



Known Unknowns Related to Russia's Future: Critical Information Needs on the Governance, Economy, Society and Military of Russia

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17.1 INTRODUCTION

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has found itself at multiple societal crossroads, each of which could have shifted the country onto a development path very different from the current one—or even threatened the existence of the state. Both at the turn of the millennium and a quarter of a century later, Western analysts have pondered whether Russia might, like the Soviet Union, be on the brink of disintegration (Luukkanen, 2001; Tertrais, 2023). What follows are six examples of societal crossroads in Russia's recent history that could have shifted the country's trajectory—or even derailed it entirely.

The first example is the power struggle between President Boris Yeltsin and the parliament in the autumn of 1993. The struggle culminated in the president ordering the armed forces to fire on the representatives of the old guard who had barricaded themselves in the lower house of parliament. This decision cast a long shadow over Russia's democracy (Kari and Holmila, 2023).

The second example is the 1999 apartment bombings in Russia, which may have been orchestrated by the authorities themselves as a pretext for launching the Second Chechen War. The war and the surge of popular support it generated propelled Vladimir Putin into the presidency in the spring of 2000 as Yeltsin's

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successor. Without Putin's quarter-century-long rule, it is likely that Russia would not have evolved into its current form of securocracy (Belton, 2020).

A third example is the structural weakening of Russia's economy following the global financial crisis at the end of the first decade of this century. Originating in the United States, the crisis is a prime example of how external factors can quickly shake Russia and its economy. In 2009, Russia's GDP contracted by 8% and foreign trade by nearly 20% (IMF, 2025; UNCTAD, 2025).

The fourth example of a societal turning point in modern Russia is the blatant election fraud during the parliamentary elections of December 2011, which triggered massive anti-regime protests in Russia's major cities. This fraud revealed the reality that even the highest levels of Russia's leadership are not immune when large numbers of protestors take to the streets (Zygar, 2015). However, under the pretext of the war in Ukraine, the current leadership has brutally suppressed public dissent with harsh penalties and violent repression (Baev, 2025).

The fifth example is Putin's open support for Ukraine's then-president Viktor Yanukovich. After the Ukrainian people ousted the pro-Russia Yanukovich at the turn of 2013–2014 and he fled to Russia, Moscow launched the 'Novorossiya operation' in Crimea and eastern Ukraine (Basora and Fisher, 2014). Eight years later, following the closing of the Beijing Winter Olympics, Putin began to finalise the operation. In other words, in February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine with the goal of toppling its West-oriented leadership. The invasion has been disastrous in many respects, not least by driving relations between Russia and the West into a deadlock that will be difficult to escape—even after the war ends (Zygar, 2023).

The sixth example is Yevgeny Prigozhin's rebellion in the summer of 2023. The immediate cause appears to have been the Russian military leadership's plan to integrate Wagner Group forces into the regular army (Barabanov and Korotkov, 2024). It still remains unclear why Prigozhin ultimately ordered his forces to stop advancing towards Moscow. His apparent assassination in August 2023, came as no surprise since Russians seem increasingly accustomed to the return of Stalin-era methods.¹ Perhaps even more significant than who gave the order to kill Wagner's leadership by downing their aircraft was the public support—and seemingly some hidden support within the military—for the rebellion (Shishkin, 2024). This support may resurface when Russia reaches a seventh major crossroads, which could ultimately prove fatal for the current leadership. These cases are examples of chains of events that could have led to significant social turbulence within Russia. It is highly likely that sooner or later Russia will again face a new societal turning point—one that could change the country's future path.

¹ The modus operandi associated with Stalin's reign of terror was: Death solves all problems. No person, no problem (Rybakov, 1988).

Numerous foresight studies on Russia conducted during this decade suggest that the country is still suffering from the post-disintegration symptoms of the collapse of the USSR, and the country may be heading towards chaos. Fig. 17.1 illustrates Russia's alternative future pathways based on earlier future scenarios (e.g., Fischer and Timofeev, 2020; Kragh, 2020; Newlin and Lohsen, 2022; Kotkin, 2024; Michel, 2024; Starr, 2024).

The core message of the figure can be summarised as follows: Putinism is likely to continue until Putin is either removed from power or he dies. After that, a power struggle is expected, especially if Putin has not had time to appoint a successor, acceptable to all major power groups in Russia. It is possible that Putinism will persist even without Putin himself. If Putinism continues for an extended period, it may eventually evolve into Stalinism.² Another possible scenario is a constitutional transfer of power to the prime minister upon Putin's death or incapability to carry out presidential duties. However, power would likely remain in the hands of technocrats for only a brief period of time before being seized by hardliners. It is also possible that hardliners could stage a coup d'état. Such a hardliner takeover would push Russia towards Stalinism and, eventually in the long run, into chaos. The fourth scenario is a coup by

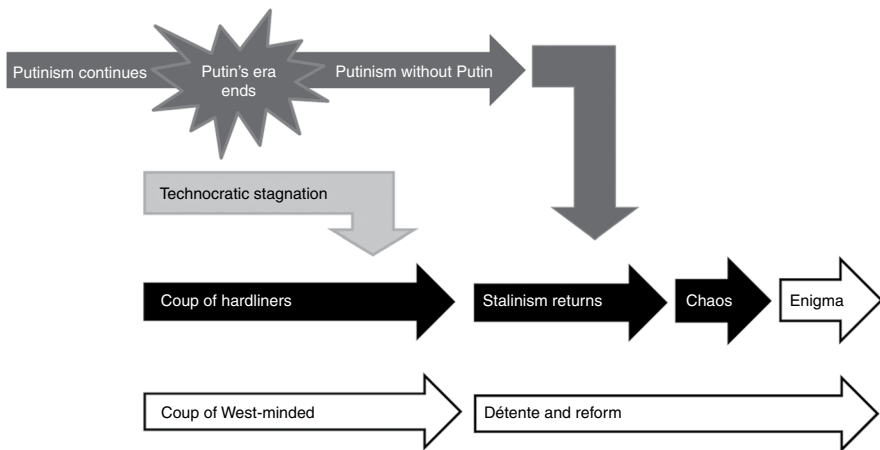


Fig. 17.1 Alternative development paths for Russia. Source: The Author.

² Features associated with Stalinism include, among others: centralised control of the state and economy (a command economy); a cult of personality surrounding Stalin as an infallible leader; totalitarian governance with the suppression of political opposition; mass repression, including widespread use of the secret police and show trials; and state-sponsored propaganda and control over culture, education, and the historical narrative (Britannica, 2025a). Putinism still differs from Stalinism as instead of Marxism-Leninism (communism) it is based on nationalism and conservatism: instead of a command economy, contemporary Russia is state-dictated capitalism; instead of mass terror and purges, Putin's Russia concentrates on targeted repression; and instead of suppressed religion during the Soviet era, present-day Russia promotes the Russian Orthodox church (e.g., Snegovaya et al., 2023).

