

KEIR GILES

RUSSIA'S

WAR ON

EVERYBODY

AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOU

B L O O M S B U R Y

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Chapter 2

POLITICS: WARFARE BY OTHER MEANS

Propaganda at home

It's hard to explain to anybody who hasn't seen it for themselves just how bizarrely different the world looks if you see it through what is shown on Russian television. Just as in Soviet times, a relentless diet of propaganda distorts and conceals what is really happening outside the country. On evening television schedules, even some comedy and chat shows – even though modelled on their Western counterparts – are geared towards portraying the West as a threat to Russia, and attacking its political leadership.¹

Cynics call the television the *zomboyashchik*, the zombie box or zombifying box. But for obvious reasons, state propaganda continues to be most effective among the generations of Russians who watch television. A video by Alexei Navalny's team showing 'Putin's Palace' in all its gaudy detail, suggestive of corruption on an unimaginable scale, was watched by millions online but made barely any difference to their opinion of Putin. Older people who got their news mainly from state television were inclined to dismiss it, and younger ones that could access a broader range of information online generally believed it – and both groups had already formed their opinions of Putin.² The tragic result is that people within Russia are so isolated from reality that even when told by their own children in Ukraine that they were under attack by Russian forces, they refused to believe them.³

1. 'Stratcom Laughs: In Search of an Analytical Framework', NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (NATO StratCom COE), March 2017, https://stratcomcoe.org/pdfs/?file=/cuploads/pfiles/Full-stratcom-laughs-report_web_15-03-2017.pdf.

2. 'Фильм "Дворец для Путина"' (Putin's Palace film), Levada-Tsentr poll, 8 February 2021, <https://www.levada.ru/2021/02/08/film-dvoretz-dlya-putina/>.

3. Maria Korenyuk and Jack Goodman, 'Ukraine war: "My city's being shelled, but mum won't believe me"', BBC, 4 March 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-60600487>.

Robert Pszczel points to the large number of Russians who conform – who echo state propaganda lines, vote for Putin and give him consistently high ratings in opinion polls. ‘I very often get this question, do they actually believe, and my answer to that is, at some point, it became immaterial. It doesn’t matter.’ There can be different motivations for a conscious or unconscious decision to fall into line, Robert says. ‘Some people behave out of fear, fear of losing the benefits they have. It’s not just government officials, it’s anywhere there’s lots of money. Other people are just in some kind of collective sense of belonging. You have to speak about this sort of altered state of consciousness, the sort of brainwashing, which is done on an individual level but also on a collective level.’ ‘In modern Russia it’s more difficult not to be aware of the facts, but it’s still possible to live within this make-believe world,’ Robert goes on. ‘Young people are more dangerous in a way, because they have never known anything different and some of them actually believe.’

As ever, it’s hard to work out how much of this belief is genuine – especially since shows of belief include students being deceived into taking part in televised demonstrations of loyalty to President Putin, or in some cases being lured there by the promise of higher grades,⁴ or tricked into thinking they were going to a concert.⁵ But the reaction at home to the assault on Ukraine showed how the relentless bludgeoning of Russians’ consciousness through the television held another danger: the normalization of aggression and violence towards the outside world. Long before the invasion, this was an inevitable core component of Russia’s propaganda. On the anniversary of 9/11, the chief editor of the Rossiya-24 TV channel was proud to send a friend birthday wishes that ‘the World Trade Center should always be burning’.⁶ Petr Tolstoy, who represents his country as head of the Russian delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in Vienna, told Russian television in July 2021 that the leaders of Ukraine should be murdered and ‘hung from street lights [because] Ukraine is a part of our Great Russia’.⁷ Leading propagandist Dmitry Kiselev uses his television show to boast of how Russia could ‘reduce the United States to radioactive ash’.⁸ (Kiselev also takes

4. ‘Студентов обманом заставили участвовать во флешмобе в поддержку Путина’, *DOXA*, 6 February 2021, <https://news.doxajournal.ru/novosti/studentov-obmanom-zastavili-uchavstvovat-vo-flshemobe-v-podderzhku-putina/>.

5. Will Vernon, 18 March 2022, <https://twitter.com/bbcwillvernon/status/1504838568514052098?s=27>.

6. Fedor Kuzmin, ‘Главред “России 24” пожелал башням-близнецам “гореть к ****”. Так он поздравил друга’ (Chief editor of Rossiya-24 wished for the Twin Towers to ‘burn to f***’. That’s how he congratulated his friend), *Afisha*, 11 September 2020, <https://daily.afisha.ru/news/41408-glavred-rossii-24-pozhelal-bashnyam-bliznecam-goret-k-tak-on-pozdravil-druga/>.

7. Video in tweet by Sergej Sumlenny, 8 July 2021, <https://twitter.com/sumlenny/status/1413150943923773441?s=27>.

8. Stephen Ennis, ‘Russian media learn to love the bomb’, *BBC Monitoring*, 23 February 2015, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-31557254>.

regular aim at other enemies of Russia, like homosexuals, whose hearts he says should be burned to avoid the risk of them being used for organ donations.)⁹

The cumulative effect is highly toxic. Valeriy Akimenko spent a large part of his career studying and reporting on Russian media, which meant he had no choice but to watch. 'Others could switch it off. I couldn't do that,' he says. 'So it did have a damaging effect on my state of mind and on my attitudes, of course.' Disinformation researcher Jakub Kalenský agrees. 'The most painful part of [the work] was to watch the Russian TV shows,' he says. 'When you watch them for several hours, it affects you physically. You feel the hatred.'

I asked Valeriy to talk me through the propaganda broadcasts, and he painted a picture of an almost constant barrage of hate. 'If we deconstruct it by days of the week, Saturday and Sunday are the days of the heaviest bombardment,' he said. 'It all begins on Saturday with relatively minor propaganda broadcasts like Sergey Brilev's *Vesti v Subbotu* on Rossiya-1, the main state TV channel, and Russian senator Aleksey Pushkov's *Postskriptum* (Postscript) on the second-tier Moscow city government controlled Tsentri-TV. That's Saturday. Then the heaviest salvos come on Sunday, where we will have a spread of three main propaganda broadcasts of considerable length, every hour on the hour from 7 pm Moscow time. At that time NTV and *Itogi Nedeli* will fire the first broadside. That's a programme more than an hour long. And while that is still on the air, at 8 pm Moscow time, Dimitri Kiselev in his *Vesti nedeli* would unleash his venom on us. That lasts at least two and a half hours, sometimes in excess of three hours. That by far and away was the most poisonous of the broadcasts. And at times all of these are almost exclusively about Ukraine, with a smattering of other news from abroad and very little about Russia. It's just impossible to comprehend. When I describe these kinds of things to my children or to my wife it does not compute.'

Finally at 9 pm Moscow time would be *Voskresnoye vremya* on Channel One TV, the other main TV channel, also state-controlled. So that will be Saturday and Sunday taken care of. On Sunday, Kiselev's *Vesti Nedeli* would be immediately followed by two other heavyweight propaganda broadcasts: first, *Moscow. Kremlin. Putin* (the name speaks for itself; a quasi-documentary); and then *Voskresny vecher* with Vladimir Solovyev, an aggressively pro-Kremlin and anti-Western talk show of a couple of hours. During the week that will be followed up by other similar formats, such as the now notorious twice-daily 60 Minutes talk show on Rossiya-1, in the mould of *Voskresny vecher* but fronted by a husband-and-wife team, and *Vremya pokazhet* – 'Time Will Tell' – on Channel One TV; as well as various other formats on various other channels. Combined with their regular news bulletin output during the same hours during the day on the three main channels plus second tier channels, the volume of propaganda is colossal,' Valeriy says.

9. Leo Barraclough, 'Russian TV Anchor Rejects Allegations of Homophobia', 12 August 2013, <https://variety.com/2013/tv/global/russian-tv-anchor-rejects-allegations-of-homophobia-1200577004/>.

The approach will be familiar to anybody who has read George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, except that Orwell's 'Two Minutes Hate' stretches on for hours, and 'Hate Week' is all year round. But Valeriy also noted a peculiarity of the broadcasts: 'There is almost no Russian news content in any of these programs. When Putin speaks, whatever he says is obviously given generous airtime, but that's not exactly Russian news. It's very different from for example BBC or Sky News where there is a lot of local or national news of a meaningful nature. In these programmes nothing of the sort happens,' he says. But the most distinctive feature of this Russian programming is that it is viciously deceitful and negative. 'If you take the picture of the West on Russian TV, it is beset by chaos and degradation and the near collapse of the liberal world order,' Valeriy goes on. 'Of course, that has migrated through various stages – with Trump's election it acquired a very particular slant in defence of Trump, but still drawing attention to lots of negative things about the United States.' Overall, though, he says, 'The whole volume of output is exclusively negative. It's vile and mendacious.'

The war on history

Efforts to isolate the Russian population from a true picture of events both in the outside world and in their own country help the authorities promote the notion of a Russia under threat from an aggressive, expansionist West, by preventing domestic media users from measuring against reality. The result is broad acceptance, at least in public, of the version of reality endorsed by the Russian state. But that alternative reality also involves the rewriting of history, since Russia's past is often just as unacceptable as its present. After a brief period when free discussion of history was possible, Russia has returned both to the Soviet version of its history and to Soviet practices for promoting and enforcing it.¹⁰ This involves enforced amnesia regarding inconvenient events, and promotion of officially-sponsored falsifications. The war on facts goes far beyond just an academic discussion and instead is an integrated part of Russian security policy that has a direct impact both on domestic politics and on Russia's neighbours.¹¹ Trying to identify the current Russian leadership with moments of Soviet national glory, for instance, offers a reason to support it when there aren't many other reasons available.

Officially promoted fictions cover the whole span of Russia's history from its earliest beginnings to the present day. They begin with one of Russian history's most cherished myths: that the early princes of Muscovy were in some way

10. Jade McGlynn, 'Moscow Is Using Memory Diplomacy to Export Its Narrative to the World', *Foreign Policy*, 25 June 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/25/russia-puting-ww2-soviet-ussr-memory-diplomacy-history-narrative/>.

11. Gudrun Persson, 'Controlling the Past', *Frivärld*, 8 May 2020, <https://frivarld.se/rapporter/controlling-the-past/>.

successors – separated by several hundred miles and a different century – to the entirely different state of Kievan Rus', in what is now Ukraine. Descriptions of Russian history that wish to include Kievan Rus' are forced either to contrive awkward explanations for why that history leaps suddenly hundreds of miles and hundreds of years to Moscow, or simply to ignore the obvious gap altogether.¹² Today, the latest issues of school textbooks bring the revision of history forward to the present day by telling Russian children that Crimea rejoined Russia following a referendum there – but omitting the Russian military operation to seize the peninsula that preceded it, or the fact that the referendum did not offer voters the choice of remaining Ukrainian.¹³

Together with suppressing the history of Soviet repression in the previous century, the enforced ignorance lays dangerous foundations. In early 2022, Russia closed down one of its longest-standing human rights organizations, Memorial, which had been established even before the end of the Soviet Union to preserve the memory of the victims of communist repression.¹⁴ The Russian leadership of today saw this memory as a threat. And they are of course correct: young people knowing nothing about the crimes of Stalin and other Soviet leaders eases the path for a return to authoritarianism. The less people are aware of the extremes to which repression was taken in the past, the less likely they are to oppose it today when President Putin calls for an 'essential self-purification of society', to rid the country of traitors and those whose sympathies lie abroad, in a direct echo of Stalin's purges.¹⁵ And opposing it is already a brave choice – individual Russians are

12. In 2020 I was asked to contribute to a documentary on Russian history produced for the UK's Channel 5 television. We discussed this misguided idea that Kievan Rus somehow turned into Muscovy despite the gap in space and time between them. But that would have meant they no longer had a catchy title about Russia's 1,000-year history – because Russia's history simply isn't that long. So, in the end, the result aired in March 2021 was one we've seen many times before: a discussion of Kievan Rus', then an awkward gap with no explanation as to why you're now moving on to talking about an entirely different remote city-state far to the north-east. The documentary is available to view at <https://www.my5.tv/russia-vs-the-world>.

13. Halya Coynash, 'Russia did not invade Crimea in new school textbooks edited by Putin adviser', Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, 16 August 2021, <https://khpg.org/en/1608809430>; Keir Giles, 'Crimea's referendum choices are no choice at all', Chatham House expert comment, 10 March 2014, <https://www.eureporter.co/world/2014/03/11/opinion-crimeas-referendum-choices-are-no-choice-at-all/>.

14. 'Russia's Top Court Upholds Decision To Shut Down Memorial Rights Group', RFE/RL, 28 February 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-memorial-shutdown-confirmed/31728086.html>.

