

Security Outlook 2018

Edited by
Artur Gruszczak



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ul. św. Anny 6, 31-008 Kraków
tel./faks: 12 431-27-43, 12 421-13-87
e-mail: akademicka@akademicka.pl

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<https://akademicka.pl/>

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Notes on Contributors



Marek Czajkowski is Associate Professor at the Department of National Security of the Jagiellonian University. His research interests include international relations, international security, Russia and its foreign and security policy, military and technological dimensions of national and international security with special attention given to missile defence and space security. He is author of *Missile Defence in International Relations* (2013).

Paweł Frankowski is Associate Professor at the Department of National Security of the Jagiellonian University. His main research concerns space policy, labor standards in free trade agreements, and theories of international relations. His particular interest lies in the design and impact of focal points in the institutions of global trade. Currently he has embarked on the project on Trade and Sustainable Development chapters in free trade agreements of the European Union, investigating the role of these chapters in a global context.

Artur Gruszczak is Professor of Social Sciences, Chair of National Security at the Jagiellonian University. He is also Faculty Member at the Centre International de Formation Européenne in Nice. His principal interests and research areas include: strategic studies; EU internal security; migration and border management; intelligence cooperation. Recently he co-edited with Paweł Frankowski *Technology, Ethics and the Protocols of Modern War* (2018) and *Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Regional and Global Security* (2018). He is author of *Intelligence Security in the European Union. Building a Strategic Intelligence Community* (2016).

Mateusz Kolaszyński is Assistant Professor at the Department of National Security of the Jagiellonian University. In his research he deals with the issues of constitutional status of intelligence services and state surveillance.

Arkadiusz Nyzio graduated with honours from Jagiellonian University in Kraków (2012). Holds two bachelor's degrees (political science, national security) and two master's degrees (political science, European studies). In 2017 he received his PhD cum laude from the Jagiellonian University. He is the editor-in-chief of the scientific journal *Poliarchia* and Assistant Professor at the Department of National Security of the Jagiellonian University. He studies law at the Faculty of Law and Administration of the Jagiellonian University.

Paweł Tarnawski is a former police officer. Graduated from Jagiellonian University Law Faculty, Police Academy in Szczytno (Poland) and FBI National Academy in Quantico (USA). He was an investigator of the EU Council Security Office and the International Criminal Court. Former expert of the UN Security Council in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Former expert of the Office of the Polish Prime Minister for security of the International Youth Days (2016). A law enforcement trainer in Poland and abroad. In 2017-2018 he was Assistant Professor at the Department of National Security of the Jagiellonian University.

Foreword



Today's world is increasingly preoccupied with the state of its security. Challenges, risks and threats mushrooming across the regions and continents evoke feelings of discomfort, uncertainty, and anxiety. Domestic instability, regional conflicts and global tensions reflect deep, structural security problems. Any plausible and reasonable response to those problems, challenges and dilemmas requires an insight into contemporary political, economic, social and cultural phenomena at national and international levels. This collected volume is a modest attempt to delve into some aspects of security which drew attention of the authors in the year 2018. The contributors belong in the Department of National Security of the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland (http://www.zbn.inp.uj.edu.pl/en_GB/). Their chapters illustrate the research profile of the Department and individual interests of each author. The institutional factor has determined the structure of the publication: it links selected global and regional issues with some aspects of Poland's security.

Artur Gruszczak
July 2019

MAREK CZAJKOWSKI 

Russia in the World

Cold War 2.0 on the Rise



ABSTRACT

In this paper, we briefly evaluate several of the main problems of Russian foreign policy related to its place in the world – the ones most important throughout 2018, and which will surely resonate in years to come. There are growing tensions with the West, Russia's strategy of *frozen conflicts*, involvement in the Syrian civil war, and the economic situation, which to a great extent influences its policies.

Keywords: International relations, international security, Russia, foreign policy, Cold War, Syria

1. INTRODUCTION

Since at least 2014¹ the term Cold War has been frequently used to describe the state of relations between the West and the Russian Federation. We are not going to discuss at length either the similarities or differences² between the original Cold War, which is a well-documented and conceptualized historical process, and the current state of world affairs, which is, naturally, much less understood.

¹ See for example: D. Trenin, *Welcome to Cold War 2.0*, "Foreign Policy", March 4, 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/03/04/welcome-to-cold-war-ii/> (accessed December 27, 2018).

² See some interesting arguments in: O. A. Westad, *Has a New Cold War Really Begun?*, "Foreign Affairs", March 27, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-03-27/has-new-cold-war-really-begun> (accessed March 28, 2018).

However, we find the term Cold War applicable to our considerations pertaining to Russia's place in the world, because its momentous contradictions with the Western world are exactly what best define today's Russia. Therefore, the main resemblance between the history and the present lies in the will of both sides to oppose each other with the use of a wide range of aggressive means, short of all-out military confrontation. This will is of course unequally distributed, because, as we shall argue, Russia badly needs heated confrontation, while the West would prefer softer means of competition. Thus, as the new Cold War is on the rise, we will argue that this is happening to a great extent by the Kremlin's own design.

In this paper we first of all briefly evaluate the position of the Russian Federation in the world and the main planes of the Russian foreign policy as of the end of 2017. This is intended as necessary background for our further considerations, which come in the next and most important part of the article. It contains an evaluation of several of the main problems of Russian foreign policy related to its place in the world – those most important throughout 2018, and which will surely resonate in years to come. And finally, we present a brief conclusion which will encompass a general assessment of the year's developments and brief predictions for the future.

2. RUSSIA AT THE END OF 2017

At the end of 2017 Russia was continuing on the course selected several years before, bound for a multi-faceted confrontation with the West. We agree with the argument that said confrontation is for the most part caused by Russia's actions.³ In this section, we will try to assess Moscow's positions by pointing to the main dimensions of the renewed Cold War. Further on we will assess the key drivers behind this Russian stance. The following is a summary of the views that we have already expressed several times in recent publications.⁴

³ R. N. Haass, *Cold War II*, Project Syndicate, February 23, 2018, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/new-cold-war-mainly-russia-s-fault-by-richard-n--haass-2018-02> (accessed February 25, 2018).

⁴ See for example: M. Czajkowski, *Kremlin's Survival Strategy – The International Dimension*. In: A. Podraza (ed.), *A Transatlantic or European Perspective of World Affairs: NATO and the EU Towards Problems of International Security in the 21st Century*, Madrid: Instituto Franklin, Universidad de Alcalá, 2018, pp. 143-159, or *Aktualna polityka zagraniczna Federacji Rosyjskiej a Unia Europejska*, "Krakowskie Studia Międzynarodowe" 2017, vol. XIV, no. 2, pp. 115-135.

2.1. The Main Dimensions of Cold War 2.0

As far as Russia is concerned, Cold War 2.0 may be characterized by several key developments, ranging from symptoms of global strategic confrontation, to keen competition in several important regions, to the propaganda war on the Russian internal front.

