

HOW TO OUTPLAY A “MAD MAN” STRATEGY: LESSONS FROM RUSSIAN AGGRESSION IN UKRAINE

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Abstract. To choose an effective strategy to stop Vladimir Putin and Russia’s aggressive ambitions and imperialistic policy, Western political and military leaders first need to understand Russia’s *modus operandi* and strategic logic of the Kremlin and Putin’s regime goals. The current article focuses on the hypothesis that Putin is a rational person who is behaving like the Russian version of a “mad man”. In this case, the mad man strategy and other game theory models could be used to force Russian leaders to accept Western demands and analyse the advantages and disadvantages that the Russian version of the mad man strategy would offer to Russia and how the West could respond to it. Why did Putin eventually choose to act in this manner, and could the West have other more beneficial or less violent options on the table? What went wrong in terms of Russian strategy, and how could this be used to force Russia to abandon its aggressive ambitions in Ukraine and in neighboring countries in the post-soviet space? What else can be expected from Putin and his circle, and how should the West respond to Russia’s maneuvers, aggressive policy and Kremlin-backed security threats? The article also contributes to the discussion of how similar “mad man” situations might be interpreted and resolved in future international conflicts.

Keywords: Vladimir Putin, war, Russia, Ukraine, “mad man” strategy, Kremlin’s strategic logic, Russia’s *modus operandi*, Russian imperialistic policy, Western response

1. Introduction

Since February 24th (2022), most people around the world, particularly in Western countries, have probably been wondering if Russian authoritarian leader Vladimir Putin has gone completely insane for starting the war in Ukraine. Experts may have added a game theory dimension and asked if Putin is simply employing the “mad man” strategy.¹ The extremely brutal and

¹ This article is published with the support of project 253 (O-014) “Strategic Narrative as a Model for Reshaping the Security Dilemma” (Estonian Military Academy). For more on Putin’s mad man strategy see **Rachman, G.** 2022. Putin, Ukraine and the mad man theory

costly military invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops, as well as the bombing of civilians in Ukrainian cities, and terror and genocide against the people of Ukraine, appears to be the behavior of a lunatic. Furthermore, absurd narratives and propaganda based on perverse interpretations of history, outright lies and fabrications about Ukraine² spread by Russia's political elite and the Russian media constantly make one wonder if living in a completely different informational space has pushed the entire nation into a parallel universe. Who could seriously believe that Ukraine planned to provoke Russia with chemical components delivered by the United States, or that a dirty nuclear bomb was being built in Chernobyl? Russian propaganda narratives accentuate that the Ukrainian government is a fascist junta and that Ukrainian neo-Nazis (including soldiers) regularly murder women, children and commit genocide in the Donbas against the local Russophone people?³ Accusing the Ukrainian

of diplomacy. – Financial Times, 7 February. <https://www.ft.com/content/3d8b94e9-0db7-4aa5-ac6a-9fef2ce43ab6> (accessed on 28 February 2022); **Braw, E.** 2015. Putin is 'Playing the Mad man' to Trick the West. – Newsweek, 1 April. <https://www.newsweek.com/2015/04/10/impeccable-logic-behind-putins-madman-strategy-318529.html> (accessed on 3 August 2022).

² For more information on the main narratives of Russian disinformation see, e.g., **U.S. Department of State** 2022. Fact vs. Fiction: Russian Disinformation on Ukraine. <https://www.state.gov/fact-vs-fiction-russian-disinformation-on-ukraine/> (accessed on 22 August 2022). See **Ventsel, A.; Hansson, S.; Madisson, M.-L.; Sazonov, V.** 2021, Discourse of fear in strategic narratives: The case of Russia's Zapad war games. – Media War & Conflict, Vol. 14, No. 1, pp. 21–39; see also **Madisson, M.-L.; Ventsel, A.** 2020. Strategic Conspiracy Narratives: A Semiotic Approach. Routledge; **Veebel, V.; Vihmand, L.** 2019. Living in confronting or parallel strategic narratives? The reasons behind the missing security dialogue between Russia and the Baltic States. – Journal on Baltic Security, Vol. 5(2), pp. 1–12 [**Veebel, Vihmand** 2019]; **Mölder, H.; Sazonov, V.** 2020. The Kremlin's Strategic Narratives on the Baltic States During the COVID-19 Crisis. – Belonna Quarterly, Vol. 4, pp. 35–54. See also **Sazonov, V.; Ploom, I.; Veebel, V.** 2022. The Kremlin's information influence campaigns in Estonia and the Estonian response in the context of Russian-Western relations. – TalTech Journal of European Studies, Vol. 12 (1), pp. 27–59.

³ For more on these pro-Kremlin anti-Ukrainian narratives and Russian hybrid war in Ukraine see **Sazonov, V.; Mölder, H.; Müür, K.; Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, P.; Kopõtin, I.; Ermus, A.; Salum, K.; Šlabovitš, A.; Veebel, V.; Värk, R.** 2016. Russian Information Campaign against the Ukrainian State and Defence Forces. Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence. https://www.ksk.edu.ee/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Report_infoops_08.02.2017.pdf (accessed on 2 September 2022) [**Sazonov et al.** 2016]; **Snegovaya, M.** 2015. Putin's Information Warfare in Ukraine: Soviet Origins of Russia's Hybrid Warfare. USA: Institute for the Study of War; **Westerlund, F.; Norberg, J.** 2016. Military Means for Non-Military Measures: The Russian Approach to the Use of Armed Force as Seen in Ukraine. – The Journal of Slavic Military Studies, Vol. 29, No. 4, pp. 576–601. See also how Russia uses international law in its hybrid warfare – **Voyger, M.** 2018. Russian Lawfare – Russia's Weaponisation of International and Domestic Law: Implications For The Region And Policy Recommendations. – Journal on Baltic Security, Vol. 4(2), pp. 35–42.

state and government of Nazism is a major narrative of Russian propaganda and is being done at all levels, including Putin accusing Ukraine of Nazism.⁴

However, the systemic nature of Russia's strategic (imperial) narratives over the last 15–20 years speaks against Putin's sudden bout of madness. Russia's accusations against Ukraine and Western countries in general did not emerge overnight but were carefully developed and intentionally cultivated both domestically and globally over decades, laying the groundwork for Russia's war in Ukraine and for the current confrontation with the West. Moreover, for years Russia's political elite has systematically exploited the Russian people's historic fears of Western Nazism, as well as cultivating the idea of the uniqueness of the Russian civilization. The ideological concept known as the Russian World, *Russkyi mir* (Pax Russica), had already been introduced before the 2008 war in Georgia⁵. All of this demonstrates well-calculated actions dating back decades, calling into question the notion that Vladimir Putin has suddenly gone mad. Instead, one could argue that hopes for greater strategic gains in competition with the West appear to be present when consistently pursuing a mad man strategy. Although most of Russia's narratives have been disseminated to Westerners, they have worked well for many years, strengthening the commitment of some groups to the Kremlin's current propaganda model that promotes Russia's special role in the "Russian World". Thus, for his Russian supporters, Putin's behavior might actually be a sign of full commitment to his long-term goals. Therefore, this might actually be the "calculated" madness of Vladimir Putin, following the historic example of a mad man strategy used by President Richard Nixon in the 1960s against the Soviet bloc.