15. 'В Кремле объяснили слова Путина о самоочищении России' (Kremlin explains Putin's words about the self-purification of Russia), RIA Novosti, 17 March 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220317/rossiya-1778651331.html>.

prosecuted for alluding to historical facts which are inconvenient for current state narratives.¹⁶ The ongoing consignment of inconvenient history to the memory hole has sent Russian bookshops and libraries scrambling to purge their shelves of unapproved books in order to avoid criminal proceedings.¹⁷ In a direct echo of Soviet censorship from the previous century, even before books reach the shops the FSB is confiscating them from printing houses as part of the campaign to suppress historical accounts of Soviet repressions and atrocities.¹⁸

The most prominent part of the current leadership's borrowing of the Soviet past to legitimize itself is the Great Patriotic War, still ubiquitous in Russian culture and officially promoted memory over seventy years after it ended. But the USSR's conduct before, during and after the war was so horrific that the official myths are at times barely recognizable from real events. Already in the 2010s, the mythologized events of the Second World War played such a central role in Russia's official self-image that genuine historians, including the head of the state archives, who pointed out the gap between fact and fiction found themselves out of a job.¹⁹ In confirmation that Russia does not wish its citizens to know the truth, the military archives covering the war, briefly open, were ordered closed by Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu in 2020.²⁰ According to Reiner Schwalb, the focus on war history feeds directly into stoking Russia's population for conflict today. 'Stalin is coming back, because Stalin and the military in World War Two were not only strong, but they defeated the Germans,' he says, '– so the new military could do the same, not with the Germans but with NATO. That makes them feel good. And that creates acceptance in the population.'

But Russia's heavy reliance on its censored and idealized history of war heroism also highlights the fact that some of the country's most cherished historical fictions are fragile and highly vulnerable to objective scrutiny. Russia's war story is especially sensitive to the fact that in its campaigns of mass murder and its invasion and subjugation of neighbouring peoples, the Nazi regime it vilifies resembled the USSR itself. As a result of these similarities, pointing this fact out – in fact making any comparison between Nazi Germany and the USSR during the Second World

16. Halya Coynash, 'Russian fined for reposting that the USSR & Nazi Germany invaded Poland', Human Rights in Ukraine, 1 July 2016, <http://khp.org/en/index.php?id=1467327913>.

17. Olga Timofeyeva, 'Изыми с глаз моих!' (Get it out of my sight!), *Novaya gazeta*, 15 July 2021, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2021/07/15/izymi-s-glaz-moikh>.

18. 'The FSB has taken a great interest in reading', *Barents Observer*, 7 September 2021, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/democracy-and-media/2021/09/fsb-has-taken-great-interest-reading>.

19. Tom Balmforth, 'Russian Archive Chief Out after Debunking Soviet WWII Legend', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 17 March 2016, <http://www.rferl.mobi/a/mironenko-state-archive-chief-removed-from-post-panfilov-legend/27619460.html>.

20. 'Приказ Министра обороны Российской Федерации от 12.11.2020 № 591' (Order No 591 of the Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation, 12 November 2020), Russian state legal database, <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202103220036>.

War – is now illegal in Russia.²¹ Thus there are now topics that cannot be discussed in public in Russia, in just the same way that it was dangerous to speak freely in the Soviet Union – or in Nazi Germany.

The biggest difference between Hitler's Germany and Stalin's USSR was that one regime was not only destroyed but eradicated, and its ideas completely discredited, while the other survived for another forty-five years until the end of the Soviet Union in 1991.²² It is hardly surprising that Sergey Lavrov points to 'the Nuremberg trials verdicts as the foundation of today's world order'.²³ Nazi Germany had its Nuremberg reckoning and the Soviet Union had none. An intensive programme of 'de-Nazification' in Germany was briefly, haphazardly and incompletely emulated by Russia in the 1990s, but the results of that process are now steadily being reversed as part of the rehabilitation of the Soviet past described later in this chapter. Nothing could more clearly demonstrate that Russia has no counter-argument to this inconvenient truth than its making the whole conversation illegal. If the two regimes were not so similar, there would be no need to outlaw comparisons between them. After all, nobody is likely to outlaw a comparison between black and white.

And those similarities still echo today. One of the stated aims of Russia's assault on Ukraine was 'de-nazification' of the country, based on Russia's long-standing propaganda campaign claiming that Ukraine and other countries like the Baltic states are run by neo-Nazis.²⁴ The rest of the world couldn't help but notice that this involved sending the Wagner group, Russian mercenaries with genuine Nazi leanings, to kill Ukraine's Jewish president.²⁵ And as the war ground on, Russia's embrace of the 'Z' invasion marking symbology came more and more to resemble the ubiquitous swastikas of Nazi Germany, and the fascist-style mass rallies in support of the war became more and more reminiscent of Nazi Party rallies.²⁶ It

21. 'Путин подписал закон о запрете уравнивания ролей СССР и Германии в войне' (Putin signs law forbidding equating the roles of the USSR and Germany in the war), RIA Novosti, 1 July 2021, <https://ria.ru/20210701/voyna-1739359047.html>.

22. Robert Conquest, 'Stalin's reputation as a ruthless master of deception remains intact', *Guardian*, 5 March 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/mar/05/russia.artsandhumanities>.

23. Sergey Lavrov, 'The Law, the Rights and the Rules', Russian MFA website, 28 June 2021, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4801890.

24. Kayleen Devlin and Olga Robinson, 'Ukraine crisis: Is Russia waging an information war?', BBC Monitoring Reality Check, 23 February 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/60292915>.

25. Verity Bowman, 'Russian Wagner mercenaries enter Ukraine to assassinate Volodymyr Zelensky, officials claim', *Daily Telegraph*, 20 March 2022, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2022/03/20/russian-wagner-mercenaries-enter-ukraine-assassinate-volodymyr/>.

26. Rafi Schwarz, 'Vladimir Putin Holds Giant Nazi-Style "World Without Nazism" Rally', 18 March 2022, <https://www.mic.com/impact/putin-rally-crimea-ukraine-nazis>.

was as though the Russian authorities had been so diligent about calling everyone around them Nazis that they didn't notice how they had become Nazis themselves.

At the same time, people from the countries of eastern Europe that suffered most from the Second World War were repeatedly shocked at the willingness of German politicians to join in with Russia's erasure of the parts of that history it finds inconvenient. Despite the fact that Ukraine and Belarus bore the brunt of fighting on the eastern Front, and lost a horrifying proportion of their populations in the process, some German policies were driven by the notion that the Second World War was fought between Germany and Russia, not the Soviet Union – and that Germany therefore owed it to Moscow to prioritize Russia's interests over those of Ukraine.²⁷ The continuing drive to make amends for Germany's conduct in the 1940s has been perversely twisted by collusion in Russia's war on history and now in effect argues that because Germany invaded Poland, Ukraine, Belarus and the Baltic states, it must now support Russia against those same countries. This extends to wilful or deliberate erasure from history of the effects of the joint Nazi–Soviet division of Poland in 1939. In June 2021, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier built an entire high-profile speech around a supposed first-hand account of the experience of a Russian soldier at the opening of the German offensive in June 1941 that was completely impossible, and could only have been written by somebody who chose to ignore the earlier Soviet invasion of Poland which moved the front line some 300 km west of where Steinmeier's story was supposed to have taken place.²⁸

The intensive campaign to enforce a Soviet view of the history of the Second World War on Russians reaches well beyond Russia itself.²⁹ The restoration of Soviet myths about the 1939–41 period when the USSR collaborated with Nazi Germany to occupy eastern Europe between them has seen the former victim states of Soviet aggression and occupation throughout northern and central Europe subjected to a sustained information barrage, seeking to excuse Moscow's conduct and to shift blame for both the Second World War and its aftermath to those same victims. These campaigns promote the idea of the Soviet Union itself as a victim, not an instigator, of the war, and as a benevolent protector of the nations under its military control.³⁰ According to Sergey Karaganov, a leading

27. Christian Trippe, 'Opinion: World War II reconciliation gesture still needed in Eastern Europe', *Deutsche Welle*, 19 June 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/opinion-world-war-ii-reconciliation-gesture-still-needed-in-eastern-europe/a-57961269>.

28. '80. Jahrestag des deutschen Überfalls auf die Sowjetunion am 22. Juni 1941 und Eröffnung der Ausstellung 'Dimensionen eines Verbrechens. Sowjetische Kriegsgefangene im Zweiten Weltkrieg', German presidential website, 18 June 2021, <https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Frank-Walter-Steinmeier/Reden/2021/06/210618-D-Russ-Museum-Karlshorst.html>.

29. Ivo Juurvee et al., 'Falsification of History as a Tool of Influence', NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, December 2020.

30. Stefan Forss, 'Russia's Victim Narrative', *Frivärld*, 30 November 2020, <https://frivarld.se/rapporter/russias-victim-narrative/>.

Russian polemicist, Russians are a 'liberating people' who freed the world, and the West only hates Russians because Russia is the only 'viable part' of European civilization.³¹

But this brings the Russian myths head to head not only with abstract discussions of history but with the real and direct lived experience of those nations. Estonia's former president, Kersti Kaljulaid, recalled how her grandmother was imprisoned in Siberia for nine years because her grandfather – not she – had worked for the independent Estonian state before the Soviet annexation. 'All Estonian families have these kind of stories,' she adds.³² Kersti Kaljulaid's grandparents were, in relative terms, lucky – her grandmother returned to Estonia and lived until 1987, while her grandfather escaped abroad. But former Estonian Defence Minister Jüri Luik's grandfather never returned. He was an officer in the Estonian Army when the Soviet occupation began in 1940, Jüri explains. 'In 1940, he and his fellow officers were arrested and taken to a concentration camp in Norilsk in northern Siberia. And in 1942 he was shot by the Soviet tribunals. I don't know where his grave is.'

For many in the countries formerly occupied by the Soviet Union, Russia's Victory Day is no cause for celebrations; instead, it marks the transition from one oppressor to another. After the liberation of German prison and concentration camps across eastern Europe by the Red Army, Soviet security forces found it convenient to make use of their facilities – including at Auschwitz – to imprison the victims of the new regime.³³ Savage repressions and mass murders of the civilian population in the occupied territories made it plain that the new Soviet overlords could be just as brutal as the old Nazi ones.³⁴ This is occasionally recognized in accidental outbreaks of honesty by Russian officials – as when Mikhail Ulyanov, Permanent Representative of Russia to International Organizations in Vienna, told Latvian academic Veiko Spolitis, 'There is nothing to celebrate in your case. This is not your Victory. It is ours.'³⁵ But the savagery also

31. 'The Real Russia. Today. The Nemtsov murder case, political mayhem in Kyrgyzstan, and a neo-isolationist recipe for Russia', *Meduza*, 2 November 2020, <https://meduza.io/en/brief/2020/11/03/the-real-russia-today>.

32. "'Russia is a threat': Estonia frets about its neighbor', *Washington Post*, 24 March 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/russia-is-a-threat-estonia-frets-about-its-neighbor/2017/03/24/011ad320-0f2b-11e7-9b0d-d27c98455440_story.html.

33. Stuart Dowell, 'After liberation of Auschwitz death camp Stalin's feared NKVD used camp to hold Polish prisoners', *TheFirstNews*, 28 January 2020, <https://www.thefirstnews.com/article/after-liberation-of-auschwitz-death-camp-stalins-feared-nkvd-used-camp-to-hold-polish-prisoners-10133>; 'The Macikai Complex of a Nazi German prisoner-of-war camp and the Soviet GULAG forced-labour camps (1941–1955)', <https://www.silutesmuziejus.lt/maciku-lageriai/the-macikai-complex/>.

34. 'World War 2 in Lithuania (1940–1944)', *TrueLithuania.com*, <http://www.truelithuania.com/tag/rainiai-massacre>.

35. Tweet by @Amb_Ulyanov, 17 April 2020, https://twitter.com/Amb_Ulyanov/status/1251120241255559168.

extended wherever the Red Army reached – not only Germany as it was conquered, but also countries like Poland that were supposed to have been liberated.³⁶ The fact that this history, despite being extensively documented at the time,³⁷ was largely obscured in western Europe for much of the twentieth century stemmed not only from the enforced alliance with the Soviet Union, but also from its roots in a curious oversight by the UK and France in September 1939 – that in going to war ostensibly to protect Poland, they declared war on one of its invaders but not the other.

For Jüri and others, direct family history serves as a constant reminder of what is at stake in resisting Russia. ‘Obviously, for me, it had a deep meaning to be the Defence Minister of Estonia and to visit the bases where my grandfather had served,’ he says. ‘When doing my job, I often thought of him and that what I was doing as Defence Minister had brought me full circle, and showed that in the end the communists lost and we won.’ It was not just the countries conquered by the USSR that learned from the experience. At the end of the Second World War, unlike most of eastern Europe the greater part of Finland remained unoccupied by the USSR. But the history of desperate defence against Moscow that bought that freedom still drives a determination to preserve it today. Pekka Toveri says that in Finland, ‘support for general conscription is very strong, and willingness to defend one’s country against armed attack is the highest in Europe’. This is because ‘Finns generally think that only high readiness to fight for your country gives safety’, he says. This attitude stems from the lessons of the twentieth century and its wars fought against the Soviet Union. ‘Every Finnish family has lost someone fighting the Russians. Finns have seen what the Soviet occupation meant to smaller nations like our Baltic neighbours, and really don’t want to share that fate.’