As to the first of these levels, we can observe hostile Russian activities directed against the US and the West as a whole. There are many instruments of this effort, ranging from intimidation via the renewed military rivalry, to information warfare intended to disrupt the Western institutions⁵, to a growing ideological assault against the values fundamental to Western identity. The most direct and clearly visible result of these actions is the interference in political processes within the Western societies, like meddling in the 2016 presidential elections in the US⁶, and influencing other political developments in the US⁷ and in other countries. With regard to this an

[...] informational pressure has become a fundamental instrument of Russian influence [...]. Pretexts for overt and covert media operations have included deliberately provoked incidents in the field of intelligence, on state borders, through migration flows, at events organised on Russia's own territory and the territories of foreign states (e.g., conferences, festivals, peace camps), violations of the air-space of NATO states and neighbouring countries, interference in parliamentary and presidential elections, financial and political support for radical environments and centrifugal trends within the EU, interfering with decision-making processes, discrediting political leaders who have opposed the Kremlin, and many more besides.⁸

⁵ For comprehensive information on Russia's disruptive activities see: GMF Alliance for Securing Democracy, *Authoritarian Interference Tracker*, <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/toolbox/authoritarian-interference-tracker/> (accessed December 27, 2018).

⁶ See in detail: R. D. Blackwill, P. H. Gordon, *Containing Russia*, "Council Special Report", no. 80, Council on Foreign Relations, January 2018, pp. 6-9; and K. Yourish, L. Buchanan, D. Watkins, *A Timeline Showing the Full Scale of Russia's Unprecedented Interference in the 2016 Election, and Its Aftermath*, "The New York Times", September 20, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/09/20/us/politics/russia-trump-election-timeline.html> (accessed September 22, 2018).

⁷ See for example a tracker that monitors Russian Twitter operations: GMF Alliance for Securing Democracy, *Hamilton 68*, <https://dashboard.securingsdemocracy.org/> (accessed December 14, 2018).

⁸ J. Darczewska, P. Żochowski, *Russia's 'Activity' toward the West – Confrontation by Choice*, "Russian Analytical Digest" 2017, no. 212, December 19, p. 2, <http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/RAD212.pdf> (accessed December 22, 2018).

The second, regional level of the new incarnation of the Cold War is the renewed Russian interest in the struggle for control of the areas in which Moscow had some influence in the 20th century but which was substantially lost after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Additionally, Russia tries with great determination to establish its presence in other places, wherever possible. There are many different ways to do so, from economic incentives, to political backing, to information warfare, to military assistance and the use of the Russian armed forces in combat. The most crucial areas in which Moscow is trying to reassert itself as the regional power are Central Europe, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Middle East⁹ and Central Asia, but we should also add Africa and Latin America as areas increasingly important from the point of view of Russian foreign policy.¹⁰ In all of these regions, the Kremlin's aim is to create opportunities for co-operation through which to foster the spread of its influence and push against the interests of the Western nations. Generally speaking, this is a policy of establishing and sustaining multiple fronts of competition with the West, especially with the US.

And finally, on the third level of this new Cold War there is the propaganda war waged by the Kremlin against its own society. This is intended to inflate the perception of threat from the West and to augment the *fortress under siege* mentality. Furthermore, by praising national values, especially resilient defiance against external influence, the authorities try to underline the idea that Russians have a different set of values to the one acknowledged in West. This internal information warfare strategy is in the first place supposed to augment the political legitimization of the regime, and secondly to strengthen the Russian people's will to sustain a difficult economic situation.

2.2. *The Main Drivers of the Current Russian International Strategy*

There are many reasons for this policy of amplifying threats and then confronting their purported sources. As we do not have enough space within the framework of this article to describe the different interpretations of this proposed by various authors, but will put forward only our own argument. It is, of course, debatable, but it represents our best knowledge and the conviction based upon it.

⁹ See this very informative analysis: W. Rodkiewicz, *Bliskowschodnia polityka Rosji. Regionalne ambicje, globalne cele*, „Prace OSW”, no. 71, December 2017.

¹⁰ See this very informative and comprehensive presentation: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *The Return of Global Russia*, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/interactive/global-russia> (accessed November 11, 2018).

Our explanation encompasses three levels of argument.

The first-level considerations point to what we call the “realist-futurist” perspective. This reflects the Russian authorities’ assertion that they evaluate world affairs using *the realist* viewpoint. Therefore, they focus on analyzing the relative power of countries and international institutions, weigh what they take to be the real interests of nation-states, and try to gauge the state and resilience of the international system. This state-centric perspective, as seen from the realist point of view, stresses the capacities of countries and the strength of the instruments possessed by them, along with the willingness of their authorities to wield the tools they have. This results in the Kremlin’s assessment of what actions states and non-state actors are actually able to undertake and to what effect.

What emerges from such an analysis is a picture of a weakening West, no longer able to maintain the liberal order which it created and which has suited its interests so well. This weakness is especially visible in terms of its strength of will to act decisively, which is evidently waning, which in turn leads to a virtual lack of ability to confront mounting threats and to promote its own interests in the long run. In short, the West as a whole is, in the Kremlin’s optics, in sweeping decline without any clear vision to stop it, while self-serving political and financial elites keep it that way for their own short-term political and economic benefits.

This weakness of the West, as the narrative goes, contributes to the sharp transformation of the world order, which is driven mainly by the rise of huge countries like China or India, by change in Africa and by the turmoil in the Middle East, which is far from being over. The maturing of the new technologies of the virtual world and the emergence of the even more advanced reality of artificial intelligence are also important factors in these developments. Therefore, if we assess the world from Moscow’s standpoint there is clearly no need for Russia to conform to Western-made rules or values, as they are inevitably doomed to fade. The world as we know it is nearing its end and a new one is emerging. The international actors who have understood this will be able to shape the coming international system, while those who are stuck in the old world will fall prey to the new one’s creators. Furthermore, it seems to the Kremlin a very smart thing to contribute to the fall of the old system, to speed things up and, furthermore, to increase Russia’s ability to shape the new world order in ways considered to be most beneficial to itself. This is *the futurist* part of the whole narrative.

This argument explains first of all why the Russian leaders, who on the other hand are usually considered to be rather rational and cunning political players, are ready to commit the scarce resources of an economically weak country to huge global endeavors. It also explains why Moscow does not care for the established Western standards – even if this costs Russia a lot, due to punishing

sanctions (despite many critics' opinions¹¹, these are actually quite effective¹²), or as a result of the other Western counteractions in political and military spheres. Simply put, the stakes are extremely high and success lies ahead in the future – it is therefore necessary to invest economically and politically today to reap the benefits tomorrow.

This purportedly realist perception of the world in a state of transition is, we believe, an important driver of Russia's foreign activity. It may even be argued that this way of thinking forms the bulk of the new ideology emerging on the Russian side of the new Cold War.¹³

The second level of the interpretation is fully compatible with the first, and forms a sort of the other side of the coin that makes the whole argument's international dimension complete. It relates to the genuine perception of threat that is profoundly present within the Russian elites and the society as a whole, and which perfectly complements "realist-futurist" thinking, using the same *realist* method of measuring the world.

The threat perception that persists in the Russian collective identity encompasses two basic factors. One is the traditional awareness of the danger from the West that has lived in the Russian mind for centuries; the mentality of the *fortress under siege* has been augmented, both by real events like the devastating wars which came from the West several times, and by systematic inflation of the Western threat for internal purposes. The latter has been continuously performed throughout history by various rulers for many reasons, but especially because it was always deemed effective as one of the best tools for the legitimization of authority. The second factor is the Russian exceptionalism that stems, among other things, from the traditional concept of the Third Rome, which was nicely replaced by the communist idea to bring social justice to the world. This attitude largely contributes to the perception of a unique Russia being endangered by "the other" who do not understand it and therefore want to destroy it instead of getting along with it.

