun, and it was envisaged that constitutional reform would take place under the new president. Significant progress had been achieved already on separating state and business interests as well as enforcing the rule of law in the economic realm.

Helped by Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky, who repeatedly demonstrated his willingness to compromise to end the war in Ukraine's Donbas region and gradually restore Ukraine's control over its eastern border, Putin agreed to regularise the Normandy talks, which brought together the French, German, Russian, and Ukrainian leaders. Measurable progress included enacting a lasting ceasefire, avoiding a humanitarian catastrophe in the Donbas, and furthering the region's reintegration into Ukraine's economy, society, and politics.

In order not to re-awaken Russian memories of the Soviet Union's disintegration, the gradual exit strategy on which the parties finally agreed ensured that Russia could preserve its

reputation internationally and in the eyes of its population through language provisions and economic links to Russia for the people of the Donbas. The easing of tensions in eastern Ukraine, in turn, led to a gradual lifting of the European Union sanctions related to the region. These steps improved Russia's economic situation and Russian-EU economic relations more generally.

The topic of Crimea, although touched on in political dialogue, was not resolved. Relations between Moscow and Kyiv remained complicated, but Zelensky's balanced foreign policy and popularity, including in Russia, paved the way for the lifting of mutual sanctions. Contacts between Ukrainians and Russians were made easier by the restoration of travel connections, such as regular flights between Ukraine and Russia.

Internationally, French president Emmanuel Macron continued to push forward with his idea of a renewed Russian-European dialogue while highlighting the need to end the war in Ukraine. With Macron's symbolically important attendance at the 2020 victory parade, Russian-EU relations received a new impetus. Putin recognised the EU as the more predictable political player, while the US under a re-elected president

Donald Trump had no interest in confronting Moscow.

Russia pivoted towards Europe rather than China, recognising the concerns of Russia's elites and population about China's growing influence over the country's economy and its visible military ambitions. France and Germany watched the difficult transition of 2024 without increasing the pressure on the regime, helping restore a degree of trust in the EU-Russian dialogue. Moscow's participation as an observer in the 2020 Group of Seven (G7) summit and the prospect of its full return to the group as well as renewed efforts to pave the way for new arms-control treaties underpinned the image of Russia as an EU partner rather than an adversary.

The decisive economic reforms the new Russian president put at the heart of his electoral programme have the potential to bring about structural changes in the Russian business climate. The more predictable economic environment resulting from the corruption crackdown that began before the election and an emphasis on the rule of law have helped attract international investment, in particular from European companies. The information technology and education sectors have flourished, as have technology start-ups. Growth in these two sectors helps reorient the country's foreign policy,

where a more diverse set of business interests has a stake than before.

Not all of the country's old elites can adjust to the new situation. Younger bureaucrats and employees of state-controlled companies share the new vision of building a modern, competitive, and more transparent country. But the older, top-level elite needs to be gradually pushed out of its position of political and economic power through a process based on some form of a transitional justice agreement.

Despite a real reform impetus, Russia remains too diverse and complex to change overnight. The extent of the political opening remains unclear, political tensions continue, and societal expectations are high. Preobrazhensky is aware of his fragile position. The old elites have tried—as yet, unsuccessfully—to resist his reform-oriented course. Russia's rapprochement with the West has brought some political and economic gains, but traces of the previous state policy of opposition to the West remain. Despite these caveats, Russia is clearly on a path towards deeper integration with European economic and international actors, a development that is supported by the population.



Stressed Eagle

SCENARIO 2: HIGH SOCIAL STABILITY AND CONFRONTATIONAL RELATIONS WITH THE WEST

The state of affairs after 2024

On New Year's Eve 2024, Russian president Maxim Troitsky addresses the nation in a televised speech. He invokes national unity and pledges to uphold the legacy of Vladimir Putin, who became acting president on this day a quarter of a century ago.

Troitsky's election was successfully managed, and a sizeable majority of the electorate embraced him as Russia's new president in 2024. The president remains the centre of gravity and a pre-eminent figure in the Russian political system, even though the amended Russian constitution tilts the power away from the presidency and towards the parliament and the newly emboldened formidable State Council. The council is headed by Putin, who, after twenty-four years in power, secured himself continued critical influence.