West-minded siloviki,³ though given China's growing influence in Russia, the author considers this option more theoretical than realistic—or its time may come after the chaos.⁴

17.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

Russia's earlier societal crossroads underscore the need of Western analysts to anticipate where Russia is headed. The ultimate goal of this study is to support intelligence studies on Russia by identifying critical information needs that are likely to shape Russia's future development. This study was conducted by compiling the views of ten Finnish Russia experts regarding critical information needs related to Russia. The participating experts represent a range of fields, including the EU administration, the governmental institutions of Finland, the media, business and academia.

The experts were asked to share their views on critical information needs related to Russia. These needs were explored through four domains: (1) governance, (2) economy, (3) society and (4) military. Although these domains are closely interconnected and difficult to separate because of their overlaps, the experts were asked to name the five most important information needs they identified for each domain. Empirical data was collected through surveys and face-to-face interviews between January and May 2025. A summary of the preliminary empirical results was sent to the experts in July, allowing them to supplement their answers. Theoretically, up to 50 different responses could have been collected for each domain; however, because the answers were very similar, some domains received fewer than 20 distinct answers. The author found no contradictions between the experts' responses.

As several of the participating experts hold positions where public disclosure of their views is prohibited, their names are not revealed. However, to ensure the validity of the results, it is worth noting that the experts selected for the study have extensive experience concerning Russia. Each expert has on average worked on Russia-related issues for approximately 30 years.

The author of this article also has extensive experience of working in Russia analysis. From 1997 to 2024, the author served as Professor of Russian Economy at Lappeenranta University of Technology and the University of Turku, after which he became Finland's first Professor of Intelligence Studies, tasked with establishing the academic field of intelligence studies in Finland.

³ Siloviki refer to individuals who hold power within the country's security agencies, military, or law enforcement. The term derives from the Russian word for force or power and describes those who work for or have worked in coercive state apparatus, which include the Ministry of Defence, Federal Security Service (FSB), Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), Federal Protective Service (FSO), National Guard, Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), and Ministry of Emergency Situations (MChS) (Wikipedia, 2025).

⁴ A description of the content of the different scenarios can be found in the Finnish-language article (Liuhto, 2024).

The author alone is responsible for the interpretation and presentation of the empirical data.

The article is structured as follows: the empirical results of the study are reviewed next. In the empirical section, the respondents' views are presented, but the author frames these with factual background. The author's own viewpoints are primarily presented in the conclusions. That is, the author has selected five critical information needs per sector ultimately based on the expert views. At the end of the article, some policy recommendations are highlighted that Western policymakers might want to consider so they can better prepare for the next time Russia reaches a societal crossroads, which may happen sooner than most Russia analysts think.

17.3 CRITICAL INFORMATION NEEDS RELATED TO RUSSIA'S FUTURE

17.3.1 The Finnish Experts' Views on Critical Information Needs Related to Governance

In authoritarian states, the role of the head of state is overemphasised. In authoritarian regimes, the propaganda apparatus seeks to create an image of the leader as an indispensable superhuman without whom neither the state nor its citizens are able to survive. However, the notion of the leader's indispensability becomes problematic the moment their physical or mental health begins to falter. Consequently, it was no surprise when the Finnish experts on Russia emphasise the critical importance of obtaining reliable information regarding Vladimir Putin's health.⁵

Putin's media appearances are carefully managed to project an image of a mentally stable and physically robust leader, yet one interviewee pointed to a weakness in his leadership during crises. It is unlikely that Putin experiences paralysis or indecisiveness akin to Stalin's the moment Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941. Putin's previous absences from public during unexpected crises may well represent a calculated strategy by the Kremlin, i.e., the Kremlin may first observe how the public reacts and only thereafter Putin decides whether to give a public statement or not. Nonetheless, this explanation does not negate the fact that at the onset of sudden crises, Putin appears to leave Russians to fend for themselves.⁶

⁵ Putin was born on 7 October 1953, which means he had turned 72 years by the time this book went to print. The average life expectancy for a Russian man is under 70 years (WHO, 2025). Russian legislation does not require the president to disclose information about his health. However, the Kremlin published information about Putin's health in October 2024 (Edwards, 2024).

⁶ Stalin's ability to make decisions deteriorated for several days after Adolf Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941 (Khlevniuk, 2017). A similar pattern appears to have occurred in Putin's case on a few occasions, such as in August 2000 when the Kursk submarine sank following the explosion of one of its own torpedoes (Belton, 2020).

The Finnish experts also stress the need for accurate insight into the Russian president's genuine popular support, particularly regarding which members of the power elite truly back him. Interpreted inversely, their responses suggest these experts place little trust in opinion polls conducted by Russian polling agencies regarding Putin's popularity.⁷ Since such polling can no longer be relied upon automatically, there is significant demand for surveys conducted by freelance journalists and independent sociologists in Russia. However, the sensitivity of the questions can endanger Russian respondents—or even result in journalists or researchers being imprisoned on charges such as discrediting the armed forces or assisting Western intelligence.⁸ To ascertain Putin's true support within the elite, intelligence-based sources become necessary, as traditional research methods are almost entirely ineffective.

Beyond Putin's health and popularity, a crucial intelligence need concerns the power struggles taking place within and around the Kremlin. The Finnish experts highlight the importance of identifying individuals who wield political power—especially those without official roles within the state apparatus. This underscores the need for study into the Kremlin's grey eminences. The experts are equally interested in the relationships among the main power clans and entities exercising regional power. While information about regional power groupings is even harder to obtain than that on federal-level power clans, it is essential to remember that Russia's unity is not maintained by good governance or even strict Kremlin control—but rather by the fact that many regions lack the prerequisites for independence: a coherent national identity, political leadership advocating for autonomy, economic viability and above all military power.

Exceptions to this rule include, for instance, regions of the North Caucasus, Tatarstan, and certain territories with significant non-Russian minorities—such as Bashkiriya. Though the North Caucasus remains economically weak, its regions often attempt to assert autonomy as soon as central control loosens.⁹ By contrast, Tatarstan possesses many prerequisites for independence—distinct identity separates it from other Russian regions, the region has a strong leadership and a relatively diverse economy by Russian standards (Britannica,

⁷ In addition to the Levada Center, opinion polls in Russia are also published by the state-run organisation VCIOM (2025). The results on Putin's approval rating published by these organisations are almost identical, although this does not guarantee the reliability of the data. According to Levada (2025), Putin's approval rating stood at a historically high 87% in August 2025, despite the war in Ukraine – or perhaps precisely because of it. It is worth noting that before the invasion of Ukraine (2000–2021), Putin's monthly approval rating averaged 74%. Putin's approval rating was just 31% before the second war in Chechnya began in August 1999. At the end of 1999, his approval rating was already 79%.