¹¹ See for example: E. Ashford, *Why New Russia Sanctions Won't Change Moscow's Behavior*, "Foreign Affairs", November 22, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2017-11-22/why-new-russia-sanctions-wont-change-moscows-behavior> (accessed December 14, 2018).

¹² N. Gould-Davies, *Sanctions on Russia Are Working*, "Foreign Affairs", August 22, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2018-08-22/sanctions-russia-are-working?cid=int-lea&pgtype=hpg> (accessed August 24, 2018).

¹³ P. Felgenhauer, *Russia Develops a New Ideology for a New Cold War*, "Eurasia Daily Monitor" 2018, vol. 15, issue 52, April 5, <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-develops-a-new-ideology-for-a-new-cold-war/> (accessed April 6, 2018).

In the post-Cold War world, this perception of threat is represented by the conviction that the West attempted to isolate and subdue the Russian Federation after it emerged from the ashes of the Soviet Union. As is widely believed in Russia, the real roots of current hostilities lie in the early 1990s, when Moscow abandoned communism and tried to become a partner for the West. But instead of engaging Russia the Western powers struggled to sideline it, pressured it with their values and ideas, and pushed it from vital positions in Europe and elsewhere. This was the moment when Russia separated from the West instead of becoming a sort of third part of it, in addition to the US and the EU.¹⁴ In practical terms, this means that the West should have left post-Soviet space and Central Europe in the Russian sphere of influence, disregarding the aspirations of numerous nations. According to this narrative, Russia was entitled to decide on the destiny of those nations, and the West should have acknowledged that. When it did not do clearly meant that it had hostile intentions. The overarching propaganda machine that controls the information space in Russia, and its well-trained, experienced psychological warfare cadres, guards this view and maintains it as an important part of Russian collective and individual identity.

And this is precisely why the greater part of Russian society and the elites are genuinely convinced that their country is actually endangered by the vile West, incarnated in the increasingly aggressive NATO.¹⁵ And so, Russia is allegedly the subject of vicious attacks that take many various forms such as political, economic and military pressure or even hybrid warfare against it.¹⁶ Therefore, Russians consider their own actions against the West fully legitimate. For example, they see influencing Western political processes and elections as just a counteraction prompted by the West, which long ago started spreading its influence in the sphere that rightfully belonged to Russia – Central and Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia.

Additionally, as noted by a disarmament expert assessing Putin's state-of-the-country address of 2018, "[i]f anything, his speech revealed the persistence of deeply rooted insecurities about Russia's ability to thrive in competition with the

¹⁴ А. Храмчихин, *Россия и Запад остаются антагонистами*, "Независимое Военное Обозрение", December 15, 2017, http://nvo.ng.ru/gpolit/2017-12-15/1_977_antagonists.html (accessed December 20, 2017).

¹⁵ А. Бартош, *Гибридизация НАТО набирает обороты*, "Независимое Военное Обозрение", January 12, 2018, http://nvo.ng.ru/gpolit/2018-01-12/1_979_nato.html (accessed January 14, 2018).

¹⁶ Idem, *России неизбежать гибридных войн*, "Независимое Военное Обозрение", March 9, 2018, http://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/2018-03-09/1_987_hybridwar.html (accessed March 10, 2018).

West”.¹⁷ This tacit understanding of Russia’s inferiority in most areas is another feature which naturally calls for a firm answer to the menace of the hostile Western world.

The existence of this well-established perception of threat helps to explain why external conflict has been chosen as the uniting factor of Russian politics. This is because it was, and is, very easy to make Russians believe they were and are in danger and therefore must unite around the authorities and allow the strengthening of the state in every one of its capacities. And here, finally, we come seamlessly to the third level of our interpretation, which concerns the ruling elite and the legitimization of increasingly personalized authoritarianism¹⁸ in Russia. We might add that we are strongly convinced that this internal political plane of the whole argument is the most essential one.

As we have argued since 2015,¹⁹ the Russian authorities’ legitimacy suffered serious blows in at the turn of the first decade of the 21st century. Until then it had relied on the so-called *Putin Consensus*, which was a sort of unspoken agreement between the Kremlin and the society. It envisaged popular consent to turning the state steadily more and more authoritarian in exchange for a constant growth of the welfare of the society, ensured by the government. However, since systemic deficiencies, lack of reforms, and low oil prices contributed to the downfall of the Russian economy, which in turn reflected on the decrease of the wealth of the nation, the Russian authorities were compelled to invent another way of legitimizing themselves – the external existential threat, which, as they argued (see above), never subsided after the end of the Cold War. We fully agree with one keen observer that

[t]he present stage of development of Putin’s model of governance is characterised by stagnation and inertia in the economic, political and ideological spheres (it is frequently compared with the Brezhnev era of ‘blossoming decay’). Efforts to

¹⁷ S. Squassoni, *Threat Assessment: Potemkin Putin versus the US Nuclear Posture Review*, “Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists”, March 4, 2018, <https://thebulletin.org/2018/03/threat-assessment-potemkin-putin-versus-the-us-nuclear-posture-review/> (accessed March 5, 2018).

¹⁸ M. Zavadskaya, *The Fight for Turnout: Growing Personalism in the Russian Presidential Elections of 2018*, “Russian Analytical Digest” 2018, no. 217, March 26, pp. 2-4, <http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/RAD217.pdf> (accessed March 27, 2018).

¹⁹ M. Czajkowski, *Rosyjska operacja w Syrii – cele i możliwe następstwa*, „Analizy ZBN” 2015, no. 1 (1), October 20, http://www.zbn.inp.uj.edu.pl/analizy?p_p_id=56_INSTANCE_qVSbpBSjmGcR&p_p_lifecycle=0&p_p_state=normal&p_p_mode=view&p_p_col_id=column-1&p_p_col_count=1&groupId=92718966&articleId=105026627 (accessed December 30, 2018).

mobilise public support for the government focus on negative issues: strengthening the anti-Western ideology [...], with its underlying concepts of seeking an enemy and of Russia being a fortress under siege, re-Sovietisation of the policy of memory and consenting to a rehabilitation of profoundly autocratic models of governance [...].²⁰

This is, by the way, a very convenient method of legitimization because it is based on an obvious historical background and on the carefully maintained identity of Russia being confronted with the world for centuries, which we have depicted above. It is also convenient for the government, because it interacts with a very predictable “enemy” which, certainly and first of all, wants co-operation, balance and good relations. This makes the conflict manageable in the sense that Russia may escalate and deescalate it according to its own wishes, with the comfortable confidence that it will not spin out of control as the other side will respond in the way it is expected to. The other very important feature of the presently renewed conflict, which plays into the hands of the Kremlin, is that it allows the malevolent West and its huge sanctions regime to be blamed for all of Russia’s economic woes.

The essence of the legitimization process derived from this serious but manageable conflict is that in its course the Kremlin may create opportunities to display the resolve, skills, and decisiveness necessary to protect the people of Russia. Then it may televise it to the nation to rally it under the flag, call people to the colors using patriotic slogans, and finally prove that the current régime is the one that can defend the country and its people. This narrative is also designed to distract society’s attention from internal problems because the existential external threat is portrayed as so important that it dwarfs all the other issues.

This somewhat constructivist approach to the understanding of the drivers of Russia’s conduct should complement the traditional realist approach to Moscow’s foreign and security strategies. This is because Russians really think of their place in the world in terms of existential threat, no matter what the real situation looks like. It is the natural Russian suspiciousness and the fear of the West deeply embedded in people’s minds that enable the authorities to rather easily securitize foreign policy and seek the new legitimization after the economy stagnated.

