



NATO PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY

POLITICAL COMMITTEE (PC)

**CONFRONTING RUSSIA'S
CONTINUING GEOPOLITICAL
AND IDEOLOGICAL
CHALLENGE**

General Report

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SUMMARY

Relations between Russia and West are currently at a new post-Soviet low and the prospects of a new reset of relations are bleak at best. NATO's prudent dual track approach to Russia is likely to be reaffirmed in the new Strategic Concept. However, it is timely to have a frank and in-depth discussion among the Allies on what the NATO-Russia relationship should entail in practice in the upcoming decade.

The report provides an update on Russia's strategic challenge to NATO and its key partners, both in the military and non-kinetic domains. It notes that especially since the invasion of Ukraine in 2014, the Putin regime has become much more ideological, which has clear foreign policy implications and severely limits the possibility for a genuine rapprochement between Russia and the transatlantic community. The Rapporteur warns that the potential increase of Russian military adventurism in the near- to mid-term would not be surprising.

The Rapporteur also explores the growing strategic alignment between Russia and China and urges the Euro-Atlantic community to be consistent and committed to the rules-based order in their relations with Moscow and Beijing.

The report provides an overview of Russian destabilizing activities in its immediate neighborhood and in the broader MENA region. The Rapporteur urges the Allies to increase their support for Georgia's and Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration and their transformation into success stories.

It also discusses the growing repressive nature of the regime domestically and calls for continuation of the policy of sanctions unless Moscow revisits its destabilizing behavior and human rights violations.

The report concludes with a series of recommendations aiming to reassure Allies in the face of Russia's military and hybrid threats and urges Allies to be realistic about the prospects of genuine dialogue with the current regime beyond maintaining channels of communication to prevent accidental escalation.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The threat environment for NATO has become significantly more complex over the past decade and now includes the implications of the rise of China, the fallout of the devastating global health crisis and the proliferation of emerging and disruptive technologies. Yet, it is important for Allied policymakers not to lose sight of the one constant in the Euro-Atlantic security landscape: Russia's continuing antagonistic behavior vis-à-vis NATO and the political West in general.

2. It might be tempting to portray Russia as a declining power, whose total GDP is smaller than that of Italy or of South Korea, whose industry is unable to offer high-value products for the global market, and whose soft power is waning even in the former Soviet republics. Indeed, as prominent commentator Thomas Friedman put it, Russia has devolved from a superpower to a super troll (Friedman, 2021). There is a wide consensus in the Western academic community that in the long-term China presents a much bigger challenge to the liberal democratic world order, but that Russia will remain the principal source of security challenges in the short- to near-term (Foreign Affairs, 2017). With its nuclear arsenal comparable only to that of the United States, its still significant conventional military capabilities, its sophisticated hybrid warfare machine and its energy leverages, Russia will remain capable, in the foreseeable future, of inflicting harm to the interests of the Allies. And Moscow continues to demonstrate its intention to confront the West: for instance, the US institutions concluded that Russian intelligence services were behind a recent massive cyberattack against SolarWinds, an American computer network (CISA, 2021). The US Intelligence Community Assessment, released in March 2021, also found that Russian President Vladimir Putin authorized Russian interference in the 2020 US presidential elections aiming to affect US public perceptions (NIC, 2021). In March and April 2021, Russia initiated a massive military buildup on the border with Ukraine and in the illegally annexed Crimea, which led to a significant deterioration of the security climate in Europe and alarmed NATO. In June 2021, the Russian military threatened to use force against the British Navy's HMS Defender passing through what Russia illegally claims to be its territorial waters off the coast of Crimea. Russia also introduced a concept of "unfriendly countries". Currently, there are two countries on the list: the Czech Republic and the United States - both NATO Allies.

3. Russian foreign policy's anti-Western propensity derives from the character of Putin's regime. In recent years, this regime has been ditching the last remnants of the democratic facade and turning into a full-fledged dictatorship. The attempted assassination and the subsequent jailing of the opposition leader Alexey Navalny in what was a complete travesty of justice has demonstrated that Mr Putin – who has been in power longer than any other Russian leader since Joseph Stalin – is no longer constrained by potential reputational losses domestically or internationally. Mr Putin has – literally – poisoned his relationship with the democratic public opinion.

4. Relations between Russia and the West are currently at a new post-Soviet low. Although there has been recent cooperation on limited issues between Moscow and the new US administration in Washington, such as the renewal of the New START nuclear arms-reduction treaty, relations appear to be set to continue their downward trend. Before President Joseph R. Biden had even taken office, Moscow accused the incoming administration of "Russophobia" and Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov, stated that the Kremlin was expecting "nothing positive" from the new administration (Clark, 2020). President Biden chose to meet Mr Putin early in his presidency to set the red lines, raise human rights concerns and convey a message that the US is "not looking for conflict with Russia, but we will respond if Russia continues its harmful activities" (Erlanger, 2021). The US side had low expectations from the Russo-American summit in Geneva on 16 June 2021: instead of seeking a new 'reset', the US leadership had a modest goal of establishing a "predictable and rational" relationship with Russia. In the current political climate, it was not realistic to expect the leaders to agree on anything more ambitious than the return of respective ambassadors back to their posts and the establishment of consultations framework on cyber security (Kroenig & Ashford, 2021).

5. Even the EU, where some members have long been promoting cooperation with Moscow, is now looking to take a tougher stance on Russia, especially following the treatment of Josep Borrell, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, during his visit to Moscow, wherein three EU diplomats were ousted from the country and Borrell stood by as Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov called the EU an "unreliable partner" (Herszenhorn & Barigazzi, 2021). While French President Emmanuel Macron continues to call for dialogue with Russia as a prerequisite for durable peace in Europe, he also stresses that he has no illusions about Russia and that "this process [of negotiating with Russia on European security] will take many years" (Momtaz, 2020). On the eve of the EU Summit on 25 June 2021, France and Germany suggested exploring ways for renewed dialogue with Russia, but the initiative was dropped due to the opposition of several EU member states (Siebold, Emmott & Baczynska, 2021). In sum, the appetite for engaging in a comprehensive dialogue between Russia and the West is currently lacking on both sides, and the prospects of a new reset of relations are bleak at best.

6. NATO pursues a prudent dual track approach to Russia: defense and deterrence on the one hand, and openness to dialogue on the other. The group of independent experts established by the NATO Secretary General to reflect on NATO priorities for the next decade supported the continuation of this approach. At the Summit on 14 June 2021, Allied leaders reiterated that "Russia's aggressive actions constitute a threat to Euro-Atlantic security" and, while reaffirming the dual-track approach, stressed that there can be no return to 'business as usual' as long as Russia¹ fails to demonstrate compliance with international law and its international obligations. It is reasonable to expect that this dual-track approach will be further endorsed in the new Strategic Concept. However, it is timely to have a frank and in-depth discussion among the Allies on what the NATO-Russia relationship should entail in practice in the upcoming decade. The NATO Parliamentary Assembly should stand ready to be a part of this discussion.

7. This report builds on previous Political Committee reports on Russia. It aims to provide an update on Russia's strategic challenge to NATO and its key partners, both in the military and non-kinetic domains. It will briefly describe its evolving relations with key global and regional partners. It will discuss to what degree the evolution of Russia's internal situation might affect its foreign policy and relations with NATO. Finally, it will offer recommendations on ways for NATO member states to bolster political cohesion vis-à-vis Russia and to develop a sober and values-based Russia policy. This report will not discuss in detail one of the key aspects of relations with Russia – namely arms control, as this complex issue will be addressed comprehensively by this year's report of the NATO PA Defense and Security Committee.

II. RUSSIA AS A GLOBAL PLAYER

A. RUSSIA'S CONTINUING ANTAGONISM TOWARDS THE EURO-ATLANTIC COMMUNITY

1. The Evolution of Russia's Foreign Policy Philosophy

8. The foreign policy philosophy of post-Soviet Russia has evolved from a brief period of embracing the Western-led world order in the early 1990s, to the advocacy of the so-called multipolar world, and to open competition with and even hostility towards the West since the mid-2000s and especially after 2014. The 2000 National Security Concept of the Russian Federation talked at length about the protection of democracy, constitutional rights and freedoms as well as merits of international cooperation and commonality of interests with other global powers, while lamenting that the West often chooses to act unilaterally. However, the 2014 Military

¹ Russia is mentioned 61 times in the NATO Summit Communique, compared with 10 references to China.

Doctrine, 2015 National Security Strategy and 2016 Foreign Policy Concept clearly identified the United States and NATO as a principal threat to national security – an assessment that is also reflected in the latest National Security Strategy issued in July 2021. The document characterizes the confrontation with the West as protracted and increasingly dangerous with threats from NATO intensifying and the risk of the use of military force increasing. References to potential cooperation with the United States, Europe and NATO which offered an “olive branch” to the West in the previous version of the strategy, were replaced by an expression of lacking interest in dialogue and partnership in the foreseeable future (Buchanan, 2021). Instead, the United States and its allies are described as “unfriendly countries” ranked last behind Russia’s other strategic partners (Trenin, 2021).

9. When he openly articulated Russia’s anti-Western doctrine at the Munich security conference in 2007, Putin was still widely regarded as a pragmatist. Competition with the West was mainly geopolitical, not ideological. The Kremlin’s narrative at the time focused on the notion that Russia is ‘rising from its knees’ and that the West, and the United States in particular, sought to contain Russia as an unwelcome competitor and a threat to the Western global hegemony. The so-called ‘colour revolutions’ in former Soviet republics, and especially the 2003 ‘Revolution of Roses’ in Georgia and the 2004 ‘Orange Revolution’ in Ukraine, were interpreted by the Kremlin as nothing but a Western conspiracy to take over the control of these republics which Moscow always regarded as part of its natural sphere of influence.