⁸ Russia sentenced a Russian journalist to more than five years in prison for fake news about Russia's armed forces (BBC, 2023). Another regrettable example of Russia's use of hostage diplomacy is the case of American journalist Evan Gershkovich (Light and Trevelyan, 2024).

⁹ For example, the relationship between Chechnya and the Kremlin is based on a power symbiosis between Vladimir Putin and Ramzan Kadyrov. Genuine trust between them can be questioned. If

2025b). In Bashkiria, many perceive that the Kremlin is trying to weaken its ethnic identity by ending national-language schooling and by disproportionately recruiting Bashkir men for the war in Ukraine (Saarilahti-Guzman, 2025). When assessing the economic conditions necessary for Russian regions to break away, it should be recalled that out of Russia's over 80 regions, only about one-third are net contributors to the federal budget in 2025—meaning most regions actually benefit economically from the federation's existence (Danilov, 2025).

According to the Finnish experts, the relationship between the Kremlin and business oligarchs remains inadequately understood. Although Forbes (2025) reports on the wealth trajectory of over 100 Russian billionaires, the lists omit several individuals closely tied to the state apparatus—even President Putin himself, whose property is estimated to exceed USD 200 billion (Khan and Thier, 2024). Even if the aforementioned estimate is likely exaggerated, Putin wields enormous leverage over Russian oligarchs via security services, capable of confiscating any billionaire's assets in Russia (Forsman, 2025). Without up-to-date human intelligence (HUMINT), only cursory media reporting provides insight into the Kremlin–oligarch nexus, especially since the Kremlin has dismantled free media in Russia and is now tightening controls over internet information (Ilyushina, 2025).

The Prigozhin rebellion in summer 2023 understandably keeps the Finnish experts focused on non-state armed actors in Russia. This attention is justifiable, since several Russian regional leaders have formed their own paramilitary units under the pretext of regional security. Moreover, some major corporations have established private militias, ostensibly to send fighters to Ukraine, although their actual objectives remain opaque. Likewise, ethnic and mercenary paramilitary groups have proliferated rapidly. Legally, these groups are difficult to categorise because they officially operate as volunteers under the Ministry of Defence, yet their ultimate loyalties are unclear (Sukhankin and Ajitrotutu, 2025). While a large-scale civil war appears unlikely, the potential for conflicts between regions—especially in the volatile North Caucasus—cannot be entirely dismissed.¹⁰

The Finnish experts are also concerned about the political role of the armed forces and security services, their internal cohesion and loyalty to the Kremlin, the competition or even rivalry between power ministries and how disputes among them are resolved. A formal indicator of the armed services' growing role is the number of Russian parliamentarians who have been trained or worked in power apparatus. Numerous studies have documented

either man were to die, the Kremlin's relationship with Chechnya would likely become unstable. Unlike Putin, Kadyrov – who is more than 20 years younger – is believed to be in deteriorating health (Al Jazeera, 2025; Ericson, 2025). It is not entirely implausible that Kadyrov's sudden death could plunge Chechnya, or even the entire North Caucasus, into turbulence (Vasilyeva, 2025).

¹⁰ An example of inter-regional conflict within Russia is the clash between Chechens and Dagestanis in the late 1990s (Vega, 2020).

how Russia's siloviki have augmented their influence over politics and the economy during Putin's rule (e.g., Kryshantovskaya and White, 2003; Rivera and Rivera, 2017). However, how internal disputes are settled remains speculative. The media has reported several mysterious deaths of generals and senior security officials—cases the Kremlin has neither thoroughly investigated nor deemed necessary to explain publicly (e.g., Ashton, 2023; Corelli, 2025).

By 2006, Orthodox Christians comprised roughly 15%–20% of Russia's population, while Muslims constituted the second-largest religious group at 10%–15% (CIA, 2025). As the Muslim population is growing faster than other groups, it means that Muslims will probably become Russia's largest religious group in the coming decades. Although there is no automatic causal link between Islamic separatism and the growth of the Muslim population in Russia, it would be unwise to disregard it when forecasting Russia's trajectory. The founding of the Caucasus Emirate in 2007, which aimed to establish an Islamist state in the North Caucasus, is an illustrative example here.¹¹ Since Islamist extremist movements raise the likelihood of terrorism and separatism, the Finnish experts justifiably express heightened interest in the growth of Islamic separatism, although comprehensive information is difficult to obtain without intelligence support.

The interview responses also reveal interest in emerging opposition movements—particularly as they relate to political organisation among veterans of the Ukraine war. Dissatisfaction with the authorities may intensify if veterans are left unsupported after the war ends. Their combat experience, combined with discontent, could pose a threat to the Russian leadership—or even national stability.¹²

In the Soviet Union, culture was often the only avenue for public criticism. As expressing dissent is increasingly risky under Russia's draconian penalties, one Finnish expert emphasises the need for information on cultural expressions opposing the regime. However, cultural dissent is hardly immune to the regime's reprisals—reflecting the governing elite's growing fear of ordinary Russians.¹³

One interviewee also voiced concern that Russia's foreign policy may be increasingly managed not by the foreign ministry but by security services. For Finland, this could mean the FSB operating in the Republic of Karelia may possibly coordinate operations against Finland. From a global perspective, the Finnish experts flagged a critical information need regarding ties between the

¹¹ Islam unites all Caucasian republics in the Russian Federation. Its influence is growing. Moreover, Islam is spreading across all age groups and social categories. Religious separatism remains a central issue throughout the Russian Caucasus and enjoys widespread support (RLI, 2020).

¹² By mid-2025, some 140,000 Russian soldiers have returned to civilian life after fighting in the war against Ukraine and now require reintegration support (MT, 2025a).

¹³ Dozens of Russian cultural figures have been sentenced to prison for criticising Russia's military actions in Ukraine, and several prominent cultural influencers have emigrated from Russia (OVD, 2025).

