



## REPORT

# HOW RUSSIA BRINGS ITS AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE TO THE GLOBAL SOUTH

| IVAN U. KLYSZCZ |

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Cover page photo: Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar shake hands on the sideline of G20 foreign minister s meeting in New Delhi, India, March 2, 2023. Russian Foreign Ministry Press Service via AP/ Scanpix

Photo: Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov shaking hands with Myanmar Foreign Minister Wunna Maung Lwin during their meeting in Naypyidaw (Nay Pyi Taw), 3 August 2022. AFP / Scanpix

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>ASEAN</b>	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
<b>BRI</b>	Belt and Road Initiative
<b>BRICS</b>	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa
<b>COVID-19</b>	Coronavirus disease 2019
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>G7</b>	Group of Seven
<b>G77</b>	Group of Seventy-Seven
<b>JCPOA</b>	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
<b>KSORTS</b>	Council of Russian Compatriot Organisations in Tunisia
<b>MENA</b>	Middle East and North Africa
<b>NATO</b>	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
<b>PGII</b>	Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment
<b>PMC</b>	private military company
<b>RIC</b>	Russia-India-China
<b>SCO</b>	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
<b>SIPRI</b>	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
<b>TPPRF</b>	Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Russian Federation
<b>UAE</b>	United Arab Emirates
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNSC</b>	United Nations Security Council
<b>US</b>	United States
<b>USSR</b>	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Russia is pursuing a great power agenda in the ‘Global South.’ This agenda involves both sanctions evasion and manoeuvres to weaken the Western-led liberal international order. How have Russia-Global South relations changed since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine? How has Russia been mobilising its relations with the countries of Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and South and Southeast Asia to get ahead in its years-long war against Ukraine and broader confrontation with the West? Based on fieldwork in India and Tunisia and open sources, this report highlights two sets of categories that can be used by state and non-state actors to approach the complexity of Russia’s wartime relations with the Global South. These sets describe Russia’s relationships with the countries of the Global South and specific manoeuvres Moscow carries out to bolster its position in its war against Ukraine and its broader confrontation with the West.

Moscow’s relations with the over one hundred and thirty countries of the Global South can be roughly divided into four categories: hierarchical, strategic, superficial, and confrontational. These four categories are mutually exclusive, dynamic and change with time. Hierarchical partners are those that Moscow patronises; they depend on Russia in some critical areas, primarily regime security. Despite some adjustments at the margins, these asymmetrical relationships have changed the least since 2022, albeit the relative value of these partners has grown for Moscow. Examples of such are Nicaragua, Syria, and Venezuela. Strategic partners are those that Moscow regards as critical for its broader international agenda. These tend to be larger countries such as the BRICS group, Algeria, and Egypt. Since 2022, these relations have remained essential to Russia, but the limitations of their partnership have also become evident in the sparse support that Moscow received. Superficial partners are the remaining countries, in which Russia has either not developed an interest or failed to bring a promising relationship to a strategic level. Following the 2019 change of government, Bolivia has transformed from a potential strategic partner in South America to a superficial interlocutor. Finally, confrontational relationships are those that Russia has with a few countries of the Global South. These tend to be countries locked in a conflict with Russia’s client states: Costa Rica in Nicaragua’s case or Colombia in Venezuela’s case. The report does not offer a case study for this last type of relationship.

Russia’s engagements with the countries of the Global South are diverse and involve economic, military, security, and strategic elements, as well as a variety of state and state-aligned private actors. This report highlights three of these engagements, or ‘manoeuvres’, selected for their prevalence since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. These are non-mutually exclusive and can be found simultaneously in various cases: strategic communications, sanctions evasion and market substitution, and regime sheltering. Strategic communications refer to the various means, channels, and narratives that Russia promotes to shape international public opinion in its favour. In the context of Russia’s full-scale aggression against Ukraine, they have become a tool for Moscow’s war. Sanctions evasion and market substitution are bracketed together as tools for Russia’s economic statecraft that are both meant to manage the impact of international sanctions on the country’s economy. Intermediaries in the Global South have sometimes provided a critical lifeline for Russia’s exchanges. Regime sheltering refers to Russia’s permissive and sometimes protective attitude towards regimes that violate international law and human rights. Some of these regimes are Russian clients (Syria), while others are not (North Korea). Moscow’s support for these regimes can provide them with a critical lifeline that allows them to continue with their modus operandi. In doing so, this manoeuvre contributes to the weakening of international norms and international order.