Russian society appears tacit. It is rare for an anti-government protest to muster more than a few thousand attendees. There are hipster cafes in Arkhangelsk, electric buses on the streets of Bratsk, and new schools being built in Buryatia. The Northern Latitudinal Railway 2 project was completed on time and will help open up gas reserves in the High North. Under new leaders, and after brief defiance, the Communists and Liberal Democrats have been brought back into their roles as token opposition parties through a series of regional and State Duma elections.

In the wider world, Russia can present itself as a power on the rise. Despite the occasional terrorist attack, Syria is now quiet and Moscow's status as a Middle Eastern power broker is undisputed, if not strengthened. United States pressure on China has constrained its economic and political rise and helped restore a balance of sorts between Beijing and Moscow. Russians do not feel quite so dependent on the goodwill of their eastern neighbour, even if the truth they will not admit is that China also represents their greatest long-term fear. In Asia, Africa, and Latin America, relatively small-scale Russian initiatives have capitalised on a backlash against perceived US arrogance to establish an identity for Moscow as the guarantor of the status quo and

sovereign rights against Washington's ever more assertive 'America First' bluster.

And yet, within the Russian elite there are growing worries about the potential fragility of the situation. The deep, systemic problems facing the economy and the system of national governance have not been tackled. Instead, money is spent largely on addressing or sometimes merely disguising the symptoms of these problems. But what if the money runs out? What if the long-feared credit crisis hits?

The road to 2024

To many, the appointment of Colonel Maxim Troitsky as Russian deputy prime minister at the end of 2022, the day after he received his second Hero of the Russian Federation star, was a sign of things to come.

Troitsky had been given his first medal for his engagement in Syria, but this one was for the daring—and well-televised—extraction of Russian nationals from the Saudi capital, Riyadh, amid a civil war Moscow had not started but which, many suggested, it was happy to keep burning. A soldier of note



with no particular political backstory but a record of efficiency, honesty, and personal bravery, Troitsky was a churchgoer, was married, and had a son serving in the police: precisely the kind of loyal, competent successor Putin had been looking for.

Putin's chances of installing his candidate as successor without too much trouble were good. The constitutional overhaul suggested by Putin in his state-of-the-nation address in January 2020 and implemented in the following months pre-emptively stopped elite infighting and maintained his role as the primary arbiter and power broker. Additionally, high oil prices resulting from the conflict in Saudi Arabia, which was caused partly by a domestic power struggle and partly by increasing tensions with Iran, helped the state meet Putin's ambitious targets for infrastructure growth and family income supplements.

This may not be the diversification that many wanted, and between 2021 and 2024 gross domestic product growth continued to fail to hit Putin's 3 per cent target, but there is still money to spend. Yet despite some handouts here, a new railway line there, social inequality remains largely unchanged. Most people feel that while they are not facing pov-

erty, they are also not enjoying the kind of improvements in their standards of living they once enjoyed and had come to expect.

A combination of division, antagonism, and economic problems in the West proved much more effective than propaganda. As a second-term US president Donald Trump continued his economic and political struggle with China, the impact on global trade was worse than expected and risked turning the West's stagnation into outright recession. The persisting migration crisis in Europe also helped reconcile Russians to their lot: it was easy for them to think that there may be worse things than having to put up with corruption and embezzlement at home.

Besides, the Russian regime moved aggressively into trying to take on the anti-corruption narrative as its own. The show trials of opposition leader Alexei Navalny and his allies in 2021 on charges of money laundering and illegally accepting foreign funds became case studies of how Western hybrid war was behind much of the opposition movement. By enabling the flows of dark money and allowing Russia's corrupt officials and embezzling minigarchs to buy fashionable penthouses in London and villas in the south of France, the West

also connived to help the very people now being targeted for high-profile prosecutions at home. Russia's new online television channel, TV-Zakon, lovingly covered all of these cases, with video footage of culprits' extravagant homes and tearful apologies to camera.

Sceptics might note that Putin's closest allies remain resolutely untouchable. But this new campaign has done much to distract an angry population that is conscious of having been stolen from for so long. At the same time, a new generation of internet monitors and agents driven by artificial intelligence helps amplify the official narrative—that the good tsar is finally getting tough with his swindling boyars—and squeeze out unpatriotic messages.