Kremlin and a MAGA-aligned business elite—although open media scrutiny can offer only surface-level insight into this relationship.¹⁴

The experts highlight additional critical intelligence needs in two areas: (1) Russia's national identity, and (2) the prospective power struggle and regime change after Putin. As national identity is a vast construct shaped over long timescales, it must be deconstructed into measurable components before useful insight can be generated. Similarly, analysis of potential regime change requires knowledge of existing federal power clans and the use of scenario technique to forecast how power dynamics may evolve after Putin. The experts also requested information on the impact of major accidents on the regime's legitimacy—particularly incidents involving the deaths of children resulting from corruption or official negligence, or major national disasters like those affecting nuclear power plants. These accidents may lead ordinary Russians to question the whole regime's legitimacy (Table 17.1).¹⁵

17.3.2 *The Finnish Experts' Views on Critical Information Needs Related to Economy*

Since Russia launched its war of aggression against Ukraine, the Russian leadership has begun to withhold information much like during the Soviet era. Ministries, the central bank and the statistical authority publish limited

Table 17.1 Critical information needs related to governance

Putin-related factors: Physical health, mental leadership capability during crises and genuine popular support.

Power structure-related factors: Unofficial wielders of political power, interactions among dominant power clans, regional power groups, Kremlin–oligarch relationships, private military companies, political role and loyalty of the armed forces and security services, intra-agency tensions, mechanisms for resolving disputes and unity of the armed forces.

Emerging phenomena: Islamic separatist movement, emerging opposition movements and cultural manifestations of anti-Putin sentiment.

External dimension: Role of the military and security services in shaping Russia's foreign policy and the Kremlin's covert influence over Western decision-makers.

Future enigmas: Russia's national identity, power struggles and potential regime change post-Putin and how internal accidents might impact the regime's legitimacy.

Source: The Author based on the empirical data.

¹⁴ MAGA is an abbreviation of a slogan 'Make America Great Again'. Although Unger (2021) presents a treasonous picture of President Donald Trump's connections to Russia, current actions matter more than past contacts or the president's current rhetoric. On the other hand, the shadow of suspicion is not dispelled by the fact that efforts have been made to hinder investigations into Trump's ties to Russia (The Times, 2025). Based on publicly available information, it appears that individuals close to the MAGA administration have had close ties to the Kremlin or to Russians who have possibly acted on behalf of Russian intelligence services (e.g., Swaine and Harding, 2017; Fenbert, 2025).

¹⁵ One example is the Kemerovo shopping mall fire, in which dozens of Russian children died in 2018 (MT, 2018). Similarly, the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and the suppression of information related to the accident are believed to have significantly undermined the Soviet leadership's credibility — ultimately accelerating the collapse of the USSR (Solohubenko, 2016).

statistical data, and the available data must be treated with caution. For this reason, it is understandable that the Finnish experts are forced to seek reliable information about the true state of the Russian economy through media or statistics published by non-Russian or international organisations. The experts want more information about the growing role of the state in the economy. In particular, they are interested in the balance sheets of state-owned enterprises.

Additionally, there is a perceived need for information related to the impact of lower energy prices on state finances and the indebtedness of the public sector, private companies and households. Moreover, identifying the main creditors of this debt is of particular interest.¹⁶ The Finnish experts are interested in how Russia manages to finance its war in Ukraine and when signs of economic collapse might begin to appear. The financial reserves of the country's national welfare fund are currently on track to run out by the end of 2026 (MT, 2025b). Furthermore, it has been revealed that the financial state of Russia's commercial banks, due to their non-performing loans, is weaker than previously reported. Several large Russian banks have approached the government indicating that they might need emergency funding in 2026 (Bloomberg, 2025). A looming banking crisis in Russia could shake the whole of Russian society.

The Finnish experts also express a need for more information about Russia's traditional, less acute economic problems, such as income distribution, household purchasing power, the state of the service sector and the role of the shadow economy.¹⁷ These traditional Russian problems are likely to worsen as the economy gradually deteriorates.

A surprising finding in the research is that only one expert raises the state of Russia's strategic infrastructure as a critical information need. The war reduces Russia's resources to invest adequately in the country's highways, railroads and oil and gas pipelines, which will significantly impact Russia's societal functioning and economic competitiveness. In Russia, which has nearly twice the land area of the United States, freight transport is inherently a challenge. Since transport volumes seem to have grown by 5% in 2024 compared to the previous year, this suggests that Russia's real economy is not

¹⁶ Russia's government spending accounted for 37.3% of GDP in 2024, which is 1.7 percentage points higher than in 2022 (Belkin, 2025). Although the increase is not dramatic, it indicates a move towards the growing role of the state in the Russian economy. Meanwhile, the debt service ratio of the private non-financial sector has doubled since the beginning of the invasion, reaching around 23% in 2024. The corresponding figure was below 20% in Finland and under 15% in the USA (TGE, 2025). Loan subsidies have increased as well. Central Bank of Russia estimates that about 15% of Rouble-denominated loans receive interest subsidies from the state. Nearly two-thirds of these subsidised loans are housing loans (BOFIT, 2024).

¹⁷ According to UNU WIDER (2025), income inequality in Russia is at the same level as in Italy, meaning that income distribution in Russia is more equal than in the USA, for example. Here it needs to be underlined that income distribution is not a synonym for wealth distribution. The number of people employed in the informal sector of the Russian economy reached approximately 16 million in 2024, which accounts for one-fifth of total employment. This is the highest share since 2016 (Tadviser, 2025).

collapsing due to logistical problems immediately (Gerasimenko, 2025).¹⁸ When considering strategic infrastructure, special attention must be paid to natural gas transportation, as gas satisfies more than half of Russia's energy needs (EI, 2025). It remains an open question how Russia will manage the maintenance and servicing of its over 180,000-km-long gas pipeline network in the future. The length of Gazprom's gas pipelines becomes more concrete when noting that the company's pipelines could circle the globe four times (Gazprom, 2024). It remains to be seen whether the Ukrainian army will retaliate by targeting Russia's gas network if Russia continues its missile strikes on Ukrainian energy facilities.

While only one Finnish expert highlights the state of Russia's strategic infrastructure, several experts raise the need for information related to Russia's military-industrial complex. They are particularly interested in how the system operates, who the main actors of the complex are and what its greatest weaknesses might be. As several recent analyses of Russia's military-industrial production and logistics have been published (e.g., KSE, 2025a; 2025b), this indicates a need for more active information dissemination on the subject.

The experts are also interested in the impact of sanctions on Russia's economy, including how well Russia has managed to replace imports with domestic production. However, statistics suggest that instead of growing domestic import substitution, imports from China have increased. In other words, China seems to have replaced Western imports—not Russia's own industry. This conclusion is supported by the fact that Russia's imports are currently as large as before the invasion began (BOFIT, 2025).

