The launch of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 opened a radical new chapter in the country’s domestic and foreign policy. Expecting a lightning victory but instead finding itself trapped in a brutal war of attrition, the Kremlin has been forced to commit immense resources and political capital toward its effort of paralyzing Ukraine’s ambitions of fully integrating into the economic and security structures of the transatlantic community.

Over the last year, the CSIS Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program has analyzed the immediate impacts of Russia’s 2022 invasion and what it will mean for the Putin regime’s domestic and foreign policy making going forward. Comprising five distinct reports, this effort seeks to understand Russia’s ongoing adjustment to this new context, including its evolving global strategy under confrontation with the West, efforts to deepen cooperation with the countries of the Global South, and adaptation to the new realities of an economy under pressure from sanctions and the growing demands of the military-industrial complex.

Within this project, CSIS experts and scholars authored two papers examining implications of the war and the Western sanctions regime for Russia’s economy and domestic politics. Putin’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine became a crash test for the system he built, which is unprecedented in his nearly quarter-century rule. How sustainable is Putin’s regime in light of the recent challenges to its economic, political, and ideological resilience? The two publications below aimed to address these questions.

This project first turned to the economic impacts of the full-scale invasion, specifically focusing on the one-year anniversary of the international sanctions regime leveled against Moscow as punishment for the latest phase of its war in Ukraine. Titled “Russia Sanctions at One Year: Learning from the Cases of South Africa and Iran” and published in February 2023, the paper provided an overview of the sanctions and export controls placed on Moscow thus far and explored the challenges they represented to sustainability of the regime in comparison to two other historical cases: the sanctioned economies of contemporary Iran and apartheid-era South Africa.

While the paper cautioned against overestimating the sanctions’ ability to crush the Russian economy, the authors concluded that, depending on their scale, the restrictions may seriously inhibit the country’s economic development. In the cases of South Africa and Iran, rather than delivering a deathblow overnight, sanctions had a corrosive effect on growth and the quality of life for average citizens. Existing domestic opposition movements were then able to play off the social discontent that sanctions generated to mobilize anti-regime sentiment. In South Africa, sanctions did contribute to undermining the apartheid regime. While they have not led to the collapse of the Islamic Republic in Iran, they have resulted in political unrest, which has taxed the resources of the government in Tehran. The authors concluded that in the case of contemporary Russia, if the Kremlin mismanages the economic situation, and escalating rounds of sanctions continue to bite the pocketbook of the average Russian consumer, the regime could be faced with a rise in social discontent that would demand a corresponding...
crackdown. A vicious cycle could emerge, where increased social repression leads to further anti-government sentiment and domestic instability.

Rounding out the program’s work on Russian domestic politics was a white paper examining the evolution of the Kremlin’s ideological messaging under Putin in light of the new challenges imposed by the war. In “The Ideology of Putinism: Is It Sustainable?”, Maria Snegovaya, Michael Kimmage, and Jade McGlynn explored this ideational dimension that could help sustain the Putin regime despite the economic slowdown.

The authors concluded that the Putin regime does in fact have an ideology, and its core tenets have remained more or less constant over time. Putinism centers on narratives of statism, Russian exceptionalism, militarism, anti-Westernism, and the importance of so-called “traditional values” that are framed as antithetical to contemporary Western society. This toxic cocktail includes several mutually consistent arguments, which can be flexibly applied by the regime to provide policy justifications (including for the war in Ukraine). The plasticity of these narratives should not be confused for the malleability of the ideology’s core elements. They are more a way of selling or packaging the policy to different audiences. That this ideology is not spelled out in philosophical texts but most often absorbed through signs, symbols, and popular culture makes it both malleable and easily digestible for less-educated people.

The report suggests that this ideology could help the current leadership of the Kremlin maintain its hold on power, especially given the dearth of domestic challenges to the regime’s messaging apparatus. Paradoxically, even the sanctions-induced economic decline may help the Kremlin’s ideology-building effort. As the authors discussed, in Russia during periods of turmoil many people often need to feel a sense of connection to something greater than themselves, a historical continuity and communion. The flexibility of Putin’s ideology machine and the simplicity of the narratives it spreads suggest that Putinism is not going anywhere soon and may even become further entrenched in Russian society.