This report presents these two sets of categories – Russia’s Global South partnerships and Russia’s manoeuvres in the Global South – through three in-depth case studies (India, Tunisia, and Myanmar). First, the case of India is meant to illustrate a strategic partner of Russia and a country where Russia engages in sanctions evasion and market substitution. Second, Tunisia exemplifies a superficial partner where Moscow engages in strategic communications. Third, Myanmar is meant to show

how Russia engages in regime sheltering for a client state. This selection is not meant to suggest that these pairings are representative (i.e., that strategic partners are more prone to be used by Russia for sanctions evasion, or that superficial partnerships are more prone to be the target of strategic communications). As explained in the report, Russia engages – or at least attempts to engage – as many countries as possible in these and other manoeuvres.

Finally, the report concludes with six recommendations for those interested in Russia’s agenda in the Global South and its connection to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The main message is that countering Russia’s manoeuvres in the Global South will help pressure Moscow to abandon its aggressive foreign policy, which we witness in Ukraine, Europe, and the rest of the world.





## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report is to explore the evolution of Russia's recent wartime relations with the countries of the 'Global South.'<sup>1</sup> This report argues that Moscow has developed its relations with the countries in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and South and Southeast Asia primarily to bolster its position in its years-long confrontation with Ukraine and the West. This report identifies four distinct categories of bilateral relations between Russia and its Global South counterparts: hierarchical, strategic, superficial, and confrontational. Countries in each category responded differently to Russia launching the full-scale war on 24 February 2022.

This report also presents three non-mutually exclusive manoeuvres that Russia carries out internationally, bringing its aggression against Ukraine and confrontation with the West to the rest of the world: strategic communications, market substitution and sanctions evasion, and sheltering of regimes. There are other specific manoeuvres that can be mentioned (such as creating coalitions of non-sanctioning states), but these three stand out for their worldwide prevalence and impact. These three manoeuvres combine diverse elements of economic statecraft, traditional diplomacy, and security policy and involve state and state-aligned actors (e.g., the *Wagner* Private Military Company, PMC). Despite their diversity, these manoeuvres are deployed in a similar direction: to challenge the international order.

<sup>1</sup> I use the notion of 'Global South' a-critically, referring roughly to the countries of Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia. Sometimes included in the 'Global South' group, China and Turkey are omitted here. China is omitted due to its special relationship with Russia and great power aspirations, and Turkey is omitted due to its NATO membership.

In the last two decades, Russian foreign policy has been making common cause with China in pushing for a "multipolar" world order to revise the US and Western-led liberal world order.<sup>2</sup> The years-long aggression against Ukraine is part of this challenge as norms concerning the paramount legitimacy of democratic government, territorial integrity and the self-determination of states are directly defied by Moscow.<sup>3</sup> Considering this background and in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Moscow's manoeuvres in the Global South are not neutral. They are oriented towards Russia's broader confrontation with the world order. As Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon argued in 2020:

[China and Russia] have targeted key features of the American hegemonic system and the broader international order without directly confronting the United States militarily. By establishing new regional and international infrastructure, challenging liberal democratic architecture, and entering into unilateral assertive foreign policy initiatives, Moscow and Beijing have taken important steps to shape the ecology of international order in line with their own preferences.<sup>4</sup>

Three contrasting case studies are offered to illustrate the three manoeuvres featured in this report, and three out of the four categories of bilateral relations: Tunisia and strategic communications; India and sanctions evasion; and Myanmar and regime sheltering. These pairings are meant to exemplify the type of relationship and the manoeuvre; they are not meant to suggest that one category of relations lends itself more to one specific manoeuvre. Two or more of these manoeuvres can be found across each category. The confrontational category is not included due to space constraints.

This report is based on fieldwork in New Delhi and Tunis, where I interviewed several experts, practitioners, and journalists. Online interviews

<sup>2</sup> Arguably, Moscow adopted this vision as its core foreign policy principle since Yevgeny Primakov became Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1996.

<sup>3</sup> This does not mean that Russia's invasion of Ukraine is part of a broader confrontation between autocracy and democracy. See: Michito Tsuruoka, "[Why the War in Ukraine is not about Democracy versus Authoritarianism](#)," *Royal United Services Institute*, 27 June 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, *Exit from Hegemony: The Unraveling of the American Global Order* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

were also carried out (especially in the case of Myanmar).<sup>5</sup> This report brings insights from a cross-regional perspective, focused on the commonalities of Moscow’s engagements with the countries of the Global South. By offering a rigorous and empirically rich analysis of Russia’s Global South engagements and their role in the war, this report also adds value to our understanding and response to Russia’s aggression.