10. However, especially since the invasion of Ukraine in 2014, the Putin regime has become much more ideological. The state propaganda presents Russia as the stalwart of ‘traditional values’, as opposed to the West’s alleged moral decadence. The 2015 National Security Strategy refers to democracy only once, while making multiple references to “traditional Russian spiritual and moral values” (IEEE, 2016). This focus is reinforced by the most recent National Security Strategy which asserts that those values are under active attack by the United States and its allies as well as Westernization more broadly, which includes “transnational corporations, foreign non-profit, non-governmental, religious, extremist and terrorist organizations” (Galeotti, 2021). During the last decade, the authorities have been consistently trying to increase the nationalistic temperature in the country through state TV channels as well as flooding movie theatres with ultra-patriotic films. The regime also cultivates and widely displays its close ties to the Russian Orthodox Church. The emerging state ideology curiously combines the glorification of both Russia’s tsarist and Soviet – even Stalinist – heritages. The mythologization of the Soviet victory in the Second World War has reached extraordinary proportions in Putin’s Russia. Putin himself, in recent years, has demonstrated obsession with history, for instance, starting the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) leaders-summit with an hour-long lecture on the origins of the Second World War, which included the vindication of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact (Radchenko, 2020). The evolution of the Putin’s regime from pragmatism towards embracing an ultra-nationalist and traditionalist ideology has led to an emergence of a de facto alliance – ideological but in some cases also practical – between the Kremlin and the far-right movements in the West. This ideologization of the Russian regime has clear foreign policy implications and limits the possibility for a genuine and durable rapprochement between Russia and the transatlantic community.

2. Russia’s Military Challenge²

11. While Russia can no longer afford to act as an adequate counterweight to the United States in the global arena, it still remains a major global player largely owing to its military might. In parallel to identifying the United States and NATO as the main adversary, the Kremlin has been

² For more details, see 2020 NATO Defence and Security Committee report: [Russian Military Modernisation: Challenges Ahead for NATO Allies](#)

conducting an ambitious military modernization program and boosting its military presence from the Arctic to the Middle East and beyond.

12. Having learned the lessons from the invasion in Georgia in 2008, Russia, under defense minister Anatoly Serdyukov (2007-2012), embarked upon a substantial overhaul of its armed forces. The ultimate goal was to make the Russian forces smaller but more agile, better coordinated, deployable on a short notice and equipped with modern weaponry. Investments in modern equipment soared – some \$640 billion were earmarked for defense modernization for the period until 2020 (Monaghan, 2016). Experts highlight particular progress in developing aerial defense capabilities (such as the S-400), drones, hypersonic weapons, short- and intermediate-range ballistic and cruise missiles as well as electronic warfare (Giles, 2017). Russia also tested a 9M729 (NATO designation: SSC-8 Screwdriver) cruise missile, in what Allies concluded was a violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. The Serdyukov reform also aimed at streamlining the command structure, enhancing the military education system and considerably increasing the salaries of the military personnel.

13. Furthermore, Russian forces are acquiring invaluable real-life experience in Syria and in Ukraine. Russia claims that it has tested some 300 weapon systems in Syria, and, as a result, decided to discard 12 of them (Stoicescu, 2019). Also, tens of thousands of Russian troops were deployed to Syria on a rotational basis, including all the commanders of the military districts, providing opportunities to test command and control and to identify talent (Howard & Czekaj, 2019).

14. Troops and platforms that Russia deploys in its Western regions outnumber those of NATO on the Alliance's eastern flank. It is estimated that Russia has 150,000 military personnel in its Western military district, including about 65,000 in combat units. This does not include about 30,000 rapidly deployable airborne combat troops. Russia's Baltic Fleet has a total of 35 warships and two submarines, while the air power in Russia's Western military district reportedly comprises some 190 fighters, 80 bombers and 160 attack helicopters (Marran, 2021). Russia also deployed substantial anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities in the Baltic and Black Sea regions, including S-400s and nuclear-capable Iskander-M missiles in Kaliningrad district, and, according to Ukrainian sources, in the illegally occupied Crimea. Russia has dramatically increased its presence in the North Atlantic in recent years. New Russian submarines are seen as a growing threat to Allies' vital sea lanes of communication and undersea fibre optic cables linking North America and Europe. Furthermore, the quadrennially-rotating and regionally-focused *Vostok*, *Tsentr*, *Kavkaz*, and *Zapad* military exercises have been conducted on a significantly larger scale as of late. *Zapad* aims to test the ability to rapidly deploy and maneuver Russian forces against potential adversaries on its Western borders. NATO representatives noted the lack of transparency during the conduct of the *Zapad* exercise in 2017. The most recent *Zapad* exercise took place in September 2021. It was the biggest exercise in Eastern Europe since four decades, and the scenario of the drills was offensive, where the West/NATO was portrayed as enemy in a regional- to large-scale conflict.

15. Russia's strategic nuclear forces continue to be central to Russia's military strategy. In line with the New START treaty, Russia deploys about 1,500 warheads on strategic long-range missiles and bombers. In addition, it is estimated that nearly 2,000 warheads are assigned to the so-called non-strategic platforms with shorter ranges. Under Putin, Russia seems to have placed a greater reliance on nuclear weapons and Russian officials' public statements suggest that Moscow does not exclude threatening to use them even during regional conflicts (CRS, July 2020).

16. Gauging Russian defense spending is a complex task. The official defense budget for 2020 was about 3.12 trillion rubles (about \$50 billion according to January 2020 exchange rates). The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the steady nominal growth of Russian defense spending over the years and the official budget for 2021 was again about 3.1 trillion rubles (Marran, 2021) – however, due to the depreciation of the ruble, this amount now translates into about \$43 billion. This would place Russia behind NATO Allies the United States, the United Kingdom, France and

Germany in terms of defense spending. That said, the actual Russian defense spending is believed to be considerably higher. Credible sources such as SIPRI and IISS calculate that Russia spent more than \$60 billion annually on defense in 2019 and 2020. Moreover, since Russia buys equipment and services from its own state companies in rubbles, some experts suggest applying the purchasing power parity (PPP) criteria – in that case, the value of the Russian defense spending would jump to about \$150-180 billion a year (Kofman, 2019). Russia consistently spends about 4% of its GDP on defense.

17. The record of Russian defense modernization is not straightforward. Russia's defense-industrial complex continues to face challenges. For instance, Russia appears unable to mass produce their modern battle tanks, the T-14 Armata. Russia also postponed the delivery of new Sukhoi Su-57 Felon multi-role fighters to the end of 2027, instead of the early 2020s (IISS, 2020). The development of Russia's new submarine-launched ICBM is beset with delays and testing failures (Warsaw Institute, 2017). Russia's evolution towards a more ideological regime seems to have affected the pace of the Serdyukov's reform. According to a prominent Russian military expert Alexander Golts, pragmatists such as Serdyukov are increasingly being replaced within the Russian military establishment by ideologists who believe in the whole-of-society approach to defense as well as in the exceptional qualities of the Russian people as the key resource to win wars (Golts, 2018).

18. There is a clear dilemma of reconciling Russia's global ambitions with its military capabilities. Russia seeks several goals at once: to maintain global power status (hence the need to develop power projection capabilities as well as to retain a significant nuclear arsenal), to retain and expand its control over the 'near abroad' (hence the need to have combat-ready units, A2/AD as well as hybrid capabilities), to protect itself from the perceived NATO threat (hence the need to have the ability to mobilize masses and form large units with formidable firepower), and to preserve the current regime (hence the notion of "fortress Russia" and the possibility of a 'short victorious war' to boost regime popularity). Whether Russia would be able to succeed in all these efforts is highly questionable, given its sluggish economic growth, the existence of sanctions, lack of technological development, and rising domestic discontent. The rational adjustment of competing goals – such as reducing confrontation with the West – seems unlikely given the regime's own interests. If the growth of Russia's military capabilities proves slower than that of its competitors', there is a risk that Russia might hurry to capitalize on its current global and regional clout before it has diminished. The potential increase of Russian brinkmanship in the near- to mid-term would not be surprising.

3. Russian Hybrid Warfare, Cyberattacks, Propaganda and Disinformation

19. While Russia remains one of the world's top military spenders and it concentrates its capabilities on its Western direction, it nevertheless cannot hope to match the collective military capabilities and defense spending of NATO. Moscow is therefore seeking to gain the edge over NATO 'on the cheap' – namely, by widely employing so-called 'hybrid' techniques. Hybrid warfare can be defined as "the use of asymmetrical tactics to probe for and exploit weaknesses via non-military means (such as political, informational, and economic intimidation and manipulation) [that] are backed by the threat of conventional and unconventional military means."³ In NATO's context, 'hybrid warfare' entails a campaign against an ally or the Alliance by means that an adversary would hope would not trigger Article 5 of the Washington Treaty – albeit NATO has declared readiness to defend any Ally against any threat.