In light of a likely ability of the Putin regime to sustain existing challenges domestically, the CSIS experts focused on foreign policy implications of Russia’s changing international posture, including its evolving stances in its immediate neighborhood and in the Global South. Given its deepening confrontation with the West in the aftermath of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia is refocusing its attention on other regions in an effort to create alternative alliances with the countries of the Global South, reinforce its control over the states in its “zone of interest,” and create new channels for economic cooperation and sanctions circumvention.

Exploring Russia’s changing approach to the countries located in its immediate vicinity beyond Ukraine, Max Bergmann, Tina Dolbaia, and Nick Fenton wrote “Russia’s Adaptation Game: Deciphering the Kremlin’s ‘Humanitarian Policy’,” published in December 2022. The issue brief analyzed the Kremlin’s September 2022 “Concept of Humanitarian Policy of the Russian Federation Abroad.” On its face, the piece presents itself as a strategic justification for the Russian government to protect the interests and culture of Russian speakers internationally. Centered on the notion of the “Russian World” (Russkiy Mir), the decree provides a nebulus pretext for Moscow’s interference in the countries of the former Soviet Union. Given their smaller size and significant domestic populations of Russian speakers, countries in the South Caucasus, Baltics, and Central Asia face particular risks in the context of the policy’s threatened implementation. While the document itself does not represent any grand departure from the Kremlin’s preexisting rhetoric on this topic, the timing of its publication was noteworthy. In the context of the Kremlin’s ongoing military frustrations in September of last year, the authors argued that the updated humanitarian policy reflected Moscow’s efforts to put its neighbors on notice. In effect, the policy warns the post-Soviet states bordering Russia that despite challenges facing the Russian military in Ukraine, the Russian state remains committed to exerting its influence over its historic near abroad.
Going beyond Russia’s immediate neighborhood, Mathieu Droin and Tina Dolbaia authored “Post-Prigozhin Russia in Africa: Regaining or Losing Control?” in September 2023. The piece assessed Russia’s expanded influence across Africa in recent years, a success due primarily to the efforts of the late Yevgeny Prigozhin and his Wagner Group, a private military company (PMC), and the changes that are likely to follow Prigozhin’s death. Ultimately, despite Prigozhin’s exit from the stage, the authors concluded that Russia’s influence in Africa will continue, whatever the outcome of the Wagner Group’s ongoing restructuring. No matter who is leading Russian influence efforts on the continent, Moscow’s uniquely tailored regime survival packages aid the governments of destabilized regions more than the competing offers of Western governments. The latter’s long-term focus on institutional capacity building, rather than the immediate survival of governments with questionable democratic credentials, leads boxed-in rulers to choose Moscow’s offers of support. The piece concluded with policy recommendations for Western states to strengthen their positions on the continent vis-à-vis Moscow and calls on these governments to take advantage of Wagner’s current moment of weakness.

Lastly, this changing geopolitical context also necessitates examining available options for the U.S. policy response. To explore this topic, in January 2023, Max Bergmann authored “What Could Come Next? Assessing the Putin Regime’s Stability and Western Policy Options.” This brief argued that while the United States and its partners have a strategy for Ukraine in the context of a potential military victory for Kyiv, they are lacking a clearly stated approach to relations with Russia in case of Moscow’s military defeat. While recognizing that the immediate threats to Vladimir Putin’s rule remain remote, the piece articulates an idea that if military successes for Kyiv somehow force Putin from office, the West needs to offer an alternative path for Russia that envisions the country as an integral member of the liberal international order. Western messaging that a post-Putin Russia would not be condemned to isolation in turn could put further domestic pressure on the Kremlin indirectly aiding Kyiv’s war effort.

In all, the different reports that make up this series—combined with multiple public panel discussions and a series of interviews and debates on the program’s podcast, Russian Roulette—provided an initial effort at analyzing the major restructuring Russia’s domestic and foreign policy is undergoing in light of the Kremlin’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine. This work has depended on active outreach to Russian-speaking communities and outlets, and the authors are excited to see their findings stimulating new debates within Russian-language media.