Regardless of whether Putin is mentally ill or attempting to profit from a Russian version of the "mad man" model, the worst-case scenarios that Western analysts predicted materialized in Europe in February 2022 when Russia attacked Ukraine.

⁴ **Interfax** 2022. Путин заявил, что российские войска воюют на Украине с неонацистами. – Interfax.ru, 03.03.2022. <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/826103> (accessed on 27 August 2022).

⁵ *Pax Russica* was introduced in Putin's Russia 2006–2007: **Rosyiskaya Gazeta** 2007. Послание Федеральному Собранию Российской Федерации Президента России Владимира Путина. – Российская газета, 27.04.2007. <http://www.rg.ru/2007/04/27/poslanie.html> (accessed 12 June 2021). **Сычева, Л.** 2007. Русский мир, русская культура, русский мир. – [lsycheva.ru](https://lsycheva.ru/books/culture/culture_7407.html). https://lsycheva.ru/books/culture/culture_7407.html (accessed on 2 October 2022). **Reuters** 2022. Putin approves new foreign policy doctrine based on "Russian World". – Reuters, 5 September. <https://www.reuters.com/world/putin-approves-new-foreign-policy-doctrine-based-russian-world-2022-09-05/> (accessed on 8 September 2022).

According to this article, the West is challenged with a trilemma of choosing a strategy to stop Putin’s aggressive ambitions. One option is to employ a rational approach which relies on credible deterrence and the logic of increasing the level of pain on Russia in order to persuade the Russian political elite to comply with Western demands. A second option is to declare that President Putin has gone insane, with a respective medical diagnosis, the solution which would include measures similar to those of psychologists and psychiatrists. A third option would be to treat President Putin as a rational person who is behaving like a Russian version of a “mad man”. In the latter case, the mad man strategy and other game theory models could be used to force Russian leaders to comply with Western demands.

The current article focuses on the third option, attempting to analyze which advantages and disadvantages the Russian version of a mad man strategy would offer to Russia and how the West could respond to it. Why did Putin eventually choose to act in this manner, and could the West, or even China, have other more beneficial or less violent options on the table? What went wrong in terms of Russian strategy, and how could this be used to force Russia to abandon its ambitions in Ukraine and in neighboring countries? What else can be expected from President Putin, and how should the West respond to Russia’s maneuvers and threats? The article also contributes to the discussion of how similar “mad man” situations might be interpreted and resolved in future international conflicts. Although there are some lessons to be identified and learned, the focus of the current study is on policy and security recommendations for assessing the risks of conflict escalation and finding a way out of stalemate situations.

The importance of Ukraine to Putin

Ukraine is important to Russia because it fits into the Kremlin’s propaganda concept of the Russian World, *Russkyi Mir*.⁶ In the Russian Federation this concept, which is actually an old Russian imperial legacy, has been developed

⁶ Ukraine’s sovereignty and Ukraine in the Western sphere of influence would be a big shock for Russia’s political elite as it represents a major defeat of Moscow’s historical strategy of exercising control over the geopolitical space around Russia’s borders. According to Z. Brzezinski, the loss of Ukraine diminishes the Kremlin’s possibilities of having influence over the Black Sea region. For many centuries, Ukraine and the Kyivan Rus have historically been a significant part of Russia’s nation-building narrative. Kyiv has traditionally been regarded in Moscow as the “mother of all Russian cities”. (see **Brzezinski, Z.** 1997. *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy And Its Geostrategic Imperatives*. New York: Basic Books 46; **Sazonov, V.; Mölder, H.** 2017. *Why did Russia attack Ukraine?* – EMA Occasional Papers, Vol. 6, p. 28).

into an ideological narrative since the late 1990s.⁷ Since 2001, Vladimir Putin has publicly used the term *Russkyi Mir* on various occasions to refer to the mythical ideal of Russian culture and the Russian language;⁸ however, it has gradually evolved into the idea that Russia should protect and support anyone who identifies as Russian and considers Russia to be his or her cultural center.

This cultural-propagandistic concept clearly aims to mobilize large masses of Russian-speaking people mostly in the former Soviet Union and in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and to persuade them of Russia's global ideological supremacy.⁹ The geopolitical focus of *Russkyi Mir* was on the former Soviet Union republics and on regions with large Russian-speaking populations, referring primarily to countries that Russia considers to be in its sphere of influence or "near abroad" regions, as well as to Russia's so-called compatriot policy in general.¹⁰ However, this focus has gradually expanded over time and has come to consist of Central and Eastern Europe and the Russian diaspora in distant countries as well. As Vladimir Putin succinctly

⁷ The ideological concept of *Russkyi Mir* is not a new phenomenon and it was not invented in Putin's era. While the concept of a *Russkyi Mir* does indeed derive from the medieval Kiyvan Rus' state, in reality the concept of a *Russkyi Mir* is a much more recent phenomenon. It is reasonable to argue that the concept of *Russkyi Mir* originates in the Slavophile movement of the 19th century Russian Empire and its perceptions. It is also important to mention one of the founders of Slavophilism, Aleksei Khomyakov (1804–1860) who has referred to the "Russian spirit" and to Russian philosophers, in particular Vladimir Solovyov (1853–1900) and Nikolai Berdyaev (1874–1948) who spoke of the "Russian idea" (see **Laruelle, M.** 2015. The "Russian World" Russia's Soft Power and Geopolitical Imagination. Center of Global Interest, p. 3). The Russian philosopher Vladimir Solovyov argued: "The Russian empire, isolated in its absolutism, is only a threat of struggle and endless wars. A Russian empire that wishes to serve the ecumenical church and the goal of social order, to take them under its protection, will bring peace and blessing to the family of nations" (**СОЛОВЬЕВ, В.** 1999. Спор о справедливости. Москва-Харьков, <http://www.vehi.net/soloviev/russianidea.html> (accessed on 27 October 2022)). Here we see talk of 'taking under its protection' which is also used today by the Putin regime which claims to protect Russian-speaking people outside Russia. Under the banner of protecting Russians, Russia invaded Ukraine on 24th February 2022 and is carrying out genocide and terror there.