For the time being, Russians are proud to live again in a country that rose from its knees internationally. But overall, they are not so much happy as resigned to the status quo. Russians see no credible alternative or focus for opposition. The state is as repressive as ever, but smarter. Why protest when National Guard drones are filming you and running the pictures through advanced facial-recognition software? You may not be beaten at today's protest march, but you will still receive a massive fine or a suspended sentence that

prevents you from getting a good job next week. Why post something critical of the government online when it is getting better and faster at deleting it and then suspending your account? Why support some outspoken radical who might turn out to be a foreign agent?

This is not approval or happiness, despite relative economic stability coupled with the unending stream of parades and festivals. Rather, it is atomisation and resignation. People grumble at home or to their families but see no ways of influencing the political situation. Instead, they concentrate on improving their own lives and let everyone else look after themselves. This may look like stability, but some of the older or more thoughtful members of the elite are already muttering about Brezhnevism 2.0, and how quickly latent potentials of protest can manifest themselves in times of crisis.

Likewise, the external picture is unsettlingly volatile. When elements of a US Stryker brigade were deployed to the newly inaugurated Fort Trump in Poland, Putin resisted calls to take the high ground. Instead, he pushed Minsk to allow Russia to open a new airbase at Biaroza—at the cost of a generous new energy deal. This determination to play tit-for-tat with a powerful and erratic America scares many, even within the

security elite. In 2022, when a Spanish Eurofighter Typhoon taking part in the recently launched Enhanced Baltic Air Defence Mission collided with a Russian Su-35 off the Estonian coast, Washington and Moscow managed the ensuing crisis, but it was close.

With Troitsky as the heir apparent, attention focused on what he might portend. His relative lack of political experience and exposure gives him unexpected latitude. He talks about the importance of the rule of law, which many consider a coded indication that he will guarantee the property rights of today's magnates while protecting Putin and his family. He also talks about a new chapter in Russia's history, arousing all kinds of fears and hopes in society as a whole. Many abroad, especially in a Europe tired of feeling squeezed between Russia and the US, are hoping this offers the chance of a new relationship.

But can Troitsky deliver? None of the roads past 2024 is easy. Structural economic modernisation means taking on entrenched interests, above all in the natural-resources sector. A genuine reset with the West will mean addressing the frozen conflict in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine and accepting the loss of influence over the country—something

that is still anathema to Russian nationalists. After twenty-four years of Putin, Troitsky's ascent is bound to raise a series of inevitably contradictory expectations and the risk of a backlash of anger and disappointment. There is hope in the air—but it is often hope, not despair, that fuels revolutions.



Wounded Eagle

SCENARIO 3: LOW SOCIAL STABILITY AND COOPERATIVE RELATIONS WITH THE WEST

The state of affairs after 2024

In 2024, Yekaterina Nadezhnaya, a former successful governor of the Siberian region of Krasnoyarsk, becomes Russia's first female head of state since Catherine the Great. In the months after her election, her government has to actively manage different sources of domestic instability while benefiting from largely cooperative relations the West.

Neither isolation nor an increase in confrontation with the United States and the European Union is an imminent risk because of the West's lack of cohesion and policy drive, so the Russian leadership can concentrate its efforts on buying off social instability. Concern over domestic tensions has unified the elite around a risk-minimising strategy that avoids provocations and seeks out transactional deals with diverse external players.



Social volatility and the resulting low governability are the key domestic challenges for the Russian leadership. Protests in cities across the country have become the new normal. They primarily focus on local issues and so demonstrate the lack of state capacity to deliver on the tacit social contract based on the principle of socio-economic well-being—or at least stability—in return for political acquiescence.

Nadezhnaya, who has governed effectively in Siberia despite this trend thanks to economic success, publicly discusses opinion polls conducted by organisations close to the state that regularly show how unpopular costly foreign policy actions have become. Such endeavours are widely seen as diverting resources and attention away from the need to address socio-economic challenges. These include a further decline in real incomes, high inequality, and tensions between the centre of government and the periphery over budget allocations and responsibilities. Local elites are no longer willing to bear the brunt of the centre's lack of strategy for regional development.