One Finnish expert raises the situation of Russia's coal mining towns as a critical information need. The background to this concern is that the competitiveness of Russia's coal industry continues to deteriorate. Some 30 enterprises in the coal sector employ roughly 15,000 people, and these jobs are at risk (Stolyarov and Lyrchikova, 2025). The problem is socially more significant than just the fate of these 15,000 jobs because many coal towns belong to Russia's so-called monotowns. The term monotown derives from the fact that the livelihood of residents in these towns largely depends on the operations of a single company.¹⁹ Russia is estimated to have over 300 such monotowns, with a total population of 14 million people, i.e., a tenth of the country's total population. However, not all monotowns face as bleak a future as those focused on coal production, as some specialise in the

¹⁸ In 2024, road transport accounted for 74%, rail transport 13%, pipeline transport 11%, water transport 1.5%, and air transport the remaining 0.5% of Russia's freight shipments (Gerasimenko, 2025).

¹⁹ The official classification of a monotown includes, for example, the following criteria: an urban settlement that has a population of more than 3,000 residents; at least 20% of the total employees in the municipality work for one organisation engaged in the same economic activity; and the enterprise is engaged in either mineral extraction or its industrial production, excluding oil and gas (Russian Government, 2014).

excavation of metals, including critical rare earth metals, for which demand is growing (Crowley, 2020).

One expert raises a need for information on how sanctions affect individual people. Some media reports in July 2025 indicate that while production selection has narrowed, consumer prices have increased fast. Moreover, the delivery times for foreign car parts, excluding those from China, have become much longer. However, it seems that at least some ordinary Russian consumers do not feel any immediate urgency regarding the situation yet, since salaries have gone up as well (IS, 2025). The average wage in Russia is now over 70% higher than in 2021. On the other hand, annual inflation has galloped at the rate of 10% during the whole invasion, eating up the overwhelming majority of increased buying power (BOFIT, 2025).

Another expert expresses an information need on how Russians' attitudes towards the West have changed. Although the reliability of Russian opinion polls cannot be taken for granted, it should be mentioned that nearly 40% of Russians viewed the USA positively in May 2025. A similar level was also recorded at the end of 2021. The low point was reached during the presidencies of Barack Obama and Joe Biden, when only about one in ten Russians viewed the USA positively (Levada, 2025). One should be careful in interpreting these opinions as well, as they could be a target of manipulation.

Several experts mention the need for more information on the war's impact on Russia's innovation economy and R&D activities. Russia's investment in R&D lagged behind the developed world even before the Ukraine invasion. In 2021, Russia's R&D-to-GDP ratio was only 1.0%, compared to 3.5% in the United States and 2.4% in China (World Bank, 2025). Additionally, it should be noted that Russia's R&D-to-GDP ratio has somewhat deteriorated during the invasion. It is also noteworthy that the state accounts for two-thirds of the country's R&D investments (Dezhina, 2024). Russia's artificial intelligence (AI) capabilities also emerge in the interviews as a critical information need. According to media reports, Russia is falling behind in AI expertise, at least in the civilian sector, but the level of military AI development remains unknown (Jankowich and Spirlet, 2025). For this reason, more research activities should focus on R&D and AI development inside Russia's military sector.

One expert also raises the issue of the impact of a possible lifting of sanctions on Russia's future development. Although currently it does not appear that sanctions will be lifted, anticipating this issue is relevant not only for the Russian leadership but also for the West. It would be particularly important that sanctions be eased gradually and under strict conditions so that removing sanctions would not enable Russia to accelerate its military-industrial production.

Regarding Russia's external economic relations, the experts emphasise the relationship between China and Russia, such as the real economic dependence on China, China's true business presence in Russia and

Sino–Russian technological cooperation. This is understandable, as half of Russia's imports originated from China in 2024, and this share is expected to grow further (European Commission, 2025a).²⁰ Before the Ukraine invasion in February 2022, China's share of Russian imports was a quarter and one percent of the country's foreign direct investment (FDI) stock (Liuhto, 2021). In addition to China, the experts highlight the need for information related to Russia's capability to attract foreign capital and technology in the future. Recent developments may indicate the direction of future trends. Russia's annual FDI inflow fell to three billion US dollars in 2024, down tenfold from 2021 (UNCTAD, 2025). After the invasion began, Central Bank of Russia has not published the country breakdown of FDI (CBR, 2025).

The experts mention Russia's economic future enigmas related to the permanence of ownership rights, the technological and financial capability to utilise Arctic energy resources, and the contraction of the global fossil fuel economy and its impact on Russia's export revenues. Events in Russia over the past three decades demonstrate that the permanence of strategic ownership rights ultimately depends on the Kremlin's will (Belton, 2020). It is quite likely that a change of power in the Kremlin would also bring about changes among the most important oligarchs, as the current oligarchs are no longer protected by the Kremlin's fear of losing its image in the West (Forsman, 2025). Russia's Arctic regions have vast energy and raw material deposits, but Russia's technological capability, especially in offshore production, is considered lacking.²¹ Moreover, the massive investment needs, high production costs, and uncertainties in demand development will likely slow the exploitation of Arctic natural resources. On the other hand, China's technological expertise and growing raw material demand could bring China and Russia even closer together and make China a more active player in the Arctic region (Pezard et al., 2022). Although it is difficult to assess how quickly the global fossil fuel economy will develop, it is clear that Russia's export revenues will decline. However, a collapse will not occur in the very near future because a significant part of the world will still rely on fossil fuels. According to Bruegel (2025), mineral fuel export revenues accounted for two-thirds of Russia's export earnings in January–June 2025 (Table 17.2).

²⁰ China's share of Russia's foreign trade (exports and imports) was 34% in 2024. The future development of Russia's dependence on China can be anticipated by examining Canada's and Mexico's trade relations with the United States. Over 60% of Canada's and Mexico's foreign trade in goods is conducted with the United States, which is currently the world's largest economy (European Commission, 2025a; 2025b; 2025c; IMF, 2025). As China is expected to become the world's largest economy within the next two decades, Russia's economic dependence on China will most likely increase from its current level.

²¹ For example, one fifth of the world's undiscovered oil and gas reserves are located in the Arctic. In addition, the region has significant metal deposits and a vast fish stock (e.g., Egorov et al., 2021).

Table 17.2 Critical information needs related to economy

Real state of the economy: Growing role of the state in the economy, impact of lower energy prices on state finances, indebtedness of the public sector, private companies, and households, income distribution, purchasing power of households, state of the service sector, role of the shadow economy and a state of strategic infrastructure.

Military-industrial production: Business network and functioning of the military-industrial complex.

Impact of sanctions: Results of import substitution, situation of coal mining towns, most painful sanctions at the individual level, impact of war on innovation and R&D activity, ability to utilise artificial intelligence and impact of possible lifting of sanctions.

External dimension: Real economic dependence on China, Chinese true business presence in Russia, Sino-Russian technological cooperation and capability to attract foreign capital and technology.