⁸ The ideology and its historical roots are further explained, e.g., in **Sazonov, V.** 2016. The ideology of Putin's Russia and its historical roots. The concept of the Russian World. – **Sazonov et al.** 2016. [**Sazonov** 2016]

⁹ **Iovu, A.** 2021. Russkyi Mir in the Black Sea region. – Middle East Institute: Frontier Europe Initiative, July. <https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2021-07/0712%20Russkyi%20Mir%20in%20the%20Black%20Sea%20Region%20-%20Andrei%20Iovu.pdf> (accessed on 27 August 2022). [**Iovu** 2021]

¹⁰ **Sazonov** 2016, see footnote 2.

revealed, “*Russia’s border doesn’t end anywhere*”.¹¹ The ideology of the Russian World is also supported by Russia’s self-definition and self-reflection of the Kremlin as a “Third Rome”, referring to historical parallels from the 15th–17th century when Moscow declared itself as the sole legitimate successor of the Eastern Roman Empire. Currently, Russia employs this argument to justify the expansionary nature of its foreign policy and to legitimize its claims in Eurasia.¹²

Thus, the protection of those who identify as Russians (often Russian speakers with mixed ethnic background—Russians, Jewish people, Tatars, and Ukrainians) has been the center of gravity for many of Russia’s ideological narratives for many years. To quote, for example, former Russian Prime Minister and President Dmitry Medvedev: “*Protecting the rights and interests of Russian citizens abroad remains our most important task*”.¹³ The Russian Federation used this justification both in 2008 after it launched an invasion to support the two mostly Russian-speaking provinces of Georgia (by arguing that Russia protects “*its own interests, especially when they coincide with the security of Russian citizens*”¹⁴) as well as in 2014 after Russia occupied Crimea¹⁵ (“*Millions of Russians and Russian-speaking people live in Ukraine and will continue to do so. Russia will always defend its interests using political, diplomatic and legal means*”¹⁶). Furthermore, in Crimea Putin used the argument

¹¹ **Iovu** 2021, see footnote 3.

¹² **Sazonov** 2016, see footnote 2, pp. 24–25. The ideologues of the Moscow principality in late Middle Ages postulated: Moscow is the third Rome, two have already fallen (the Roman Empire and Byzantine Empire) and the fourth Rome will not come. The narrative of the third Rome did not only mean that Moscow is the legal, historical successor of the Roman Empire and Byzantium, but also that Moscow is the last Rome because there will not be a fourth; the end of the world will come instead. It was, in a sense, an apocalyptic teaching (**Kupp-Sazonov, S.; Sazonov, V.** 2022. *Su kiri on täis koera haukumist – valik Ivan Julma läkitusi*. Tallinn: Äripäev, p. 44).

¹³ **Estonian Public Broadcast (ERR) News** 2016. Medvedev: Russia will “protect its citizens” always and everywhere. – ERR News, 30 August. <https://news.err.ee/118920/medvedev-russia-will-protect-its-citizens-always-and-everywhere> (accessed on 22 August 2022).

¹⁴ **Kendall, B.** 2008. Meeting Russia’s new “Number One”. – News BBC, 27 August. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7583450.stm> (accessed on 22 August 2022).

¹⁵ For more on the annexation of Crimea in 2014 see **Mölder, H.; Sazonov, V.; Värk, R.** 2015. *Krimmi Venemaaga liitmise ajaloolised, poliitilised ja õiguslikud tagamaad*. II. – Akadeemia, Vol. 1, pp. 77–104; **Mölder, H.; Sazonov, V.; Värk, R.** 2014. *Krimmi Venemaaga liitmise ajaloolised, poliitilised ja õiguslikud tagamaad*. I. – Akadeemia, Vol. 12, pp. 2148–2161.

¹⁶ **Prague Post** 2014. Full text of Putin’s speech on Crimea. – Prague Post, 19 March. <https://www.praguepost.com/eu-news/37854-full-text-of-putin-s-speech-on-crimea> (accessed on 2 September 2022). [**Prague Post** 2014]

of protecting Russians in Ukraine in the most cynical way possible, stating that “*Russians, just as other citizens of Ukraine, are suffering from the constant political and state crisis that has been rocking the country for over 20 years*”.¹⁷ In this way, he blamed Ukrainians for the suffering of Russians caused by instability created to a large extent by Russia itself. Moreover, Russian politicians and diplomats also tend to accuse other countries of Russophobia, particularly the former Soviet republics, claiming that they discriminate against local Russian speakers. At the same time, Russia itself repressed civil society and democratic opposition in Russia, closed local human rights groups, restricted freedom of expression, and brutalized and arrested participants of peaceful demonstrations in Russian cities.

In this light, by relying on the argument that those who “think like Russians” need to be protected, the Kremlin manipulates its diaspora, and any country with a sufficiently large share of a Russian-speaking population can be potentially targeted by it. In Ukraine, Russians are the second-largest ethnic group (about 78 percent of the total population are Ukrainians and 17 percent are Russians). In addition, Russian is the second most common language after Ukrainian, as 24 percent of the population speak it as their first language.¹⁸ At the same time, the proportion of Russians differs across regions in Ukraine. Thus, Putin had a theoretical reason to believe that a significant share of people living in Ukraine would support Russia’s military invasion or that it would at least help him divide the Ukrainian society and create internal chaos, resulting in the separation of some regions in Ukraine.

Another argument as to why Russia chose Ukraine as a primary target lies in the way in which the former defines its security strategy. Russia has, for decades if not centuries, associated its security with the long-term security of its frontiers. Physical territory is important to Russia, as shown by Russia’s “borderization” policy¹⁹ which took effect in the case of Georgia. Russia appears to rely on a geopolitical reading of its identity as it perceives itself as a traditional land power, which necessitates maintaining physical control and a sphere of influence over its border regions to guarantee safety and security.

¹⁷ **Prague Post** 2014.

¹⁸ **World Population Review** 2022. Ukrainian Population 2022, Live. <https://worldpopulation-review.com/countries/ukraine-population> (accessed on 1 August 2022).

¹⁹ Referring to Russia’s constant efforts to expand already illegally occupied zones even further in Georgia. For further information see, e.g., **Seskuria, N.** 2021. Russia’s “hybrid aggression” against Georgia: The use of local and external tools. – CSIS.org. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-hybrid-aggression-against-georgia-use-local-and-external-tools> (accessed on 10 August 2022).