The road to 2024

Regional and local elections in 2020 and the State Duma election in 2021 demonstrated the limits of the Kremlin's ability to manage social and local issues without turning diffuse discontent into coherent political opposition. Politics became a matter of situational coalition building. A combination of targeted social spending and occasional repression kept protest mobilisation at bay. Repression had to remain limited, though, in order not to endanger the new rapprochement with the EU.

Scope for this rapprochement opened up as a result of domestic political and foreign policy divisions within the EU as well as economic pragmatism from leading EU members and the Russian government. Russian NGOs have been disappointed by the lack of Western support for their cause and no longer know whom to rely on in their struggle against the Kremlin. All sides, including activists, elites, and ordinary citizens, are aware of the precarious nature of the situation. Yet all consider the potential costs they would have to pay for an attack on the system too high.

Significant emigration, in particular of the young and skilled, is another important issue in public debates. Roughly every second Russian knows at least one person who has emigrated. Personal linkages to friends and family members abroad and easier travel to the EU thanks to visa liberalisation have allowed for important alternative channels of information. These links have provided new comparative reference points, shaping expectations about living standards in Russia.

In light of these developments and the lack of Western foreign policy cohesion under a re-elected US president Donald Trump, the Russian regime changed foreign policy gear. By reducing military expenditure, limiting its international exposure, and making credible steps towards compromises with the EU in the Middle East and Ukraine, the Russian leadership demonstrated a degree of responsiveness to the popular call for stable or even higher living standards. Moscow credibly signalled an intention to focus on domestic issues and better and consistent relations with a distracted and unthreatening West. With China, Russia sought a pragmatic but cautious relationship based on red lines that would limit Chinese influence over the Russian economy, especially in Russia's Far East. To remain credible, the Russian leadership had to introduce some substantive reforms. However, as early as 2020,

then president Vladimir Putin ensured that he would exercise influence behind the scenes or through an informal advisory role, which he could interpret as he saw fit. The new leadership was recruited from within the ruling elites—though not from Moscow but from the economic powerhouse of Siberia. A new language of technocratic competence was adopted, paired with an official narrative centred on the need to actively manage inequalities, ease social tensions, fight corruption, and rebuild state legitimacy from within. This shift in narrative was achieved only gradually over the last two years of Putin's presidency.

An increasing global fragmentation of power—including a long-term rift between the US and the EU, diverging interests within the EU, and an increasingly powerful China—made a common Western approach towards Russia impossible. Moscow sensed and used the room for manoeuvre that opened up both at EU level and in cooperation with individual EU member states. Russia seized opportunities as and when they presented themselves.

It proved impossible for the EU to maintain a united front on economic sanctions linked to the war in eastern Ukraine. Divisions paved the way for closer relations between Rus-

sia and some EU members. The parliamentary election in Germany gave rise to the first-ever national coalition of the Christian Democrats and the Greens. Berlin maintained a broadly Russia-critical policy under chancellor Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer and foreign minister Norbert Röttgen—both Christian Democrats—but pragmatically adjusted to a more cooperative stance vis-à-vis Russia. They did so to avoid being sidelined in an EU dominated by French president Emmanuel Macron and Italy's new right-wing prime minister Matteo Salvini or endangering the EU's global voice, most notably in the Middle East.

A real strategic partnership was not in sight either, however. Trump's re-election led to a hard-to-manage escalation in relations with China and Iran. In turn, he courted outgoing president Putin and governor Nadezhnaya. The EU failed to formulate a coherent position on these global challenges because of domestic divisions and remained uncomfortably squeezed between global powers.

The new type of Russian cooperation with the West rests on shaky foundations and should be seen as a pragmatic attempt at damage limitation, rather than a fundamental change. In light of the EU's internal divisions over relations

with Russia and its need to secure a role in global politics, the union gave up on the objective of actively trying to change Russia. Instead, the Europeans switched to a focus on peaceful co-existence, a familiar approach from the days of the Cold War.