Future enigmas: Permanence of ownership rights, technological and financial capability to utilise Arctic energy resources and contraction of the global fossil fuel economy and its impact on Russia's export revenues.

Source: The Author based on the empirical data.

17.3.3 The Finnish Experts' Views on Critical Information Needs Related to Society

The Finnish experts highlight Russia's demographic development and the actual number of Russian soldiers killed in the war as critical societal information needs. The underlying concern is that Russia's population was already projected to decline even before the war began. According to a pre-war forecast, Russia's population was expected to decrease from the current 144 million to 136 million by 2050 (UNCTAD, 2024). The true number of Russian soldiers killed in the war is unlikely to be published even after the conflict ends, but as of summer 2025, the death toll may approach 200,000 (Meduza, 2025a). In addition to the dead, one must also consider the significantly higher number of young men who have been disabled in the war. Since these disabled men often lack the necessary financial means to start a family and the birth rate is already at the moment historically low in Russia (MT, 2025c), the UN pre-war projection for 2050 appears overly optimistic.

The experts also seek more data on Russian emigration—particularly the movement of educated individuals abroad, the so-called brain drain. According to some media reports, more than 600,000 Russians had emigrated by summer 2024, with only a portion returning. The situation regarding the brain drain appears somewhat more positive for Russia, as many educated Russians have had to return to Russia after failing to find employment matching their qualifications abroad (bnc, 2024). One Finnish expert emphasises the need for information on Russia's immigration policy. Immigration in Russia is a double-edged sword: while the labour-short country desperately needs labour migrants, these migrants have caused some societal problems, such as crime.²²

²² Contrary to popular perception, immigrants are underrepresented in crimes committed in Russia. While immigrants make up around four percent of Russia's population, they accounted for only two percent of documented crimes in the country in 2024 (One, 2025).

However, a more significant long-term societal challenge is likely to be the growing tensions between the native population and immigrants, particularly in a situation where economic growth has dropped to a low level (PSCR, 2025).

The Finnish experts also identify the social cohesion, stability and crisis resilience of Russian regions, especially developments in Moscow and the North Caucasus, as a critical knowledge gap. As this theme was already discussed earlier in the article, we turn now to the corruption of the elite and security services, also mentioned as a critical information need. Even if Russia is considered to be Europe's most corrupt country (TI, 2025), it is extremely difficult to obtain detailed information about corruption linked to the elite and security services. However, the increased number of police investigations related to corruption and several media reports suggest that the war has fuelled a kleptocracy in Russia (e.g., TASS, 2024; Smirnov, 2025; Trevelyan, 2025).²³ As corruption increases and economic growth slows, the likelihood increases that Russia's leadership may combat corruption through brutal means—another step toward Stalinism (Meduza, 2025b; MT, 2025c; Pertsev, 2025).

Levada (2025) and even some Western institutes (FES, 2025) present a rather rosy picture of public trust in institutions, the judiciary and media in Russia. These findings differ significantly from, for example, those of a USA-based foundation regarding trust in media (El Bas et al., 2024). It is difficult to explain these contradictory results. To resolve this contradiction, it would be advisable to employ freelance journalists and independent sociologists in Russia to conduct targeted opinion surveys based on face-to-face interviews, rather than rely on opinion polls conducted via telephone, the internet or email surveys. The latter methods do not guarantee anonymity for respondents, thereby inevitably distorting the results in authoritarian Russia, where people may lose their jobs or even be sent to prison for their anti-war or anti-regime views.

As military spending has increased, social expenditures have been cut. In 2025, social spending decreased by approximately 16% compared to the previous year (Wisniewska, 2024). Since the state of Russia's housing and communal services was already far below Western standards before the invasion, it is understandable that one expert raises the issue of housing and communal services as a critical information need.²⁴ The system, suffering from a lack of funding, is deteriorating from poor to worse, inevitably increasing dissatisfaction among citizens using these services. With independent election monitoring

²³ Russian authorities identified over 15,000 corruption cases during the first three months of 2025. This figure represents a 24% increase compared to the same period a year earlier (Goble, 2025a).

²⁴ In January 2005, an estimated 10,000 pensioners and WWII veterans packed the streets in Putin's hometown of Saint Petersburg. In a sign of the radicalisation of these pensioner-protesters, many are now linking political demands to their calls that benefits be restored. Thousands in Saint Petersburg shouted, "*Putin resign!*" (vanden Heuvel, 2005).

organisations no longer operating in Russia, the Kremlin can manipulate election results rather freely after the September 2026 parliamentary elections.²⁵ However, public dissatisfaction will manifest in everyday life, forcing the Kremlin to consider how to manage growing discontent. In authoritarian states, inventing an internal scapegoat or external enemy is a commonly used method.²⁶ It is a tragic historical irony that Russia—once instrumental in defeating Nazi Germany—is now heading down the path towards fascism. Notably, already some 10 years ago, Vladislav Inozemtsev, a Russian academician, called Russia ‘*an early-stage fascist state*’ (Inozemtsev, 2017, 1).

The Finnish experts are also interested in internal tensions within Russian society. This is a critical theme, as numerous tensions existed before the invasion—and the war has likely only exacerbated them. Earlier tensions included disparities in well-being, ethnic tensions, conflicts between the native population and immigrants, religious tensions and tensions related to sexual orientation. Considering both existing and war-amplified tensions, it seems inevitable that Russia is heading towards a turbulent decade (Sukhankin, 2025). In order to prevent national disintegration, hardliners within the Kremlin are likely to gain more influence. However, a hard-line policy is unlikely to provide a sustainable solution to Russia’s societal problems—but it may be the only approach known to the current ruling elite, which was born in the totalitarian Soviet Union.

Since the population’s dissatisfaction and anti-Western sentiments have already been addressed, it is appropriate to now examine another topic cited by the experts: how ordinary Russians view China. According to Levada (2025), over 80% of Russians held a good or very good attitude towards China in September 2024. This positive sentiment has remained at a similar level throughout the twenty-first century. Interestingly, this figure was below 50% in the mid-1990s. It would be of great interest to explore whether attitudes towards China differ among Russians living near the Chinese border compared to those in other parts of the country—since proximity does not always result in friendship.

The Finnish experts are also keen to understand how young people in Russia view their future. According to Levada (2025), most young people support Putin’s current policy. Nearly three-quarters of young Russians aged 18–24 believe Russia is moving in the right direction. Moreover, 86% of young people believe in the possibility of self-realisation in Russia, and 94% are proud of their citizenship (TNCR, 2025). From a Western observer’s perspective,

²⁵ In July 2025, Russia’s only independent election monitoring organisation, Golos, ceased operations following the five-year prison sentence handed to its co-chair on trumped-up charges (Szakonyi, 2025). The next parliamentary election in Russia is scheduled to take place by September 2026.