This knowledge of the stakes and the risks drove diplomats and politicians from the eastern parts of Europe to try to sound the alarm for NATO and the EU over Russia’s likely plans. As early as 1994, Estonian president Lennart Meri warned that ‘My people and I watch with concern how little the West realizes what is currently brewing in the expanses of Russia.’³⁸ But as late as 2013, these warnings were not heeded. Jüri recalls how in conversations in Western capitals, ‘I had to explain that some of the political moves by Russia are not just benign internal politics, but rather they carried a lot of risks and a lot of echoes from the past. Now, after

36. Mindy Weisberger, ‘Skeletons of WWII-era nuns murdered by Soviets unearthed in Poland’, *LiveScience*, 5 March 2021, <https://www.livescience.com/wwii-nuns-murdered-by-russian-army.html>.

37. Marcus Papadopoulos, ‘British Official Perceptions of the Red Army, 1934–1945’, Royal Holloway University of London, 2010, available at <https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.530798>.

38. ‘Address by H.E. Lennart Meri, President of the Republic of Estonia, at a Matthiae-Supper in Hamburg on February 25, 1994’, Estonian presidency website, <https://vp1992-2001.president.ee/eng/k6ned/K6ne.asp?ID=9401>.

Ukraine, it has become quite easy to explain Russia. But before that, it was quite difficult.' Robert Pszczel too recalls how when he was reporting back to NATO before 2014, he was told 'we respect your judgement and it's interesting what you say but it's a very pessimistic picture' – so, he says, his accurate assessments and predictions of Russia's future steps were dismissed.

The exception that proves the rule is Norway. At the end of the Second World War, instead of remaining as occupiers the Soviet Union withdrew its troops from northern Norway and retreated to territory it had seized from Finland instead. In stark contrast to the rest of Europe, Norwegian journalist Vilde Skorpen Wikan says, 'I think the Second World War made us feel like we could trust Russia ... We've not had this experience that other countries have had of being at war with Russia or being part of the Soviet Union. We don't have remnants of Soviet architecture or anything else to remind us about this.'

This leads to a paradox in Norway's attitude to Russia. On the one hand, Vilde says, Norwegians too are highly conscious of the need to protect the country's independence. 'The idea that we have mandatory military service for young women and men is something foreign friends have found a little bit shocking. But to us, it's something that is quite popular. Even though it's mandatory, you have so many volunteers that no one is getting, you know, drafted against their will,' she says. 'A lot of people are eager to contribute to the defence of the country. We also have the Heimevernet, the Home Guard, where people are on standby for military service.' But on the other hand, the far north of the country has a close and friendly cross-border relationship with Russia. 'There is close cooperation, educational exchange programmes, people going out over the border to do their shopping, and so on. So, people in northern areas do find it challenging that maybe the central government emphasizes this hostile aspect of Russia when this maybe differs from their own personal and historic relationship,' Vilde explains.

The unusual success of this cross-border cooperation is only partly due to Norway's equally unusual experience of the Red Army, says Norwegian defence researcher Tor Bukkvoll. 'The Soviet withdrawal has a resonance in the two northernmost counties, those areas that were liberated by the Red Army. That is gradually fading away since it's connected to generations, but today, it's still there to some extent.' It's also connected with deliberate Norwegian policy based on sound pragmatic grounds. 'The cooperation on the civilian side with Russia in the north, starting after the end of the Cold War, was based on an assumption that this would benefit Norway economically, especially in those northern areas of Kirkenes and Finnmark,' Tor explains. 'That cooperation is still there, and it may now be more important than ever. At least to the Russians across the border on the Kola Peninsula, we can show that the West is not out to destroy Russia.'

Censorship and isolation

But that message doesn't travel far. The Kremlin's default assumption is that dissent or protest in Russia must be inspired from outside. During the election protests in

late 2011 and early 2012 President Putin said that he was offended at seeing protesters wearing white ribbons which, in his opinion, had been 'developed abroad'.³⁹ He also said that protesters had been 'paid to participate', and that these were 'tried and tested schemes for destabilising a society'.⁴⁰ This baseless fear of foreign influence provides the context for an ongoing campaign trying to prevent Russians receiving unapproved information from the outside world – and in the process, wiping out the last remnants of a free and independent media in Russia. Russia's crackdown on sources of foreign information following the invasion of Ukraine, including banning Facebook and Twitter and criminalizing reporting on the war, was just another stage in a long process of denying ordinary Russians any access to the reality of the world around them.

Media with any foreign links at all have to carry prominent warnings on their reports that they are created or distributed by 'foreign agents', in the same way packets of cigarettes have to carry graphic warnings of their harmful content and the consequences of consuming them – or the way in Nazi Germany that undesirable elements like Jews, homosexuals or the disabled were badged for ready identification. (Russia claims, falsely, that RT and Sputnik are similarly forced to label their content in the US.)⁴¹ Journalist Sonya Groysman is one of the many Russians who has been labelled in this way. She explains how 'any of our articles in the media, podcasts and even posts on social networks – even stories or comments on Instagram – must be marked with a degrading twenty-four-word disclaimer that you are not merely a journalist and a person, but a foreign agent. The alternative is fines and the prospect of a criminal case.' The designation is effectively a permanent one, since there is no procedure for removing yourself from the list – and meanwhile, Sonya saw her work prospects dwindling, with fewer employers willing to take on the extra burden of hiring 'foreign agents'. A further punishment is to drown them in bureaucracy, including the requirement 'to submit five forty-page reports a year on the source of your income and what you have spent it on'.⁴²

Russia genuinely does have plenty to fear from a free, independent media, especially as it continues to commit crimes at home and abroad. One of the ways the British government responded to the chemical weapons attack in Salisbury in 2018 was to release as much detail on the incident as was possible without

39. 'Meeting with participants of the "seliger-2012" forum', Russian presidential website, 31 July 2012, <http://kremlin.ru/transcripts/16106>.

40. 'A Conversation with Vladimir Putin. Continued', from live broadcast across all major Russian TV and radio channels on 15 December 2011, Russian presidential website, <http://archive.premier.gov.ru/events/news/17409>.

41. 'RT America Received More Than \$100 Million In Russian Government Funding Since 2017, Filings Show', RFE/RL, 26 August 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-rt-america-funding/31427870.html>.

42. Sonya Groysman, 'I Am a "Foreign Agent"', 17 August 2021, *Moscow Times*, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/08/17/i-am-a-foreign-agent-2-a74815>.

compromising the ongoing criminal investigation. Not only was this helpful in mobilizing international support – it also allowed media outlets, including in Russia, to start their own independent investigations into what had happened. The end result was the exposure of hundreds of Russian intelligence officers.⁴³ There's a clear motivation for the Kremlin to continue its campaign to stamp out this threat – with the added bonus that after independent media are suppressed altogether, there will be nobody to report on repression and persecution of the rest of the population or on Russia's crimes abroad in Ukraine or beyond.

Russia has always been impervious to Western horror and condemnation, which means there is little to constrain it in the atrocities it commits in Ukraine. But there's little likelihood that Russia will be deterred by the prospect of outrage at home either, even if knowledge of what its military is doing abroad filters through to domestic audiences. Moscow has taken steps in advance to ensure the truth does not reach its population. The ban on the Russian media using the words 'war' or 'invasion' to describe the conflict with Ukraine builds on decades of preparation to secure Russia's 'national information space' against inconvenient facts.⁴⁴

But crude and direct censoring or blocking of the media is not the only way Russia controls the information its people receive about the outside world. This isolation of Russian audiences is reinforced by steps as effective and simple as omitting undesirable words from the Russian translations of Western leaders' speeches,⁴⁵ or simply refusing altogether to report on controversial issues like the presence of Russian troops abroad where they have no right to be.⁴⁶ The danger of Western books can be reduced by producing unauthorized, and subtly altered, versions of these books in Russia.⁴⁷ And even in the previous decade, the notion of foreign broadcasters being allowed the kind of access to the Russian media market that RT enjoyed in the West was already impossibly remote.⁴⁸

43. Bellingcat Investigation Team (2018), '305 Car Registrations May Point to Massive GRU Security Breach', Bellingcat, 4 October 2018, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2018/10/04/305-car-registrations-may-point-massive-gru-security-breach>.

44. 'Russia Bans Media Outlets From Using Words "War," "Invasion"', *Moscow Times*, 26 February 2022, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/02/26/russia-bans-media-outlets-from-using-words-war-invasion-a76605>.

45. 'Merkel's Remark On "Criminal" Annexation Omitted In Russian Translation', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 12 May 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/content/russiamerkelputintranslationcriminalwordomitted/27011285.html>.

46. 'Analysis: "Don't mention the war!" – Russian TV silent on troops near Ukraine', Media analysis by BBC Monitoring, 27 July 2015.

47. Howard Amos, 'Western Experts Cry Foul Over Russian Books Published in Their Names', *Moscow Times*, 9 August 2015, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/western-experts-cry-foul-over-russian-books-published-in-their-names/527629.html>.

48. Keir Giles, 'The information war: how Moscow controls access to Western media', *The World Today*, August–September 2015, p. 19.

Russia has also had some success in censoring the internet, including on occasion with the active help of platforms like YouTube.⁴⁹ But the Kremlin's attempts to block access to undesirable information on the internet using purely technical means have a habit of backfiring. Russia's state communications regulator is Roskomnadzor – which translates more literally as Russian communications surveillance, or supervision. In 2018, it tried to shut down the messaging app Telegram, on the grounds that it was being used to spread illegal content. The attempt took thousands of websites offline because they used the same hosting services as Telegram's distributed network. Today, Telegram is still in widespread use in Russia. In early 2021, Roskomnadzor tried again, announcing that Twitter would be 'slowed' because it was failing to follow Russian rules on content. This time the damage was briefer but far more widespread, including making a large number of government websites inaccessible. Researchers later worked out that in trying to restrict traffic to t.co, the domain used to host all content shared via Twitter, Roskomnadzor had accidentally restricted all domains that included that string of four characters – for instance, Microsoft.com.⁵⁰ Eventually, Russia moved to block social media platforms altogether in order to suppress information on its war on Ukraine.⁵¹ But to the dismay of counter-disinformation practitioners, removing Twitter from Russia did not have the effect of removing Russia from Twitter, and the country's disinformation outlets continued to shape audiences worldwide unhindered (see Chapter 5).

These attempts at censorship will not be completely successful while Russia still does not have complete control of the internet – or a better developed technical grasp of how to restrict people's access to it, leading to fewer embarrassing mistakes. But despite the growing role of online sources, television is still the main way most sectors of society get their news and information. The propaganda channels Valeriy described form viewers' opinions, which then also spill over into the internet as online providers feel the need to fall into line.⁵² Overall, this creates an information environment within Russia that, despite access to a notionally common internet, is steadily retreating still further from the rest of the world and into its own artificial reality.

49. 'Free Speech a "Core Value," YouTube CEO Says After Blocking Russian Opposition Videos', *Moscow Times*, 27 September 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/09/27/free-speech-a-core-value-youtube-ceo-says-after-blocking-russian-opposition-videos-a75153>.

50. Dan Goodin, 'Russia's Twitter throttling may give censors never-before-seen capabilities', *Ars Technica*, 6 April 2021, <https://arstechnica.com/gadgets/2021/04/russias-twitter-throttling-may-give-censors-never-before-seen-capabilities/>.

51. Dan Milmo, 'Russia blocks access to Facebook and Twitter', *Guardian*, 4 March 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/04/russia-completely-blocks-access-to-facebook-and-twitter>.

52. Christina Cottiero, Katherine Kucharski, Evgenia Olimpieva and Robert W. Orttung, 'War of words: the impact of Russian state television on the Russian Internet', *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, March 2015.

Many people's first thought on the reintroduction of censorship and attempts to limit technical means for distributing information is that this is a throwback to Soviet times. It's true that the Russian security services in the 1990s reacted to the arrival of the internet with as much horror as that of the photocopier in the 1970s.⁵³ But as so often, the roots of this attitude go far deeper in Russian tradition than communist times. Russia has always seen the idea of its subjects enjoying uncontrolled access to news and ideas from abroad as highly dangerous, and throughout its history has tried its hardest to prevent this.⁵⁴ The blocks and filters Russia is putting in place today in its attempts to prevent direct access to news from abroad are more of a distorting lens than an information Iron Curtain. But at the same time, Russia has also slowly reinstated soft barriers to direct human contacts between its subjects and the outside world. The foreign agents' law has also been used to cut links between Russian and foreign universities, in ongoing efforts to reduce the ability of foreign organizations to influence Russians.⁵⁵ Veteran BBC correspondent Sarah Rainsford says her expulsion from Moscow in 2021 after reporting on Russia for many years was 'a clear sign that things have changed. It's another really bad sign about the state of affairs in Russia and another downward turn in the relationship between Russia and the world – a sign that Russia is increasingly closing in on itself. She says Russia prefers to host foreign journalists who do not speak the language, and who therefore find it harder to reach real people and hear their stories. 'I really think it is indicative of an increasingly difficult and repressive environment,' she says.⁵⁶ Foreigners with friends in Russia now need to tread carefully, since just speaking to an employee working in a sensitive sector of the economy can inadvertently land that friend on a list of foreign agents.⁵⁷

In this as in so much else, the trend is not a new development but a return to old habits. Russia has always felt the need to insulate its population from excessive exposure to foreigners so they are not contaminated with dangerous ideas of political liberty or democracy. A visitor to Russia in the seventeenth century reported that travel abroad by its subjects was punishable by death.⁵⁸ Three

53. Soldatov and Borogan, *The Red Web*.

54. This historical approach is explored in more detail in Keir Giles, 'Moscow Rules: What Drives Russia to Confront the West', Chatham House, 2019.