It might have been possible for Putin to stay on as president beyond 2024 by removing the two-term limit in the 2020 constitutional reform process. But his preferred choice was to opt for an institutional innovation and flank his new role with trusted individuals from his circle. He ensured that he would exercise influence as head of the State Council, an advisory body to the president that saw its role elevated as part of the constitutional reforms. In this role, Putin does not face restrictions on his term in office and maintains a flexible level of control without being held responsible for the minutiae of policymaking. In the constitutionally recalibrated system, neither the president nor the prime minister holds enough power to endanger Putin's lasting influence, creating a degree of power-sharing.

Putin oversaw the transition in close cooperation with long-trusted Federal Security Service (FSB) chief Sergei Naryshkin. Having tested the waters between 2020 and

2024, Putin presented Nadezhnaya as his preferred candidate shortly before the presidential election. She put forward a credible economic and social programme based on her experience as governor of one of Russia's strategic regions. Her nomination signalled to local and regional elites a new room for manoeuvre while also intensifying the competition between old and new elites at the subnational level.

The official candidate's programme was supported by liberally minded economists like Alexei Kudrin and thus signalled a commitment to at least partial reforms. Given the need to continuously balance different sources of social instability, the State Council was made up of members of the elite with different sets of expertise and actively managed by Putin. If the global economy experiences a downturn and the oil price drops, economic elites are allowed to play a more visible role in this arrangement; if internal or external security issues become more prominent, the voices of the *siloviki*—politicians with a background in the security services—will be heard.

To strengthen the role of the State Council and adopt a more cooperative approach towards the EU, it was essential to dismantle the old National Security Council, which had come to symbolise the ideologically motivated confrontation with

the West. That was also done to avoid the council becoming a platform for disgruntled elites and oligarchs to join forces against the new president.

Prominent former members of Putin's inner circle—especially the *siloviki*—have not disappeared from the scene, of course. While they continue to insist on certain red lines in Russian politics, they do not form a coherent opposition to the emerging leadership at the moment because they see the need for reform. But their support will not be indefinite. In particular, the economic elites are ready to readjust their preferences to benefit from the new business opportunities that opened up after the lifting of international sanctions imposed on Russia for its part in the war in the Donbas.

The key question remains whether the new presidency can balance the diversity of old and new interests at the national and subnational levels. If not, the old *siloviki* or new regional elites may eventually mount a challenge against Russia's fifth president. That would make it harder for Putin to control the players on his chessboard.



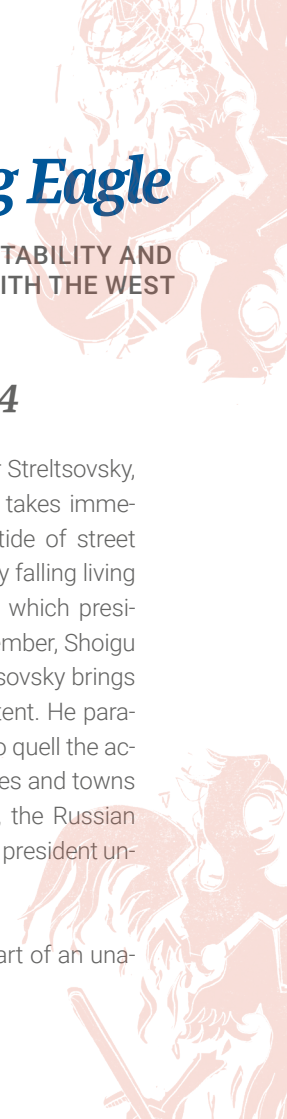
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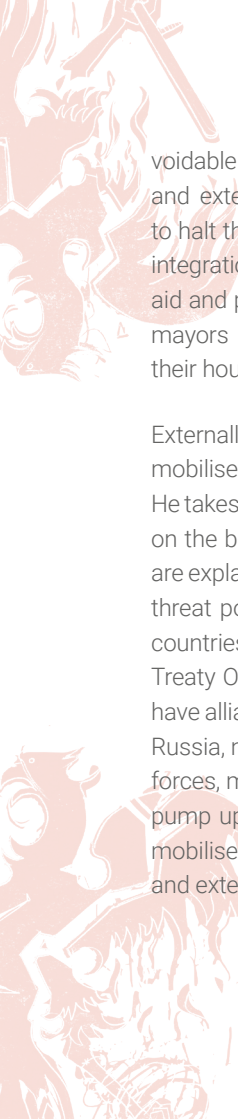
SCENARIO 4: LOW SOCIAL STABILITY AND CONFRONTATIONAL RELATIONS WITH THE WEST