³ As defined in the 2015 NATO PA Defence and Security Committee General Report [Hybrid Warfare: NATO's New Strategic Challenge?](#)

20. In 2013, Russia's Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, published an article where he detailed this new form of warfare in which unconventional, disruptive, and deniable methods blur the line between war and peace.⁴ Ukraine was the first target of this new type of warfare. In 2014, using the chaos of the Revolution of Dignity, Russia muddied the waters further by spreading disinformation while Russian forces dressed in regular uniforms lacking insignias, nametags, and ranks swiftly occupied Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula without a declaration of war or even Moscow's acknowledgement that they had sent troops. Following this, Russia organized proxy forces in Ukraine's east and consistently supported them with military manpower and equipment. Though Ukraine was the testing-ground for the more aggressive aspects of Russia's conception of warfare in the modern era as described by Gerasimov, Russia's hybrid tactics have been used throughout Europe to spread disinformation, influence elections, and change perceptions.

21. In the past years, Russia has been relentlessly subverting democracy and the rule of law in Europe by spreading fake news and disinformation, supporting far-right, nationalist, and anti-EU political parties, weaponizing energy resources, and conducting cyberattacks (Taylor, 2019). Some of the most brazen and worrying hybrid efforts where Russia is the main suspect include: the 2014 explosion at an arms depot in the Czech Republic; the 2016 Montenegro coup attempt in the lead-up to NATO accession, where two of the convicted participants were alleged Russian military intelligence agents (Crosby, 2019); attempts by Russian diplomats to sabotage the naming deal between Athens and Skopje in 2018, paving the way for an eventual NATO membership for the Republic of North Macedonia; Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, Brexit referendum, and the indirect-funding – via a loan from a Russian bank – of France's primary Presidential opposition candidate (Taylor, 2019); as well as various cyberattacks that bear all the signs of Moscow's implication, especially the 2015 attack on Ukraine's electrical grid, the first successful attack of its kind, the cyberattack on the German Bundestag in 2015, and the breach of SolarWinds software which allowed Russia to obtain emails from U.S. government agencies including the Treasury, Justice, and Commerce departments (Reuters, 2021). In response to the SolarWinds attack as well as interference in 2020 US elections, President Biden introduced, in April 2021, sanctions on specific Russian individuals and entities. In the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia launched highly publicized aid campaigns to the most-stricken countries, while its propaganda machine portrayed these campaigns as evidence of the efficiency and benevolence of the Russian state, in contrast with the allegedly incompetent Western response. The development of the Sputnik V vaccine was also used as a foreign policy tool by Russia: it was offered extensively to foreign countries, including NATO Allies, despite the fact that Russia did not produce, at the time, enough vaccines for its own citizens. Russian propaganda and internet trolls also spread criticism of and fueled mistrust in American and European vaccines among Western societies.

B. RUSSIA AND CHINA

22. The growing strategic alignment between Russia and the People's Republic of China (henceforth China) is arguably one of the most important elements of the contemporary global geopolitical landscape. During the Cold War, relations between the USSR and China could be described as 'cold peace' at best: they were marred by territorial disputes and ideological differences between the strands of Communism they professed, facilitating the US-China rapprochement in the 1970s and the inclusion of China in the U.S.-led global order. The disputes between Moscow and Beijing naturally disappeared, or were settled, in the post-Cold War period. The rapid growth of China's economic, military and technological power during that period also turned China into a worthy counterpart for Russia: in fact, Russia is currently widely regarded as the junior partner in this relationship.

⁴ Gerasimov did not consider this new type of warfare to be a "Russian" theory of conflict and believed that Western countries were already using this type of warfare against their adversaries, for instance by supporting 'color revolutions' in eastern Europe and the uprisings in the MENA region.

23. Moscow and Beijing are united in their opposition to US global leadership. Both often act in unison on the UN Security Council (UNSC), for instance, blocking UNSC Resolutions on Syria or, more recently, on condemning the military coup in Myanmar. The Sino-Russian partnership particularly intensified in the wake of the sharp deterioration of Russia's relations with the West in 2014: Beijing refrains from criticizing Russia's aggression against its neighbors, and Moscow, likewise, is mute on – or supportive of – Beijing's crackdown on the rule of law in Hong Kong and oppression of Uyghurs. Both countries also oppose open internet and advocate the establishment of an international regime that would authorize states to control online activities, allegedly to tackle terrorist and other security threats. Russia and China increasingly emulate each other's authoritarian practices, such as cracking down on allegedly foreign-funded NGOs or imposing restrictions on social media. Following in their neighbor's footsteps, China has been perpetuating a "Russian-style nihilistic disinformation" campaign against Western vaccines by using state media and online sources (Paun & Luthi, 2021). During the protests in Hong Kong, the state officials had been strategically using emergency coronavirus measures to restrict pro-democracy advocates from gathering, and Russia later used these same tactics to clamp down on pro-Navalny demonstrations (Thiessen, 2020).

24. The military component of Sino-Russian relationship is significant. For China, Russia is an indispensable supplier of advanced military capabilities, and Russian arms exports to China have risen markedly since 2014. China acquired Russian Su-27 and Su-35 fighter aircraft, S-300 and S-400 air defense systems, as well as anti-ship missiles. It is estimated that Russian arms account for some 70% of China's total arms imports (Kendall-Taylor & Shullman, 2021). Russia remains a more significant military power than China owing to its formidable strategic nuclear forces and more advanced airpower projection and A2/AD capabilities, but the balance is changing. China outspends Russia at least 3 times on defense; it is investing heavily in state-of-the-art capabilities such as supersonic cruise missiles, modern drones, and hypersonic weapons; according to the US DoD, China already "has the largest navy in the world" with some 350 ships and submarines (DoD, 2020). China also plans to double its nuclear weapon arsenal within a decade. China, however, lacks operational experience to make full use of its newly acquired hardware. In this regard, Russia provides invaluable support by conducting, since 2005, joint military exercises. Notably, in the framework of the annual Joint Sea maritime exercise, Russian's and Chinese navies conducted drills in the Mediterranean in 2015, and the Baltic Sea in 2017.

25. China dwarfs Russia as an economic power. The two nations have significantly increased their trade volumes and foreign direct investments since 2014, with bilateral trade reaching \$110 billion in 2019. While trade tumbled in the first half of 2020 due to the pandemic, both nations expect to recuperate and continue to grow in 2021 and beyond (Standish, 2020). This economic relationship is both complementary and uneven: Russian exports to China consist mainly of weapons and raw materials, while China sells manufactured products. Since 2010, China is Russia's largest trading partner with 15.5% of Russia's total trade turnover in 2018⁵, while for China trade with Russia accounted for less than 1% of its total trade (Hillman, 2020). China exploited Russia's international isolation in 2014 by securing an agreement, mainly on Chinese terms, to build the first natural gas pipeline – "Power of Siberia" – between the two countries. The pipeline became operational in 2019 and by 2025 it is expected to carry 38 billion cubic meters (bcm) of gas annually – for reference, in 2018, China consumed about 283 bcm, most of it domestically produced. This project enhances the diversification of China's energy imports, but hardly provides Moscow with a significant leverage vis-à-vis Beijing (CRS, April 2020). Moreover, as the EU moves towards climate neutrality by 2050, Russia will gradually lose its most important energy customer and will increasingly depend on China's willingness to purchase Russian hydrocarbons. Despite its efforts, Moscow has not been able to secure a more substantial role in China's Belt and Road Initiative, which largely bypasses Russia.

⁵ The volume of Russia's trade with the EU as a whole, however, is more than double that with China.

26. Despite numerous natural synergies and regular high-level political dialogue – bilaterally as well as in the context of groupings such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) – Moscow and Beijing have not formalized their global ‘division of labor’ and have not formed a hard alliance. There has been no shortage of voices, including in Russia, predicting the imminent collapse of the Sino-Russian axis due to a variety of reasons, including Russia’s cultural proximity to Europe and Russian uneasiness with China’s growing influence in the Arctic and Central Asia. Conversely, Russia also cultivates close relations with China’s regional competitors India and Vietnam. However, Chinese leaders and diplomats have so far managed to assuage Russian fears and to demonstrate that they treat Russia as an equal partner. Even if increasingly powerful China can potentially challenge Russia’s national interests in the long run, this threat is arguably considered too distant in comparison with a more immediate challenge of ensuring the stability of the Putin regime (Ziegler, 2021).

27. China’s growing assertiveness prompted a number of prominent voices on both sides of the Atlantic to urge re-engagement with Russia in order to prevent the emergence of a unified anti-Western Sino-Russian bloc. However, unless the Euro-Atlantic community is willing to make major concessions to Russia, including those that could compromise the interests of NATO’s eastern European Allies and partners, it is highly unlikely that Moscow would reverse its current course towards closer alignment with Beijing. The Sino-Russian partnership is built on the strong convergence of interests and underpinned by growing socialization between political classes and societies of both countries. Any attempts to drive a wedge between Russia and China are likely to be futile and possibly backfire. In their relations with both China and Russia, the Euro-Atlantic community should demonstrate consistency, predictability and commitment to the rules-based order.

C. RUSSIA AND THE BROADER MENA REGION

28. Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia’s influence in the Middle East dissipated. However, under President Putin, Russia has re-emerged as an important factor in the geopolitics of the broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Russian activism is driven by several factors: 1) raising its political prestige; 2) ideological – in line with the Kremlin’s general aversion to regime change by means of popular uprising, Russia tends to support old Arab regimes, especially those with roots in pan-Arabism and Arab socialism, such as the Ba’ath Party, that were once sponsored by the Soviet Union; 3) economic – mainly in terms of arms sales to the region and some energy cooperation; and 4) practical – to hone its military power projection and command and control capabilities. In addition, Russia regional activism also increased because it could – as a result of the West’s MENA fatigue as well as new power projection opportunities offered by Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea. Russia uses Crimea as a base for warships with the ability to project power over the Middle East, in particular through their ability to use the Kalibr cruise missile’s 1,500 km range.