55. Elizabeth Redden, 'Bard College Declared "Undesirable" in Russia', *Inside Higher Ed*, 9 July 2021, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/07/09/bard-grapples-what-it-might-mean-be-declared-%E2%80%98undesirable%E2%80%99-russia>.

56. 'Sarah Rainsford on Russia: "I've been told I can't come back – ever"', BBC News, 14 August 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-58213845>.

57. Natalia Antonova, 'Scientists Want Out of Russia', *Foreign Policy*, 14 October 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/10/14/scientists-space-russia-paranoia-elite-corruption/>.

58. Adam Olearius, 'The voyages and travells of the ambassadors sent by Frederick, Duke of Holstein, to the Great Duke of Muscovy and the King of Persia begun in the year M.DC.XXXIII. and finish'd in M.DC.XXXIX', https://openlibrary.org/books/OL6951428M/The_voyages_and_travells_of_the_ambassadors_sent_by_Frederick_Duke_of_Holstein_to_the_great_Duke_of_

centuries later, in communist times, the danger of exposure driving these drastic isolation measures was still just as strong, as the Kremlin 'feared direct contact between the Western world and their own, feared what would happen if Russians learned the truth about the world without or foreigners learned the truth about the world within.'⁵⁹ The discouragement of foreign contacts steadily grew in many different ways, some of them more subtle than others. In 2021, Russians holding foreign currency bank accounts were in no immediate danger of having their US dollars confiscated – but they were warned that holding them was 'dangerous', as the inevitable decline of the dollar could mean they would lose their savings.⁶⁰ (In the event, they lost their savings for the opposite reason – because of the dramatic fall in the rouble exchange rate and currency restrictions introduced after the invasion of Ukraine.)⁶¹ But under Putin, the removal of a BBC correspondent was just one symptom of a persistent pattern of a return to old Russian restrictions not only on what its citizens are allowed to read, but also on who they are allowed to meet.⁶²

Despite the challenges of being a country at war, including a drastic curtailment of flights abroad, foreign travel is at the time of writing still technically permitted for most Russians.⁶³ University professor Andrey Makarychev thinks that while the Kremlin is confident that it can successfully prevent any attempts at organized opposition within the country, it is also perfectly content for the problem to quite literally go away by moving abroad. 'In this sense, Russia is smarter than the Soviet Union,' Andrey says. 'With the exception of Covid, the borders have been open. So, the message is you don't like what is going on here? No problem, go and find your own country and goodbye.' Veteran Australian diplomat Kyle Wilson agrees, and explains that while 'Putin has created an environment in which the fascist current in Russian history is now riding high', there is still a way to go. 'They are edging

59. 'George Kennan's "Long Telegram"', February 22, 1946, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116178>.

60. 'Россиянам объяснили опасность покупки американских долларов' (Russians are told why it's dangerous to buy American dollars), *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, 3 May 2021, <https://www.mk.ru/economics/2021/05/03/rossiyanam-obyasnili-opasnost-pokupki-amerikanskikh-dollarov.html>.

61. Huileng Tan, 'Russians are scrambling to withdraw US dollars at ATMs as the ruble hits a record low on sweeping Western sanctions', *Business Insider*, 28 February 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/ruble-hits-record-low-russians-rush-withdraw-us-dollars-atms-2022-2>.

62. Tatia Lemondzhava, 'In Russia, the Doors Are Closing: How – and Why – Russians Are Losing Their Freedom to Travel Abroad', *Foreign Policy*, 29 April 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/29/in-russia-the-doors-are-closing-tourism-putin-human-rights/>.

63. Matthew Mpoke Bigg and Niraj Chokshi, 'Aeroflot says it will suspend international flights', *New York Times*, 5 March 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/05/world/europe/aeroflot-russia-international-flights-suspended.html>.

steadily towards a more overtly repressive state. But they seem to be still a fair way off totalitarianism because apart from Covid, Russians can still travel.' But with Russia's control over its citizens growing rapidly tighter, there is no telling how soon it might emulate its neighbour Belarus and once again ban most citizens from leaving the country at all.⁶⁴

Cracking down

Restrictions on personal liberties are already well established in Russia, particularly when it comes to the right to express discontent with the way the country is run. Alexei Navalny is by far the most high-profile critic of the current Russian leadership, not least because this has led to at least one attempt by the Russian state to murder him. But close attention to Navalny in the West can overshadow the many other individuals who have suffered severe consequences as a result of showing their support for him or for other opposition figures.⁶⁵ Supporters across Russia have been fired from their jobs, or pretexts found to imprison them.⁶⁶ One Russian newspaper concluded that the attempt to eradicate Navalny's organization in 2021 indicated a new zero tolerance approach to political opposition: 'the authorities are continuing, or possibly even completing, their operation to remove from politics altogether the opposition that is not willing to compromise.'⁶⁷ As so often, the campaign was impervious to irony. By banning an organization fighting corruption and by branding its activities extremist, the Russian leadership effectively confirmed that it considered corruption to be an essential part of the country's system of governance.⁶⁸

64. 'Belarus bans most citizens from going abroad', BBC News, 1 June 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-57316838>.

65. Nataliya Vasilyeva, 'Navalny activists forced underground as Russia's only opposition crumbles under Kremlin pressure', *Telegraph*, 1 May 2021, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/05/01/navalny-activists-forced-underground-political-movement-crumbles/>.

66. "'It has to be today': Transcript from secretly recorded meeting shows what it's like to be fired from Moscow's subway for supporting Alexey Navalny", *Meduza*, 14 May 2021, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2021/05/14/it-has-to-be-today>.

'Суд назначил бывшему координатору архангельского штаба Навального 2,5 года колонии за репост клипа Rammstein' (Court sentences former coordinator of Navalny staff in Arkhangelsk to 2.5 years in prison for reposting a Rammstein video), *Mediazona*, 29 April 2021, <https://zona.media/news/2021/04/29/borovikov>.

67. 'Will Russia still have a non-systemic opposition?', *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 12 August 2021.

68. 'Navalny Groups Vow To Carry On After Moscow Court Suspends "Certain Activities"', RFE/RL, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-navalny-court-places-restrictions-organizations/31225294.html>.

Over the course of 2021, Russia's campaign to suppress political opposition, or in fact most forms of dissent, accelerated rapidly. High-profile arrests of prominent figures like Alexei Navalny were the tip of the iceberg of a much broader campaign of intimidation and repression.⁶⁹ Mass detentions at street protests were backed up by hundreds of separate actions against individuals, like a journalist for an opposition outlet charged with 'taking part in unsanctioned rallies' after reporting on a demonstration.⁷⁰ In Soviet times, those who considered defying the regime could see newsreels of show trials. Today, the security forces can post to social media video of all stages of brutal arrest and detention in near real-time.⁷¹ The establishment of Rosgvardiya, Russia's 'National Guard', in 2016 confirmed the leadership's deep sense of insecurity, and the threat it perceives from Russia's own population. Although notionally an internal security force, Rosgvardiya is highly militarized and has a wide range of weapons systems for inflicting mass casualties when necessary.⁷² In addition, its powers have been steadily expanding, prompting comparisons with the Soviet Union's NKVD.⁷³ Rosgvardiya's supplementary role of controlling the population in newly-occupied territories meant that its appearance among the Russian troops massing to invade Ukraine in early 2022 was one of the surest indicators that an attempt to occupy the country was about to be launched. But even before suffering severe casualties in Ukraine, the combined effect of paying and arming these organizations represented a colossal drain on the Russian economy, with over 2.5 million people employed by law enforcement and internal security agencies.⁷⁴

69. 'How we got here: Meduza looks back on Russia's most high-profile incidents of repression over the past six months', *Meduza*, 19 July 2021, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2021/07/20/how-we-got-here>.

70. 'Корреспондента Дождя забрали в полицию для составления протокола из-за акции 21 апреля' (Dozhd correspondent detained by police for charges over 21 April demonstration), *Dozhd*, 27 April 2021, https://tvrain.ru/news/korrespondenta_dozhdja_zabrali_v_politsiju_dlja_sostavlenija_protokola_iz_za_aktcii_21_aprelja-528956/.

71. Tweet by Kevin Rothrock: 'Highly disturbing video of police in Vladivostok interrogating and humiliating local journalist Gennady Shulga. Cops raided his home and "questioned" him about the opposition's Jan. 23 protests. Especially noteworthy: the police themselves leaked this footage', 6 February 2021, <https://twitter.com/kevinrothrock/status/1358122270967922688>.

72. Zdzisław Śliwa, 'The Russian National Guard: A Warning or a Message?', National Defence Academy of Latvia, 2018, <https://www.baltdefcol.org/files/files/publications/RussianNationalGuard.pdf>.

73. Paul Goble, 'Putin Gives National Guard Powers Even NKVD Didn't Have – The Question Now is Why? Gorevoy Says', *Window on Eurasia*, 5 June 2017, <http://windowoneurasia2.blogspot.com/2017/06/putin-gives-national-guard-powers-even.html>.

74. Vladislav Inozemtsev, 'Не много ли силы? За 15 лет число силовиков выросло более чем вдвое' (Isn't that enough power? In 15 years the number of power ministry employees has more than doubled), *Forbes Russia*, 11 July 2017, <https://www.forbes.ru/biznes/346301-ne-mnogo-li-%07sily-za-15-let-chislo-silovikov-vyroslo-bolee-chem-vdvoe>.

Censorship doesn't only relate to the war on Ukraine. Soviet-style suppression of basic truths severely affects people's lives if they choose to speak up on other issues too. Kerstin Kronvall has been reporting on Russia's tumultuous changes for a quarter of a century. She has been following the story of Vyacheslav Yegorov, a local civic activist in in Kolomna, south-east of Moscow. Yegorov is no stranger to confrontations with the authorities. His long-standing opposition to uncontrolled official dumping of waste in his home town has seen him arrested and imprisoned multiple times, including on charges of organizing demonstrations that he says he was unaware had even happened. At the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, he heard of shortages of protective equipment in the city hospital, and decided to help. Provided with a list of essential supplies by the hospital's chief doctor, including gloves and respirators, Yegorov posted the list on a website and tried to start raising funds to buy the hospital what it needed. Shortly afterwards Yegorov – and the chief doctor – were summoned to the FSB for questioning, and accused of causing panic.⁷⁵ He was eventually fined 30,000 roubles (about £300, a substantial amount in rural Russia) and placed under house arrest for six months, followed by another six months of 'special conditions' including not being allowed to use the internet.⁷⁶

Long-term Russia-watcher Samantha de Bendern had long advocated a harder line against Russia over its attitude to human rights, in line with past international practice against oppressive regimes. Before the invasion of Ukraine she called for measures against Russia comparable with those faced by South Africa under apartheid – 'the country was basically completely cut off and boycotted and sanctioned by the rest of the world'. At the time of writing, that describes Russia's near-term prospects following ostracism not over domestic concerns but over the attack on Ukraine. But within Russia itself, Reiner Schwalb suggests increasingly firm measures by the authorities are broadly accepted: 'Most Russians seem to believe only a country that is controlled with an iron fist is really stable. Democracy brings chaos. That's their view. Stalin killed millions, but almost nobody cares about that any more.'

Meanwhile Russia's regression to an older style of governance where suppression of any kind of political dissent is the norm is accelerating. As part of the process, Russia is progressively dropping even the pretence to genuine democracy and rule of law. The ways in which Russia's notional 'elections' have now become an entirely cynical routine with little attempt to simulate an actual exercise in democracy were

75. 'I Ryssland straffas initiativ för att hjälpa sjukhus som saknar skyddsutrustning – Vjatjeslav Jegerov blev inkallad till förhör då han försökte få tag på handskar och respiratorer' (In Russia, initiatives to help hospitals that lack protective equipment are punished – Vyacheslav Yegorov was summoned for questioning as he tried to get gloves and respirators), *Yle*, 7 April 2020, <https://svenska.yle.fi/artikel/2020/04/07/i-ryssland-straffas-initiativ-for-att-hjalpa-sjukhus-som-saknar-skyddsutrustning>.