The state of affairs after 2024

In summer 2025, Russian interior minister Igor Streltsovsky, who also leads the Party of Russian Patriots, takes immediate and forceful action to stem the rising tide of street protests. The demonstrations were triggered by falling living standards and growing social injustices, with which president Sergey Shoigu has failed to cope. In December, Shoigu steps down on grounds of ill health, and Streltsovsky brings in emergency funding to calm popular discontent. He parachutes in detachments of the National Guard to quell the activist groups, which have disrupted order in cities and towns throughout Russia. In an emergency session, the Russian Federal Assembly appoints Streltsovsky acting president until a presidential election can be held.

The Kremlin justifies such drastic moves as part of an una-





voidable response to national crises on two fronts: internal and external. Domestically, Moscow takes decisive action to halt the threats of social disruption and the territorial disintegration of the country. Apart from providing immediate aid and policing, the Kremlin dismisses local governors and mayors who prove unable to prevent instability and keep their houses in order.

Externally, Streltsovsky moves into national crisis mode and mobilises ground and air forces to display Russian resolve. He takes immediate action to deploy large numbers of troops on the borders with Ukraine and Georgia. The deployments are explained in terms of an urgent need to counter the direct threat posed to Russian security and sovereignty by these countries. As soon-to-be members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), Kyiv and Tbilisi have agreed to have alliance troops stationed close to the Russian border. In Russia, national and regional officials, helped by the security forces, make intensive use of traditional and social media to pump up a climate of national emergency and the need to mobilise to counter threats to the Russian state from internal and external enemies.

The road to 2024

Several domestic and international developments paved the way for the crises. In 2023 and 2024, corruption spiralled out of control and brought state institutions close to collapse. The demographic crisis hit home, and the rift between the Russian periphery and the centre of government became unmanageable.

Internationally, two key trends informed the Kremlin's strong reaction. First, the United States, under Democratic president Elizabeth Warren, and NATO overpowered Russia in Ukraine and Georgia. The decision of the Western alliance in 2021 to move ahead with integrating both countries as members came just after Russia had agreed to concessions in the Minsk peace process regarding the return to Ukraine of full control over its eastern border.

Inadvertently, Russian president Vladimir Putin and his security services therefore removed a major obstacle to NATO enlargement. Ethnic patriots in the Russian military and security elite charged Putin and his circle with indecision in the face of a sharp rise in external threats and foreign support of

domestic subversions. They called for immediate action to avoid Western victory and Russian collapse. They used patriotic appeals—‘Save Russia or perish!’—to bolster the case for changes in leadership and the mobilisation of political and military forces.

The second external trigger of this shift was the rapid downturn in the global economy. Worsening economic conditions brought about a split in the domestic elites by the end of 2022. Domestic changes soon gathered speed. The image of Putin as a master strategist was broken once and for all. Putin’s plans to manage a transition of power proved impractical in such crisis conditions. Oil and gas prices dropped to an extreme low of \$15 a barrel. The National Wealth Fund was used up at breathtaking speed as the outgoing president sought to stabilise the economy in tried and tested ways.

None of this worked. In the view of the Russian leadership, it was impossible to regain momentum with the support of the International Monetary Fund or other Western donors. After years of bad relations with the West, Moscow’s potential lenders—the European Union and the World Bank—had major requirements of Russia in the form of real anti-corruption measures. If the Russian leadership had agreed to

this, it might have lost control of power internally. Even China, celebrated just a few years ago as Russia’s most important strategic partner, could not save the Kremlin from the effects of the international economic crisis.

At the beginning of 2023, Russian defence minister Sergey Shoigu was officially presented as the president’s only capable successor. Putin had taken steps in 2020 to balance the power of the presidency by increasing the roles of the parliament and the State Council, to which he then shifted his personal authority. The Kremlin’s idea was to demonstrate resilience internally and externally by putting forward a relatively popular and strong personality—hence the choice of Shoigu. Outspoken pro-reform and pro-Western voices, led by former ministers Alexei Kudrin and German Gref as well as prominent businessmen and senior officials, had been sidelined by a succession of technocratic prime ministers starting with the appointment of Mikhail Mishustin in early 2020.