²⁰ M. Domańska, *Putin for the Fourth Time. No Vision, No Hope*, “OSW Commentary”, December 13, 2017, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2017-12-13/putin-fourth-time-no-vision-no-hope> (accessed December 15, 2017).

As we have already noted, this perspective is also fully compatible with the former two; it might even be said that it shows the original dimension of the whole process. It also explains why the Russian authorities are so daring and blunt – it is because their very existence is at stake. Simply speaking, if the Kremlin's occupants cannot prove that their authority is necessary for the very survival of Russia, they will not be able to rule with the consent of the people. Consequently, this would mean that a widespread terror, with all its costs and unpredictability, would become the last resort in the preservation the power of the ruling elite.

3. RUSSIA IN THE WORLD 2018 – SELECTED PROBLEMS²¹

During the course of the year 2018 we observed a further development of the processes highlighted and briefly explained above. Particularly important was a continuation of the international strategy of controlled conflict with the West which was still the most important defining factor of the Russian foreign policy. As we have already explained, its causes are deeply rooted in multi-faceted threat perception and in the authorities' desire to stay in power at all costs. These intertwined factors also had an impact on the economy of Russia, which virtually stagnated despite some relatively positive statistics.

As we have argued several times, Russia's position in the world is driven to the greatest extent by its internal political dynamic, which, in turn, is determined mostly by the state of country's economy. Therefore, the most important and profound problem of the Russian foreign policy of 2018 was economic development and this issue must be addressed first here. The other important problems that we choose to highlight in this section are the state of relations with the West and Russia's policy of cultivating so-called "frozen conflicts", with special attention to the war in Syria.

3.1. *Economy*

As we often argue, the main problem that Russia faces is economic stagnation, which may even be called a creeping crisis. Its structural nature limits the

²¹ For a comprehensive assessment of Russia's current status see this very informative publication: OSW Team, *Putin for the Fourth Time. The State of and Prospects for Russia (2018-2024)*, Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), March 2018.

state's ability to overcome the most acute economic pitfalls, which contributes to the lowering of the society's living standards. This, in turn, compels the authorities to continue seeking external legitimization in the way that has been described above. Although President Vladimir Putin trumpeted rosy prospects for economic and social development²² and the advent of a whole new innovative economy, it seemed overly unrealistic. No substantial structural reforms were implemented during 2018 and none are on the table for the foreseeable future, while the pauperization of the society²³, especially its weakest strata²⁴, increases.

A country's economic situation is usually described with use of some basic metrics like GDP, GDP per capita or the others like them. This is of course informative, especially when the dynamic of these indicators is considered. But these metrics do not explain everything, and some other methods of description should also be applied to show the characteristics of the economy and its prospects. Additional and more sophisticated statistical tools may of course be applied, but we cannot afford an extended analysis of that sort within the framework of this article. Instead, we will only try to enumerate and briefly describe those most important structural features of the Russian economy that reflect its current state and future prospects, against the background of some basic numbers.

In terms of the GDP PPP (measured in current international USD) Russia performed more or less steadily at the level of 3.6-3.7 trillion from 2012 to 2017.²⁵ However, due to a sharp decline of the Russian currency in this period, the GDP measured in current USD, which had peaked in 2013 at 2.3 trillion, subsequently fell to a low of 1.3 trillion in 2016 with a bounce to 1.6 in 2017.²⁶ The recent forecast²⁷ holds that the rate of growth should remain at the level 1.6-1.8% in 2018-2020. However, currently available estimates do not take into account the decline of the oil prices that started in November 2018 – Russian Urals crude blend fell from its

²² В. Путин, *Послание Президента Федеральному Собранию*, March 1, 2018, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/messages/56957> (accessed March 2, 2018).

²³ *Безпросвета: бедных в России стало больше*, "Газета.ru", December 11, 2018, <https://www.gazeta.ru/business/2018/12/10/12090253.shtml> (accessed December 12, 2018).

²⁴ J. Rogoża, *Watering Down the Pension Reform in Russia*, Centre for Eastern Studies, September 5, 2018, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2018-09-05/watering-down-pension-reform-russia> (accessed September 7, 2018).

²⁵ The World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.PP.CD?locations=RU> (accessed November 29, 2018).

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ As of November 2018, untitled document <https://www.oecd.org/eco/outlook/economic-forecast-summary-russia-oecd-economic-outlook.pdf>, in: *Russian Federation – Economic Forecast Summary (November 2018)*, Paris: OECD, November 2018, <http://www.oecd.org/eco/outlook/russian-federation-economic-forecast-summary.htm> (accessed November 29, 2018).

peak of over 80 USD at the beginning of October to around 50 USD by the end of December 2018. At the onset of 2019 it is impossible to predict whether black gold's price will recover to the level of 70 USD, which is considered reasonably comfortable for Russia.

The problem of the price of hydrocarbons takes us to one of the main features of the Russian economy: its heavy dependence on the export of natural resources.²⁸ This is an obvious and often argued issue which does not need further rehearsal here; it is only worth noting that this problem is also well understood in Russia – some even say that “[...] Russia remains a raw material appendage of the EU”.²⁹ The most important long-term impact of this state of affairs on the Russian economy is that its overdependence on hydrocarbons means that related industries maintain priority in the Russian economic reality. That is why no tangible transition to high-tech industry can be observed, despite the fact that it has been frequently declared on the political level. And that is why it is so difficult to get out of the vicious circle of the priorities of the gas-and-oil-addicted economy.

This issue takes us to another problem: the increasing underinvestment in the Russian economy – and this refers to an extent even to the hydrocarbons sector.³⁰ This is mainly because state-owned and private entities usually do not use long-term planning, but concentrate on short-term extraction of profits. A good part of those profits end up in private coffers, which is another well-known and often-depicted process. Much of the capital is also transferred abroad by companies and banks – this particular phenomenon accelerated greatly throughout 2018. According to the official data it reached 42 billion USD in November, projected to rise to 66 billion USD by the end of the year.³¹ What is more, average foreign investment net flows to Russia have declined visibly since 2014³², not only

²⁸ See current and perspective budget figures: *Russia's Budget for 2019-2021: Increasing Reserves, Decreasing Transparency*, “OSW Analyzes”, November 28, 2018, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2018-11-28/russias-budget-2019-2021-increasing-reserves-decreasing-transparency> (accessed November 30, 2018).

²⁹ Р. Фаляхов, *Сырьевой придаток: как Россия меняет газ на технологии*, “Газета.ru”, April 30, 2018, <https://www.gazeta.ru/business/2018/04/17/11720185.shtml> (accessed May 2, 2018).

³⁰ V. Inozemtsev, *Claims of Peak Oil Production in Russia Probably Overblown*, “Eurasia Daily Monitor” 2018, vol. 15, issue 147, October 17, <https://jamestown.org/program/claims-of-peak-oil-production-in-russia-probably-overblown/> (accessed October 18, 2018).

³¹ *Capital Outflow from Russia Sets New Records*, “Pravda.ru”, November 13, 2018, http://www.pravdareport.com/news/russia/economics/13-11-2018/141984-russia_capital_outflow-0/ (accessed November 15, 2018).