As Russia’s political elite view the country’s role in the world, Russia has its “privileged interests and status” or “unique” or “historically specific” relations with some neighboring or partly Slavic-populated regions due to this reading.²⁰ This applies to Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Kazakhstan, but also to Finland, Sweden, and the Baltic countries. So far, Russia has used all possible means to either take control over its neighbors (like in Belarus), to control conflicts between neighbors (as shown by the protracted conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, or the frozen conflicts in Georgia and in Transnistria, Moldova), to offer military support (like to Kazakhstan), to deter them (Finland, Sweden, and the Baltic states), or to develop good relations with them (like with China).

In circumstances when, according to Putin’s speech on the 24th of February 2022 “all diplomatic options have run out,” the decision of Russia to attack Ukraine does not sound like the decision of a mad man. Instead, gaining control over its neighbor’s territory, resources, infrastructure, strategic locations and military capabilities sounds like a rational strategy from a geopolitical perspective, in order to avoid the situation where “enemies” (global Anti-Russia mostly in the form of the NATO Alliance) gain control over Russia’s bordering countries. It was increasingly difficult for Russia to increase its control over Ukraine after the Euromaidan events in 2013–2014, as well as due to the dynamics of the conflict in Donetsk and Luhansk that no longer show any positive trends for Russia. It must be acknowledged here that the Kremlin’s decision to shift from soft to hard policies in Ukraine in 2014 exacerbated, if not started, the process by which control over Ukraine slipped from its grasp. As a result, President Putin most likely decided that because Russia no longer had control over some border regions, it needed to use force against Ukraine even though there was no real risk that either Ukraine or the West would attack Russia. Nevertheless, Putin deliberately mixed fears and actual risks by talking about this “perfectly real threat” in his speech on Crimea in 2014:

Let me note too that we have already heard declarations from Kiev about Ukraine soon joining NATO. What would this have meant for Crimea and Sevastopol in the future? It would have meant that NATO’s navy would be right there in this

²⁰ **Berls, R. E.** 2021. Strengthening Russia’s influence in international affairs. Part II: Russia and its neighbours: A sphere of influence or a declining relationship? – NTI, 13 July. <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/strengthening-russias-influence-in-international-affairs-part-ii-russia-and-its-neighbors-a-sphere-of-influence-or-a-declining-relationship/> (accessed on 1 August 2022).

*city of Russia's military glory, and this would create not an illusory but a perfectly real threat to the whole of southern Russia.*²¹

Intriguingly, the demand for security guarantees was already stressed by Russia before the 2008 war in Georgia, as well as before the 2022 war in Ukraine. Russia's leaders demanded, almost unanimously, that Western countries provide immediate security guarantees, then and now. This is reflected, for example, in Vladimir Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007²² and in public statements from Putin and Sergey Lavrov in late 2021 and early 2022.²³ However, because Western countries assumed this was just another clown show put on by Russia in the international arena, they failed to recognize the warning signs of the chaos and destruction that ensued in Ukraine. As a result, it cannot be ruled out that some sort of assurance from the West that Russia's neighboring countries will remain neutral is something Russia actually wants from the West.

In addition to that, the Russian political elite believes that the West is actively pursuing the overthrow of Russia's current regime; the latter regards only superpowers as true actors in international relations. It is in this context that Russian statements regarding Ukraine's lack of full sovereignty make sense. This also explains why, for many years now, Russia's clear strategy has been to engage in dialogue only with other "real sovereign states" and "superpowers" but not with its small (and often critical and suspicious) neighbors. Hence, Russia might actually believe that Ukraine and other similar countries are puppet states of NATO or the US, and that they could be used in confrontations with other global powers without getting into direct conflict with them on their own territory. The only thing that smaller countries can do is unite against Russia while also seeking powerful allies in the global arena

²¹ **Prague Post** 2014, see footnote 10.

²² A speech delivered at the MSC 2007 by the President Vladimir Putin – **Russian President Vladimir Putin's Speech at the 2007 Munich Conference on Security Policy** 2007. – The International Relations and Security Network. https://is.muni.cz/th/xlghl/DP_Fillinger_Speeches.pdf (accessed on 2 September 2022). See also **Kupp-Sazonov, S.** 2012. Vladimir Putini Müncheni kõne tõlkimisest ja tõlgendamisest Eesti ajakirjanduses. – Sõna sõjast ja sõda sõnast. Tekste ja tõlgendusi. KVÜÕA toimetised, Vol. 16, pp. 57–72.

²³ See, for example, **Eckel, M.** 2021. Putin Demands That West Provide Russia With Security Guarantees 'Immediately'. – RadioFreeEurope, 23.12.2021. <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-news-conference-security-guarantees/31622197.html> (accessed on 12 August 2022). **Nilsen, T.** 2021. Lavrov demands 'clear answer' from Nordic neighbors on security guarantees. – The Barents Observer, 1 February. <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2022/02/lavrov-asks-nordic-neighbors-about-security-guarantees> (accessed on 2 September 2022).

that Russia fears. This applies particularly to Ukraine, and the United States and the EU which Russia has accused of escalating the conflict. China, on the contrary, seems to be the one and only global player that Russia currently admires. In 2014, Putin expressed his special gratitude to China in his speech on Crimea, saying “*we are grateful to the people of China, whose leaders have always considered the situation in Ukraine and Crimea taking into account the full historical and political context*”²⁴.

2. Theoretical considerations: Why is it critical for President Putin and the Russian political elite to take the initiative, to strike first and asymmetrically?

What are the justifications for using the “mad man” game when discussing Putin’s war in Ukraine in 2022? Analysts have already been using game theory models for decades to study international relations and conflict escalation. The best example of this is the period of the Cold War when game theory models were applied to predict the dynamics of the confrontation between the East and the West. The key element of the Cold War, particularly in 1980s, was the nuclear arms race. At that time, politicians and researchers debated intensely over the threat of the US and Soviet use of nuclear weapons leading to mutually assured destruction. They went on to discuss whether it would be reasonable to strike first with nuclear weapons in order to paralyze the opponent. Game theory models consisting of key concepts like the prisoner’s dilemma, perceptual dilemma, mad man strategy, and variations thereof were used to model military conflicts.²⁵ For example, the RAND Corporation used the prisoner’s dilemma in their studies in the 1950s.²⁶ Since the current confrontation between Russia and the West is similar to the Cold War in nature, it is reasonable to use this strategic thinking today to explain and predict the dynamics of the war in Ukraine, as well as the confrontation between Russia and the West in general.

²⁴ **Prague Post** 2014, see footnote 10.