The West, headed more decisively by the US under a new, Democrat-led administration, was not seen even as an important potential future economic partner for Russia. Anti-Western propaganda became received wisdom among Russians. The impression that Russia had been deliberately

humiliated and victimised for the second time since 1991 began to colour all official political communication in foreign and domestic politics.

At the same time, this narrative was an effort to justify the mistakes in Russia's Ukraine policy. The marginalisation of the attempted modernisation partnership with the West was reinforced by the sharp increase in emigration from Russia to the West. What is more, the West had little to offer after the onset of a serious global repression in spring 2021. Relations between Russia and the West descended into deep distrust and confrontation.

After 2021, Russia had to withdraw from many out-of-area commitments in Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America to use dwindling resources to tackle growing and urgent domestic problems. Only two bases in Syria, which was still not completely pacified, were retained, albeit with much-decreased personnel. Costly engagements far from Russia's borders were no longer justifiable at home nor affordable given growing economic woes. In every respect, the focus shifted back to Russia itself.

At home, the years 2022–23 saw an ever-higher incidence of

public protest in a widening range of locations. The protests were in response to falling real incomes, growing inequality, low pay, and poor delivery in education, healthcare, and social welfare.

Putin's ability to respond to growing discontent was limited by the economic downturn that had fuelled the protests. Neither of the two younger technocrats appointed prime minister in rapid succession after Mishustin could improve the delivery of goods to an increasingly disgruntled population. The collapse in oil and gas prices had devastating effects on the Russian budget and the Kremlin's capacity to restock food baskets. This led to an even greater reliance on state-controlled messaging via television and social media. Such messaging proved relatively ineffective. This created a quandary for Moscow as to how far it should use—and allow local authorities to use—repressive means to prevent and quell protest action.

It is in this environment that president Putin, in an attempt to bolster capacity, appointed Streltsovsky interior minister Putin's inner circle, as well as a growing number of people in the security and economic establishment, became increasingly concerned about the system's apparent inability to prevent

further domestic instability. The situation helped convince Putin that rather than pass the presidential baton to a younger technocratic leader, he should go for someone with proven loyalty and a long record of effective management of emergency situations. Shoigu qualified on both counts. He was nominated by Putin and duly installed by way of a well-managed campaign that gave him a decisive victory in the 2024 presidential election.

The first months of the Shoigu presidency were marked by a deepening global economic crisis, coupled with extremely tense relations with the West, especially the US. This stand-off was partly due to the domestic political advantages the Democratic US president saw in taking a tough line on Russia, in particular with regard to Ukraine and other East European states in the region. Tensions with the West included increasingly troubling instances of confrontation around the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine.

Attempts to translate these tensions into appeals for patriotic solidarity in Russia fell on deaf ears. Most Russians were pleased to see Russia withdraw from the Middle East and favoured an end to the war in Ukraine. Shoigu found it was no longer possible to soften the blow of disappointing public

service delivery at home by wielding a bigger club against the West. With his health deteriorating and his political support all but evaporated, he retired to his native Tuva.

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What conditions will shape the run-up to the 2024 presidential election in Russia? What type of leader is likely to emerge—if, indeed, a leadership change takes place? These are the questions at the heart of the scenarios presented here. Our aim is not to speculate about the successor of president Vladimir Putin, and we have settled on only four basic scenarios out of a much wider range of potential outcomes. This scenario exercise deliberately selects and excludes possible factors and constellations. The logic of each scenario—and of the foursome taken together—is meant to provide a basis for for-



The advantage of drafting scenarios over thinking about a grand strategy is that scenarios might provide more clarity to decision makers and experts about a subject—in this case, Russia's alternatives and the impact of those alternatives. The aim is to provide an impetus to continue, or seriously begin, a discussion of domestic and foreign policy in and vis-à-vis Russia. This type of exercise is desirable not only in the case of Russia but for any country trying to position itself in a fast-changing economic and political environment.