76. Kerstin Kronvall, 'I Ryssland är det bäst att hålla tyst om missförhållanden om man vill gå ostraffad' (In Russia, it is best to keep quiet about misconduct if you want to go unpunished), *Yle*, 31 July 2021, <https://svenska.yle.fi/a/7-10003309>.

highlighted in the voting for the State Duma in 2021. Old-school methods of neutralizing the opposition like putting them in jail were joined by new techniques like blocking access to apps and Google Docs tools used for opposition campaigns – and to the dismay of democracy advocates both inside Russia and beyond, Google and Apple assisted the Kremlin in doing so.⁷⁷ One candidate standing against Putin's party, Boris Vishnevsky, found that two Photoshopped lookalikes were running in the same election – and just in case that wasn't enough to confuse voters, they had also both been given the name Boris Vishnevsky.⁷⁸ Meanwhile the use of criminal law both to punish dissidents and to settle rivalries between individuals close to the heart of power is also becoming more and more transparent and barely even bothering to pretend to legitimacy. When former Economic Development Minister Alexey Ulyukayev was put on trial after being set up to receive a bribe of \$2m dollars in cash, he pointed out that if true, the charges meant his government accusers ran a huge off-the-books slush fund of ready cash for facilitating corruption – and that this had been of no interest at all to the prosecutors instructed to take him down.⁷⁹

Throughout all of these rapidly accelerating processes of state control of ordinary citizens, and all the symptoms of a return to the darker, more authoritarian Russia of the past, there is one constant theme: a reminder that now as in past centuries, if Russia is unable to secure the loyalty of its subjects through propaganda, it demands it through force. Strategies for dealing with differences of political opinion have been tried and gradually discarded, leaving only Russia's traditional fallback of oppression.⁸⁰

Getting poorer

Meanwhile not only the cost of the mechanism of repression at home, but also the obsession with finding foreign enemies – and maintaining Russia's former status in the world – has added direct economic costs to the political ones, and had a

77. Andrew Roth, 'Apple and Google accused of "political censorship" over Alexei Navalny app', *Guardian*, 17 September 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/17/apple-and-google-accused-of-political-censorship-over-alexei-navalny-app>.

78. Megan Baynes, 'Russia: Opposition politician Boris Vishnevsky says two lookalikes with same name as him running in St Petersburg election in bid to confuse voters', *Sky News*, 8 September 2021, <https://news.sky.com/story/russia-opposition-politician-boris-vishnevsky-says-two-lookalikes-with-same-name-as-him-running-in-st-petersburg-election-in-bid-to-confuse-voters-12402116>.

79. 'An elderly gladiator and his cardboard sword', *Meduza*, 7 December 2017, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2017/12/07/an-elderly-gladiator-and-his-cardboard-sword>.

80. Anton Troianovski, 'Putin Assails Russians Who Back the West, Signaling More Repression', *New York Times*, 16 March 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/16/world/europe/putin-russia-ukraine-protests.html>.

catastrophic impact on ordinary Russians' prosperity. Here too, the devastating effect on standards of living of the plummeting rouble exchange rate and restrictions on imports introduced after the attack on Ukraine are just the latest stage of a long trend. Historian Stephen Kotkin pointed out as long ago as 2016 that 'if Russian elites could somehow redefine their sense of exceptionalism and put aside their unwinnable competition with the West, they could set their country on a less costly, more promising course'.⁸¹ Andrey Makarychev agrees: 'Russia is disproportionately much more interested in foreign affairs rather than rebuilding and reconstructing the country. Just imagine how much [military operations] cost, and how much cities and municipalities and townships and other parts of Russia could get from that.'

When President Putin first arrived in power, he pointed at Russia's dependency on energy exports and its failure to innovate and modernize its economy as serious challenges. But high oil prices in the years that followed meant there was little incentive to tackle the problem seriously.⁸² Ordinary Russians are now paying the price for that failure to take the opportunity. Still heavily reliant on energy exports, the Russian economy is highly sensitive to changes in the international price of oil. When that price fell sharply in late 2014, the value of the rouble fell with it. The standard of living for ordinary Russians started to fall rapidly and has been doing so ever since. The number of Russians who think they earn more than the bare minimum required to survive has been steadily decreasing, and now stands at only 25% – despite the fact that the official subsistence minimum is just \$157 a month.⁸³

According to government communications expert Linas, 'the official message to the population is that yes, they will be working hard in order to ensure decent living conditions and so on. But the history shows that they keep saying the same thing year after year after year. And that's why there is huge frustration among the Russian population that basically they are left alone.' Even before 2022, Russia had to resort to introducing price controls and export quotas because essential goods had become unaffordable for such a high proportion of the population.⁸⁴ In mid-2021, a poll found almost 40% of Russians saying they have to forgo basic groceries and other essentials.⁸⁵

81. Stephen Kotkin, 'Russia's Perpetual Geopolitics: Putin Returns to the Historical Pattern', *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2016): 2–9.

82. David Clark, 'Russia's biggest enemy? Its own economy', *EU Observer*, 16 September 2021, <https://euobserver.com/opinion/152825>.

83. 'Evaluation of the Necessary Subsistence Minimum Among Russians', Levada-Center, 31 March 2021, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2021/03/31/evaluation-of-the-necessary-subsistence-minimum-among-russians/>; 'Russian government sets subsistence level at \$157.57 for 2021', TASS, 9 January 2021, <https://tass.com/economy/1243017>

84. Max Seddon and Henry Foy, 'Kremlin may restrict more food exports to shield it from high prices', *Financial Times*, 6 June 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/07378501-0ab9-4eef-ad13-eb72adff1838>.

85. '2 in 5 Russians Can't Afford Necessities – Poll', *Moscow Times*, 26 August 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/08/25/2-in-5-russians-cant-afford-necessities-poll-a74888>.

Meanwhile Russia continued to pour funds into not only its military but also its propaganda campaigns abroad.⁸⁶ Once again, this is a symptom of how Russia measures its greatness in terms which are unrecognizable in the West. Just as in Soviet times, it prioritizes military might and status symbols to awe the world over basic infrastructure for its own people – including things that most Europeans have taken for granted for most of living memory, like all-weather roads and indoor toilets.⁸⁷ Sixty years after the USSR sent Yuri Gagarin into space, reporter Erkka Mikkonen visited the city of Komsomolsk-na-Amure where Gagarin is an honorary citizen. He found people were still living in ninety-year-old ‘temporary’ barracks with no indoor plumbing or sanitation.⁸⁸

Linas points to the leadership’s attitude to Russia’s own population as yet another holdover from previous times. ‘In Russia the political elites – a really small group of people tightly connected to another really small group of people from the business institutions – are working in order basically to achieve their own personal goals,’ he says, ‘while the population is left somewhere outside and is being used as a base of resources. That comes from Tsarist Russia, when the domestic population was nothing more than labour for the workforce, or the manpower for going to the wars.’

Where Russians do try to improve their own standard of living, they are faced with a hostile environment for entrepreneurs, where any successful business is a target for corrupt judges, tax officials and police officers. The basic lack of a fair and independent judicial system that can enforce contracts and protect property rights makes it straightforward for businesses to be stolen from their owners. Often, the owner himself is prosecuted as part of the process. And when cases do go to court, it is wise to treat the outcome as a foregone conclusion. US investor Michael Calvey was accused of embezzlement. The distinguishing feature of his trial in 2021 was that no evidence of his crime was presented, and no witnesses testified against him – so state prosecutors argued that all the evidence suggesting his innocence merely proved how well organized the crime had been. To nobody’s great surprise, Calvey was still found guilty and given a five-and-a-half-year suspended jail sentence.⁸⁹

According to a survey carried out by the presidential security service the same year, more than three-quarters of Russian businessmen said they felt they were at

86. ‘RT America Received More Than \$100 Million In Russian Government Funding Since 2017, Filings Show’, RFE/RL, 26 August 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-rt-america-funding/31427870.html>.

87. ‘Indoor Plumbing Still a Pipe Dream for 20% of Russian Households, Reports Say’, *Moscow Times*, 2 April 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/04/02/indoor-plumbing-still-a-pipe-dream-for-20-of-russian-households-reports-say-a65049>.

88. Tweet by Erkka Mikkonen, 12 April 2021, <https://twitter.com/Erkanomia/status/1381596379022290945>.

89. Henry Foy, ‘US investor Calvey found guilty of embezzlement by Russian court’, *Financial Times*, 5 August 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/b8e222d0-e022-4c1b-bdbb-6fa9af63a182>.

risk of unfounded criminal prosecution by the state. Plainly this is a justified fear, since in the same poll 18% of prosecutors agreed with them. The syndrome is so well known that at a high-profile economic conference in St Petersburg, an MP joked that progress was plainly being made towards a healthy investment climate in Russia because they were ‘three days into the forum and nobody’s been arrested.’⁹⁰

Paranoia at home and Abroad

But the genuine fear within Russia is matched by a misguided fear of the outside world. So much of Russia’s confrontational behaviour is based on a fundamentally wrong assumption: the idea that the West is driven by the desire to ‘dismember and destroy Russia.’ This keystone belief is regularly stated by figures like former FSB chief and now Secretary of the Security Council Nikolai Patrushev, and is a recurring refrain throughout Russia’s propaganda directed at its own people.⁹¹ Robert Pszczel observed a steady progression during his five years in Moscow: ‘In a practical sense, yes, they were getting more paranoid. It was beginning to resemble more like the Soviet Union.’ In fact the Russian state has never been more secure from external threat than it is today, and yet the new National Security Strategy released in mid-2021 effectively sees ‘not just foreign countries as a threat, but the very processes reshaping the modern world.’⁹² Once seen through this prism, everything becomes an attempt to bring Russia down. In this view, Western sanctions imposed since 2014 are not only intended to undermine Russia’s economy and administer ‘punishment’ for Crimea, but in fact have the ultimate aim of regime change – even though there is little doubt that uncontrolled regime change in Russia and the ensuing chaos would be the last thing anybody in the West would actually want.⁹³

A recurring question in the West is whether Russia’s leaders truly believe they are under threat, or whether this is a known fiction maintained in order to keep power through frightening the population with the menace from abroad – and to provide the rationale or excuse for wars of conquest against countries like Ukraine. French academic Bruno Tertrais distinguishes between three different types of Russian paranoia. He points to ‘sincere paranoia’ (what they really believe),

90. Seddon and Foy, ‘Kremlin may restrict more food exports to shield it from high prices.’

91. A core element of the ‘Vecher [Evening] with Vladimir Solovyev’ propaganda broadcast on Rossiya 1 TV, for example. Selection available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bKy4xAC4gKE>.

92. ‘New National Security Strategy Is a Paranoid’s Charter’, *Moscow Times*, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/07/05/new-national-security-strategy-is-a-paranoids-charter-a74424>.

93. See, for example, interview with Sergey Karaganov in *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 24 April 2014, <http://www.rg.m/2014/04/23/karaganov-site.html>.

‘internalized paranoia’ (what they want their population to believe) and ‘instrumentalized paranoia’ (what they want the leaders of other countries to think they believe).⁹⁴ But from the outside it is hard to discern the lines between them. Andrey Makarychev points out that ‘if you keep reiterating certain positions or certain narratives, year after year, even decade after decade, it’s just a matter of time when you start seriously believing in that. I don’t rule out that some people in the Kremlin do believe in this world that they have produced, because they feel quite comfortable with this fantasy.’ And if the Russian leadership has convinced itself that the West is its enemy no matter what, the paranoia becomes self-perpetuating. As Mark Galeotti explains, ‘You can’t go to Putin and say look, you’re wrong about the West. They have no hostile intentions towards you. That will just get you laughed out of the room.’ Still worse, Galeotti says, the Russian intelligence services are ‘driving this narrative that speaks of an aggressive West actively seeking to constrain Russia abroad, subvert the Kremlin at home, because this works for them. It gives them profile, it gives them budgets, gives them autonomy and gives them a purpose.’⁹⁵

This creates a vicious circle, where the West takes steps in defence of sovereignty or international law, which are interpreted by Russia as further evidence of hostility to Moscow, which then prompts the Kremlin to escalate still further, leading to further Western defensive measures. Whether the Russian leadership truly believes its own propaganda about the West, or whether it is fully conscious that it is based on a myth, the effect is the same: entirely unnecessary confrontation with the West. And the war on Ukraine shows the disastrous consequences of this self-deception.

The acceptance of this delusion also reinforces the belief that Russians who are angry with the regime cannot have been thinking for themselves and must be under the influence of hostile foreign powers that want to destabilize and destroy Russia. Just as in Soviet times, Russia searches for imaginary foreign links lying behind the ever-present threat of radicalization from abroad and attempts at destabilization within the Russian Federation, laying the groundwork for direct attack.⁹⁶ In 2019, Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov explained how the US had a ‘trojan horse’ strategy of using political warfare and information warfare to ‘mobilize the protest potential of the population’, which would then be combined with precision strikes against critical infrastructure to neutralize Russia.⁹⁷ This

94. ‘Quelles relations franco-russes?’ (What kind of French-Russian relations?), Diploweb.com, 3 February 2021, <https://www.diploweb.com/Video-P-Vimont-et-B-Tertrais-Quelles-relations-franco-russes.html>.

95. Mark Galeotti, ‘Russian Intelligence & Security Community’, Russia Strategic Initiative, 12 August 2021, <https://community.apan.org/wg/rsi/project-connect/w/events/31576/mark-galeotti-russian-intelligence-security-community/>.