²⁵ See, for example, **Plous, S.** 1993. The Nuclear Arms Race: Prisoner’s Dilemma or Perceptual Dilemma? – *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 30, No. 2. <https://www.socialpsychology.org/pdf/jpr1993.pdf> (accessed on 28 August 2022). [**Plous** 1993]

²⁶ **Morgan, M.** 2001. The curious case of the prisoner’s dilemma: model situation? Exemplary narrative? https://www.researchgate.net/publication/30526286_The_curious_case_of_the_prisoner's_dilemma_model_situation_Exemplary_narrative (accessed on 28 August 2022). [**Morgan** 2001]

The prisoner's dilemma describes strategic decision-making in a situation where opponents have to choose between cooperation to prevent war or striking first with the risk that they destroy each other.²⁷ In principle, the prisoner's dilemma suggests that arming with more weapons is a strictly dominant strategy, which is the best response to every strategy of the opponent, that both sides are better off arming regardless of what the opponent chooses to do, and that, ideally, both sides prefer to arm while the other disarms. In that way, armament gives a clear advantage if the opponent disarms, and arming keeps both opponents equal and eliminates the risk of military inferiority, should the opponent decide to arm as well. The most crucial moment here is that if both sides choose to arm, they will be worse off compared to the situation where they had both chosen to cooperate and disarm.²⁸ Furthermore, based on the prisoner's dilemma, some researchers and politicians at that time advocated for a preventive first nuclear strike against the opponent.²⁹ Another relevant game theory approach, the perceptual dilemma, suggests that while both opposing superpowers ideally prefer unilateral armament, each party also prefers arms reduction to all options available. However, they want to avoid disarming while the opponent arms and, thus, perceive that the other side prefers unilateral armament. Even if both sides actually prefer disarmament, they also believe that their own disarmament leads the other side to arm, and this again leads to an arms race that is interpreted as further evidence of the opponent's intention to arm. Disarmament is possible only if both opponents succeed in convincing each other of their actual preferences.³⁰

In the light of these game theory models, Russia's behaviour—such as the occupation of South Ossetia, the annexation of Crimea (2014), military intervention in the Syrian civil war (2015), constant accusations that the NATO Alliance and West pose a direct security threat to Russia, and demonstrations of Russia's "superweapons"—and the country's extremely aggressive rhetoric with regard to Russia's "enemies" start to make sense. This conduct follows the logic of the prisoner's dilemma and of the perceptual dilemma that defines armament by all means as a strictly dominant strategy, with striking first as

²⁷ **United States vs Soviet Union: Prisoner's Dilemma** 2015. – Cornell University: Networks, 11 September. <https://blogs.cornell.edu/info2040/2015/09/11/united-states-vs-soviet-union-prisoners-dilemma/> (accessed on 1 August 2022).

²⁸ **Plous** 1993.

²⁹ **Morgan** 2001.

³⁰ **Plous** 1993.

a one and only utility-maximizing strategy if the country actually does not care whether it causes damage to itself and to others or not. From a different perspective, politicians have long debated whether the NATO Alliance should deploy fewer troops along the NATO Eastern Flank to avoid escalation with Russia. In any case, based on the prisoner’s dilemma, it would only have been in the best interests of Russia if the Alliance had decided on disarmament. This conduct follows the logic of aggressive realism whereby the actors are within a zero-sum anarchic environment and it is rational to seize the opportunity to strengthen one’s security.

However, the mad man strategy appears to be the most relevant game theory approach in describing President Putin’s motivation when waging war in Ukraine in 2022. One empirical and historical example of mad man strategy is the first presidency of Richard Nixon in the 1960s.³¹ Nixon’s aim was to convince the Soviet Union that he was irrational and emotional enough to initiate an all-out nuclear war so that, as a reaction, the Soviet Union would pressure Vietnam to capitulate. One could also argue that President Donald Trump employed a similar kind of “image creation” during his recent presidential term³².

Within game theory models, being mad (irrational or unstable) is, in principle, an element of strategically relevant uncertainty. Again, assuming one party acts irrationally, the other party may believe that war will cause more damage because the opponent is unconcerned about their own losses. In theory, equilibrium would be for the second player to pull back in order to avoid massive damage. Furthermore, this would also allow the “insane” player to fold as well, so that equilibrium for both sides would actually be to fold.³³ Drawing parallels with some recent events, to some extent the decision of the US administration to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan in 2021 could potentially be based on calculations that enormous damage caused by a mad man (i.e., the Taliban) should be avoided and therefore a fold-fold solution should be preferred.

³¹ **Carroll, J.** 2005. Nixon’s mad man strategy. – The Boston Globe, 14 June. http://archive.boston.com/news/globe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2005/06/14/nixons_madman_strategy/ (accessed on 26 October August 2022).

³² **Naftali, T.** 2017. The Problem With Trump’s Mad man Theory. – The Atlantic, 4 October. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/10/madman-theory-trump-north-korea/542055/> (accessed on 18 October 2022).

³³ **Mad man Strategy and its Application to Game Theory** 2017. – Cornell University Networks, 10 September. <https://blogs.cornell.edu/info2040/2017/09/10/30860/> (accessed on 28 August 2022).

To summarize, it appears understandable and rational, based on game theory models, that President Putin and Russia wanted to use their strategic advantage as crazy and unpredictable players to initiate something sufficiently insane, looking to scare off Western countries and force them to fold their positions and options. From Putin's viewpoint, he simply had no choice but to take the initiative and attack because he had strongly established the message to the Russian people that Russia would regain its former glory. Furthermore, there was also no reason for President Putin to wait for any kind of trigger from NATO's side since the Alliance consistently confirmed that it had no intention of threatening or attacking Russia. Military action against Ukraine is clearly insane in terms of the risks it entails for the initiator and Putin has succeeded in shocking everyone in this regard.

What has also made Russia's choice of a mad man strategy rational is the fact that, after the loss of the Soviet empire, Russia is a revisionist state (see Putin's assertion in 2010 that "the demise of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the [20th] century")³⁴ and a significantly lesser player compared to its previous posture against its collective competitor, the West, or its individual competitor, the United States. In terms of economic capabilities and competitiveness, Russia is falling far behind the West and the United States. It has, however, maintained and nurtured a remarkably large and effective military. However, because Russia's economic development trajectory will not allow it to remain in the global competition for long, the military's usefulness will gradually diminish. As a result, if it has immediate security goals it must act sooner rather than later. Furthermore, because it cannot dominate in every military domain, it must choose its technological niches.³⁵ Likewise, its aim with those niche capabilities is to be able to cause as much damage to the opponent as possible. Most importantly for this discussion, as a lesser power with specific niche capabilities, Russia needs to keep the initiative and act asymmetrically. Thence comes also its stress on nuclear arms as this is an already available capability (compared to the need to be successful in the 4IR), the use of which is considered unacceptable (thus

³⁴ **NBC News** 2010. Putin: Soviet collapse a "genuine tragedy". – NBC News, 4 August. <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna7632057> (accessed on 28 August 2022).