29. Russia’s military involvement in the Syrian Civil War has been one of the defining features of its foreign policy as well as a major factor in the evolving geopolitical landscape of the Middle East more broadly. Russia’s presence in Syria radically changed the outcome of the war. It allowed Russia to establish a strategic foothold in the region by expanding its previously limited military presence in the Syrian port of Tartus. It also signaled to leaders in the region that Moscow is an ally they can count on in hard times (Rumer, 2019). As the war on the ground is winding down, Russia is now focused on Syria’s politics as well as potential economic benefits from the eventual rebuilding of Syria — estimated to cost \$350 billion (Vohra, 2019). When it comes to both the prospect of influencing Syrian politics as well as reconstruction, Russia has one main competitor which also holds immense sway over the Assad regime: Iran.

30. Russia and Iran’s relationship is based on shared aspirations to combat U.S. influence, which includes their partnership in Syria, Russia’s vetoing of resolutions against Iran at the UN, and their work together to improve the 2015 Iran nuclear deal in Iran’s favor (Geranmayeh & Liik,

2016). Economically, bilateral trade rose from \$1.74 billion in 2018 to \$2 billion in 2019 and Iran also experienced a large rise in exports to nations within the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) since signing a free trade deal. The pair has also worked closely to better connect their economies through infrastructure projects, such as Moscow's plans to build a new port on the Caspian Sea to enhance Russian-Iranian trade flows and better connect Russia to Indian Ocean trade routes (Vatanka, 2020). For the most part, Russian-Iranian relations are a win-win. However, differences remain, especially over their interests and long-term objectives in Syria — and to a lesser extent, Central Asia — as well as holding strikingly different positions on Israel.

31. President Putin and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu have vastly expanded Russian-Israeli relationship. This relationship is clearly based on more than just bilateral trade as well — numbering \$5 billion. According to Russia, about two million of their former countrymen — Russian-speaking Jews hailing from the former Soviet Union — live in Israel. This, along with Israel's advanced technology and economy, as well as their significant geopolitical role in the Levant, are all factors which have encouraged Russia to closely engage with Israel (Kozhanov, 2020). Russia's relationship with Israel is a delicate balancing act though. Israel and Iran are enemies and Moscow often remains silent when Israel conducts airstrikes on Iranian targets in Syria. On the other hand, Russia has been lobbied by Israel to not sell S-300 air-defense systems to Syria and Iran, which it did anyways; yet at the same time Russia has refused to sell the more advanced S-400 (Rumer, 2019).

32. The Gulf States are not inclined to be natural partners of Russia. Russia and the Gulf States have relatively insignificant bilateral trade, most are opposed to Russia's role in Syria and Russia's partnership with arch-rival Iran and are close allies of the United States. However, the Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia, have been exploring opportunities for closer cooperation with other partners, including Russia, in response to what they perceive as declining US interest in the region. The historic 2017 visit to Moscow by Saudi King Salman signaled a new relationship and came with billions of dollars' worth of bilateral promises on everything from oil to arms (Wintour, 2017). Most of these investment promises have yet to be materialized, however. The tenuous nature of this partnership was revealed in March 2020 when Russia and Saudi Arabia were battling over reducing oil output (Belenkaya, 2020). Though relations between Russia and the Gulf States have since settled and overall have been on an upward trajectory over recent years, it is still a fact that Russia remains a competitor to Gulf oil producers and not an ally, while at the same time possessing no ability to offer them commercial opportunities to diversify their economies (Rumer, 2019).

33. Russia's activities in the Maghreb have centered on oil and arms exports with a focus on three countries — Egypt, Libya, and Algeria. Upset by the Obama administration's recognition of his predecessor Mohamed Morsi, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt seeks to expand security partnerships beyond Egypt's long-standing alliance with the United States. In October 2018, Egypt announced a strategic partnership agreement with Russia and the two have since expanded their economic and military ties — including the agreement on the Dabaa nuclear power plant construction by Russia's Rosatom, and even potential purchase of Su-35 fighter jets by Egypt (a move that could trigger US sanctions under 2017 Countering Russian Influence in Europe and Eurasia Act) (Sharp, 2020). Overall, however, the record of Russo-Egyptian partnership has not been impressive: Russia lacks the investment heft that Egypt critically needs, and Egypt is not willing to give up its strong ties with the United States by providing Russia the military basing and cooperation it wants (Rumer, 2019). When it comes to Libya, Russia supports General Khalifa Haftar — mainly through the Wagner Group, a mercenary organization made up of ex-Russian servicemen which is likely controlled by the Russian government (Reynolds, 2019) — and it hopes that this support will materialize into military presence and economic gains in the long-term. Russia has also cultivated, since the Soviet times, close ties with Algeria, a major buyer of Russian weapons. In fact, Algerian arms acquisitions are such a significant aspect of the Russian-Algerian bilateral trade that Russian exports to Algeria are over 450 times greater than the meagre importation of Algerian products by Russia. Algeria is also a major oil supplier of Europe and a

member of OPEC, and when it comes to energy, much like how the Gulf States see it, Russia is more of a competitor than an ally, and although Russia's Lukoil and Algeria's Sonatrach have signed agreements of cooperation and exploration, little has come of it (Mohammedi, 2021).

34. Russia is also trying to expand its influence in Africa beyond the Maghreb. In late 2020, Sudan reportedly agreed to allow Russia to set up a naval base on the Red sea for up to four ships and 300 personnel, which would give Russia an important foothold in the strategic region between the Suez Canal and the Gulf of Aden (the deal has been subsequently put on hold). The Wagner Group was also reportedly deployed in Sudan, as well as in the Central African Republic, and a number of other African countries. Overall, Russia's official presence in the Sahel has increased significantly since 2019, specifically in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. Russia aims to gain long-term economic and political influence in the region and present itself as an alternative to other important players, such as France (Sukhankin, 2020).

III. RUSSIA AND ITS IMMEDIATE NEIGHBOURHOOD

A. RUSSIA AND THE POLITICAL UPHEAVAL IN BELARUS⁶

35. No other country in the post-Soviet space has been closer to Russia politically, historically and culturally than Belarus. According to the 2009 census, 70% of the population speaks Russian as their main language and only 23% spoke Belarusian (CRS, 2021). The two countries have formally created a "union state" in December 1999, albeit most of its provisions have yet to be implemented. The country's dictator Alexander Lukashenko, in power since 1994, occasionally flirted with the West and made concessions such as releasing some political prisoners in 2015, but mainly in order to induce Russia to make concessions, especially in terms of receiving Russian oil and gas at reduced prices.

36. Ideologically, the Lukashenko regime has been cultivating the Soviet Belarusian identity, including the re-introduction of the Soviet Belarus flag and coat of arms, nurturing memories of the Second World War and promoting the notion of Russia as Belarus' 'older brother'. However, during the 30 years of independence, Belarusian society, and lately even Lukashenko himself, are increasingly embracing a wider interpretation of the Belarusian identity, including drawing on the nation's medieval past when it was part of the European cultural sphere. The competition between these two identities is manifested optically in the Belarusian protests of 2020-21, where the demonstrators widely and almost exclusively use the national white-red-white flag, the *Pahonia* coat of arms and the Belarusian-language slogan "Zhivye Belarus" ("Long live, Belarus"), while the government supporters use the official Soviet-era flag.

37. The Belarusian upheaval in 2020 is an expression of these ongoing fundamental changes in Belarusian society. The regime clearly anticipated some potential discontent in the leadup to the August 9 Presidential election, and Lukashenko initially chose the tactics of presenting himself as the protector of Belarus's independence from Russian encroachment. Lukashenko even accused Russia of interference in the campaign and arrested 33 Russian "mercenaries" accused of working with the Belarussian opposition and plotting 'terrorism' in a bizarre spectacle which ended in the men's release following the election (Euractiv, 2020). However, when Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, in place of her imprisoned husband, unexpectedly garnered immense public and electoral support, Lukashenko turned not only towards a brutal crackdown on mass protests, but also called on Putin for help, invoking the rhetoric of Russians and Belarusians being the same nation under assault by the West.

⁶ For more details on developments in Belarus, see the NATO PA's 2021 ESCTD report, [Belarus, Political, Economic and Diplomatic Challenges](#).

38. Moscow remained relatively quiet in the days following the rigged election. Given that the protesters had no overt pro-Western or anti-Russian sentiments, if Moscow pushed too hard to prop-up Lukashenko they risked influencing Belarusians pro-Russian perceptions in a negative way (Sestanovich, 2020). Moscow also had to assess the potential opportunity to push the cornered Belarusian dictator into accepting further integration.