³² Trading Economics, *Russia Foreign Direct Investment Net Flows*, <https://tradingeconomics.com/russia/foreign-direct-investment> (accessed December 28, 2018).

for purely pragmatic reasons³³ but also thanks to growing, politically motivated, economic pressure exerted on the Russian economy.³⁴

Despite this grim picture, Russia seemed to be able to weather the worsening economic situation³⁵, so the “[...] collapse is not around the corner”.³⁶ The society got accustomed to a “new normal” on a much lower level than some five years previously, although apathy and a sense of hopelessness spread.³⁷ Nevertheless, lack of real progress itself and the stagnation of the economy was the most profound feature of the Russian economic reality of 2018. The authorities seemed unable to restore significant economic growth and increase the wealth of the society, because the woes of Russia’s economy are systemic and have not been addressed in any significant way, at least until now.³⁸

One of the worst and most often discussed problems of the Russian economy is the legal system, which is unclear, full of loopholes and leaves room for arbitrary decisions to be made. This allows cohorts of bureaucrats at every level of the state apparatus to extract illegal profits from their normal activities – the overarching system of corruption is embedded in the society and economy and was alive and well in 2018, despite anticorruption rhetoric and some demonstrative anti-graft operations. And all of this is unlikely to change³⁹, because bureaucracy of every kind lives in symbiosis with the political authorities, and remains their primary

³³ See for example how Santander bank defines disadvantages for FDI in Russia: Santander Bank, *Russia: Foreign Investment*, December 2018, <https://en.portal.santandertrade.com/establish-overseas/russia/foreign-investment> (accessed December 28, 2018).

³⁴ See for example: J. Kajmowicz, *Amerykańscy giganci uderzają w rosyjską energetykę. Putin pod presją*, “Energetyka24”, March 6, 2018, <https://www.energetyka24.com/amerykanscy-giganci-uderzaja-w-rosyjska-energetyke-putin-pod-presja> (accessed March 7, 2018).

³⁵ See for example: A. Åslund, *Russia’s Economy: Macroeconomic Stability but Minimal Growth*, “Russian Analytical Digest” 2018, no. 220, May 16, pp. 2-4, <http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/RAD220.pdf> (accessed May 20, 2018).

³⁶ S. Secrieru, *The Real and Hidden Costs of Russia’s Foreign Policy*, “Brief Issue”, no. 2, Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, February 2018, p. 2.

³⁷ *Безрыбка: чего ждать России в 2019 году?*, “Газета.ru”, December 28, 2018, https://www.gazeta.ru/comments/2018/12/28_e_12111787.shtml (accessed December 28, 2018).

³⁸ D. Tsygankov, *Regulatory Policy in Russia – Smart Suggestions, But Poor Implementation*, “Russian Analytical Digest”, 2018, no. 224, September 26, pp. 2-4, <http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/RAD227.pdf> (accessed September 28, 2018).

³⁹ See the very informative analysis of Putin’s system in: J. Petrović, *The Putin System*, “CSS Analyses in Security Policy”, no. 225, April 2018, <http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CSSAnalyse225-EN.pdf> (accessed May 5, 2018).

tool for exerting power over the society and an instrument for extracting profits for the inner circle of the power elites.

All in all, the economic stagnation in Russia in 2018, still balanced on the brink of crisis, limited the authorities' ability to use its instruments of internal and foreign policy alike. Hence the demand for legitimization via external threat persists, for if the authorities cannot prove themselves to be benefactors of the society, they must pose as its defenders.

3.2. Relations with the West

Based on what we have already argued, it is no wonder that Russia's relations with the West in general and the US in particular continued to deteriorate in 2018.

However, from the point of view of the vital interests of the Western nations, there were no substantial, unmanageable problems, ones that could not be at least de-escalated. The contradictions in these relations might well have been resolved in good faith and the rivalry could have easily been kept at a lower level of confrontation, or might even become a sort of friendly competition. What is more, the US and Russia shared many very important common interests in the economic and security fields. With respect to this, the current incarnation of the Cold War does not resemble the original one, which was based on ideological contradictions that could not have been overcome; they could only be set aside for tactical reasons and even then only for limited periods.

But from the Russian point of view, the national interest looks different. We must remember that the Russian Federation is a highly authoritarian state: the respected watchdog Freedom House rates it "not free" with just 20 points out of the 100 available.⁴⁰ In this kind of a system the interests of the society, such as economic growth, welfare, social development, the freedom of individuals to achieve their own goals and so on are subordinate to the interest of the power elite. This elite's well-being is not directly bound to that of the society as a whole because an unelected government is not directly dependent on its constituency. Therefore, it does not have to care for voters in order to survive and continue to control the country in such a way as to achieve the personal and corporative goals of leading figures, ruling circles and the institutions that support them.

And here is the nature of the contradictions between the West and Russia that lingered throughout 2018. For the Russian authorities, this conflict is itself

⁴⁰ *Freedom in the World 2018. Russia Profile*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/russia> (accessed December 28, 2018).

a value, as it is an important tool in the upholding of power, so it persists despite the fact that the Western side of it considers this struggle counterproductive and unnecessary, especially in terms of economy and security.

Therefore, Russian relations with Western nations were full of cold words and adversarial actions throughout 2018, but these were prompted rather by Russia than the West. One of the most prominent examples of brutal offensive action was the attempted murder of Sergei Skripal, a former Russian intelligence operative residing in the UK. It has been argued, and we tend to agree, that this was a sort of Russian demonstration, intended among other things to intimidate the West and prove that Russia was ready to use every means at its disposal against its enemies.⁴¹

In 2018, the mounting militarization of relations became one of their most distinctive features. Vladimir Putin's threats of new weapons,⁴² including the concept of a very powerful autonomous underwater system – an ultimate retaliation weapon with a yield of 100 Mt⁴³ – was accompanied by military provocations and the actual use of armed force as an instrument of Russia's foreign policy as highlights of the year. This prompted some voices in the US and elsewhere to promote an increase in the pace of the development of the new capabilities directed at negating Russian advances.⁴⁴ But the West, in general, did not seem inclined to counter the Russian moves with an all-out arms race – the military threat from Moscow was rather downplayed by the majority of experts and politicians. This was mostly because the Russian armed forces, despite their high rate of modernization, remained inferior to those of the advanced Western nations, especially with regard to capabilities for projection of power abroad.⁴⁵

⁴¹ W. Rodkiewicz, *The Russian Attack on the United Kingdom: The Aims and the Consequences*, "OSW Analyses", March 14, 2018, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2018-03-14/russian-attack-united-kingdom-aims-and-consequences> (accessed March 15, 2018).

⁴² P. Felgenhauer, *Putin Unveils Array of Nuclear 'Super Weapons' Aimed at US*, "Eurasia Daily Monitor" 2018, vol. 15, issue 32, March 1, <https://jamestown.org/program/putin-unveils-array-of-nuclear-super-weapons-aimed-at-us/> (accessed March 2, 2018).

⁴³ J. Drew, *Russia's Doomsday Torpedo Is A 'Third Strike' Weapon*, "Aviation Week & Space Technology", January 24, 2018; <http://aviationweek.com/defense/russia-s-doomsday-torpedo-third-strike-weapon> (accessed January 25, 2018).

⁴⁴ See for example: L. Seligman, *U.S. Calls For Better Defenses As Putin Touts New Nukes*, "Aviation Week & Space Technology", March 2, 2018; http://aviationweek.com/defense/us-calls-better-defenses-putin-touts-new-nukes?NL=AW-05&Issue=AW-05_20180305_AW-05_986&sfvc4enews=42&cl=article_1&utm_rid=CPEN1000001539178&utm_campaign=13901&utm_medium=email&elq2=f53860a09c77445e902d25c3aeac5118 (accessed March 3, 2018).