³⁵ **Bendett, S.; Boulègue, M.; Connolly, R.; Konaev, M.; Podvig, P.; Zysk, K.** 2021. *Advanced military technology in Russia Capabilities and implications*. London: Chatham House. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/09/advanced-military-technology-russia> (accessed on 28 August 2022). [**Bendett et al.** 2021]

enabling asymmetry and allowing it to harness the mad man strategy).³⁶ Its nuclear strategy of escalate-to-de-escalate is a mechanism which allows Russia to claim its mad man posture while also managing the risks involved. It claims that it will only escalate in order to de-escalate. As a result, the opponent will be discouraged from engaging in the escalation. In the context of revisionism, Russia's economic, technological, and military capabilities provide yet another reason for it to employ the mad man strategy.

3. Are the events and reactions that followed in accordance with the game theory models and expectations of the Russian leaders?

In hindsight, taking a look at the first month of the war, President Putin has obviously also made some serious miscalculations. First and foremost, he failed to forecast how the war would be received in the West. On the one hand, this relates to the political and economic sanctions that have been imposed against Russia. Based on previous responses by the West such as those after the 2014 annexation of Crimea, it is highly likely that Putin expected the West to fold again. This expectation was also expressed in his speech which threatened all parties interfering in Ukraine with unprecedentedly serious consequences.³⁷ The extensive sanctions against Russia, such as the removal of selected Russian banks from the SWIFT messaging system, setting restrictive measures on the Russian Central Bank, imposing individual sanctions against Vladimir Putin and Russia's elite, closing the airspace of the European countries to Russian planes, and other restrictive measures that the United States, the United Kingdom, the EU, Japan, and many other countries have imposed on Russia, is clearly something that Putin had hardly expected from the Western countries. Furthermore, repeated statements by Western firms that they were ceasing operations in Russia and leaving the country represent a huge moral blow as well as a significant economic loss to Russia in terms of high unemployment, lower tax revenues, shortages of commodities, high inflation, and so on.

When considering the ways in which both President Putin and the majority of Russian society identify themselves through the concept of *Russkyi Mir*,

³⁶ Bendett *et al.* 2021.

³⁷ **Putin orders special military operation for Ukraine** 2022. – Bloomberg, 24 February. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/videos/2022-02-24/putin-orders-special-military-operation-for-ukraine-video-l00nw4qc> (accessed on 28 August 2022).

Putin's miscalculations could also be associated with twisted self-reflection and mirroring. To mention a few examples, Putin and his companions have widely shared the view that Russia intends to act as a key security provider in the region; Russia's political elite justified the annexation of Crimea by relying on the common historical legacy of Crimea and Russia; they also argued that no violation of international law had taken place related to Ukraine in 2013–2014 and called on other countries to understand Russia's actions based on their own historical experience, and so on.³⁸ Furthermore, Stoicescu (2015) argues that Putin constantly accused the West of provoking Russia politically and economically and of interfering in Russia's internal affairs. Stoicescu concludes that the main aim of this narrative is to exploit Western fears of war and to increase the readiness of Western countries to make compromises with Russia.³⁹ It is likely that, after many years of intensive propaganda, Russia thought that the Western audience had also internalized these narratives and would not dare to challenge Russia's perceived right to occupy Ukraine.

The same strategy that Russia used during the occupation of Georgian territories in 2008 and during the occupation of Crimea in 2014 has suddenly proven ineffective. Despite the fact that Russia's current aggression against Ukraine has refocused on aggressive threats and mystification of its identity as an unstoppable "war machine", reality has revealed that Russia lacks strategic political leadership and the ability to efficiently conduct large military operations on foreign territories. This was also the case even in the early stages of confrontation. Russia was unable to mobilize the support of the Russian-speaking community in Ukraine and use it to its own benefit because those who supported Russia had most likely already departed Ukraine for Russia. Those residents who were previously critical of Ukraine and mainly neutral toward Russia have likely recognized that Russia has nothing more to offer than their own fears (corruption, political persecution, economic stagnation, and so on) as a result of the current actions in Ukraine. Furthermore, the Russian-speaking community in Ukraine had no respected leader behind whom all Russian-speaking Ukrainians could unite. The best that President Putin could come up with was an attempt to pull a political zombie, former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, into the international arena to oppose the current Ukrainian administration. This indicates a significant underestimation of the Ukrainian reality, or mere hubris.

³⁸ Veebel, Vihmand 2019.

³⁹ Stoicescu, K. 2015. Vene oht Läänemere piirkonna julgeolekule. – RKK/ICDS publications "Taustapaberid" (available only in Estonian). https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/2015/Kalev_Stoicescu_-_Vene_oht_Laanemere_piirkonna_julgeolekule.pdf (accessed on 28 August 2022).

4. How could Russia’s miscalculations be used to force Russia to withdraw from Ukraine?

How could Putin be stopped in Ukraine? What can we learn from Putin’s logic of aggression against Ukraine that is currently being deployed? According to the logic of the prisoner’s dilemma, escalation is a dominant strategy and the one who folds suffers the most. Thus, folding and acquiescing to Russian demands in Ukraine (and in other places like Georgia, Finland, Sweden, the Baltic countries, and so on) should not be the preferred strategy for Western countries as it would not give any further superiority over Russia in the long term. Instead, the West should maintain its initiative and further exert pressure on Russia. In the eyes of the West, there are two fundamental options: either cause as much indirect harm to Russia as possible and then wait for Russian “machinery” to destroy itself, or actively contribute to Russia’s regime change. The main difference between these options is the risk of a nuclear conflict with Russia. Also, the happy medium of causing indirect harm appears to be the best balance within the power-security dilemma. Russia’s mad man tactics are in essence a means to balance aggressive and defensive postures. Either Russia wants to communicate that it is defensive but has nothing to lose and thus can be aggressive in applying its defensive policy, or Russia is being subtly aggressive while demonstrating that its actions are intended to be defensive responses to other countries’ aggressive moves.