39. When the protests reached a critical stage however, and Lukashenko's grip on power seemed unassured, Russia, fearing radical change in Belarus and potential protests of their own, quickly stepped in to help. First, Russia reportedly provided two planes filled with Russian journalists to shore up the Belarusian state media and propaganda apparatus after a number of journalists and other staff resigned or were fired from their positions (Luxmoore, 2020). Second, Putin announced the creation of a reserve of Russian law enforcement officers on standby to be deployed to Belarus if "the situation starts getting out of control" (Moscow Times, 2020). Third, when Lukashenko met Putin in Sochi in September 2020, the regime was granted a \$1.5 billion loan. In a series of subsequent meetings, Putin and Lukashenko discussed further assistance to Belarus, especially as the EU and the US introduced wide-ranging economic sanctions and airspace blockade in the wake of the illegal diversion of the Ryanair flight by Minsk in order to arrest an opposition journalist, Roman Protasevich. Finally, Russia provided political support, through statements and in-person summits, to the Lukashenko regime which pushed Belarus into a pariah status due to indiscriminate repressions, torture and intimidation of its population and endangering safety of European citizens during the abovementioned incident of the diverted airliner. In turn, Lukashenko's public remarks have markedly changed since the upheaval started, and he now regularly heaps praise upon Russia and Putin and promises that Belarus will never change its allegiance from Russia towards other countries (Walker, 2020).

40. Russian aid to Lukashenko is not free however, and it certainly comes with strings attached. So far, Russia has earned clear military concessions from Belarus, with the two countries adopting a common military doctrine and a Russian-Belarusian "regional grouping of forces", as well as intensified talks regarding an integrated advanced air defense system. Since August 2020, Russian forces have been conducting training activities in Belarus on a monthly basis. A new Russian-Belarusian joint training center has been established in Belarus near Grodno with the presence of Russian trainers. In September 2021, Russian Su-30SM planes were deployed in Baranovichi with a mandate to jointly patrol the aerial borders of the Russian-Belarusian Union State. Lavrov has also already stated that Belarus' upcoming 2021 chairmanship of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) will be used to advance Belarusian-Russian integration, and Russia has also sought to quickly settle trade disputes with Belarus within the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), as well as exploit the constitutional amendment process in order to formalize Belarusian integration with Russia via the Union State (Barros, 2020). If the Lukashenko regime survives in the near term, the independence of Belarus risks being further curtailed – Lukashenko is likely to be further weakened by Belarus's gradual loss of energy leverage and income. Russia has actively sought ways to bypass Belarus and Ukraine to supply oil and gas directly to EU countries via the NordStream pipeline, while also attempting to change the way in which oil and gas is taxed by 2024. The latter will deprive Belarus of its ability to buy Russian crude at below-market prices — therefore substantially cutting into Belarusian energy reexport profits (Shraibman, 2020).

41. The outcome of the political crisis in Belarus is very difficult to predict. On the one hand, the opposition is motivated to continue protests due to wide conviction among their ranks that Tsikhanouskaya won a landslide victory in the August 2020 elections. The legitimacy of Lukashenko is widely questioned not only in Belarus, but also internationally as leaders of democratic countries hesitate to refer to Lukashenko as 'president'. While the opposition continues to emphasize that the uprising is not anti-Russian in nature, the intervention of Putin on the side of Lukashenko certainly affects the public perception of partnership with Russia. For instance, the survey amongst young Belarusians by the Berlin-based Centre for East European and International Studies found that 55% of respondents agree that Belarus should seek closer cooperation with the

EU even if it meant estrangement from Russia (Krawatzek, 2020). That said, the majority of Belarusians at this stage favor a dual-track approach of co-operating with both Russia and the EU (OSW, 2021).

B. THE CONTINUING AGGRESSION IN GEORGIA AND UKRAINE

42. Russia's violation of Georgian and Ukrainian territorial integrity and the continued destabilization of these NATO and EU aspirants has been addressed extensively in NATO PA reports, resolutions, and statements. These destabilizing activities continued in 2020 and 2021, despite the ongoing pandemic.

43. In **Ukraine**, Russian and Russian-backed militants continue to fuel the armed conflict in Ukraine's eastern regions, which has cost more than 13,000 lives since 2014 and displaced more than 1.5 million Ukrainian citizens. The reinforced ceasefire was agreed to in July 2020, including the removal of heavy equipment from the frontline, and led to a reduction of incidents. However, in the beginning of 2021, Russian proxies have re-intensified the shelling of Ukrainian positions, including the use of banned hardware. By April 2021, Russia moved massive amounts of combat-ready forces to the border of Ukraine and into the occupied Crimea. The scale of this rapid build-up – more than 100,000 troops, according to the Ukrainian forces – was unparalleled since the invasion into Ukraine in 2014. Allied leaders and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg expressed serious concern about these developments, while Gerald E. Connolly, President of the NATO PA, called the build-up “reckless and irresponsible” and called on Russia “to step back from its provocation and escalation and return to responsible behaviour and diplomacy”. Leaders of the Euro-Atlantic community reaffirmed their solidarity with Ukraine in the face of Russia's destabilizing actions.

44. While Russia subsequently announced the withdrawal of its troops, President Connolly noted “we should not let ourselves be fooled by what some will present as ‘de-escalation’. The reality is that Russia has been building up its military presence in Crimea since 2014. And that it continues to escalate through other means.” According to US Defense Department officials, in September 2021, some 80,000 Russian troops as well as significant amounts of military equipment remained near the Ukrainian border (Cooper & Barnes, 2021). Russia once again demonstrated its reckless behavior on 23 June 2021, when the Russian military and border guards threatened to attack the British Royal Navy's HMS Defender sailing from Odessa to a port in Georgia. The incident occurred in the vicinity of the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea, which Moscow illegally claims to be a part of Russia. On 12 July 2021, Mr Putin published a lengthy article “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” condescending and full of historical inaccuracies and distortions, where he belittled Ukrainian statehood and reduced to an artificial entity separated from Russia and currently steered by foreign powers. He also presented a series of thinly disguised territorial claims and asserted that Ukraine as a sovereign state can only exist in close partnership with Russia, thus de facto denying Ukraine the right to choose its alliances. Some analysts interpreted the article as an ideological groundwork for a potential new wave of aggression against Ukraine (Dickinson, 2021).

45. The “Normandy Four” peace talks between Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany continue to show little-to-no progress: their meetings only take place at the level of political officers and there was no summit or ministerial-level meeting since 2019. The latest round of talks at the level of political advisors in April 2021 has reportedly ended without yielding results (Reuters, 2021). The main shortcoming of the format is Russia's participation as a mediator rather than as a participant of the conflict. Ukraine calls for the expansion of the Normandy format and the inclusion of the United States as a potential way to break the deadlock. Russia is opposed to the idea (Socor, 2021). In February 2021, on the sixth anniversary of the Minsk II accords, the U.S. and the European members of the UN Security Council as well as Germany issued a statement condemning Russia's continued fueling of the conflict via financial and military support to its local proxies, continued deployment of forbidden military equipment and continued denial of access to

the Donbas segment of the Ukrainian-Russian border to OSCE monitors (Euroactiv, 2021). Moscow's unilateral decision in September 2021 not to extend the mandate of the OSCE Border Observer Mission at the Russian checkpoints Gukovo and Donetsk is particularly deplorable. Despite the expressed desire of Russian-controlled local puppets to be annexed by Russia, Moscow has refrained from such a move – both due to the cost of reconstructing the devastated region, estimated to be more than \$20 billion (Reznikov, 2021), and because maintaining frozen conflicts has proven to be an effective tool to derail the Euro-Atlantic integration of Russia's former satellites.

46. Russia continues to violate human rights in the illegally occupied and annexed Crimea. According to the EU, during the seven years of occupation, the "residents of the peninsula face systematic restrictions of their fundamental freedoms" (EEAS, 2021). The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) said they regularly receive "credible information alleging torture and ill-treatment by the Russian Federation's security service and police in Crimea of individuals deprived of liberty" (Unian, 2021). In particular, Russia has systematically oppressed the Crimean Tatar community, including closing their media outlets, persecuting their leaders and designating their self-governing body – the Mejlis – as a terrorist organization. In September 2021, Deputy Head of Mejlis Nariman Dzhelial and several other Crimean Tatar activists were arrested. Russia has also violated international law and its own agreement with Ukraine by building a bridge between Crimea and Russia and de facto curtailing Ukraine's rights of free navigation in the Azov Sea. In 2018, Russia illegally captured three Ukrainian naval vessels exercising their right to free passage. Russia has also conducted Duma elections on the territories of Crimea and certain regions of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, which constitutes a gross violation of the international law.

47. In an attempt to revive international attention to the Crimean issue, Ukraine launched, in October 2020, the 'Crimean Platform' – a strategy on the de-occupation of Crimea which involves collaborative efforts on four levels: heads of state and government, foreign and defense ministers, the inter-parliamentary level and the expert level. The inaugural summit of the Crimea Platform took place in Kyiv on 23 August 2021 at Heads of State and Government level. In April 2021, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly established an informal support group for the Crimea Platform. The group aims to promote NATO PA members' awareness of developments related to Crimea and maintain support for the non-recognition of Russia's illegal annexation. This group would examine how the NATO PA could contribute to the objectives agreed at the Crimea Platform Summit. Three leading members of the NATO PA – Ojars Eriks Kalnins of Latvia, Prof. h.c. Dr Karl A. Lamers of Germany and Rick Larsen of the United States, and three of their counterparts from the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine – First Deputy Chairman Ruslan Stefanchuk, Head of the NATO PA delegation Yehor Cherniev and Deputy Head Solomiia Bobrovska – committed to lead the supporting efforts to remobilize international attention on Russia's illegal occupation of Crimea and its multi-faceted impact. The first meeting of the group took place on the heels of Russia's massive military build-up in and around Ukraine, including in Crimea. NATO PA President Congressman Gerald E. Connolly reiterated on several occasions the firm position of NATO Parliamentarians that the Allies will never accept the illegal occupation of Crimea. At the NATO Summit in June 2021, Allied leaders reiterated that they would "not recognize Russia's illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea".