⁴⁵ A. Lavrov, *Russian Military Reform from Georgia to Syria*, Washington, DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies, November 2018, p. 26, <https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs->

And so, despite loud announcements, the military dimension of Russian foreign policy quite obviously remained trained on the internal public – it is clearly a tool of the securitization of relations with the West. In reality, Russia remained militarily inferior to the US, and the more it tried to show otherwise the more profoundly true it was. But in fact this does not matter from the Russian point of view, as Moscow is not preparing for a full-scale confrontation with the West. On the contrary, the Western advantage, along with even limited counteractions to the Russian military developments, played directly into the hands of the Kremlin. This was because Western military might, actual and inflated by propaganda alike, was used as an important justification for the actively defensive posture of the Russian authorities.

The other significant factor of relations with the West in 2018 was the alleged involvement of the Russian entities in the political life of Western nations, especially the US. This was intended, it is said, not only to influence the electoral process but also to stir-up many controversial issues in American political and social life. In 2018 a lot of information surfaced depicting the way Russian troll farms and spy agencies tried to impact heated American political debates. This not only cast a long shadow on mutual relations but was also increasingly securitized in the US political debate, in fact even more than the military threat from Russia. Thus Moscow's meddling in American political and social life was not only viewed as a menace from outside but also became an instrument of internal political struggle in the US.

It is, however, worth noting that influencing other nations' internal processes is one of the oldest instruments of foreign policy and it should not be viewed as something extraordinary. The question, rather, is this: why did the Russians decide to act so bluntly and directly that that many activities could be attributed to them relatively clearly? This, in turn, hit Russia back severely, for example through an expansion of the sanctions regime and other American counteractions that are negative for Russia's interests.

The answer to this important question is, of course, multi-faceted, the argument here being a sort of continuation of the one already presented in the overview of 2017.

First of all, it appeared that the Kremlin cared in 2018 even less about sanctions or international opinion than before – at least when it came to the opinion of the so-called democratic, developed world. Contradictions and conflict were

in themselves values for Russians, so they were ready to take some damage if only the strategy as a whole worked.

Secondly, the Western sanctions became, in fact, a positive factor for the Kremlin's narrative, because they were portrayed as an instrument of aggression against Russia. This was not only intended to strengthen the common anti-Western sentiment within the society, but it also allowed the regime to attribute the country's economic woes to external enemies instead of the country's own authorities. Thus, it was easier to call on the society to patiently muddle through adverse conditions. We argue that no matter what is officially being said on this issue, the sanctions regime is beneficial to Russia (namely, the Russian top political elite). And so, many of Moscow's actions, from the Skripal affair to saber rattling, to almost openly meddling in political and social processes in the West, might be understood as instrumental to the Kremlin's desire to preserve the sanctions regime. One might even observe that Russia was careful to not to allow the West even to ease the system of sanctions.

And finally, this sort of open incursion into Western societies seems to the Russians not only a convenient and useful tool, but also the only one that might actually work. Without a military instrument, Moscow has virtually no other way to influence the West and make it bend to Russian wishes more than it would otherwise be willing to. The real Russian political influence in the West is waning because Russia turns more and more authoritarian and aggressive and less and less stable, more isolated and marred by economic decline – thus weakening its position as a valuable political partner.

To summarize, the inflated conflict with the West remained the highlight of 2018, as it had been in the previous years. The Kremlin trod carefully to keep it at the level needed for internal reasons while at the same time tried to avoid prompting decisive Western counteraction.

3.3. The Russian Intervention in Syria as an example of the Frozen Conflict Strategy

The term “frozen conflict” refers, as we see it, to an armed conflict which currently remains in a state of relative calm but has not been resolved in any permanent way. The defining feature of this situation is that it also involves an outside actor, let us call it a “freezer”, which played a decisive role in fostering this calm by using own influence and resources. Subsequently this external player manages the conflict constantly in its already *frozen* state. To do this it needs to be able to continuously implement a multitude of effective instruments of influence, rang-

ing from political backing to economic incentives/dependence, to military assistance/combat support. The *freezer* should certainly be a very strong actor relative to the main adversaries. It is rather obvious that a country that decides to execute such a strategy does so because it sees that as most suitable for itself. Therefore, it does not matter what the interests of the nations or governments involved are; they are supposed to remain weak, vulnerable and susceptible to external influence. A *freezer* is of course not interested in seeking a lasting solution, despite its power and influence, because this would deprive it of benefits derived from the state of affairs it created. In practice, this kind of quietened armed conflict usually takes the form of a relative balance of power resulting in a *de facto* ceasefire, with hostilities escalating and de-escalating according to the wishes of the *freezer*. This *modus operandi* has been the Russian instrument of choice in the post-Soviet space since the early 1990s. More recently, the *frozen conflict* strategy has become a tool of the new Cold War, as we can observe in Ukraine and Syria.

Setting aside the vast Ukrainian problem, the Russian involvement in Syria may also be understood as an attempt to implement a strategy of this kind because the endgame that the Kremlin has pursued there was to divide Syria and then to freeze the conflict. This means, in the most general terms, that Moscow is not interested in strengthening anyone's position but its own. Consequently, being the balancing power gives Russia, in theory, the most influence at the least cost to itself, because all the parties to the conflict need a balancing actor for their individual purposes, so it can develop its own interests relatively freely. Theoretically, this is enough to keep all the forces more or less equal and balance them against one another. This is the logic of the frozen conflict and it is exactly what the Russians have tried to do in Syria.

Having managed to shore up the regime of the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad in the course of 2016, in 2017 the Russians decided to calm the war down and agreed to establish de-escalation zones in Syria. Officially this was in order to ease the situation of the population withered by many years of hostilities, but in fact it bought time for the regime and the forces allied with it to regroup and strengthen. Then in 2018 most of those safe zones were wiped out, resulting in the consolidation of the part of the country controlled by the government. Thus, Syria is currently divided into four zones. First is the government-controlled area which comprises roughly two-thirds of the country, in which there is also the strong Iranian presence and where the Russian military installations are located. Second is the Kurdish Rojava area which remains under international, especially US patronage. Third is Turkish controlled north-west of Syria. And finally, the Americans govern a small pocket on the southern desert by the Jordanian border, along with some anti-Assad fighters.

During 2018 we could see how the Russians tried to establish a certain pattern of balance in Syria intended to lead to the final freezing of the war in the way they wanted it to. In practical terms, this meant that Moscow allowed the participants in the conflict to pursue their goals in a limited way. And so:

- Israel conducted extensive⁴⁶ actions against the Iranian forces in Syria⁴⁷ with tacit Russian consent. This was because Tel-Aviv views Teheran expanding its presence at its northern borders as directed towards the establishment of a staging area for operations against the Jewish State – this is, of course, considered an existential threat to Israel.
- On the other hand, the Russians agreed to an Iranian presence, knowing that it both kept the Israelis at bay and limited al-Assad's power and room for maneuver. It also bogged down the Americans, who were focused on resisting the rise of Tehran's influence throughout the Middle East.
- The Syrian government was allowed to subdue almost all of the areas that had been designed as de-escalation zones but was not permitted to conquer all of them. This is because it was not necessary for the Russians and could prove costly. What is more, by securing all the territory the Syrian dictator would need Moscow much less. This is because the post-war reconstruction would require not the firepower the Russians have but rather a great deal of money, which the Kremlin cannot provide in substantial quantities. That is why Syria is intentionally left divided and the Russians evidently prefer to keep it that way.
- This refers especially to the vast portion of Syrian land controlled by the Kurdish organizations in association with some Arab tribal militias, the US and the forces of other NATO countries. The Russians see this as a counterbalance against Damascus, Ankara, and Tehran.
- And finally, there is a strong and growing Turkish presence in Syria that the Russians allowed and even welcomed because it is another counterbalance to both al-Assad and the Kurds. The latter are the foremost target of Turkish activity, as Ankara sees Kurdish aspirations to independence as the biggest

⁴⁶ Israel confirmed to have executed over 200 attacks on targets in Syria since 2017, see: D. Williams, *Israel Says Struck Iranian Targets in Syria 200 Times in Last Two Years*, "Reuters", September 4, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-israel-syria-iran/israel-says-struck-iranian-targets-in-syria-200-times-in-last-two-years-idUSKCN1LK2D7> (accessed September 6, 2018).