Country	Region	Relationship	Manoeuvre example
Tunisia	North Africa	Superficial	Strategic communications
India	South Asia	Strategic	Market substitution & sanctions evasion
Myanmar	Southeast Asia	Hierarchical	Regime protection

**Table 1. Case studies**

The cases of India, Myanmar, and Tunisia have few features in common other than belonging to the Global South, so commonalities in their Russia engagements stand out. They are all members of the G77 and identify their foreign policy priorities with those of the Global South. The strategic value of these states for the West also varies, but none of them are trivial. These cases were chosen either for relatively easy access or because of previous research experience. Three regions are highlighted: North Africa and South and Southeast Asia.

## 1. RUSSIA’S RELATIONS WITH THE GLOBAL SOUTH: A CROSS-REGIONAL APPROACH

Despite its post-Cold War diplomatic contraction, Moscow is still an important partner for many countries around the world. It has mostly preserved the Cold War-era network of foreign representations, making that of Russia one of the world’s largest.<sup>6</sup> Yet, Russia’s influence in the Global South is hard to gauge by using typical measures. Its trade and investment beyond Europe and China are small. Moscow usually avoids formalising alliances through treaties, which hinders a straightforward analysis of its international engagements.

Nonetheless, regarding the Global South, either presence or absence of certain features suggests four different types of relationships: hierarchical, strategic, superficial, and confrontational. Following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia has left or de-emphasised its participation in several traditional multilateral diplomacy venues. This will render these bilateral relationships – and the relevant

*Despite its post-Cold War diplomatic contraction, Moscow has preserved its network of foreign representations, making it one of the world’s largest*

multilateral organisations – more valuable to Moscow.<sup>7</sup> These categories help to narrow down the ways in which Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine changed Russia’s relations with the Global South.

**Hierarchical relationships** are those Moscow has cultivated with states where there is an asymmetry in terms of power and authority to the benefit of Russia. Hierarchy in international

<sup>5</sup> Due to security concerns, fieldwork in Myanmar was not considered.

<sup>6</sup> Russia entertains diplomatic relations with nearly every country in the world. In 2021, Moscow had 144 embassies, with several consulates and permanent missions. The yearly Lowy Institute Global Diplomacy Index measures the number of postings and representations to rank all countries in the world. In 2021, Russia ranked overall the sixth largest diplomatic actor, above the United Kingdom and below Turkey. See: “[Global Diplomacy Index. 2021 Country Ranking](#),” Lowy Institute, accessed in March 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Hanna Notte, “[How Ukraine Has Changed Russian Diplomacy](#),” *Foreign Policy*, 16 September 2022.

relations is a relationship between a patron and a client.<sup>8</sup> More than a partnership or alliance, patronage implies a loss of sovereignty in certain domains as the client accepts the patron's authority in exchange for 'goods' that it could not procure otherwise. Hierarchy does not imply an empire since the clients do not surrender their sovereignty in its entirety. Moreover, different clients usually have several patrons. The Soviet collapse brought an end to Moscow's international patronage network based on the Communist bloc politics. Since the 2000s, Moscow has built a new patronage network around arms exports, security services to the regimes, and trade of strategic goods, such as grains and energy.

*Since the 2000s, Moscow has built a new patronage network around arms exports, security services to the local regimes, and trade of strategic goods*

Moscow's relationship with Syria illustrates this hierarchical relationship well: by choosing to rely on Russia to protect its regime, Bashar al-Assad made Syria dependent on Russia across several sensitive domains ranging from defence to food security.<sup>9</sup> As mentioned above, Moscow does not rule over Syria like an empire. Damascus also counts on Iran as its major patron. Other similar cases include Mali, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, albeit in none of these is Russia involved militarily as much as in Syria. Russia's patronage of personalistic regimes and regimes amidst civil wars makes its post-Cold War network vulnerable to its counterparts under the threat of losing power. For instance, long-standing Russia partner Alpha Conde of Guinea left office in 2021, which diminished Moscow's influence in that country.<sup>10</sup> Guinea was once Russia's primary West African partner.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine rendered evident the costs of such association for

Moscow's hierarchical partners, but only to a point. On the one hand, there are hints that Russia's focus on the war against Ukraine, international sanctions, and economic decline complicate Moscow's ability to provide resources to its 'clients.' For instance, Russian aid meant for Syria has reportedly been diverted to the newly occupied territories in Ukraine.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, no disengagement from Russia was evident among these partners across 2022. The degree of mutual investment and a lack of reliable alternatives encourages many of these partners to go 'all in' while consistently articulating pro-Moscow positions. In turn, the value of these partners has grown for a progressively isolated Moscow – an opportunity some of them have used to readdress the terms of the bilateral relationship. Partners such as the Maduro regime in Venezuela have gained new leverage to renegotiate some terms of their bilateral relationship but have not hesitated to support Moscow at the UN.<sup>12</sup>