48. Ukraine continues to be the laboratory for Russia's propaganda and disinformation techniques. Russian propagandists relentlessly belittle the country's democratic achievements and exaggerate every problem in Ukraine in an attempt to demonstrate to the Russian public that democracy and pro-Western orientation leads to disaster. Fact-check entities such as StopFake.org and the EU East Stratcom Task Force report on Russian anti-Ukrainian propaganda and fake news nearly on a daily basis. In response to these activities, President Volodymyr Zelensky imposed, in February 2021, a package of sanctions which took three TV channels charged with conveying pro-Kremlin narratives off the air. Kyiv links these three TV channels with businessman and politician Viktor Medvedchuk, whom Kyiv considers the main representative of Putin in Ukraine. The move was justified on national security grounds, albeit it

was criticised by some rights watchdogs and EU officials. The United States, however, supported "Ukraine's effort to counter Russia's malign influence in line with Ukrainian law, in defense of its sovereignty and territorial integrity." (RFE/RL, 2021).

49. **Georgia**, also a victim of Russia's aggression since 2008, has been engulfed for months in an internal political crisis since their parliamentary elections in late 2020. The leader of Georgia's main opposition party United National Movement, Nika Melia, was prosecuted for allegedly organizing "mass violence" during the protests prompted by the incident in June 2019, when a controversial Russian parliamentarian Sergei Gavrilov, assumed the seat of the chair of the Georgian parliament where a meeting of lawmakers from Orthodox countries was taking place. Melia denied the charges. The prosecution of Melia⁷ and the opposition's claims that the 2020 elections were rigged⁸ led to the months of boycott of the new parliament by main opposition parties. While this political crisis was mainly of domestic origin and was driven by deepening political polarization, Russia is its clear geopolitical beneficiary as crises like this could make it more difficult to mobilize support within the West for accelerating Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

50. However, following repeated calls from the international community, including the NATO PA, and thanks to the mediation efforts by European Council President Charles Michel, Georgian politicians demonstrated statesmanship and agreed to end the political deadlock. The 19 April Agreement brokered by Mr Michel was initially signed only by the Georgian Dream and minor opposition political parties in Georgia, but the opposition eventually returned to the parliament once the ruling party agreed to significant concessions. While the political situation in Georgia remains tense, especially in the run-up to the local elections later in 2021, which will serve as a test for the ruling majority, the demonstrated ability by Georgian politicians to find a compromise for the sake of national interests bodes well for the Georgian democracy and its Euro-Atlantic integration. While Georgia stands out as the regional leader in terms of democracy and civil society development, its Euro-Atlantic partners continue to call for additional reforms and criticize what they see as shortcomings: more recently, the United States said it was "deeply troubled" with Georgian Parliament's approval of six Supreme Court judges prior to the implementation of an inclusive and comprehensive judicial reform (AP, 2021), while the EU condemned instances of homophobic violence and attacks on journalists (Civil.ge, 2021). The US officials and politicians have also expressed their disappointment with the decision of the ruling party to withdraw, in July 2021, from the 19 April Agreement and the continuing refusal of the main opposition to fully embrace the Agreement (Gillespie, 2021), (U.S. Embassy in Georgia, 2021).

51. Despite repeated calls, Russia, in violation of the EU-mediated ceasefire agreement, continues the 'borderization' activities reinforcing the physical separation between the Tbilisi-controlled territories and the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia under de facto Russian occupation which Moscow recognizes as 'independent republics'. Russia closed, since September 2019, many of the crossing points of the administrative border line, impeding people-to-people contacts with regions under de facto Russian occupation (Civil.ge, 2020). The 53rd round of the Geneva talks to tackle the aftermath of the 2008 Russian-Georgia War conflict was held in June 2021. While important issues were raised, including the borderisation and militarization of the occupied regions and the humanitarian situation, there were little practical results beyond "a substantive and frank exchange of views" (Civil.ge, 2021c).

⁷ Mr Melia was subsequently released on bail posted by the EU.

⁸ International observers, including the NATO PA delegation, assessed the first round of the Georgian parliamentary elections as competitive and that, overall, fundamental freedoms had been respected. However, international observers expressed concern about significant issues related to the implementation of the electoral framework during the campaign and on election day.

52. Russia also continues to build-up its military presence in the occupied territories and to integrate them into the Russian economic space, thus carrying out de-facto annexation of the two territories. Grave violations of human rights in Russian-controlled territories include deprivation of right to life, torture and inhuman treatment, restriction of freedom of movement, illegal detentions and kidnappings, violation of right to property, restriction of right to health and education, including teaching mother tongue to Georgian students, ethnic discrimination, and hampering hundreds of thousands of IDPs and refugees expelled from their homes. Russia maintains two illegal military bases in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions of Georgia, which are under the command of Russia's Southern Military District. Each of the bases is housing around 4,500 militaries. The Russian FSB "border guards" are also present in the occupied territories. The military bases are well armed and equipped with modern sophisticated offensive military equipment, including long-range artillery, anti-aircraft defense systems and Electronic Warfare capabilities. Amid ongoing military build-up, Russia holds illegal military exercises in occupied territories of Georgia. According to the Georgian sources, since 2012, around 592 exercises have been conducted in Abkhazia region and around 336 in Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia. Russia's military exercises in Georgia's vicinity include the large scale annual strategic-operational exercise "Kavkaz".

53. Russia's role in the escalation and eventual truce of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict in 2020 was a source of concern for Georgia. Tbilisi has a direct stake in the peaceful resolution of the conflict for a number of reasons: the risk of even bigger Russian military presence in the South Caucasus, the potential impact on pipelines and other transit infrastructure that run from Azerbaijan through Georgia further to the west and the risk of antagonizing sizeable Armenian and/or Azerbaijani communities in Georgia (Seskuria, 2020). Georgia's Western partners welcomed Georgia's assistance in facilitating the release of 15 Armenian prisoners of war in exchange for maps showing the location of landmines in the Karabakh region. NATO and the NATO Parliamentary Assembly continue to support the efforts of the OSCE Minsk Group to find a peaceful solution to this conflict.

C. RUSSIA AND THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

54. Despite the significant geographic separation and the lack of a common border, Russia remains an essential source of influence on Moldovan politics, economics, and strategic choices. One of Europe's poorest countries sandwiched between Romania and Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova (henceforth Moldova) has been swinging back and forth between pro-European and pro-Russian geopolitical inclinations. For Moscow, Moldova is not a country of truly strategic interest, but its internal fragility, political vacillation, separatism in Transnistria and susceptibility to Russian soft power allow Moscow to retain a degree of control and prevent European integration without investing significant political, economic, or military resources.

55. In November 2020, the pro-European and US-educated candidate Maia Sandu, convincingly defeated the incumbent, Russian-backed Igor Dodon, in the presidential elections. The new president pledged to accelerate the country's European transformation and tackle pervasive corruption. However, the president's constitutional mandate is limited and Sandu lacked support in the parliament, which was dominated by the supporters of Dodon. The parliament refused to endorse the cabinet of ministers proposed by Sandu. To end the standoff, snap elections were held on 11 July 2021 and ended in a sweeping victory for Sandu's Party of Action and Solidarity, winning 63 seats in a 101-seat parliament. The pro-Russian Electoral Bloc of Communists and Socialists received 32 seats. Sandu's and her party's electoral victory was widely welcomed in the EU, but Moldovan people have yet to demonstrate that the current pro-European course is irreversible. Moldova has also yet to demonstrate tangible results in combatting corruption and to overcome the reputational damage caused by the 2014 corruption scandal when \$1 billion was stolen from three Moldovan banks.

56. The status of Moldova's breakaway region of Transnistria remains unresolved. The region declared its sovereignty with the crucial help of Russia's 14th army in the early 1990s. Within a

decade, Russian military presence has been considerably reduced, reportedly to about 1,400-2,000 troops, many of them tasked with guarding a massive ammunition depot in Cobasna. In addition, Transnistrian authorities have armed forces of their own, more numerous and better equipped than those of the Moldovan central government (Necsutu, 2021). Sandu called for the withdrawal of remaining Russian forces and their replacement with a civilian OSCE mission. Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov brusquely rejected the idea as 'irresponsible' (RFE/RL, 2020). Sandu also supports the resumption of talks on the future of Transnistria within the "5+2" format that includes Russia, Ukraine, the OSCE, the United States, the European Union, the Moldovan government and the Transnistrian authorities. The prospects of an ultimate settlement is not high, and given the current level of tensions with the West, Russia is not likely to endorse the reunification of Moldova. On the other hand, of all Russian-backed frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space, the situation in Transnistria is the least acute, and there is a degree of economic interaction and people-to-people contacts between Transnistria and the rest of Moldova, not least because of the interest of the Transnistria elites in economic benefits offered by the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement between Moldova and the EU (Wolff, 2020).

57. Moldova does not seek NATO membership, but its pro-European governments engaged in practical cooperation with NATO on defense reform, defense education, addressing corruption in armed forces, and disposing dangerous chemicals, inter alia. Moldova also contributed to the NATO mission in Kosovo. To further facilitate collaboration, at the request of the Moldovan government, a civilian NATO Liaison Office in Chisinau was established in December 2017. President Dodon actively but unsuccessfully sought to close the office. In addition to supporting the country's reforms, the Liaison Office supports training of public information specialists within the country's armed forces and plays an important role in providing public information on NATO – an important task given the pervasive presence of Kremlin state propaganda mouthpieces in Moldovan TV and print media spaces (Euronews, 2020).