²⁶ Historically, antisemitism is not infrequent in Russia, and in recent years, antisemitism incidents have been particularly prevalent in the North Caucasus (Stein, 2023; Rudling, 2024; Trevelyan, 2024).

this situation appears not only bleak but also extremely dangerous, as the Russian military has increased its youth-targeted education efforts—sometimes resembling chauvinistic brainwashing (Garner, 2023; Alava, 2025).²⁷ Since it is difficult to believe such poll results without a second opinion, independent sociological research faces a major challenge in producing reliable information on the views of young Russians living in Russia. One must also keep in mind that young Russians who have emigrated do not necessarily represent the views of their peers who remain in Russia.

One expert raises the role of labour unions and employers as a critical societal information need. The likely reason is that Russia is on the brink of a labour shortage, as the unemployment rate is slightly above two percent (BOFIT, 2025). In other words, Russia is already at full employment, since part of the working-age population has fallen out of the labour force due to absenteeism, alcoholism and other personal problems. This labour shortage will obviously limit growth and force the Russian government to consider liberalising its immigration policy.

Several experts also emphasise the need for more information on the views of intellectuals and cultural influencers, as they increasingly represent the last public stronghold of opposition in Russia. A possible way to obtain information on how Russian-speaking intellectuals and cultural influencers think is participation in the events organised, for example, by the culture forum Slovonovo (2025), which organises events outside Russia. Discussions the author has had with some Russian intellectuals and members of the cultural elite reflect their growing dissatisfaction with the regime—alongside their frustration and concern.

The growth of nationalism and racism, and how ordinary Russians react to it, is another concern for the Finnish experts. The experts are also concerned about the rise in crime, violence and hooliganism. Serious crime has risen to its highest level in 15 years due to the influx of weapons from the war front in Ukraine (Goble, 2025b). By mid-2025, around 150 hate-motivated attacks had been recorded, with three fatalities (SOVA, 2025). The real number of the attacks is obviously much higher, since the victims often hesitate to report these incidents to the authorities due to the racism and misconduct of the authorities themselves (Tsfaye, 2025).

The experts also raise the influence of the Russian diaspora on societal development in Russia. A case in point is Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who at the beginning of the 2000s was Russia's richest man. After serving a ten-year prison sentence in Russia, Khodorkovsky established a foundation, institute, and civic organisation in the West to counter Putin's securocracy

²⁷ Yunarmiya, the Youth Army, is one of the tools used by the Russian military to shape the thinking and world view of young Russians. The organisation reports that it consists of 1.75 million children and teenagers. Despite the Russian Federation's budgetary difficulties, state funding for Yunarmiya increased in 2025 (MT, 2025d), which adds to the concern surrounding the movement.

(IMR, 2025; KF, 2025). Although the information produced by Russians who have fled to the West does not always meet the criteria of objectivity, it offers Western societies a small window into an increasingly closed Russian society.

The Finnish experts also raise the issue of how external shocks affect the unity of Russia as a critical information need. The impact of unknown major external shocks on Russia's unity and societal resilience, the so-called 'black swans', is impossible to study in advance.²⁸ Perhaps the only way to anticipate the reactions of Russians towards future black swans is to analyse past external shocks that have affected Russia, such as the 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis, the 2007–2009 global financial crisis, and the 2019–2022 COVID pandemic. These past crises show that Russian society seems externally rather resilient compared to the West. On the other hand, as one interviewee notes: '*Russia appears to be an extremely stable system—until one day the system is gone.*' Russia is a typical authoritarian state, where an external facade of stability masks an internal flame of suppressed resistance. If even a small crack lets air into the system, it can turn a flickering candle into a firestorm—potentially leading to violent regime change (Luukkanen, 2026).

One expert highlights the new technology used by the regime to control and manipulate public opinion as a critical data need. This concern is likely rooted in the example of Russia's eastern neighbour China, where under Xi Jinping a dystopian surveillance state has been built—with one surveillance camera for every two citizens (Cain, 2021; Hentunen and Helenius, 2025). It seems increasingly likely that the Russian leadership will follow China's lead towards a control society—and may even receive China's assistance in doing so (Table 17.3).

Table 17.3 Critical information needs related to society

Population: Demographic development, the real Russian death toll in the war in Ukraine, migration abroad and possible changes in Russia's immigration policy.
Unity: Social cohesion, stability, and crisis resilience of the Russian regions, corruption among the elite and security services, public trust in institutions, the judiciary, and the media, degradation of housing and communal services and internal tensions within Russian society.
Opinions: Dissatisfaction among Russians, anti-Western sentiments among the population, views of ordinary Russians on China, perspectives of young people on their future, the role of labour unions and employers and the views of intellectuals and cultural influencers.
Emerging phenomena: Growing nationalism and racism, the evolution of hate propaganda and how ordinary Russians respond to it, and the development of crime, violence and hooliganism.
External dimension: The influence of the Russian diaspora, and the potential impact of an unknown external shock on the unity and resilience of the Russian population.
Future enigmas: The use of new technologies to control and manipulate the population and its views.

Source: The Author based on the empirical data.

²⁸ 'Black swan' is a metaphor for an unpredictable, rare, and high-impact event (Taleb, 2007).

17.3.4 *The Finnish Experts' Views on Critical Information Needs Related to the Military*

The experts in Finland are interested in the real capability of the Russian army. They emphasise the following key intelligence needs: true nuclear arms capability and the Kremlin's readiness to use nuclear weapons, the condition of conventional armaments stock, the capacity to produce military hardware (particularly hypersonic missiles, drones and unmanned military systems), electronic warfare capabilities, mobilisation capacity, officer training and the capability of conscripted soldiers. This need for deeper understanding of Russia's military power has, in different words, been echoed in the past by Talleyrand, Metternich and Churchill. The phrase that has endured is: '*Russia is never as strong as she looks, nor as weak as she looks*' (Katz, 2006, 1).

Numerous reports have been published on the capabilities of the Russian military (e.g., IISS, 2025; Evans et al., 2025); however, the author of this article believes that the West will never receive a definitive answer regarding the true capability of the Russian army in a largescale war—especially considering that real conflict itself varies by situation. The unpredictability of real-life scenarios also makes it impossible to assess the readiness of Russia's leadership to use nuclear weapons, as even the most detailed military doctrine cannot ultimately determine such a decision. The use of nuclear weapons is a situational decision-making process, influenced by a leader's perception and the information available to him/her—whether that information is accurate, inaccurate, or even deliberately distorted. One of the West's recurring analytical failures regarding Russia is the assumption that Russian leaders think and act like Western leaders.

