

# Trends in International Politics 2024

---

## Russia 2024: Making or Breaking the System

---

Trend Report 2 / January 2024

Laetitia Spetschinsky

**Laetitia Spetschinsky PhD** is an Affiliated Researcher at the oiip and a guest lecturer at the Catholic University of Louvain where she has been conducting research and teaching on Euro-Russian relations for more than 15 years (Baillet Latour Chair on EU-Russia relations). Her professional background also led her to participate in the training of Belgian officials (Jean Monnet Training; 4th cycle of the Royal Higher Institute of Defence), European officials (Continuing Training for Diplomats of Member States, officials of EU delegations, the European Parliament and the Council, Brussels, European Commission).

Impressum:

Österreichisches Institut für Internationale Politik – oiip,

Austrian Institute for International Affairs

A-1090 Vienna, Währinger Straße 3/12, [www.oiip.ac.at](http://www.oiip.ac.at), [info@oiip.ac.at](mailto:info@oiip.ac.at)

Copyright © 2024

## Introduction

In Russia, the year 2024 mainly revolves around one pivotal element: the presidential election on March 17<sup>th</sup>. With no strong competitors and Putin's approval ratings ranging from 77% to 80% (VTsIOM, 2023), the upcoming election lacks excitement.

As Putin engages in his fifth presidential term, he will match the political longevity of Stalin (1922-1952 as Secretary General of the CPSU). This raises the question of what aspects of the Soviet leader Putin will emulate.

Overall, Moscow's main objectives remain to bring down US domination, to expose the West, to undermine the EU, and to sell the Russian model as a global alternative. The key to these achievements lies in Ukraine – in a victory that requires

further military progress and, likely, another wave of mobilization – but this is not going to happen before Russians go to the polls.

### The Landscape of Russian Politics

As one Russian journalist notes, “the meaning of the 2024 elections is about cementing the present, not about

moving towards the future (...). The only intrigue related to Putin's next term is to search for the limit to conservatism and fundamentalism, that is, to observe whether cementing will be followed by complete mummification” (Shevchuk, 2023).

Indeed, while all emphasis will be on defending the motherland, it is reasonable to affirm that Putin's next term will be about *protecting the system* against external and internal threats.

Those who think differently will be at risk: in 2024, the Kremlin will have more freedom than ever to suppress and punish dissent. Having withdrawn (or having been banned) from two major Human Rights organizations (the UN Human Rights Committee and the Council of Europe), the Russian authorities have very few international

commitments to abide by. The Vienna-based OSCE, where Russia remains (reluctantly) engaged alongside Western actors, retains some of the last Human Rights monitoring

mechanisms.

In such a hassle-free normative environment, internal repression is likely to escalate significantly – with automated crackdowns and harsher

**As Putin engages in his fifth presidential term, he will match the political longevity of Stalin (1922-1952 as Secretary General of the CPSU). This raises the question of what aspects of the Soviet leader Putin will emulate.**

sentences. According to the Human Rights organization Memorial which has been denigrated as a foreign agent, the number of political prisoners exceeded in late 2023 the number of 1.300 persons (Mandraud, 2023). Moreover, heftier punishments have been applied to political prisoners (including the 25-year detention on charges of treason for Vladimir Kara-Murza), indicating that the courts are over-complying with the political trends.

### **The Domestic-International Nexus**

At a meeting with the Defence Ministry board on December 19<sup>th</sup>, 2023, Putin (once again) highlighted the need to defend the nation against the West's "widespread efforts to win over the fifth column", i.e. individual traitors and terrorist organizations. This is yet another indication that many more organizations, trade unions or corporations, in Russia and abroad, are at risk of being labeled as "undesirable", "extremist" or "terrorist" (Russell, 2022).

The fight against internal threats goes hand in hand with the promotion of a new nationalist ideal, or rather an idealized version of the good citizen: the patriotic parent. 2024 has indeed been designated as "year of the family".