**Strategic relationships** are those that Moscow has cultivated with relatively strong countries and those that do not involve a hierarchical element. These relationships feature a relatively larger trade and financial component. They are also more institutionalised as they rely less on the personal rapport between Putin and the respective country's leadership. Russia's strategic partners in the Global South play a critical role in the messianic ideas underpinning the "multipolarity" espoused by Russia's leadership.<sup>13</sup>

The primary example is the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) groupings. BRICS has played a prominent role in Russia's narratives about "multipolarity" and its own great power status.<sup>14</sup> None of the BRICS or larger SCO members can be described as subordinate to Moscow since the power

<sup>8</sup> This category is based on the following literature: David A. Lake, *Hierarchy in international relations* (Cornell University Press, 2009) and Seva Gunitsky, *Aftershocks: great powers and domestic reforms in the twentieth century* (Princeton University Press, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Jonas Heins, "Putin and Assad, Partners in Crime: Why Russian Forces Steal Wheat From Ukraine," *International Centre for Defence and Security*, 3 November 2022.

<sup>10</sup> "Après la chute d'Alpha Condé, Moscou en mode survie à Conakry [After the fall of Alpha Condé, Moscow in survival mode in Conakry]," *Africa Intelligence*, 11 July 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Nikita Smagin, "Moscow's Original 'Special Operation': Why Russia is Staying in Syria," *Carnegie Politika*, 7 February 2023.

<sup>12</sup> "Russia discusses debt, energy stability with Venezuela," *Reuters*, 15 December 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Alicja Curanović, "Russia's mission in the world: The perspective of the Russian Orthodox Church." *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 66, no. 4 (2019): 253-267.

<sup>14</sup> S. Neil MacFarlane, "The 'R' in BRICS: Is Russia an Emerging Power?" *International Affairs*, Vol. 82, no. 1 (2006): 41-57.

differential between them is not as big.<sup>15</sup> Other important long-term partners include Algeria and Egypt – two of the largest African countries and two of the four largest customers of Russian arms.<sup>16</sup>

*None of the BRICS or larger SCO members can be described as subordinate to Moscow since the power differential between them is not as big*

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated not only Russia's enduring strengths in these countries but also the limits in their relationships. None of Russia's Global South strategic partners has been fully dependable. Despite attempts at 'softening' the tone of the February 2022 resolution, Brazil voted in favour of the UN condemnation of Russia's war.<sup>17</sup> Egypt has had to balance between its long-term partnership with Russia and its connections to the West.<sup>18</sup> Like Russia's hierarchical partners, the attitude of its strategic partners is – on the aggregate – also one of 'wait and see'. But the lack of asymmetry in the relationship also means that Moscow's stronger partners can afford to remain uncommitted to Russia's war. In addition, and despite their importance, Russia's strategic partners do not consider themselves to have enough leverage in Moscow to influence the war dynamics.<sup>19</sup>

**Superficial relationships** are those that Moscow holds with most countries of the Global South. These are countries that Moscow neither invests in nor regards as a priority. Moscow does not find substantive influence or loyalty among its superficial partners either. There is no precise threshold for determining which relations are superficial or

not; this type of relationship frequently lacks substantial mutual investments, business links, security cooperation, or intensive diplomatic exchanges.

Larger countries will inevitably attract Moscow's attention more, at least for business opportunities, but will not necessarily compel the pursuit of strategic bonds. For example, during the early 1990s, India was assigned a low level of priority in the Kremlin. At

the same time, Pakistan has become a closer partner to Moscow. Aside from expanded arms procurement deals in the 2010 decade, however, Islamabad did not become a close partner of Russia.<sup>20</sup> The Philippines has, in recent times, hinted that it wanted to develop a closer relationship with Russia, but mutual courting failed to transform it into a strategic partnership.<sup>21</sup> Since this group of states is the largest of the four described here, their reaction to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has varied. Due to Russia's preference for authoritarian partnerships and considering the tendency of democratic states to condemn Russia's war, it can be assumed that this group will generally include more democratic and Western-leaning states than the other ones.

**Confrontational relationships** are those that Moscow holds with only a few countries of the Global South. These are cases where Moscow perceives its counterpart to either align with the West or align against a local client or strategic partner. Russia's close partnerships with certain countries – especially in the

*Moscow has enabled the aggressive foreign policy of its closest partners in the form of arms transfers and intelligence cooperation*

military domain – have sometimes led to other countries in the region perceiving Russia's presence as threatening.

