

Inevitable Instability in Russia

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Editors

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PREFACE

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russia experienced a chaotic and turbulent 1990s. By the end of the decade, in order to prevent the disintegration of the Russian Federation, the Russian special services elevated former KGB Lieutenant Colonel Vladimir Putin as the successor to President Boris Yeltsin.

In his first major policy address to the Federal Assembly 25 years ago, Putin emphasised a broad range of themes, such as the fight against the shadow economy and corruption, harmonious relations among the great powers, the end of the Cold War, the threat of population decline, the role of civil society and the necessity of a strong state. He stated among other things: *‘But our position is very clear: only a strong, or effective if someone dislikes the word ‘strong’, an effective state and a democratic state is capable of protecting civil, political and economic freedoms, capable of creating conditions for people to lead happy lives and for our country to flourish. ... At the same time, a strong state is unthinkable without respect for people’s rights and freedom. Only a democratic state can ensure a balance of interests of personality and society, and combine private initiative with national tasks’.*

This speech is a textbook example of how, during Putin’s rule, words and actions have not aligned. Over time, Russia has moved towards an increasingly authoritarian model: independent media has been silenced, the opposition has been suppressed, and the economy has been co-opted to serve the interests of the ruling elite. Putin inherited from Yeltsin a fast-growing economy, but that growth has slowed—from over 10% in 2000 to under 2% today. More important than the slowdown itself is the nature of the current growth, which is primarily driven by a war economy.

Since Putin’s historic speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007, Russia has steadily turned against the West—the same West that had supported Russia during the early years of its post-Soviet transition. Already

in the following year, war erupted in Georgia. Six years later, Russia attacked Ukraine. In February 2022, the conflict escalated into a full-scale invasion. As Russia distanced itself from the West, it simultaneously executed a strategic pivot to China. This pivot has been dramatic in economic terms: in Putin's first year as president, China accounted for less than 3% of Russia's imports. Today, that share has climbed to nearly 50%. China has become Russia's largest energy customer and, under the banner of technological cooperation, has enabled the functioning of Russia's military-industrial base. In doing so, China has played a pivotal role in sustaining Russia's military operations in Ukraine. The seriousness of this alliance was underscored by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who reportedly stated in a closed-door event in July 2025 that China will not accept a Russian defeat in the war in Ukraine—a chilling signal to the West.

In recent years, numerous futurists and analysts have forecast that Russia is heading towards instability, or even chaos. Multiple sectors of Russian society show signs of erosion, and despite the Kremlin's use of repression and surveillance to contain dissent, the risk of internal instability is growing. A chaotic Russian collapse would pose major challenges for the West. As internal pressures mount, the Russian leadership could seek to deflect unrest by escalating a war beyond Ukraine. Crucially, one must not forget that this increasingly unpredictable nation possesses the largest nuclear arsenal in the world.

The primary objective of this book is to use insights from Finnish expertise to peer into Russia's increasingly closed political and societal system and to anticipate where the country may be heading. This volume is divided into three main parts:

1. Intelligence, information and foresight: This section explores how intelligence, information and foresight processes can support political decision-making, enhance societal resilience and counter disinformation, as well as how intelligence organisations are seen in the policy sphere.
2. Russia's war in Ukraine and European strategic autonomy: This section analyses the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, as well as the implications for European security and autonomy in the face of growing geopolitical instability.
3. Strategic information on Russia: This final section provides an overview of key strategic issues related to Russia's future trajectory, including its nuclear posture, internal cohesion, energy economy, natural resources in the Arctic, relations with China and the critical information requirements needed to assess these dynamics.

Approximately 20 Finnish experts have contributed to this book, drawing on their extensive experience in security, foreign policy and Russian affairs. Nevertheless, the views expressed here do not represent the official positions of the Finnish Government or any of its institutions.

From the perspective of European security, the situation is serious. The war in Ukraine has now entered its fourth year. Yet despite the gravity of the present, this book aims to look ahead. A fitting sentiment for such an endeavour comes from Charles Kettering, the American inventor and former head of research at General Motors, who is believed to have said: *‘My interest is in the future because I am going to spend the rest of my life there’*. It is a message worth remembering, especially for those in the Western world who do not wish to spend the rest of their lives in a world order shaped by Russia or China.

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Kari Liuhto