IV. RUSSIA'S INTERNAL POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

58. Since coming to power in 2000, Putin has incrementally constructed his "power vertical" by gradually subjugating major TV channels, the Duma and the autonomy of Russian regions as well as taking away businesses of defiant oligarchs such as Mikhail Khodorkovsky and replacing them with his cronies such as Gennady Timchenko, Yuri Kovalchuk and the Rotenberg brothers. While at the beginning of his rule he relied extensively on the expertise of market-friendly economists, such as then Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, finance minister Alexei Kudrin and presidential advisor Andrey Illarionov, already by the mid-2010s the backbone of Putin's power was consolidated around the so-called siloviki faction - representatives of the security services and the military - including currently highly influential figures Nikolay Patrushev, Secretary of the Security Council of Russia, Igor Sechin, head of Russia's oil giant Rosneft, Alexander Bortnikov, head of the KGD successor FSB, and Sergey Shoigu, minister of defence.

59. According to the Freedom House ratings, Russia fell into the "not free" category in 2003, and the democracy situation has been consistently deteriorating, apart from a brief period of thaw in 2010-2011, when mass protests following the rigged Duma elections forced Putin's hand-picked president Dmitry Medvedev to make some concessions. Having returned to the presidency in 2012, Putin swiftly reversed these concessions.

60. Often considered a legalist, Putin managed to construct a hard-authoritarian system where attributes of a democracy – such as constitutionally-enshrined rights and freedoms, elections, the parliament, multi-party system and the judicial system – formally exist but have lost any real meaning. For instance, those willing to use the right of the freedom of assembly must receive a permit from the authorities – and the absence of such permit makes the brutal crackdown on protesters formally "legal". In the elections, strong opposition candidates are routinely barred from

being put on a ballot for trumped up reasons, such as legal conviction by the government-controlled courts or alleged inaccuracies in signatures collected to support the candidacy. Voters usually only have a choice between four mainstream parties – Putin’s United Russia, the Communist Party, the ‘Liberal Democrats’ (in fact, a far-right ultranationalist party), and Fair Russia (a left-wing spin-off of United Russia). The difference between these four parties is artificial – all four support an anti-Western policy course. The Duma is nothing more than an extension of the Russian government, which was the main reason why the dialogue with Russian legislators within the NATO Parliamentary Assembly has been increasingly frustrating and futile. Russian participation in the Assembly activities was ended in 2014 as a result of the Duma’s nearly unanimous support of the illegal annexation of Crimea and its endorsement of the use of force against Ukraine.

61. With minor exceptions such as the Ekho Moskvyy radio station and Dozhd Internet-based TV channel, the Russian media space is dominated by government propaganda that has been aggressively brainwashing the audience and instilling them with anti-Western narratives for two decades. Any critics of the Kremlin are systematically mocked, defamed, and portrayed as enemies of Russia. Just like in Belarus, Putin’s propagandists reject the idea that the people of their country calling for a change of leadership might be acting on their own initiative rather than on orders from the United States. The internet has been the only relatively free space for Russians to receive and exchange uncensored information. Due to a more decentralized internet architecture than that in China, it is more challenging for the Russian authorities to impose the similar degree of control on online activities. However, the Kremlin has been increasingly preparing ground for potential limitation of the access to internet within Russia: it subdued Russia’s popular social media platform VKontakte and forced the messaging app Telegram to co-operate with the authorities. In December 2020, Putin signed a law that would allow the authorities to restrict the use of Western social media, if it fails to comply with Russian demands regarding the contents. Influential voices in Russia are calling for a complete ban of Western social media on the Russian segment of the Internet. YouTube is particularly annoying to the regime as it was widely used by the Kremlin’s chief critic Alexey Navalny to expose the extraordinary level of corruption in Russia. For instance, Navalny’s documentary on Putin’s alleged palace was viewed more than 100 million times within a week of its release in January 2021. However, the Kremlin reportedly hesitates to widely exercise Internet censorship as the move could antagonize internet users, especially the youth, who are otherwise apolitical (Troianovski, 2021).

62. The year 2020 and the beginning of 2021 have not been easy for the regime. The COVID-19 situation in Russia quickly worsened by April 2020, and at the time Russian actions against the spread of COVID was generally been viewed as slow and inconsistent, and domestic health services have struggled to cope (Mankoff, 2020). In April 2020, President Putin’s approval rating hit a historic low of 59%, having been as high as 69% just two months earlier (Ellyatt, 2020). Russia remains one of the most COVID affected countries to date, though President Putin’s approval ratings somewhat rebounded and were estimated around 66% in June 2021 (Levada, 2021). Approval ratings of the ruling United Russia party are far lower – around 27% in March 2021, according to an independent pollster Levada Center (Reuters, 2021). Despite the pandemic, the regime pushed through, in a referendum in late June, a number of hastily drafted constitutional changes – some cosmetic, others reflecting the ultra-patriotic conservative ideology. These changes served as a legal shroud to solve the essential problem of how to extend Putin’s stay in power beyond the end of his second consecutive (fourth in total) presidency term in 2024. According to the convenient interpretation of Putin’s Constitutional court, these constitutional changes ‘annul’ all previous presidential terms and allow Putin to be elected for two more terms – until 2036. Whether or not Putin really expects to stay in power until 2036 and possibly beyond, or whether the move was merely intended to provide Putin with a choice in 2024 and to prevent the frantic search of an heir in the upcoming years is a matter of Russia-experts’ debate. The findings of the Navalny investigations suggest that the wealth allegedly accumulated by Putin is formally registered under names of his associates, which might disincentivize him from ever leaving office.

63. The attempted assassination of Navalny using military-grade Novichok nerve agent in August 2020 caused an outcry not only within the free world, but also in Russian society. The independent investigation by Bellingcat experts provided damning evidence that the attempt was carried out by Russian secret services. Concrete culprits were identified and one of them even de facto confessed to the crime in a telephone conversation with Navalny himself. Moreover, Bellingcat also collected evidence that the team of special Russian agents was carrying out such activities for years and was responsible for numerous acts of mysterious poisoning of politicians, activists, journalists, even poets that happened to be the regime's opponents – in Russia, as well as abroad, as evident from the poisoning of defected Russian operatives Litvinenko and Skripal. Pressed with evidence, the confused Russian propaganda turned to the usual tactics of disseminating numerous and often mutually exclusive conspiracy theories: from denying that Navalny was poisoned, to accusing German doctors, Western security services and even his wife of administering the nerve agent.

64. Upon his return to Russia, Navalny was immediately arrested and soon afterwards sentenced to 2,5 years in jail in what was a blatant travesty of justice for an alleged past crime and disregarding the European Court of Human Rights' ruling on this case. The actions of the authorities prompted spontaneous mass demonstrations across Russia, despite cold winter temperatures, pandemic restrictions and the lack of official permits for the demonstrations. The protests were brutally suppressed and more than 5,000 people were arrested on 31 January alone. Whether the protests indicate major changes undergoing in Russian society remains to be seen, but it is noteworthy that the signs of discontent were clearly visible before the Navalny poisoning and arrest – Since July 2020, thousands of people in the Siberian city of Khabarovsk had been demonstrating regularly against the dismissal of a popular governor Sergei Furgal. The events in Belarus were also actively followed and commented on in Russian society.

65. The upcoming Duma elections in September 2021 can be expected to increase the political temperature in the country. The authorities have already indicated that many opposition candidates will not be registered. Navalny's anti-corruption organization was officially labeled 'extremist', putting it in the same category as ISIS and Al Qaeda. With an Orwellian twist, the authorities now have the formal right to dismiss from the election, or even jail, anyone who is 'associated with an extremist organisation' – a broad definition that could include sharing or 'liking' Navalny's post on social media. In complete disregard of basic legal principles, this clause can also be applied retroactively. Furthermore, the authorities are preparing measures against so-called 'smart-voting' – a process offered by the Navalny team to identify candidates with the greatest chances of defeating a United Russia candidate, even if that implies supporting a candidate from one of the other three mainstream satellite parties. The 'smart-voting' strategy led to some success for opposition candidates in the recent regional and municipal elections. The spontaneous protests in January and February demonstrate that Putin's critics, even if they are still a minority, represent a sizeable part of society. It is highly likely, however, that these people will not be represented in the new Duma. The growing polarization of the Russian society can manifest itself in different ways, and the Euro-Atlantic community should monitor these developments which may have an impact of Russia's international behavior. Internal dynamics in Russia suggests that the Alliance will increasingly be dealing with more volatile, less predictable Russia.