The measures that the West has used so far have been targeted to undermine Putin’s regime from the inside, such as economic pressure on Russia. As Putin’s statement in the meeting with Russian entrepreneurs right after the announcement of the war in Ukraine shows, he clearly did not expect such powerful economic sanctions:

Russia remains part of the world economy, and to the extent that it remains part, we are not going to inflict damage on the system we feel ourselves to be a part of. We are not going to damage the system of the global economy that we are in, to the extent that we are in it. So, I think our partners should understand this and should not try to force us from this system. Nonetheless, restrictions will be imposed, even for political considerations.⁴⁰

The most telling part of this quotation is the last sentence that reveals that Putin expected only mild sanctions that would allow the West to maintain its “face” in the international arena, but nothing more. In practice, he could not

⁴⁰ **Kremlin.ru** 2022. Meeting with representatives of Russian business circles. – Kremlin.ru, 24 February. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67846> (accessed on 28 August 2022).

have been more mistaken. As a reaction to the aggression in Ukraine, Russia has been extensively excluded from the global economic system and markets, and private companies have also strongly reacted to the war in Ukraine. As a result, economic turbulence within Russia is high, owing not only to economic contraction and insecurity but also to reputational and psychological consequences. Whatever happens in the Russian economy in the coming weeks and months, economic isolation will have a long-term impact on Russia. Although Russia declares that it will survive and rebuild its economy, the reality will not be so pleasant for the Russian people due to the lack of know-how and financial resources in Russia. Thus, heavy economic pressure is something that has surprised Putin and the initiative should be maintained in this area. In this respect, regular revisions of the “sanction packages” of the EU, the United Kingdom, the United States, and other countries on Russia are powerful tools.

However, while economic and financial sanctions against Russia have been effective, the assumption that Russia can tear itself apart appears to be somewhat dubious. At first glance, it seems to be a reasonable expectation as it already happened at the end of the Cold War. However, this expectation might not materialize since some present circumstances are different compared to those earlier times. About 30 years ago, the collapse of the Soviet Union was triggered by economic chaos, inadequate and weak political machinery, and strong aspirations of some of the former Soviet republics to regain their independence. At least in the Baltic countries, the process was initiated on a grass-root level by establishing civil society organizations and public movements. Both local politicians and the cultural elite led these movements and large numbers of people were mobilized to support the aspirations of sovereignty and freedom. Not all of these conditions are met in Russia today. Because of economic and financial sanctions, Russia is on the verge of economic chaos. However, Russia’s current political leadership is unlikely to repeat Mikhail Gorbachev’s mistake of allowing people in the Soviet Union to freely express their opinions and criticize the ruling elite. Moreover, there are no “republics” (or independent ethnic groups) in Russia that would publicly lead this process, demand freedom and expect the collapse of Putin’s regime (except perhaps some administrative units in Siberia and Far East Russia, but they are too far away from Moscow to change the “game”). Furthermore, the former Soviet republics had a clear goal of sovereignty in mind decades ago. It is unclear now what should be the long-term aim of those Russians currently protesting against the ruling elite. It is one thing to demand an end to the war in Ukraine, but it is quite another to define what Russia should look like once Putin’s

regime is deposed. In the 1990s, Russians already had a bad experience when, despite their high hopes, democracy did not turn out well in Russia. Today, the country has turned into an unsavory form of dictatorship comparable to the Soviet period. It is unclear what could guarantee that democracy will succeed in Russia this time. As a result, while it cannot be ruled out, Russian society does not appear to be prepared for a fundamental political shift.

In this light, since current internal processes in Russia are not particularly favorable to the collapse of Putin’s regime in general (even if Putin himself will be removed from power at some point in time), it seems reasonable for the Western countries to apply more active measures on Moscow to force Russia to change its course. The question is, what kind of measures should be put in place? Public statements by Western politicians condemning Russia’s aggression, or phone calls from some European political leaders to Vladimir Putin expressing their dissatisfaction with the current situation have not only failed but have even encouraged Putin and his associates to accuse other countries of either not taking Russia’s security concerns seriously enough or of posing a direct security threat to Russia. One alternative to diplomacy would be to engage in a military confrontation with Russia. Western elites like to amuse themselves about Russia having lost a significant share of its military capabilities in the conflict with NATO—as Putin would like to present it to Russians—before NATO has actually even entered the conflict. However, the reality is that Russia’s airstrikes occur in Ukraine, and NATO has little control over them. The recent incidents of not sending MiG-29 fighters to Ukraine and not responding to Russia’s airstrike against a military base very close to the Polish border are unfortunate in showing how limited NATO’s current toolbox is. The situation has deteriorated to the point where the aggressor, who is employing severe violence and brutality against one country, is simultaneously threatening other countries to stay out of the conflict.

This brings us to the main vulnerability in why the West is not credible enough in the eyes of Russia in terms of deterrence. It mostly concerns NATO (and its larger members) constantly declaring that the Alliance’s military forces “are not and will never be involved in the conflict in Ukraine”.⁴¹ In this way, the Alliance explicitly admits that it has resources but will never use them to defend its friends and neighbors. The more victims there are in

⁴¹ NATO’s statements on the current security order are summarized, e.g., in NATO 2022. Speech by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Ottawa Conference on Security and Defence. – NATO, 9 March. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_193055.htm (accessed on 28 August 2022).

Ukraine's war in the coming weeks and months, the more difficult it becomes for individual NATO countries to look in the mirror and see themselves as protectors of humanitarian values, peace, and the world's security order.

All of this points to taking more risks in order to deter Russia. If sending Alliance troops to Ukraine to fight alongside Ukrainians is still too radical for the Alliance today, it would also help if the NATO Alliance developed a straightforward strategy with a primary focus on military elements to protect Ukraine instead of the current "do-what-you-want" policy. First and foremost, Ukraine must be provided with new military capabilities that are most harmful to Russia, as well as humanitarian corridors in Ukraine. It also would not hurt to communicate this much more loudly to Russia by stating, for example, that NATO is using military tools to protect humanitarian corridors in Ukraine, and so on. So far, NATO's public communication has stressed the sanctions that Western countries have imposed on Russia and avoided openly talking about the military contributions that the Alliance has made to Ukraine. Military capabilities certainly have an important role to play in the dynamics of this war in Ukraine and straightforward communication that Russia does not have supremacy in this respect could also help to deter Russia in the future. At the very least, the West should not be afraid to speak in terms of red lines, to be committed to them while remaining flexible about where exactly they lie and what would trigger military intervention.

5. How to create ruptures in the concept of the Russian World? Conclusions and practical recommendations

Russia's military aggression and adventurism in Ukraine, the subsequent political isolation, and the economic disaster brought about by Western economic and financial sanctions have created favorable conditions for cracking the spine of the Russian World, even in the eyes of Russians. If stores are empty and even basic products are missing, travel abroad is restricted, the currency has lost significant value, people are out of work, and everyone outside your homeland considers you a pariah, ordinary Russian citizens should have doubts about the Russian world as an ideal place sooner or later. However, there are some further steps that the Western countries could consider to force Russia to scale down its aggressive ambitions and to give up the hope of its "beloved" *Russkyi Mir* worldwide.