Addressing the World Russian People Council, in late 2023, Putin reminded

the audience that traditional Russian families brought up seven or eight children. He expressed his wish to "revive these wonderful traditions" (Putin, Speech at the plenary session of the World Russian People's Council, 2023). The Kremlin adopted economic incentives and some kind of social and medical pressure in the area of abortion and birth control – a feature quite typical for (past and present) totalitarian regimes.

On the other hand, the Federal Assembly cracked down on LGBTQ-rights, outlawed gender-affirming surgeries, and criminalized gay propaganda (Davies, 2023). On November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2023, Russia's Supreme Court ruled that the "international LGBT movement" was an "extremist organization". Any display of the symbols, any participation in events or the funding of the movement can be punished with detention (from 15 days up to 12 years) (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

The revival of Russian conservative identity is, according to the President, a precondition for a strong "Russian world". Putin defines the Russian world as a value that "unites everyone who feels a spiritual connection with (Russia), who consider him/herself a native speaker of the Russian language, (who

shares a common) history, culture, regardless of nationality or religious affiliation” (Putin, Speech at the plenary session of the World Russian People's Council, 2023). As the President puts it, a Russian world requires a strong Russian ethnicity – one that embodies the idea that needs to be propagated (Putin, Speech at the plenary session of the World Russian People's Council, 2023). The strengthening of Russian identity thus serves as the national backbone of foreign policy: it is the clearest possible expression of the so-called domestic policy/foreign policy nexus.

**Foreign policy: defending the *Russskiy mir* and making new friends.**

Russian foreign policy in 2024 will remain guided by two interconnected goals.

On the one hand, the Kremlin will reinforce its role as the defender of Russian-speaking communities abroad. Foreign analysts must pay attention to those communities that are in the Kremlin’s line of sight. Two such hints appeared in December 2023.

On the 4<sup>th</sup>, Putin threatened of internal consequences for Latvia’s “Russophobic” policies towards the elderly Russians living there (Putin, Meeting of the Council for Civil Society

Development and Human Rights, 2023), as well as elsewhere in Europe (he also mentioned Germany). Despite Sergei Lavrov’s assurances that Russia has no intention to provoke NATO (TASS, 2023), escalation along cultural lines cannot be ruled out: not only the Baltics, but Poland and even Germany publicly warned about the risk of confrontation with Russia. Hybrid attacks such as cyber disruption and the instrumentalization of migrants rank high on the risk list on those borders.

Similarly, on December 14<sup>th</sup>, Putin said that “the whole southeast of Ukraine has always been pro-Russian, because these are historically Russian territories. (...) What does Ukraine have to do with this? It has nothing to do with it. Neither Crimea, nor the entire Black Sea coast in general. Odessa is a Russian city. We know this. Everyone knows this” (TASS, 2023). In the absence of any readable war goals in Ukraine (between demilitarization, decommunization and denazification), this should be considered as a clear indication of the Kremlin’s military ambitions.

On the other hand, Moscow needs to expand its circle of friends. On January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024, Russia took over the presidency of the BRICS with Egypt, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia as new full members. The

motto of “strengthening multilateralism for equitable global development and security” practically means that Russia will push a triple agenda across the group (and globally).

First, it will seek “foreign policy coordination”, i.e. coordinated pushback against the West and, ideally, the widest possible recognition of Russian territorial acquisitions in Ukraine. For now, less than a handful of Russian allies recognize its annexed territories, including Crimea, and China certainly does not.

Second, Russia will advance its trade advantages as a food, energy, and security supplier for Africa, the Middle East, and South America, pushing the narrative against former colonial powers. That, however, is contingent on how much food, energy and security Moscow can offer – and whether it can maintain a strong added value under international pressure and Chinese competition.

Third, in the economic and financial sector, Moscow intends to develop interbank cooperation and “the use of national currencies in mutual trade” (Putin, Address on the beginning of Russia's BRICS presidency, 2024). As it enters its third year under a comprehensive sanction regime, Russia

will undergo a pivotal year that will make or break its new war economy.