96. ‘A comparison of Russia’s National Security Strategies (2009, 2015, 2021)’, Aleksanteri Institute, 12 July 2021, https://rusmilsec.files.wordpress.com/2021/07/natsec_comparison_2021-1.pdf.

97. ‘Векторы развития военной стратегии’ (Vectors for development of military strategy), *Krasnaya zvezda*, 3 April 2019, <http://redstar.ru/vektory-razvitiya-voennoj-strategii/>.

attitude even extends to attempts at self-expression for ethnic and national languages within Russia itself that are notionally protected by law.⁹⁸ Putin, true to form, sees local self-awareness and the preservation of traditional cultures among the many non-Russian nationalities and ethnicities within Russia as a vulnerability that can be exploited by Russia's enemies.⁹⁹

But it is not only on its own behalf that Russia has consistently pointed to the dangers of regime change sponsored from abroad. Moscow not only prefers to keep its friends in power in autocratic regimes, but also more broadly prefers stability and predictability to sudden changes in geopolitics. In some cases, Russia can justifiably claim it was right. The West was warned before its intervention in the Libyan civil war in 2011 of all the disastrous consequences that would follow, including weapons proliferation, ongoing chaos and mass migration affecting Southern Europe. After Libya, the same concerns prompted Russia's intervention in Syria in 2015, in a successful move to head off another Western attempt to step in. But in all cases, there are two underlying concerns: the fantasy that this is all part of a deliberate and carefully planned Western campaign to overthrow regimes and its eventual target is Moscow; and the reality that when leaders whom the West dislikes are overthrown, as with Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi, they have a tendency to be lynched.

Best enemies

Russia portrays itself as being 'surrounded by enemies'. To the extent that that is true in the twenty-first century, it is entirely because Russia has created those enemies. Russia claims it is dismayed by anti-Russian attitudes, but seems unable to grasp that where they exist, they are stoked by Russia's own behaviour.

Where relations with other countries were previously good, Russia has been adept at destroying them. Before 2012, Czechia was an EU state that was relatively friendly to Russian interests. By 2021, the backlash from Russia's covert attack on munitions storage sites in 2014 that killed two Czech civilian employees meant that relations were already in the deep freeze (see Chapter 1). In the same way, even before overt invasion, nothing had done more to push Ukraine toward the West and away from Russia than the Kremlin's actions since 2014. Valeriy Akimenko explained in 2021 how 'I can describe the negative effect of Russian propaganda on me as both a Ukrainian and a resident of the West, but on the plus side no one else

98. Ramazan Alpaut, 'Russky Or Rossiisky: An Activist – And His Native Language – Go On Trial In A Russian Courtroom', RFE/RL, 17 February 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-komi-minoroty-language-ivanov-court-russky-rossiisky-navalny-putin/31108182.html>.

99. Vladimir Putin, 'Россия: национальный вопрос' (Russia: the nationalities question), *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 23 January 2012, https://www.ng.ru/politics/2012-01-23/1_national.html.

has done more to reawaken my sense of national pride and self-identity than [leading Russian propagandists] Mr Kiselev and Mr Solovyev. I am extremely grateful to them for that.' He went on, 'It's worse than a mistake, it's a crime to allow a wedge to be driven between Russia and Ukraine. It's a manifestation of some kind of tactical genius to regain Crimea, but at the same time a sign of strategic foolishness to lose Ukraine.' Even Russians abroad who observe what Russia does become politically motivated to join the opposition. Kyle Wilson explains how a new group has appeared in Australia calling itself *Adekvatnyye Russkiye v Avstralii i Novozelandii* (Appropriate Russians in Australia and New Zealand), trying to distance themselves from aggressive Russian nationalists and making clear their preference for a more accountable and representative government back in Russia.

Similarly, Russia's threats against Finland and Sweden over the prospect of joining NATO have also backfired. The proportion of Finns and Swedes in favour of NATO membership had been steadily inching up, as Russia made it more and more plain precisely why a military alliance against it is needed. In addition, even without joining NATO, both countries have focused clearly on the need to boost their own defence spending. According to Pekka Toveri, 'After the occupation of Crimea, the Russians tried to intimidate Finland. There were airspace violations, big exercises nearby, [Russian Chief of the General Staff] General Makarov visiting Finland and basically threatening us for cooperating with NATO, and so on. The result was that the population's attitudes towards Russians got harder, and the government decided to give the Defence Forces money for new fighters for the Air Force and new corvettes for the Navy over and above the defence budget. It was an almost 12 billion euro boost to our defensive capabilities. The Russians learned fast that threatening Finns with military means doesn't work that well.' And now, after Russia's assault on Ukraine starkly highlighted the dangers of not being in a defensive alliance, support for Finland joining NATO has broken all records.¹⁰⁰

One peculiarity of Russian foreign policy that seems to confirm its confrontational nature is the way the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), instead of directing it, is routinely sidelined.¹⁰¹ The intelligence services and the Armed Forces pursue their own policies in countries of interest to Russia without coordination with the MFA.¹⁰² When Russia recklessly destroyed a communications satellite to test one of its anti-satellite weapons in November 2021, endangering its own and others' space operations, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov categorically

100. 'Yle poll: Support for Nato membership hits record high', *Yle News*, 14 March 2022, <https://yle.fi/news/3-12357832>.

101. Mark Galeotti, 'Free Sergei Lavrov!', *Foreign Policy*, 17 February 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/02/17/free-sergei-lavrov-putin-russia-syria/>.

102. Ilgar Musakhanov, 'Внешнюю политику РФ теперь определяют не дипломаты, а силовики?' (Is Russian foreign policy now decided by the power ministers not the diplomats?), *Versiya*, 24 August 2020, <https://versia.ru/vneshnyuyu-politiku-rf-teper-opredelyayut-ne-diplomaty-a-siloviki>.

denied that this had happened – a few minutes before Russia's own Ministry of Defence confirmed that, yes, it had.¹⁰³

Sergey Lavrov is one of the longest-serving foreign ministers in the world, and foreigners who have watched the effect on him over the years sometimes almost feel sympathy. Mark Galeotti recalls how 'Lavrov was once one of the legends, one of the titans of the diplomatic circuit. But now he's almost become a caricature of himself. He has almost physically shrunk since 2014. He was not involved in the final discussions about taking Crimea, he was required to lie in his teeth, about the little green men.'¹⁰⁴ Robert Pszczel also thinks the need to constantly tell obvious lies after Russia's spies and soldiers commit outrages without consulting or even warning him has had a physical effect. 'It's been years and years and years that he's worked on his face,' he says. 'His nickname is "horse" after spending so long saying ridiculous things with a straight face that, you know, at some point probably you train your muscles so well they stay like that.' The years of practice were put to good use after Russia launched its assault on Ukraine, when two weeks after the invasion began Lavrov was still denying it was happening at all.¹⁰⁵

Political leaders in western European countries in particular are reluctant to recognize the extent to which their own good intentions are not reciprocated by Moscow; and when this recognition belatedly comes, it is accompanied by profound disappointment and sometimes incomprehension.¹⁰⁶ There are two natural but unfortunate human tendencies at work here. The first is optimism – the assumption that things by default ought to get better, not worse, and that includes Russian behaviour if only Russia is given a chance. The second is a pattern that's repeated by Western leaders and officials at all levels when first coming to the Russia problem: the idea, often born of arrogance as well as a refusal to learn from past experience, that they can succeed where all before them have failed and get the Russia relationship onto a proper, peaceful and stable footing. The trouble is, even a quick survey of past history shows how terribly misguided both of these ideas are.

The unfortunate result is that Western leaders who seek a genuine understanding with Russia come away disappointed, confused and dismayed – but because these leaders are constantly being replaced in Western democracies, the result is their countries coming back to Russia time after time, like a trusting spaniel perpetually confused as to why it is being beaten. The process is fairly predictable, and for all his willingness to reap the benefits of friendships with Russian oligarchs, British

103. 'Russian military admits "destroyed" satellite during test', AFP, 16 November 2021.

104. Mark Galeotti, 'Russian Intelligence & Security Community', Russia Strategic Initiative, 12 August 2021, <https://community.apan.org/wg/rsi/project-connect/w/events/31576/mark-galeotti-russian-intelligence-security-community/>.

105. 'Russian foreign minister falsely claims that it didn't invade Ukraine', CNN, 10 March 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/europe/live-news/ukraine-russia-putin-news-03-10-22/>.

106. Hans von der Burchard, 'Merkel blames Russia for 'outrageous' cyberattack on German parliament', *Politico*, 13 May 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/merkel-blames-russia-for-outrageous-cyber-attack-on-german-parliament/>

Prime Minister Boris Johnson too has experienced it. In December 2017, while serving as Foreign Minister, he went to Moscow looking for a reset, and told Sergey Lavrov that the UK and Russia had 'substantial interests in common'.¹⁰⁷ By mid-September 2018, Johnson described this as the biggest mistake of his career and a 'fool's errand'.¹⁰⁸ In early 2021, the EU's Foreign Affairs chief Josep Borrell followed the same familiar trajectory of heading to Moscow to repair the relationship and returning sadder and wiser. Borrell had pressed ahead with a planned summit meeting with unrealistic expectations against advice not to do so from member states, primarily those from the eastern part of the EU with the longest experience of Russia.¹⁰⁹ Borrell told Sergey Lavrov he had come to Moscow 'to find spaces for understanding and to build mutual trust' including on 'human rights and fundamental freedoms'.¹¹⁰ But not only did Borrell find his advances spurned and he himself publicly harangued, but on the same day Russia expelled three EU diplomats on the grounds that they had been present at opposition rallies.¹¹¹ And so yet another Western politician returned from Moscow bitterly disappointed to discover that hubris and misplaced belief in their own competence did not outweigh the combined experience of centuries of dealing with Russia.¹¹²

But still, as decades go, by Western leaders continue to succumb to the triumph of hope over experience and believe that a fresh start in relations with Russia will make everything work out this time.¹¹³ They continue to seek 'resets' with Russia,

107. Rob Merrick, 'Boris Johnson clashes with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Moscow over attacks on Putin regime', *Independent*, 22 December 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/boris-johnson-russia-sergei-lavrov-moscow-visit-putin-foreign-minister-ukraine-uk-a8124021.html>.

108. 'A conversation with Boris Johnson', AEI, 13 September 2018, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/speech/a-conversation-with-boris-johnson/>.

109. James Crisp et al., 'EU chief diplomat accused of kow-towing to Russia for vaccines on embarrassing Moscow visit', *Telegraph*, 5 February 2021, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/02/05/eu-chief-diplomat-accused-kow-towing-russia-vaccines-embarrassing/>.

110. 'Russia: Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the joint press conference with Foreign Minister Lavrov', EU External Action Service, 5 February 2021, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/92661/russia-remarks-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-joint-press-conference-foreign_en.

111. Peter Stubley, 'Russia to expel German, Swedish and Polish diplomats accused of taking part in Navalny protests', 5 February 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russia-diplomats-expel-germany-sweden-poland-navalny-b1798203.html>.

112. Mark Galeotti, 'The EU humiliated itself in Moscow', *Spectator*, 5 February 2021, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-eu-humiliated-itself-in-moscow>.

113. A report published in late 2011 described in detail the cycle of reset and crisis that had already been repeated several times since the end of the Cold War, and based on that analysis predicted that there would soon be a return to crisis. Sure enough, that crisis turned up in early 2014 in the shape of the confrontation over Ukraine. See *The State of the NATO–Russia Reset*, Conflict Studies Research Centre, September 2011, http://www.conflictstudies.org.uk/files/csrc_nato-russia-reset_preview.pdf.

looking to normalize relations by means of forgiving Moscow its sins. But doing so without addressing the fundamental causes of strife in the relationship is highly damaging, as its sole effect is to confirm to Russia that its policy of hostility toward the West will not only be forgiven but actually rewarded.¹¹⁴ The US-led Russian ‘reset’ of 2009 in particular, a few months after Russia occupied the Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, encouraged Russia to think five years later that if there were any international consequences from its seizure of Crimea, they would be only temporary. And in early 2022, the steady procession of Western leaders queuing up to visit Moscow in order to pay court to Putin and try to cajole him out of invading Ukraine were one by one lectured, humiliated and sent home empty-handed, with the net result of the whole exercise being to confirm that there was no conversation to be had.¹¹⁵ Time and again, Russia has shown that it is not inclined to reciprocate the good faith shown in attempts to improve relations, and that it does not share the West’s vision of how the two sides should live with each other.¹¹⁶ Yet in spite of everything, the idea that you can unilaterally impose a different kind of relationship on Russia when Russia isn’t interested seems never to die. If Russia were a woman, these Western leaders would have been called stalkers.