The experts are particularly interested in the pro-Western and anti-China sentiments of Russia's senior military officers. However, since expressing opinions that diverge from the Kremlin's view has historically resulted in harsh prison sentences or even the mysterious deaths of senior Russian military officers (Brooks et al., 2025), the author does not believe research efforts alone can reliably satisfy expert information needs in this area.

Given that Finland shares the longest border with Russia (over 1,300 km) among NATO countries, it is unsurprising that the Finnish experts are particularly interested in the status of Russian military bases near the border region. As a considerable amount of information has recently been published about these garrisons (e.g., GDN, 2025; Grove, 2025; Mäkeläinen, 2025; Stenvall, 2025), it appears that the continuous publication of such information is increasingly necessary.

The experts also express a strong need for more information on Russia's capacity to project military power globally, Russia's hybrid war strategies concerning Europe, and the military support Russia receives from foreign countries. It is worth noting here that although the Wagner Group's activities were integrated into the Russian regular army following the death of Prigozhin, Russia still maintains non-state military formations, such as Africa Corps and Convoy (Konvoy), operating beyond its borders (Bobin and Le Cam, 2023).

Similarly, the need for additional insight into Russia's hybrid operations in Europe is highly justified, as these activities have increased significantly across the continent (Mäkinen and Liuhto, 2025). Interest in the foreign military support Russia receives is also well-founded, as it is known that China, Iran and North Korea have supplied Russia with dual-use goods, ammunition and even soldiers (Bergmann et al., 2024). On the other hand, Russia's relations with the aforementioned trio are not on as solid a foundation as official statements might lead us to believe (Kirillova, 2025).²⁹

Since the start of the invasion, the West has expelled over 750 Russian diplomats, forcing Russia's intelligence services to look for new ways of acquiring intelligence abroad (Reuters, 2024). For this reason, it is entirely understandable that the Finnish Russia experts are interested in the new methods being used by Russian intelligence services internationally.

The Finnish experts are also eager to understand how Russia's military reform is progressing. This reform has been reported on in both the East and the West (e.g., Dai, 2023; PISM, 2023), but it seems likely that the Finnish experts believe that public reporting only scratches the surface of what is actually happening. In terms of the reform, Russia appears to be imitating Soviet-era practices: announcing grand plans whose practical foundations are questionable, especially given Russia's current economic trajectory and the existing labour shortage already affecting the country (Table 17.4).

17.4 CONCLUSIONS

Over the past three decades, Russia has faced several societal crossroads that could have altered the country's trajectory or even driven the country into a system-destabilising crisis. The war that Russia has been waging in Ukraine for the fourth consecutive year is clearly pushing the country towards a new societal turning point—one that may threaten its internal stability. Since Russia's

Table 17.4 Critical information needs related to the military

Real capability: True nuclear arms capability, the Kremlin's readiness to use nuclear weapons, the condition of conventional armament stockpiles, the capacity to produce military hardware, the electronic warfare capability, the ability to mobilise soldiers, the military training of officers and the competence of conscripted soldiers.
Opinions: Views of senior military officers.
External dimension: The status of military bases in Russia's border regions, Russia's capacity to project military power globally, hybrid war strategies directed at Europe, military support from foreign countries and new methods of acquiring intelligence information.
Future enigmas: The implementation and outcome of military reform.

Source: The Author based on the empirical data.

²⁹ According to South Korean intelligence, approximately 5,000 North Korean soldiers may have died or been wounded in Ukraine by mid-2025 (Kim, 2025).

approaching internal turbulence will not remain confined within its borders, research into Russia's future is of critical importance.

To help fill this knowledge gap, the author asked ten Finnish Russia experts to identify critical information needs that are likely to influence Russia's future development. From each of the four domains studied—governance, economy, society and military—the author has selected five urgent research topics that should be prioritised immediately (Table 17.5).

Below are five policy recommendations to help the West better prepare for Russia's approaching societal instability:

- (1) **The European Commission:** The European Union should fund a network of leading European Russia research institutes and scholars focused on anticipating Russia's future development. Research cooperation with American and British counterparts is essential.
- (2) **EU Member States:** As Russia's hybrid warfare against Europe is likely to continue or even intensify, urgent investment is needed to strengthen the foundation of Russia expertise—namely, knowledge of the Russian language, as it is not possible to recruit native Russians for several security functions of the society.
- (3) **Media:** Given that the Russian government suppresses critical information and that Western media struggles to independently produce valid insights on Russia, cooperation between leading European media houses and freelance journalists working inside Russia should be intensified.
- (4) **Universities and research institutes:** Since universities and research institutes are significant producers of information, they should ease restrictions that hinder or outright prevent collaboration with researchers based in Russia. Furthermore, the ability of Russian scholars, intellectuals and cultural influencers to travel to the West should be facilitated. Funding mechanisms should be created to enable the recruitment of leading Russian scholars into the European Union.

Table 17.5 A summary of selected critical information needs

Governance	Economy
Kremlin power clans and their interaction	Indebtedness and creditors
Regional power clans and their views	Situation in monotowns
Unity and loyalty of army and security services	State of strategic infrastructure
Advancement of Islamic separatism movement	Ability to utilise artificial intelligence
MAGA-Kremlin relations	Sino-Russian technological cooperation
Society	Military
Internal tensions in Russian society	Missile and drone production
Militarisation of society (Youth Army)	Advancement of military reform
Degradation of social services	Military bases in border regions
Veterans of the Ukraine war	Sino-Russian military cooperation
Russian diaspora and its contacts in Russia	Russia's hybrid war against the West

Source: The Author based on the empirical data.

- (5) Citizens: Russia circumvents Western sanctions with the help of companies operating in the West. The West should mobilise consumer power to counter this. To make use of this power, consumers must know in particular which Western companies transport, refine or sell Russian oil. A dedicated website should be created to inform the public about these companies' connections to the Russian oil business. Consumers have a lot of political power via their consumption decisions, since ultimately every single product or service in the world is consumed by an individual.

Since Russia's future remains a mystery, an appropriate way to end this article is a quote from Sir Winston Churchill in October 1939 (ICS, 2023). Churchill said the following in a radio broadcast, a month after Nazi Germany invaded Poland: *'I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma; but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest.'*

Today's leaders and analysts in the West now face a similar enigma that confronted Churchill—Russia. However, the key to unlocking Russia today is no longer Russian national interest, but rather the personal interests of a relatively small group known as the siloviki. The siloviki have taken Russia hostage and will exploit the country ruthlessly for their own ends until ordinary Russians find the courage to challenge their leadership and reclaim their nation for themselves. When this will happen and how, we do not know, but it will inevitably happen one day—and probably sooner than most of us anticipate.

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