#### **2024: Putin's make or break year**

What the Kremlin sees now is roughly what it gets: the West will keep supporting Ukraine and pressuring Russia but the significant moves of 2022 and 2023 are unlikely to be matched in 2024, partly because of the elections in Washington and Brussels.

In this context, Moscow's interest is to push through and build on existing positions: more Ukrainian territory, more war economy, more import substitutions, more national unity, more influence abroad. But these goals are hard to get.

In 2024, Russia might seize additional portions of Ukrainian territory, but it will also need to address frequent incidents on its own soil (beyond the Belgorod region) and cope with persistent insurgency in the occupied territories of Ukraine.

As far as Russia's war economy is concerned, the country will continue to function – but longer-term prospects depend on foreign (i.e. Asian) investments, and on the ability of the Kremlin to convince Russia's own entrepreneurs to invest *in* the country – a fight Putin has been leading as well since 2022.

Finally, the goal of preserving national unity is the hardest to forecast.

Throughout history, Russia has proven its ability to defy all predictions in matters of societal shifts.

In conclusion, either Putin manages to protect the system, to save the economy, and to lead an international “anti-establishment” (anti-West) alliance, or he will go down in history as a *failed* Stalin: a Stalinist-like statesman in longevity, in national ambition, in reliance on security services, and, in milder terms, in repression of political dissent... But a Stalin without a Yalta, and without a “great patriotic victory”,

Putin’s legacy would just be that of a geopolitical, economic, civilizational, and human disaster.

This daring comparison, one might argue, is the reason why we should expect Russia to double down on all of the above. Putin needs to proclaim some sort of victory in 2024 to protect the system. And it doesn’t matter who else celebrates with him: the system can live with self-proclaimed righteousness.

## Bibliography

Davies, K. M. (2023, 11 28). *Russia Limits Women's Access To Abortion, Citing Demographic Changes*. (online) <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/11/28/russia-limits-womens-access-to-abortion-citing-demographic-changes> (accessed: 05.01.2024)

Human Rights Watch. (2023, 11 30). *Russia: Supreme Court Bans "LGBT Movement" as "Extremist"*. (online) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/30/russia-supreme-court-bans-lgbt-movement-extremist> (accessed: 05.01.2024)

Mandraud, I. (2023, 12 11). *Russia's Repression Machine Goes Into Overdrive*. (online) accessed 05.01.2024.  
[https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/12/11/russia-s-repression-machine-goes-into-overdrive\\_6333306\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/12/11/russia-s-repression-machine-goes-into-overdrive_6333306_4.html) (accessed: 05.01.2024)

Putin, V. (2023, 12 04). *Meeting of the Council for Civil Society Development and Human Rights*. (online) <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72905> (accessed: 05.01.2024)

Putin, V. (2023, 11 28). *Speech at the plenary session of the World Russian People's Council*. (online) <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72863> (accessed: 05.01.2024)

Putin, V. (2024, 01 01). *Address on the beginning of Russia's BRICS presidency*. (online) <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73202> (accessed: 05.01.2024)

Russell, M. (2022, 03). *'Foreign Agents' And 'Undesirables': Russian Civil Society In Danger Of Extinction?* (online)  
[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE%2F2022%2F729297/EPRS\\_BRI\(2022\)729297\\_E](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE%2F2022%2F729297/EPRS_BRI(2022)729297_E) (accessed: 05.01.2024)

Shevchuk, M. (2023, 12 11). *Forty Years of Loneliness. Towards Vladimir Putin's Fifth Term (Translated from Russian)*. (online) <https://republic.ru/posts/110781> (accessed: 05.01.2024)

TASS. (2023, 12 14). *Putin proclaims Odessa Russian city, challenges Ukraine's historical narrative*. (online) <https://tass.com/politics/1721001> (accessed: 05.01.2024)

TASS. (2023, 12 18). *Russia has no intentions to attack NATO countries - Lavrov*. (online) <https://tass.com/politics/1722987> (accessed: 05.01.2024)



VTsIOM. (2023, 12 24). (online) [www.wciom.com](http://www.wciom.com) (accessed: 05.01.2024)