Despite the immense changes that have taken place in Russian politics since February 2022, even bigger developments are likely on the horizon. As the war in Ukraine continues to grind on, Moscow will have to maintain its adaptation game and creatively implement a range of tools to pursue its interests. Western nations that make up the coalition supporting Kyiv’s efforts to defend Ukrainian territory will need to adapt their own pressure tactics accordingly, while maintaining the pace of their current effort. As the world looks toward the two-year anniversary of the launch of the full-scale invasion, the CSIS Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program will continue to devote its efforts to monitoring and analyzing this dynamic.
Key Quotations

RUSSIA SANCTIONS AT ONE YEAR: LEARNING FROM THE CASES OF SOUTH AFRICA AND IRAN
Maria Snegovaya, Tina Dolbaia, Nick Fenton, and Max Bergmann
February 23, 2023

» “While the relative resilience of Russia’s economy should not be underestimated, the currently available data does indicate that sanctions will have a pronounced impact on the country’s economic development. In the cases of Iran and South Africa, sanctions never delivered a dramatic, immobilizing blow, but they did exacerbate existing structural vulnerabilities in the countries’ economies. Sanctions degraded the quality of life for the average citizen, which existing opposition movements were able to point to in their efforts to organize widespread civil disobedience.”

» “Drawing on Iran’s and South Africa’s experiences, Russia’s economy is unlikely to collapse from Western sanctions. However, sanctions will constrain its ability to generate economic growth.”

» “In all three cases, the sanctions did not deliver the deathblow that may have been originally expected, as targeted countries continue to circumvent restrictions and export to various markets. Yet, in Iran and South Africa, sanctions delivered major economic pain to the regime after several years. A declining or stagnating economy, rising fiscal inefficiencies, and escalating inflation eventually led to growing social discontent, making it harder for the regime to sustain the status quo. In both cases, the authorities attempted to stifle social protests through a combination of repression and social spending, yet those solutions only exacerbated the existing pressures on the regime.”

THE IDEOLOGY OF PUTINISM: IS IT SUSTAINABLE?
Maria Snegovaya, Michael Kimmage, and Jade McGlynn
September 27, 2023

» “This report argues that Vladimir Putin’s regime does have an ideology. As the authors show, from the start of his rule over two decades ago, the Kremlin has made serious, consistent, and increasing investments in promoting certain values. Borrowing heavily from czarist and Soviet themes, as well as other intellectual sources like the twentieth-century radical right, Putinism elevates an idea of imperial-nationalist statism amplified by Russian greatness, exceptionalism, and historical struggle against the West.”
“Apart from the security services, the army, the regular doling out of financial privileges to elite actors, and the Russian Orthodox Church, Putin’s system has not been codified in institutions; much of it depends on proximity to Putin and on patronage networks within the government. To this unsystematic system, ideology is essential. It provides a sense of meaning, of continuity, and of ritual to Russian politics—not just a way of making sense of the world, which was a strong point of Marxism-Leninism, but a way for Russians to make sense of Russia. In the absence of political parties, of real elections, of a political order grounded in procedure and constitutionalism, ideology is the connecting link. This ideology is not spelled out in philosophical texts as Marxism-Leninism had been. It can be absorbed through signs, symbols, and popular culture, making it malleable and accessible to less intellectual and less literate individuals. This population need not give its complete assent to the ideology cobbled together in Putin’s two decades of rule. They can give it partial assent, or simply live in its ambiance. Its very pervasiveness, much like the slogans and language of Soviet communism (in the early Soviet Union) or the iconography of czarist Russia, imply that the ideology is too widespread to be untrue.”

“The 2022 war marked a real turning point: the protected zones of the 2010s, such as academia, education, publishing, high culture, are now under assault as is the entire “Westernizer” wing of the intelligentsia. The flexibility of Putin’s ideology machine and the simplicity of the narratives it spreads suggest that Putinism is not going anywhere soon and may become further entrenched in the Russian social sphere.”

**RUSSIA’S ADAPTATION GAME: DECIPHERING THE KREMLIN’S “HUMANITARIAN POLICY”**

Max Bergmann, Tina Dolbaia, and Nick Fenton

December 14, 2022

“By codifying the right of the Russian state to intercede for Russian speakers in its near abroad based on an ill-defined set of cultural criteria, Moscow’s newly minted humanitarian policy provides an evergreen casus belli that Russia can invoke against its neighbors. Yet though it attempts to demonstrate Russia’s strength to former Soviet states, the decree is borne out of weakness.”

