

FOREWORD



DEAR READER,

On 10 January, the war reached its 1,417th day – exactly the same length as the Second World War on the Eastern Front between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. In nearly four years, Russia has exhausted most of the military stockpiles it inherited from the Soviet Union, lost around one million soldiers killed or severely injured at the front, and inflicted untold suffering on Ukrainians. And yet Ukraine endures.

Despite Russia’s frustrated efforts, there are no signs of change within the regime’s leadership. Vladimir Putin, the Kremlin’s figurehead, remains convinced that Russia, with its supposedly unique global role, is following a “special path”. Russia therefore continues its pursuit of Ukraine’s complete subjugation.

Through repression, Russia’s ruler has created the illusion that there is no alternative to him – that the choice is between Putin and an abyss of uncertainty. But no one is irreplaceable. The war in Ukraine has brought severe hardship to Russia, and although Russians have cultivated a myth of themselves as masters of suffering, their tolerance for pain is not unlimited. A declining economy, empty fuel tanks, and the return of murderers and rapists from the front are hitting ordinary Russians with increasing force. History shows that when the screws are tightened too far, Russians have at times found the courage to leap into the unknown.

Equally Potemkin-like is the notion of Russia's omnipotence. What does the Kremlin have to show after almost four years of war? On the one side stand a rearming Europe and a more determinedly independent Ukraine than ever before, recalling the Russian proverb that urges one to measure oneself by the might of one's enemies. On the other side lie a faltering domestic economy, hundreds of thousands of maimed and traumatised citizens, and ever-deepening repression. This is the true face of the "Russkiy Mir".

Nor has the Kremlin succeeded in breaking allied unity. Its repeated failures show that Russia's ruling elite is simply incapable of doing so. Although Russian acts of sabotage and influence efforts do occur, we should not conjure threats where none exist: not every event reflects a cunning plan or the omnipotent hand of the Kremlin – often, it is simply a coincidence.

As for Russia's own alliances, recent developments involving Iran and Venezuela have made it clear that alignment with Russia offers little benefit. These cases show that Moscow tends to forget its allies in times of need.

Russia remains dangerous despite its incompetence, and vigilance is essential to prevent the expansion of the "Russian World". While sanctions clearly affect the Russian economy, loopholes remain that must be closed through targeted measures and cooperation among Western countries – whether the issue is the smuggling of dual-use goods to Russia, vulnerabilities in its explosives industry, or the critical technological leaps that NATO will require to counter Russia's growing reliance on unmanned military systems.

There is, however, no cause for panic. In the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service's assessment, Russia has no intention of militarily attacking Estonia or any other NATO member state in the coming year. We are likely to reach a similar assessment next year because Estonia and Europe have taken steps that compel the Kremlin to calculate very carefully what, if anything, it can risk attempting. Even if no such intention exists today, our task is to ensure that this remains the case tomorrow and in the future. Russia's military reform will enhance the capabilities of its armed forces in the years ahead. To counter this, Estonia and NATO must continue investing in defence. Russia's calculations of the balance of power must always work to our advantage.

It is firm and steady preparedness that truly deters Russia. By maintaining it, we demonstrate to Russia the qualities it fears most – that we are free, resolute and resilient, and that we make our own choices without coercion or pressure from anyone.

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