V. UPDATING THE EURO-ATLANTIC STRATEGY TOWARDS RUSSIA

66. Since the early 1990s, NATO has consistently sought to engage with Russia in numerous formats. In 1991, Russia joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, in 1994 – the Partnership for Peace initiative. The milestone NATO-Russia Founding Act was signed in 1997, followed by the establishment of the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) in 2002 as a consensus-based body of equal members. NATO and Russia consulted on issues such as arms control and counter-terrorism, while Russia cooperated with NATO on a number of joint initiatives in Afghanistan. However,

Russia continued to view NATO enlargement as a Western encroachment on Russia, refusing to recognize that the enlargement process was exclusively demand-driven and conditioned on the implementation of difficult reforms by aspirants. Russian collaboration with NATO was scaled down following Russia's aggression against Georgia in 2008, and, after a brief 'reset' attempt in 2009, again in 2014 in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

67. In 2014, NATO adopted a dual-track approach of defense/deterrence and dialogue. First and foremost, the Allies were forced to re-think the security posture on their eastern flank as well as collective defense more broadly. They decided to establish the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) consisting of 20,000 personnel from land, air, and sea components which can deploy within 2-3 days. So-called Force Integration Units were created in eight nations on NATO's eastern flank designed to facilitate the rapid deployment of Allied forces to the eastern flank, support defense planning and contribute to training and exercises. NATO also bolstered its air policing mission in the Baltic region. Crucially, at the 2016 NATO Warsaw Summit, the Allies further agreed to deploy four multinational battalion-size battlegroups as part of the "enhanced Forward Presence" (eFP) in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. These battlegroups are led by the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany and the United States respectively. Action was also taken to reassure Black Sea Allies by launching a tailored Forward Presence (tFP). The tFP includes a Romanian-based and led multinational brigade, aerial-reinforcements to help guard Romania and Bulgaria's airspace, as well as actions to bolster NATO's maritime capabilities in the region. At the July 2018 Brussels Summit, NATO Member States also agreed to increase credible deterrence by creating the ability to deploy 30 battalions, 30 air squadrons and 30 naval combat vessels within 30 days as well as committing to reinforce the Allied maritime posture. Bilaterally, the United States enhanced its commitment to Europe through increased rotational presence on the NATO eastern flank and through the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI) which supports training, military exercises, and capability development of eastern Allies.

68. NATO has also taken measures to protect its members from hybrid threats. In 2015, it adopted a "Prepare, Deter, Defend" strategy where NATO committed to increase joint intelligence in order to improve awareness of potential threats, support Member States and Allies in identifying national vulnerabilities and help strengthen their resilience, as well as increase the Alliance's political and military responsiveness and ability to deter and defend against hybrid measures. NATO has also identified defense against hybrid threats as one of the priorities for cooperation with the EU. Both organizations supported the establishment of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats in Helsinki.

69. In terms of dialogue, while NATO stopped practical cooperation with Russia in 2014, the NRC continued to meet regularly between April 2016 and July 2019, serving as a venue to exchange views on key security issues, including sensitive ones such as aggression against Ukraine and Russia's violation of the INF Treaty. Irritated by NATO's insistence on keeping Ukraine on the NRC's agenda, Russia refuses to resume the Council meetings. Channels of military-to-military communication are also open to reduce the risk of miscalculation and incidents.

70. NATO's Brussels Summit in June 2021 reaffirmed the dual-track approach towards Russia. Russia's aggressive actions – including provocative activities near NATO borders, large-scale no-notice exercises, the continued military build-up as well as hybrid actions, the use of aggressive and irresponsible nuclear rhetoric and the continued violation of territorial integrity of its neighbors – were explicitly defined as a threat to Euro-Atlantic security – the first in the list of threats. Russia is mentioned 61 times in the NATO Summit Communiqué, compared with 10 references to China. Allies stated that "NATO does not seek confrontation and poses no threat to Russia" but pledged to continue to respond to Russia's aggressive behavior by enhancing deterrence and defense posture. Russian-Chinese military cooperation was also identified, for the first time, as an issue for the Alliance.

71. Overall, NATO's response to Russia's aggressive actions have been comprehensive and proportional and have sent an important message of Allied solidarity. Some NATO measures, such as the deployment of multinational battalions in the Baltic States and Poland, were difficult to imagine prior to 2014. That said, looking ahead, NATO's and Allies' strategy vis-à-vis Russia merits further updating and refining. In particular, the General Rapporteur would like to suggest the following:

- Reflect the current state of relations with Russia in the Strategic Concept and enshrine the dual-track approach, which should remain the main framework of these relations. As the independent Group of Experts on NATO 2030 suggested, this dual-track strategy should be flexible and include steps to raise the cost for Russia's hostile behavior when necessary while signaling readiness to discuss issues of common interest (Reflection Group, 2020).
- Updating the Strategic Concept also presents an opportunity for the Allies to rejuvenate their commitment to democratic values as an indispensable part of Allied efforts to stand up to Russia's and China's autocracy. At the Brussels Summit of 2021, Allies recommitted to fulfilling their responsibilities to uphold the shared values of individual liberty, human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. They pledged to reinforce consultations "when our fundamental values and principles are at risk". The General Rapporteur strongly supports the initiative of the NATO PA President Gerald E. Connolly to create a Centre of Excellence on Democratic Resilience within NATO to assist member and partner nations to strengthen their democratic institutions.
- Continue investing in credible defense and deterrence of the northern, eastern and south-eastern flanks of the Alliance. This could include new assets on the eastern flank on a rotational basis as well as upgrading tFP in the Black Sea area following the model of eFP in Poland and the Baltic States. The 2021 Brussels Summit decisions to further strengthen and modernize the NATO Force Structure and to develop the full range of forces and capabilities to meet current and future deterrence and defense needs are timely and need to be implemented across the Alliance. Potential use of NATO's common funding to support eFP and tFP should be considered. Cooperation with the EU on Military Mobility and improvement of strategic infrastructure is critical to ensure rapid reinforcement of NATO units on the eastern flank in case of crisis. The Group of Experts' proposal to establish a special unit within the NATO's Joint Intelligence and Security Division to monitor Russia-China cooperation in security-related issues should also be considered.
- Further strengthen responses to Russian hybrid threats. The 2021 Brussels Summit made important decisions in this regard, including specifying that "in cases of hybrid warfare, the Council could decide to invoke Article 5 of the Washington Treaty". NATO is committed to working to further improve situational awareness and expand its toolbox to counter hybrid threats, including Russia's massive disinformation machine. In addition to acting on revised NATO baseline requirements for national resilience, NATO should further prioritize resilience as one of the key themes on its agenda and to mainstream responses to hybrid threats in joint exercise scenarios. Enhanced collaboration with the private sector will be essential in ensuring robust cyber defense and effective countering of disinformation on social media. Again, partnership with the EU will be essential.
- Continue the application of sanctions unless Moscow revisits its destabilizing behavior and human rights violations. Despite criticism that sanctions failed to compel Russia to undo its past aggressive actions, the sanctions do act as deterrent as they raise the cost of Russian hostile actions. The sanctions have unambiguously contributed to the worsening of the investment climate in Russia, affected the value of the ruble and slowed down its economic development. The West's approach to sanctions should be flexible and ready to be revised if Russia changes its disruptive policies. Moreover, sanctions are important means by which the Euro-Atlantic community can send a political signal that reckless and aggressive

international behavior - as well as systemic violations of human rights - are not acceptable. It is important to maintain close coordination between the US and the EU as their respective sanctions complement and reinforce each other. Sanctions should in particular target those in Russia who are responsible for human rights violations – the wide adoption of Magnitsky acts is to be welcomed. On the decisions to apply personal sanctions, Allied governments should closely consult with representatives of Russian democratic opposition.

- Reduce dependency on Russian resources. Russia has widely exploited its leverage as an important, sometimes dominant, energy supplier to its immediate neighborhood and further in Europe. Europeans and North Americans should continue their collaboration on the diversification of energy markets. The most immediate task is to determine the impact of the NordStream2 pipeline and to take measures to ensure energy security of central and eastern European Allies and partners, particularly Ukraine. In the longer term, Allies should redouble efforts to implement their ambitious climate agendas, including the EU and the US goals to achieve climate neutrality by 2050. The transition to a green economy is not only a matter of economics and environment, but also of national security.
- Be realistic about the prospects of genuine dialogue with the current regime. NATO should maintain its current channels of communication with Russia. They are important not only in terms of preventing accidental escalation, but also in case Russia changes its course and re-embraces international law. However, the prospects of that happening in the foreseeable future are bleak. Artificial initiatives to reignite and expand dialogue with Moscow would send the wrong political signal and potentially further embolden Moscow's hawkish policies. A return to 'business as usual' with Russia is currently impossible. It is particularly important to resist the temptation to sacrifice the national security interests of Allies and partners for the sake of renewed dialogue with Russia. Currently, the Alliance should mainly focus on exercising strategic patience vis-à-vis Russia. The Allies should, nevertheless, explore avenues to talk to Russia in specific areas, especially arms control, but also counter-terrorism, North Korea, pandemics response and climate change.
- Explore ways to support Russian civil society. The Allies should clearly reject accusations of 'Russophobia' by widely engaging with Russian dissidents, representatives of civil society, artists, students, bloggers, etc. Since engaging them under the 'NATO' label might cause them problems domestically, these activities should be carried out by individual Allies as well as the European Union.
- Continue supporting the Euro-Atlantic integration of Ukraine and Georgia. The existence of 'grey zones' in eastern Europe provokes Russia's destabilizing behavior. Georgia's and Ukraine's NATO membership should concern NATO and these two countries - Russia does not have a veto on their future. The Euro-Atlantic community should continue and increase their support for these countries: helping them become success stories would send a powerful signal to the people in Russia that the policy of confrontation with the West and rejection of liberal democratic values is reckless and disadvantageous. The Euro-Atlantic community must also keep the issue of Crimea, the de-facto occupied territories of certain regions of Donbas and occupation of Georgia's regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali on the agenda and continue sending a firm and united signal that the illegal occupation and/or annexation of these Ukrainian and Georgian territories will never be recognized.

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