“Yet the revival and further elevation of the concept of Russkiy Mir in the humanitarian policy can be seen as an effort by the Kremlin to establish a cultural separation with the West by emphasizing Russian civilization’s distinctiveness. The policy comes against the backdrop of Moscow’s rising economic and diplomatic isolation, which in turn further elevates the status of the Russian World, as the decree provides a legal platform to the Kremlin to declare Russia culturally and politically superior to its near abroad. This language of defensive cultural posturing can be interpreted as part of Moscow’s reaction to the war and need to justify its invasion of Ukraine.”

“Today, Putin’s Russia still has enough stamina to fight for its near abroad. The Kremlin is not yet backing off—indeed, it is doubling down. Accordingly, the West should be wary of Moscow’s revisionist tendencies in the post-Soviet bloc and remain on the alert for more trouble ahead.”

**POST-PRIGOZHIN RUSSIA IN AFRICA: REGAINING OR LOSING CONTROL?**

Mathieu Droin and Tina Dolbaia

September 20, 2023

“While Prigozhin’s summer 2023 odyssey from Ukraine’s Bakhmut to Russia’s Rostov-on-Don (with a brief layover in Belarus) and back to Africa ultimately ended with his demise, it is not yet clear if the fall of 2023 will be fatal for the Wagner Group itself, which has now lost nearly all members of its
senior leadership. Following the mutiny in June, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov reassured African allies that Moscow would not withdraw Wagner mercenaries from the continent, and sources close to Prigozhin have also argued that Russia is heavily dependent on the PMC’s assets abroad and thus their removal would cause ‘a rapid compression of Russian influence’ in Africa.”

» “Yet changes in Wagner’s command and control do not necessarily mean that Russia is abandoning the PMC model altogether, given that it provides significant political and economic benefits that are particularly important amid the war in Ukraine and Western economic sanctions.”

» “As the cases of the Wagner deployment in the CAR, Libya, Mali, and Sudan have shown, Wagner’s goal in Africa is not only to provide military training and security assistance to the continent’s fragile regimes, but to sign exclusive energy and mining deals aimed at exploiting African natural resources. These practices should be exposed to establish a counternarrative against Wagner disinformation campaigns, which argue that all Western activities in Africa are grounded in neocolonialism, while eliding the economically exploitative nature of Wagner’s (and, by extension, Russia’s) own investments on the continent.”

WHAT COULD COME NEXT?
ASSESSING THE PUTIN REGIME’S STABILITY AND OTHER POLICY OPTIONS
Max Bergmann
January 20, 2023

» “This issue brief assesses the potential for the war to prompt a transition of power in Russia, as well as the possible ramifications of this. It concludes, contrary to much of the prevailing view, that if Putin leaves power, it will likely be due to a reaction against the war and Putin’s hardline approach. The potential for Ukrainian military success to cause regime instability in Moscow has generated understandable nervousness among many Western governments about what could follow Putin.”

» “Far from pushing Putin out, hardliners and regime stalwarts are probably incredibly reluctant to move against him. In fact, they will likely do everything they can to keep him in power. This is perhaps the most important factor protecting the regime from collapse. Thus, if Putin is replaced or loses power, it will likely be because the war in Ukraine goes very badly. It will be because there is a desperate need for change, not just for a new leader but for a new approach to the war that does not double down on but rather ends it.”

» “Critics might describe the discussion of a post Putin-Russia as the United States shifting to a policy of “regime change.” However, there is no point to pursuing regime change because the United States does not have the means to execute such a policy short of direct military intervention, which is unthinkable in the Russian context. Contrary to Putin’s vehement claims, the United States cannot cause “color revolutions.” All it and Europe can do is offer potential inclusion in the West should a country go down a democratic path. But that may be the biggest incentive of all; Ukraine’s 2014 Maidan Revolution, for instance, happened when people took to the streets to demand a European future. Since the Biden administration’s goal is to put pressure on the Putin regime, it is a logical extension to put ideological pressure on the Kremlin as well.”

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