It’s hard to see how European politicians hope to restore an amicable relationship with Russia when it’s challenging enough even to have a calm, serious conversation. But France and Germany in particular have been consistently intent on trying to drag the rest of Europe back into a closer relationship with Russia, regardless of Russia’s behaviour. Where there is a stated reason for this, it’s usually a misguided one – like the thoroughly debunked idea that being more friendly to Russia will stop it finding common interest with China. In mid-2021, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron startled and dismayed eastern Europe with a surprise proposal for an EU summit with Vladimir Putin. They hadn’t thought it necessary to consult other EU leaders on whether this was a good idea. The proposal was eventually shot down in high-level discussion within the EU, but the process revealed still deeper failures by France and Germany to account for, or even realize, the challenges faced by the front-line states. Following a heated debate among EU leaders, Macron said, ‘The discussion was complex, it’s normal. It’s normal because on this issue we don’t have the same histories.’ But what France and Germany consistently either fail or refuse to grasp is that they and EU countries closer to the Russian border don’t share the same

114. Michael McFaul, ‘Why deciding to “move forward” with Putin is a big mistake,’ *Washington Post*, 10 July 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2017/07/10/why-deciding-to-move-forward-with-putin-is-a-big-mistake/>.

115. Ian Bond, ‘Stronger sanctions on Russia: Essential, but not a strategy,’ Centre for European Reform, 25 February 2022, <https://www.cer.eu/insights/stronger-sanctions-russia-essential>.

116. Dominik Jankowski, ‘With Russia, Transparency No Silver Bullet,’ *Berlin Policy Journal*, 4 September 2019, <https://berlinpolicyjournal.com/with-russia-transparency-no-silver-bullet/>.

present either.¹¹⁷ While this difference of experience of relations with Russia has been forcefully driven home by the assault on Ukraine, past performance suggests that regardless of the outcome of the conflict, France and Germany will once again soon be seeking to restore closer ties with Moscow.

This has been a long-standing challenge for the countries of eastern Europe, who have repeatedly been marginalized by the larger and older members of both NATO and the EU. In 2010, just two years after the short war between Russia and Georgia, NATO held a summit in Lisbon and adopted a 'Strategic Concept' which 'committed NATO to reinforce cooperation with Russia'.¹¹⁸ The summit included a meeting of the NATO–Russia Council, attended by then Russian president Dmitry Medvedev. Janis, an EU security official present at the meeting, told me how he watched with incredulity the way European heads of state performed for Medvedev. According to Janis, Italian President Silvio Berlusconi's 'whole speech was about him as best friend of Russia – he was basically describing how he had been instrumental in every positive step in developing a good relationship with Russia.' However, the comments by French president Nicolas Sarkozy were not comical, but chilling. 'Sarkozy turned his words toward the allies from the eastern part of NATO, and said you know my friends, I understand that you have had a hard history, and I am very sorry for it, but this is history. Let history be history. We are talking about the future, and the future is Russia at our side as our partner. He didn't say "get over it", but that was the message.'

'And this was in a situation where the heads of state and government had been trying to explain that the problem is not history, and Russia as the Soviet Union, but what Russia is doing *now* – including what it had done just recently to Georgia,' Janis recalled. 'That gave us a good understanding of how a president of France could lecture us, the eastern allies, in front of the Russian president and basically tell us we were stuck in history and should snap out of it. That was quite an experience.'

Russia benefits from a curious mental blind spot routinely displayed by French and German politicians: the idea that the countries in between themselves and Moscow do not matter, or sometimes even do not exist. We'll look more closely in Chapter 6 at the German view that Poland, Ukraine and Belarus count for nothing when Berlin wants to atone for war guilt to Moscow. French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian believes too that 'Russia is our neighbour, and we are adamant that we want to find a way to ensure a discussion takes place'.¹¹⁹ Once again, the combined experience of the millions of people that live in between the two 'neighbours' is entirely disregarded – precisely as the Kremlin would prefer.

117. David Herszenhorn, 'Summit exposes stark clash of EU views on Russia', *Politico*, 25 June 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-russia-vladimir-putin-european-union/amp/>.

118. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_68172.htm.

119. Interview with *France Inter*, 24 January 2021, available at <https://twitter.com/franceinter/status/1353304333824229389>

Above and beyond ‘resets,’ other Western politicians and policymakers have repeatedly advocated ‘dialogue’ with Russia regardless of its behaviour; but all too often, without specifying the critically important detail of what is actually to be said during that dialogue in order to discourage, rather than encourage, further Russian hostile activity directed at the West. Here too the repeated offer of a restoration of business as usual with no preconditions served only to confirm for Russia that its actions do not incur long-term consequences, and so could only have helped convince Moscow that despite routine statements of ‘concern,’ in reality Europe would find further aggressive and destabilizing actions by Russia to be acceptable. Once again, it is Ukraine that has felt the tragic consequences.

In April 2000, not long after becoming president, Vladimir Putin visited London. For many in the West at the time the main concern with regard to Russia was renewed fighting in Chechnya, accompanied by fresh and widespread reports of atrocities and human rights abuses. British prime minister Tony Blair felt the best way to deal with these issues was to engage Putin in ‘proper dialogue,’ and later told the public that Putin wanted a strong relationship with the West and ‘talks our language of reform.’¹²⁰ The subsequent 20 years have seen a pattern of Russia consistently demonstrating that it believes in a form of power from a different place and a different time, that European leaders who believe all conflict can be resolved by dialogue are simply not equipped to deal with.

Both before and after the assault on Ukraine, among European states the UK has been among the most vocally critical of Moscow, and more willing than most to point to Russia as a destructive and destabilizing power. Nevertheless, while direct attacks on British or allied interests or citizens by Russia have occasionally been responded to robustly, the British foreign policy establishment’s default state has consistently been to seek cooperation with Moscow despite the very obvious absence of shared values or interests between the two countries. It was not until the attempted murders of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in March 2018 that recognition of Russian hostility became widespread enough to outweigh the notion that relations could be improved through the British side playing nice on its own. But even after 2018, Russian financial and political influence in London remained a serious challenge to dealing with Moscow, as we will see in Chapter 6. Throughout 2021, British policy towards Russia still combined strong words with persistent attempts to offer Russia routes to improving the bilateral relationship, including – still – through talking.

Tellingly, the arguments for dialogue as a means for improving the relationship would fail to stand up when examined with even the slightest knowledge of prior history. German politician Armin Laschet was a repeat offender in this regard during his campaign for the chancellorship, where he was eventually defeated by Olaf Scholz. He claimed that ‘Even in the coldest of cold wars there was always . . .

120. Nick Hopkins, ‘Blair defends “reformer” Putin’s visit to No 10,’ *Guardian*, 17 April 2000, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2000/apr/17/russia.nickhopkins>.

a dialogue between civil societies.' Given that the Soviet Union had no civil society in any recognized sense of the term, the comment showed either delusion or a wilful disregard of history.¹²¹ Another of Laschet's key messages was that with Russia 'you have to talk more, not less.'¹²² Mistaking more communication for better communication is another fallacy that refuses to die, no matter how often it is disproved.

Advice based on past experience, that approaches to Moscow should be planned with caution and with an end state in mind rather than talking for the sake of it, are repeatedly dismissed by western European politicians on equally spurious grounds. Advocates of renewed wooing of Moscow like French President Emmanuel Macron insist on the notion that "we" are "pushing Russia away from Europe", perhaps in the hope that if they repeat it often enough, listeners will overlook the fact that it is completely detached from reality.¹²³ And politicians who want closer relations with the Russian government – like, again, Armin Laschet – regularly say that those who disagree with them are suggesting Russia should be 'isolated', with all diplomatic relations and channels of communication cut. They know perfectly well that only a tiny fringe of hard-liners hold that view. But this provides a lazy, predictable way of dismissing the conversation instead of actually discussing what should be done.¹²⁴

Even when Russia was interested in talking, it found the habit of countries like France and Germany and organizations like the EU and NATO of presenting dialogue as an end in itself, without necessarily leading to any specific result, deeply frustrating. A decade before Borrell's 2021 visit, NATO and Russia were at a stalemate over plans for missile defence systems in Europe (which Russia opposed, because of the suspicion these were defences against Russian missiles). A meeting of the NATO–Russia Council in Sochi did nothing to resolve the deadlock – but after it, then NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen 'restated our commitment to pursue [the non-existent] missile defence cooperation . . . We are determined to keep up the dialogue and to keep up the work.'¹²⁵ The Russian participants who did wish to make progress on specific aspects of cooperation were unimpressed. As British Russia-watcher James Sherr pointed out at the time,

121. Philip Oltermann, 'CDU leader Armin Laschet: "Even in the coldest of cold wars there was dialogue"', *Guardian*, 9 July 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/09/cdu-leader-armin-laschet-even-in-the-coldest-of-cold-wars-there-was-dialogue>.

122. 'Armin Laschet: With Russia "you have to talk more, not less"', *DW*, 14 June 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/armin-laschet-with-russia-you-have-to-talk-more-not-less/a-57886500>.

123. James Nixey and Mathieu Boulègue, 'On Russia, Macron Is Mistaken', Chatham House, 5 September 2019, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/09/russia-macron-mistaken>.

124. 'Armin Laschet: With Russia "you have to talk more, not less".'

125. 'NATO–Russia Council makes progress in Sochi', NATO website, 04 July 2011, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_76039.htm

'from Moscow's point of view, negotiations and joint efforts are not exercises in group therapy, but means of advancing national interests.'¹²⁶

The combined result of this dogged drive by the West to restore relations when Moscow has destroyed them is that through the history of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Russia has again and again been forgiven for aggression against other countries and its own population. You can hardly blame the Kremlin for concluding that the trend is so consistent it must surely continue, and so Russia is also likely to be swiftly forgiven for any current and future attacks on its neighbours and countries further afield, up to and including full-scale military invasion.

Read the small print

At the same time, there is a persistent Russian call for 'legally binding' international treaties and agreements that would govern all kinds of different areas of international relations. In December 2021, this was the form in which Russia's demands for 'security guarantees' that formed a precursor to its 2022 attack on Ukraine were presented to the US and NATO. The most striking aspect of the treaties was how entirely unrealistic – and in fact impossible to implement – most of their conditions were.¹²⁷

Reiner Schwalb explains Russia's obsession with signing new treaties at the same time as trying to evade the commitments they have already signed up to through both a belief that a 'global power' stands above international law, and a different understanding of how countries are bound by it. 'When they are looking at international agreements and treaties, they focus on the words of the agreement where we might focus on the ideas or intent behind it,' he explains. Kimberley Marten agrees and has explained in detail how 'Russia has a pattern of not recognizing the "spirit" of an agreement, only its letter. U.S. negotiators . . . have consistently counseled spending the time to make sure that the specifics of what has been agreed are spelled out in great detail, to avoid surprises later.'¹²⁸

Nevertheless, this mismatch of understanding and intent continues to catch Russia's counterparts out. James Sherr observes that 'The Russians are the

126. James Sherr, 'NATO and Russia: doomed to disappointment?', in *NATO Review 2011/5: NATO-Russia relations: 20 years after the USSR*, http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2011/NATO_Russia/EN/index.htm.

127. Alexander Lanoszka, 'How NATO should greet Russia's "draft treaty"', Council on Gestrategy, 20 December 2021, <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/britains-world/how-nato-should-greet-russias-draft-treaty/>.

128. Kimberly Marten, 'President Trump, keep in mind that Russia and the West think about negotiations very, very differently', *Washington Post*, 25 July 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/07/25/president-trump-keep-in-mind-that-russia-and-the-west-think-about-negotiations-very-very-differently/>.

neighbours from hell. If you finally conclude a written agreement that they will stop parking their car on your lawn, don't be surprised if they park their truck there instead.' This leads to a continuing drive by Russia to sign new agreements that constrain its adversaries while leaving Moscow itself a free hand. Reiner Schwalb says Russia 'needs international treaties because of their own weakness. They can only cope with Europe and specifically NATO if NATO countries adhere to those treaties. When the Russians seem to be really interested in treaties, it's because they fear the strength of the West, in every respect. You won't hear that officially from Putin, but the Russian specialists acknowledge it.' The emphasis on written agreements with foreign countries to protect Moscow's interests persists despite past experience of this approach going badly wrong, as during the Second World War, when the Soviet Union's arrangement with Nazi Germany to carve up Europe between them soured when Adolf Hitler turned out to be not as reliable a partner in crime as Joseph Stalin had supposed.

Similar principles apply when Russia takes part in international fora like the UN. Kyle Wilson explains that Russia's aim in being a member of international organizations is not better cooperation. 'For Russia, in the UN, like in any multilateral organisation, *control* is the crucial word,' he says. 'Obviously, the UN Security Council is in a category all by itself. But in other ones, particularly in a region like ours, the Indo-Pacific, where you have organizations like ASEAN, the Asia Pacific security forum, and so on, Russian behaviour is consistent. And that is to infiltrate, to influence, to seek to manipulate, and to use those organisations in any way they can to erode the standing of the enemies, especially the United States.' To do so, Russia exploits its seat at international tables wherever it can. After the seizure of Crimea, Russia found that its new territory was unsustainable because it was not self-sufficient in water. So, Russia tried to engage the UN Human Rights Committee in forcing Ukraine to supply water to the region that it was now claiming was in fact part of Russia.¹²⁹ And in February 2022, the world watched the ludicrous spectacle of a UN Security Council resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine being administered – and vetoed – by Russia.¹³⁰

Moscow's approach to international cooperation is pursued across the board. Russia's abuse of Interpol for pursuing and persecuting its political opponents devalues the system for all its members.¹³¹ The OSCE monitoring mission in eastern Ukraine, which in theory was to receive cooperation from all sides, was

129. Halya Coynash, 'Russian occupiers of Crimea want the UN to force Ukraine to give them water', Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, 31 August 2020, <https://khhpg.org/en/1598799338>.