⁴⁷ The latest example of Israeli airstrikes in Syria is the December 25 attack on Hezbollah and Iranian targets: *Israeli Official Confirms Aircraft Struck Iranian Targets in Syria*, "Haaretz", December 27, 2018; <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/israeli-official-confirms-aircraft-struck-iranian-targets-in-syria-1.6785843> (accessed December 27, 2018).

threat to its very existence, or at least cohesion. It is also very important that the authorities in Ankara use the Kurdish threat as a uniting factor for their own internal political purposes. The Turkish political and military presence in Syria is therefore portrayed as the vanguard in the defense of the nation against its sworn enemies.

By the fall of 2018, the hostilities in Syria had subsided and it might have looked like the Russians had managed to achieve their desired endgame. The Kremlin's declared ally Bashir al-Assad, to whose aid the Russians rushed in 2015, did not control his own country. The Iranians were present but constantly battered by the Israelis. The Turks and the Americans had their zones in Syria, balancing the other actors. Israel was tied to counteracting the Iranian presence, especially in the southern part of the country. And finally, the Kurds retained their strong position, balancing both Turkey and al-Assad. All of this was exactly what suited the Russian goals, as we have just explained them. But this is also exactly what might cause the whole Russian Middle Eastern policy to be unravelled.

First of all, we have to understand that the conflict in Syria is actually an entirely different story to those in the post-Soviet space, and so the Russian position in it is also entirely different. The key and profound difference is that Russians are relatively weak in the region, in comparison to Iran, Israel, Turkey or even al-Assad's Syria. The second one is the geographic remoteness of the Syrian theater from Russia's mainland – this greatly exacerbates its strategic weakness. And finally, the situation in Syria is much more complex than anything the Russians have encountered until now, and the very size of the conflict is different, too.

Of course, the above-mentioned scheme of balances and counterbalances may work for some time. In theory, it allows for a multidirectional approach, as it gives the Russians many different kinds of leverage which, if skillfully used, might prolong the existence of the system. All the participants in the conflict might consider this overall situation not particularly suitable, but at the same time they may be satisfied with partial success. Thus, instead of taking the risk to try and change it in their favour they might accept the *status quo* as it is. And this is exactly what the Russians hope for.

But the whole scheme may also fall in an instant because of its complexity, which may prove to be too high to be fully understood and controlled. Some events may bring unexpected ramifications, spill over unchecked, and escalate with the result of destroying the balance so carefully maintained by the Russians. But this could also happen intentionally, for some of the participants in the conflict may become dissatisfied and start breaking out of control. We have to reiterate that these are relatively strong entities that cannot be simply coerced

by the Russians, who do not have the forces in Syria capable of conducting full-scale combat operations on their own. The local players also have interests of an existential nature at stake, which may further embolden them.

Therefore, some of the powers engaged in the conflict may decide that the potential benefits of a change in the balance are worth the likely costs and risks of trying to achieve one. Thus, some small-scale actions may be undertaken against Moscow's will, some opportunities may be exploited to escalate tensions and to maneuver the Russians into renewed hostilities with the goal of gaining some advantage at the expense of the other main participants. Some players may even openly act against the Russians, and some may even succeed, at least partially. This would be the worst-case scenario because Russia's authority in Syria rests to a great extent on the firepower which makes it an indispensable partner for combat operations. If it is proven otherwise, for example if Israel decides to act and manages to overpower the Syrian S-300s, Russia would lose face with strongly negative consequences.

We have also to remember some military-related operational and strategic realities. Despite its great firepower, the Russian contingent is in fact a relatively small garrison isolated from its own country's territory, depending on long supply routes controlled by other nations like Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. The Russians may of course decisively contribute to the relatively small-scale operations in the form of support for local forces. But in the case of direct full-scale hostilities undertaken against the Russian forces, their positions would be extremely difficult to sustain.

We may easily imagine at least some of the circumstances of that sort which would render Russia a less important player that it has been until now:

- The Kurds may forge some agreement with al-Assad and the Iranians, especially if the US shows a decreased willingness to remain in Syria, which is currently more possible than ever. This would contribute to a swift expansion of President al-Assad's authority and diminish the need for Russian firepower.
- The Syrian government may also strike a deal with Turkey against the Kurds, and could quickly regain most of its remaining territory with the help of the Turkish army and the indifference of the Americans, who would prefer to stay with their NATO allies. The consequence would be similar to the one outlined above.
- The Israelis may decide to get rid of the Syrian S-300s if annoyed too much and if they decided that Iranians had gained too much benefit from the air defense cover. Even if the Israeli Air Force would suffer some losses in such a venture, Tel-Aviv might consider it worthwhile.

- The Iranians may commence and escalate direct attacks against Israel, leaving the Russians with tough choices: to back them or to allow Israel to execute an all-out strike against targets on the Syrian territory.
- And finally, the US might actually keep to its current commitments and withdraw their forces from Syria in a somewhat abrupt manner. This would surely contribute to the instability in the region⁴⁸ and ruin the Russian scheme of balances and counterbalances. Consequently, all the other actors would try to exploit the opportunities that would appear in such a case and the system would have to be redesigned, with unknown consequences – at any rate it would take time and be costly for the Russians if they tried to create a new balance.

All in all, the equilibrium the Russians desire may not hold, specifically because the local players have entirely different stakes in Syria. Let us reiterate that for al-Assad, the Iranians, the Kurds and the Israelis the stakes are existential. For the Russians they are not. That is why the local players may be ready to risk relatively more and commit more resources to their strategies in Syria than the Russians can.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In summarizing developments regarding the Russian place in the world during the course of 2018 there are several points that have to be stressed.

1. The economy of Russia remained vulnerable; there was also no serious attempt to change this situation, and no significant reforms have been undertaken. This was because any substantial change would mean the destruction of the existing power structure, which is tightly intertwined with the system of extraction of short-term profits from the economy by the elites.
2. The authorities remained invulnerable to any internal threats to the stability of the ruling elite. This is due to the tight control over most of the media and to the narrative of an external threat which needs to be countered by a nation united around the strong leadership which can secure it from existential dangers. The West is not only painted as a threat to the very survival of Russia

⁴⁸ P. H. Gordon, *Sudden U.S. Troop Exit From Syria Would Exacerbate Regional Instability*, Council on Foreign Relations, December 20, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/article/sudden-us-troop-exit-syria-would-exacerbate-regional-instability> (accessed December 22, 2018).

and its identity but is also conveniently blamed for the economic woes of the society.