First, since Russia seems to be obsessed with taking control over its border regions, and its so-called sphere of influence, one of Russia's weaknesses seems

to be associated with Ukraine's EU integration. It was precisely Russia's fear that Ukraine would be interested in EU (or even NATO) membership that triggered the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Since then, Russia has constantly asked the West for guarantees that Ukraine will not be a member of Western alliances, based on the argument that Russia feels threatened. Hence, offering Ukraine accession to the EU ruins Putin's plan of expanding the Russian sphere of influence in the former Soviet republics. Similarly, it would also oppose Russia's strategic narrative of Ukraine as a highly corrupt country that commits genocide against people in Donbas and is developing its own nuclear weapons.⁴² Furthermore, risks to the EU are not very high when straightforwardly declaring that Ukraine will be an EU candidate country, stressing at the beginning of negotiations that the accession procedure relies on concrete criteria that should be fulfilled by Ukraine before joining, and that it is completely up to Ukraine itself whether negotiations will be successful or not. Ukraine has made a bold (and somewhat irrational) move by requesting “rapid” EU accession. Some political leaders in EU member countries have backed this idea, claiming that Ukraine deserves it for its staunch opposition to Russia. However, the EU has clearly failed in its communication of rejecting Ukraine's “fast” accession, because the EU's public statement was difficult to follow and could be interpreted in a voluntarist manner by anyone.⁴³ It seems that EU leaders have almost forgotten the much broader significance of their decision to both Ukraine and Russia. Spending hours arguing about the possibility of non-existent “fast accession” is quite nonsensical, especially as that time could have been spent encouraging Ukraine, finding common ground on how Ukraine could be somewhat integrated into EU's activities already setting a preliminary timeline for a negotiation procedure, and so on. Finally, Russia's favorite narrative of being besieged by the West frequently takes the form of the West extending its influence primarily through soft measures and waging hybrid wars against Russia, with the EU being the usual perpetrator.

Second, in a very calculated way, pressure should be put both on Russia's political and military elite, as well as Russians in general, to force Vladimir Putin to be removed from power. This recommendation is driven by the view that Putin can only hold power as long as he is worth more alive than dead

⁴² **BBC News** 2022. Ukraine crisis: Vladimir Putin address fact-checked. – BBC News, 22 February. <https://www.bbc.com/news/60477712> (accessed on 28 August 2022).

⁴³ See, for example, **Brzozowski, A.** 2022. EU leaders tone down Ukraine's membership plan. – EurActive, 11 March. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/eu-leaders-tone-down-ukraines-eu-membership-plan/> (accessed on 28 August 2022).

to his companions in the FSB and other administrative organs with repressive or military backgrounds. So far, the Western countries have publicly condemned Putin's actions in Ukraine, Georgia and other places, however none of them has talked about his removal from power. Putin, on the other hand, has frequently demanded that legally elected heads of state (such as Mikhail Saakashvili or Volodymyr Zelenskyy) be deposed. Considering the current hysterical situation in Russia, it is highly probable that Putin's companions have started searching for alternatives to get rid of sanctions and make their life easy again. This would mean, first and foremost, that Putin should be replaced by somebody else, otherwise it would be difficult to save face. However, on the one hand, Putin's successor cannot be somebody who is included in the list of sanctioned persons because this would not change the game from the perspective of Western countries. On the other hand, Putin's successor cannot be somebody outside the current system either because, in that case, it would be difficult for Putin's current companions to trust him (since only they can be the initiators of a regime shift). They know what they are going to get with Putin. At first glance, the situation appears to be beyond salvaging from the outside. However, there is something the West could do in this regard. Today, Western sanctions are not linked to specific demands or developments that Western countries would like to see in Russia before removing the sanctions. This clearly works in favor of Putin as it allows him to show that he is the one who is protecting his companions and the whole nation from the West's aggressive ambitions. However, if Putin and his political allies were removed from power and replaced by someone capable and reasonable enough to end the war in Ukraine, accepting responsibility for Russia's actions, sanctions would be lifted and financial and moral support would be offered not only to Ukraine (which appears to be the actual reality) but also to Russia to rebuild the country. This would change the picture completely as it would make it difficult for Putin to justify his existence in the eyes of the Russian people.

Even within Western countries, many people use the argument that it is neither fair nor reasonable to pressure ordinary Russian people because they do not desire the war in Ukraine. Fighting for their freedom, on the other hand, is something that only Russians can do. As tragic as it may be, public opinion polls in Russia confirm that the majority of Russians support Putin's regime.⁴⁴ Furthermore, tens of thousands of Internet trolls in Russia report

⁴⁴ Further information on public opinion polls in Russia is available here: **Levada Analytical Center** 2022. <https://www.levada.ru/en/> (accessed on 28 August 2022).

to their troll “factories” every morning with the goal of twisting history and justifying Putin’s actions. These are ordinary people in Russia who accept, support, and praise Russia’s aggression in Ukraine. In this respect, the West should also clearly understand that the question is not about changing merely the Putin regime, but also about changing the mindset of the majority of Russian citizens (and even of those living in the nearby regions of Russia). All of this should be considered when increasing emotional pressure on Russia.

Last but not least, the West must not overlook its relations with Russia’s neighbors. This applies not only to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia which have suffered the most as a result of Russia’s aggressive policy, but also to Belarus. On the one hand, pressure should be put on the ruling elite of Belarus because they offer a physical platform for Russia’s attacks against Ukraine as well as support and justification for Russia’s military actions in Ukraine. In this regard, the Belarusian political elite should be sanctioned in the same way that the West sanctions Russia. Furthermore, all available measures should be taken to economically and physically remove Belarus from the conflict, making it extremely difficult for Belarus to assist Putin. In addition, more emphasis should be placed on cooperation with China. Western countries have a lot to offer to China, owing primarily to their large and financially sound markets. So far, Western countries have been alarmed by China’s rise to prominence in the global arena, and they have grossly underestimated the country’s political, economic, and military capabilities. Furthermore, in Russia’s eyes, China is clearly “the new” West—the one that Russia would like to see as an ally. In this light, it appears that, rather than China having to choose between Russia and the West, it is the West that must decide whether to include or exclude China. The latter may offer short-term benefits, but in the long run, this may unnecessarily divide the globe. As recent high-level meetings between diplomats from China and the United States have shown, the reorganization of economic and political power centers in the global arena has already begun and, to Russia’s immense frustration, the future global power center is located in China, not Russia.

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