130. Michelle Nichols and Humeyra Pamuk, 'Russia vetoes U.N. Security action on Ukraine as China abstains', Reuters, 26 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-vetoes-un-security-action-ukraine-china-abstains-2022-02-25/>.

131. Kathy Gilsinan, 'How Russia Tries to Catch Its "Criminals" by Abusing Interpol', *The Atlantic*, 30 May 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/05/russia-interpol-abuse/561539/>.

routinely obstructed, with its drones consistently targeted by electronic attacks as well as occasional threats that they would be shot down if launched.¹³² Lengthy correspondence by the Russian delegation to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) about the poisoning of Alexei Navalny in October 2020 gave insights into how Russian diplomacy operates, including both trying to rope the OPCW into a scheme to both make it look as though Navalny was poisoned only after he left Russia, and trying to get access to the ongoing investigations. The exchange of letters shows how the OPCW, to its credit, consistently and politely declined as the Russian demands became more strident and irate.¹³³

There is one particular circumstance where the different approach to international agreements between Russia and Western countries leads to repeated disaster for the victims of Russian military action. When crises deteriorate to the point of armed conflict, Western powers repeatedly step in to broker ceasefires. But the contrast between Russia's literal approach to interpreting the text of the ceasefire agreements and the West's focus on their spirit and intent has repeatedly led to Russia getting everything it wants from the clash – aided by the Western powers whose main priority is ending the fighting, rather than making sure it comes to a fair or even satisfactory conclusion. In the current century, three separate examples (so far) follow this pattern: Georgia, Ukraine and Syria. On each occasion, ceasefires have been concluded on terms drafted in Moscow, leaving Russia free to interpret them in ways that startle those in the West who hadn't read them properly. It can't be said that there are no precedents to learn from. In precisely the same way, after the Second World War the Western allies protested vigorously at the way Soviet power was extended into Central Europe and the Balkans, saying that this was in violation of the Yalta and Potsdam agreements of 1945 – not to mention the earlier Moscow Declaration which stated that 'After the termination of hostilities [the Allies] will not employ their military forces within the territories of other states except for the purposes envisaged in this declaration and after joint consultation.'¹³⁴ But again, although Soviet actions may have been in breach of the Anglo-American interpretation of these ambiguous and imprecise arrangements, their interpretation in Moscow was what counted.

The brief armed conflict between Russia and Georgia in 2008 ended with Russia in control of two regions in the north of the country, Abkhazia and South Osetia, together making up about one-fifth of the territory of Georgia. Then French

132. 'Daily Report 99/2021', OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, 30 April 2021, <https://www.osce.org/files/2021-04-30%20Daily%20Report.pdf>.

133. Correspondence from October 2020 uploaded on Russian Foreign Ministry website, <https://www.mid.ru/documents/10180/4510654/%D0%9F%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%BF%D0%B8%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0.pdf/>.

134. 'The Moscow Declaration by the U.S., U.K., U.S.S.R., China', Moscow, U.S.S.R., 30 October 1943, http://insidethecoldwar.org/sites/default/files/documents/Moscow%20Declaration_1.pdf.

president Nicolas Sarkozy had delivered terms for a ceasefire to Georgia – with the fatal flaw that they had been drawn up in Moscow and not mediated in any way. The effect was that while Sarkozy, and through him the EU, thought that the ceasefire meant Russian troops would return to Russia, there were loopholes in the text of the agreement so big that Russia could drive tanks through them, which it proceeded to do.¹³⁵ Russia then declared the occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to be independent states, and bribed various small and poor countries to recognize this status. The Pacific island state of Nauru maintains this recognition to this day, in return for ongoing Russian support.¹³⁶ Over a decade later, states like the UK and Canada were calling on Russia to ‘fulfil its obligations’ under the August 2008 ceasefire agreement, apparently oblivious to the fact that Russia had done precisely what that agreement – written in Moscow – said it could.¹³⁷

In Ukraine, French President François Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel forced a Russian ceasefire on the victims of Russian aggression in the form of successive ‘Minsk peace agreements’. The texts of the agreements conspired in the fiction that the war in Ukraine was an internal matter to which Russia was not a party, demanded that Ukraine surrender key aspects of its national sovereignty and ignored Russia’s occupation and annexation of Crimea. And yet, these terms were insisted on by western European leaders as the only possible resolution to the conflict.¹³⁸

Vladislav Surkov was one of the chief designers of Putin’s current system of government, and was credited with key roles in the annexation of Crimea and the long war in eastern Ukraine. That’s not something he denies: ‘I am proud that I was part of the reconquest. This was the first open geopolitical counter-attack by Russia [against the West] and such a decisive one. That was an honour for me.’ But he also makes plain how the intent of the Minsk agreements was to break up Ukraine. In June 2021, Surkov echoed the key Russian message to the rest of the world that Ukraine is not actually a real country: ‘Ukrainians are very well aware that for the time being, their country does not really exist. I have said that it could exist in the future. The national core exists. I am just asking the question as to what the borders, the frontier should be. And that should be the subject for an international

135. As predicted in ‘The Nature of the Georgian Ceasefire’, Advanced Research and Assessment Group, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, 13 August 2008.

136. Bruce Hill, ‘What’s the deal with Nauru backing the disputed territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia?’ ABC News, 12 May 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-05-13/why-is-nauru-backing-south-ossetia-and-abkhazia/9751660>.

137. ‘Geneva International Discussions on the conflict in Georgia: UK–Canada statement’, UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 9 July 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/geneva-international-discussions-on-the-conflict-in-georgia-uk-canada-statement>.

138. Volodymyr Vasylenko, ‘The West must not force a Russian “peace” on Ukraine’, Atlantic Council, 15 August 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/the-west-must-not-force-a-russian-peace-on-ukraine/>.

discussion.¹³⁹ But when talking about revising borders, it seems probable that Moscow would only wish them to be revised in one direction. Russia has no shortage of neighbours whose territory could rightfully be restored after an international discussion of frontiers, following the Soviet annexations of East Prussia from Germany (now the Kaliningrad region), Karelia and Petsamo from Finland, South Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands from Japan, and more. Russia would probably also not wish to encourage discussion of borders too much in order not to encourage China to revive its interest in its former territories now in the Russian Far East. And Russia's founding myth, that the rulers of Muscovy were somehow the inheritors of Kievan Rus', if true would surely imply not that Moscow has claims on Ukraine, but that Russia belongs to Kyiv.

But for years, the existence of a ceasefire (in theory if not in practice) in Ukraine allowed France and Germany to pretend the problem had gone away – and to continue suggesting that if it hadn't, the best way of ending the war in Ukraine would be for Ukraine to give in, rather than for Russia to cease its attacks.¹⁴⁰ In reality the fact that neither of them had the will or the capacity to actually enforce the ceasefire meant that their insistence on Minsk as a resolution to the war meant Russia had no incentive at all to stop waging it.¹⁴¹

In both of these cases the driving objective of the Western dignitaries involved has been to stop the fighting. Russia's, by contrast, is to get maximum advantage from it. This means that Russia has ample scope to manipulate the Western fear of escalation, turning up or dialling down the military pressure as the state of negotiations demands – a tactic employed repeatedly during Russia's all-out assault on Ukraine.¹⁴² Throughout this process, Russian information campaigns exploit Western vulnerabilities, assumptions and psychological triggers – especially aversion to conflict, and prioritizing ending the fighting, short attention spans and failure to realize longer patterns, and policy being dictated by media coverage. American Russia-watcher Leon Aron says the Western media idea that not only are there two sides to every story, but that both may be equally valid, leads to a presumption that 'both sides are equally culpable', resulting in not wishing for victory by either side, just 'peace at all costs, including defeat'.¹⁴³

139. Henry Foy, Vladislav Surkov: "An overdose of freedom is lethal to a state", *Financial Times*, 18 June 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/1324acbb-f475-47ab-a914-4a96a9d14bac>.

140. Atlantic Council, 'Flawed peace plan for Ukraine doesn't pass muster', 14 February 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/flawed-peace-plan-for-ukraine-doesnt-pass-muster/>.

141. Mark Galeotti, 'The Minsk Accords: Should Britain declare them dead?', *Council on Geostrategy*, 24 May 2021, <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/britains-world/the-minsk-accords-should-britain-declare-them-dead/>.

142. Amy J. Nelson and Alexander H. Montgomery, 'Mind the escalation aversion: Managing risk without losing the initiative in the Russia-Ukraine war', *Brookings*, 11 March 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/03/11/mind-the-escalation-aversion-managing-risk-without-losing-the-initiative-in-the-russia-ukraine-war/>.

143. Speaking at the Lennart Meri Conference, Tallinn, 24 April 2015.

Former US Army officer Sulev Suvari saw at first hand the effect of these two very different approaches to ending a war. Attached to the US team negotiating a ceasefire for Syria in Geneva in 2016, he observed how even the negotiators sent by each side showed their different priorities. 'On our side was we had some really smart, capable people and individuals from the State Department, with the State Department very much in the lead, as they should be in our system,' he says – by contrast with the Russian side, which was made up primarily of military officers. This was borne out in the content of the negotiations: 'with the military leading all the conversations on the Russian side, you had a sort of breakdown between mindsets and views and goals. The State Department were focused on water and humanitarian rights, and access to medical care. And then the Russian side wanted to talk more about hard security issues and overflights and things of this nature.' It didn't help that because the US team thought the negotiations were about Syria, they sent experts on dealing with Syria not with Russia, Sulev says. 'Our side knew Syria very well. They'd all lived in the area. Almost all of them had also been to Syria at some point, or they'd been to Lebanon or worked in Turkey along the border. So they really understood the space. But nobody had really had any interactions with the Russians and the Russian military, which is a completely different ball of wax. And so that did throw them off sometimes.'

This meant in particular that the US side was under-prepared for Russian negotiating tactics – including the willingness to deny that statements had been made or agreements reached when they were already on the record. 'The Russians would say something, and then two days later say no, that's not what we said. Or, yes, we did say that but it means something different now and we're redefining it. It was Humpty Dumpty in Alice in Wonderland – if you're in charge of the words then you get to make up what the words mean. I saw that threw them off too,' Sulev says of his State Department colleagues. But in addition, Sulev realized that for Russia, the negotiations were not primarily about Syria itself, still less the best interests of its people. 'What I saw them do constantly was confuse and shift on what it really was that they were asking for,' he says. 'Even as I walked away at the end I thought, I don't know what their goal was there. It wasn't clear.'

The final result of the negotiations, though, was clear enough. A ceasefire agreement overseen by former US Secretary of State John Kerry met limited short-term US goals of easing the fighting and allowing delivery of humanitarian aid, and much broader and longer-term Russian aims of cementing its influence in the Middle East and forcing the US to back down on its previous commitment to remove President Bashar al-Assad from power.¹⁴⁴ In effect, because of the very different aims of each side going into the negotiations, both sides got what they wanted – but Russia wanted far more than the US to start with. And once again

144. Keir Giles, 'What Russia Learns From the Syria Ceasefire: Military Action Works', Chatham House, 3 March 2016, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2016/03/what-russia-learns-syria-ceasefire-military-action-works>.

western European countries – invariably including France – have bought into the fiction that the Russian ceasefire is a positive result for the victim country.¹⁴⁵

This repeated pattern only confirmed for Russia that armed force is a highly effective means of achieving swift and positive foreign policy results, with limited downside because those results are then broadly accepted by the rest of the world. These ceasefires, rather than punishing the aggressor or even being equitable and ensuring the conflict is resolved, set Moscow's terms and rewarded Russia for military action – and so can only have encouraged Putin in his decision to escalate his war on Ukraine in 2022. Russia repeatedly successfully leveraged the differential between its own and Western attitudes to conflict to cement in place its gains from armed interventions, while the West was just relieved that the active phase of the fighting has stopped. In short, ceasefire agreements of this kind provide Russia with success, and the West with an excuse for looking away. At the time of writing, the fervent hope is that the West will not pressure Ukraine into a similar surrender, to provide an excuse for looking away once again.¹⁴⁶

But although Russia's military operations are the most dramatic means it can use to intervene beyond its borders, they represent only a small part of the huge range of tools and levers Russia employs to get its way. People living beyond Ukraine are fortunate that they do not – yet – have to face an overt invasion. But for them, it is the hostile actions Moscow can take without overtly going to war that for now are the greater challenge. And those are the subject of the next chapter.

145. Patrick Wintour and Julian Borger, 'Syria Faces Perpetual War unless Russia Extends Ceasefire, France Warns', *Guardian*, 24 September 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/24/syria-war-unga-france-warning-russia-extend-ceasefire>.

146. James Nixey, 'A negotiated peace with Russia is fraught with danger', Chatham House, 17 March 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/03/negotiated-peace-russia-fraught-danger>.