3. The conflict with the West is, therefore, one of the main bases of legitimization and it has been carefully maintained by the Russian authorities. It has also become increasingly militarized, as the military as a source of national pride, the defensive force of last resort, and this tool for achieving foreign policy goals has become one of the Kremlin's last remaining instruments of internal and external strategies.
4. In this context it must also be stressed that, with regard to foreign policy, Russia has no viable tools of economic influence. Even natural gas exports became leveraged against Russia, instead of being its weapon as it had been previously. This is simply because the revenues from international trade in hydrocarbons are indispensable for both the economic and internal political fronts. Because of this, and changes on the hydrocarbons market, the relevance Russian gas and oil as a political tool declined.
5. Consequently, Russia's weight in the world continued to diminish in spite of its high aspirations.⁴⁹ This is most profoundly visible in the choice of foreign policy tools. The Kremlin frequently activates the military, it takes part in open conflicts and frozen ones, threatening the world with the powerful new weapons and other modern technologies. Nonetheless, it lacks other instruments of influence like political attraction or economic co-operation. From the point of view of the world economy and global trade, Russia matters only due to its vast natural resources and arms production.

As for the future, there are several particularly important developments which have to be considered when we try to assess the dynamics pertaining to the Russian position in the world:

1. The Russian economy, despite some stabilization, seems endangered for reasons other than its well-known internal deficiencies. As global debt reached roughly 300% of global GDP⁵⁰, as hydrocarbon prices are likely not going to spike due to high production rates, and as all of the main world economies suffer from various structural problems it is unsure whether economic growth in the world will be sustained in the coming years. In the case of any

⁴⁹ P. K. Baev, *Putin's Month-Long Diplomatic Tour Highlights Russia's Growing Irrelevance*, "Eurasia Daily Monitor" 2018, vol. 15, issue 165, November 26, <https://jamestown.org/program/putins-month-long-diplomatic-tour-highlights-russias-growing-irrelevance/> (accessed November 27, 2018).

⁵⁰ B. Chappatta, *\$250 Trillion in Debt: The World's Post-Lehman Legacy*, "Bloomberg", September 13, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2018-lehman-debt/> (accessed December 28, 2018).

major global crisis, Russia will be among those countries that will be hit the hardest, due to its overreliance on exports and the ineffective structure of the economy. Although there are some signs of change in the Russian petro-economy⁵¹, we believe that this effort will not yield a substantial change in the foreseeable future. This is primarily because President Putin

[...] lacks a clear vision for a modern Russia, let alone a concrete program of reforms. His key goal is to maintain the system of power he created, rely on a strong Russian military, and keep society in check.⁵²

2. In the immediate future, Russia will continue its bellicose policy and offensive approach towards the West “[u]nless some major ‘black swan’ event intervenes, drawing Russia closer to its Western partners to face common challenges [...]”.⁵³ There will be some effects of this policy that Moscow will be able to deem a success, like some deeper divisions inside or among states or some more political chaos fueled by the Russians. But on the other hand, the West will surely step up a defensive posture, both on the internal and international fronts. With regard to that, we have to remember that the threat from Russia is highly securitized and that some powerful economic and political circles in the West understand that they would benefit from conflict with Russia.
3. Therefore we expect that in the foreseeable future Russia will behave more or less the same as it has been doing for several years, and that some meanders of its policies will be of tactical nature. On the other hand, there will be no tangible gains from this conflict, because Russian capabilities are limited and resources scarce. On the other hand, it can also be argued that due to the deterioration of the internal situation in Russia, the Kremlin may feel compelled to escalate tensions, especially in Eastern Europe.⁵⁴ To be sure, the West will also change; it will turn more xenophobic and less open and liberal, and

⁵¹ B. Aris, *Putin 4.0: State-Led Reforms to Remake Russia's Hybrid Economic Model*, “Russian Analytical Digest”, 2018, no. 224, September 26, pp. 5-10, http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/RAD_224.pdf (accessed September 25, 2018).

⁵² J. Petrović, *Putin's Challenges*, “Russian Analytical Digest” 2018, no. 218, April 10, p. 6, <http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/RAD218.pdf> (accessed April 12, 2018).

⁵³ R. Sakwa, *Putin's Fourth Presidential Term*, “Russian Analytical Digest” 2018, no. 218, April 10, p. 12, <http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/RAD218.pdf> (accessed April 12, 2018).

⁵⁴ J. Forbrig, *Expect Russian Escalation in Eastern Europe*. In: *What to Watch in 2019*, Washington, DC: The German Marshall Fund of the United States, December 20, 2018, <http://www.gmf.org>

maybe even less democratic, but this will only make Russian actions against it less effective.

4. Russian aspirations to become a leading world power are also poised to remain just wishful thinking despite the picture that the propaganda displays for internal purposes. The West may be in relative decline, and the world order may be crumbling, but Russia is in no position to gain a decisive say in the shaping of the new international system. Even its military might will not give Moscow such a capacity, as Russia is unable to create the basic capabilities⁵⁵ required to effectively project power at greater distances.⁵⁶ Conversely, it is possible that the Russian Federation will go down with the world order even faster than the West because it has no resources, internal strength or flexibility with which to adapt to the emerging new rules. Those will most likely be created out of the complex interaction between a divided West on the one side and China with the rest of the divided developing world on the other. In that process, which we believe has already started, it is clearly visible that “[...] Russia is now becoming increasingly dependent on China [...]”⁵⁷, instead of being an autonomous, global power.
5. In Syria, the equilibrium the Kremlin desires will probably not hold, and the Russians will most likely lose some of their positions in the coming years. The most recent factor leading to the breaking of this balance is the decision by the US to lower its profile in the conflict by withdrawing its ground troops. We do not know exactly how this will proceed but it has already become a factor of change in the situation in Syria. If the Turks attack the Kurdish territories with American blessing, Damascus will surely take over southern Syria and its oilfields. In such an event Rojava will most probably cease to exist; some part of it will fall into Turkish hands, while the rest will be back under al-Assad’s rule. In this process, many of the Kurdish administrative entities will subordinate themselves to Damascus peacefully in order to avoid being over-

[fus.org/blog/2018/12/20/what-watch-2019?utm_source=email&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=2019-2-1%20world%20wire](https://rus.fus.org/blog/2018/12/20/what-watch-2019?utm_source=email&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=2019-2-1%20world%20wire) (accessed December 22, 2018).

⁵⁵ М. Климов, *ВМФ РФ лишают океанского статуса*, “Независимое Военное Обозрение”, November 30, 2018, http://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/2018-11-30/1_1024_status.html (accessed December 2, 2018).

⁵⁶ I. Kabanenko, *Russia’s Shipbuilding Program: Postponed Blue-Water Ambitions*, “Eurasia Daily Monitor” 2018, vol 15, issue 59, April 18, <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-shipbuilding-program-postponed-blue-water-ambitions/> (accessed April 20, 2018).

⁵⁷ А. Храмчихин, *Станет ли Москва младшим братом Пекина*, “Независимое Военное Обозрение”, June 29, 2018, http://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/2018-06-29/1_1002_place.html (accessed June 30, 2018).

run by the Turks. This will create a whole new set of dynamics in the situation in Syria, diminishing the need for Russian help and greatly emboldening the regime. It will be the undoing of the Russian scheme and its Middle Eastern high position, at least partially and at least for the time being. This is because Moscow will not be able to provide significant funds for reconstruction and post-conflict stabilization.

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