Moscow's aggressive foreign policy has – many times – enabled the aggressive foreign policy of its closest partners in the Global

<sup>15</sup> In GDP terms, South Africa has the smallest economy of BRICS, but it is still the second-largest African economy. In the SCO, Pakistan is a fellow member of the nuclear club.

<sup>16</sup> Pieter D. Wezeman, Justine Gadon, and Siemon T. Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2022," *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, March 2023.

<sup>17</sup> Andre Spigariol, "Brazil tried to soften UN Security Council resolution against Russia," *The Brazilian Report*, 25 February 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Cathrin Schaer, "Egypt's difficult balancing act between the West and Russia," *Deutsche Welle*, 11 February 2022.

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Sidiropoulos, "How do Global South politics of non-alignment and solidarity explain South Africa's position on Ukraine?," *Brookings Institution*, 2 August 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Rajan Menon and Eugene Rumer, "Russia and India: A New Chapter," *Carnegie Endowment*, 20 September 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Heydarian, "Philippines resets relations with Russia as Ukraine war sours ties across Southeast Asia," *South China Morning Post*, 22 August 2022.

South. This support is also frequently offered against countries that have close relations with the West. Typically, such enabling actions come in the form of arms transfers and intelligence cooperation. For instance, since 2018, the Maduro regime has been locked in a confrontation with neighbouring Colombia – a NATO global partner – as Caracas accuses the country of lending its territory for a potential US invasion. Moscow's delivery of armed groups (the Wagner PMC), weapons, and radar technology have all been perceived in Colombia as threatening.<sup>22</sup> Other countries in similar situations include Costa Rica (in relation to Nicaragua) and Côte d'Ivoire (in relation to Burkina Faso and Mali).<sup>23</sup>

These countries do not necessarily respond to Moscow's aggressiveness with bold moves. They tend to respond by either leaning more on their Western partnerships or courting Moscow to prevent a full-on confrontation.<sup>24</sup> Algeria is one of Russia's closest military partners and a long-time rival of Morocco. Rabat has aimed to maintain good relations with Moscow to prevent Russia from turning entirely on the side of Algeria on several issues.<sup>25</sup> Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has gradually absorbed Moscow's attention and resources, including those that fuel conflicts elsewhere. Therefore, Russia's perceived threat to these countries has been changing.

There are, nonetheless, many shades of grey. For instance, Bolivia has often been portrayed as a country with close relations to Moscow. Cooperation between the two states has been substantive in some areas, meaning that their relationship cannot be labelled as superficial. But in Bolivia, Moscow finds neither a subordinate regime nor a partner of true strategic value. The fall of the Morales government in 2019 made evident Russia's lack of means to pursue its preferred outcomes in that country.

<sup>22</sup> Ivan U. Klyszcz, "[Russia's Intelligence Agencies in the Global South: the Case of Venezuela](#)," *Riddle*, 9 January 2023.

<sup>23</sup> Ivan U. Klyszcz, "[Russia's Engagements in Central America](#)," *Russia Foreign Policy Papers*, 4 October 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Benoit Faucon and Joe Parkinson, "[Russia's Wagner Deepens Influence in Africa, Helping Putin Project Power](#)," *The Wall Street Journal*, 13 February 2023.

<sup>25</sup> Jérôme Galveli, "[Conflit Russie-Ukraine: le Maroc à la rescousse de l'OTAN pour fournir des munitions à Kiev?](#)" [Russia-Ukraine conflict: Morocco to the rescue of NATO to supply ammunition to Kiev?], *Maghreb Intelligence*, 14 February 2023.

These categories are also dynamic. Iran has stood out since 2022 as a strategic partner of Russia, including in the military sphere. Due to its support – the delivery of armed drones in particular – Tehran has accumulated leverage, thus rendering Moscow unable to push for the restoration of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). But up until recently, this partnership was more ambiguous and, at

*One country can go from being a close ally to becoming indifferent to Russia*

least relatively, superficial. In that sense, one country can gain relevance, while cooperation can increase in pace and depth.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, one country can go from being a close ally to becoming indifferent to Russia. One example is Guinea: under Alpha Conde, the country was among the top recipients of Russia's development aid and a trusted partner for Moscow's African diplomacy. Reportedly, Conde was a key intermediary during Moscow's attempt to secure a naval installation on the Red Sea shore of Somaliland.<sup>27</sup> The fall of Conde in 2021 led to a downgrading of relations between the two countries.<sup>28</sup> In this sense, Putin's reliance on personal rapport for building strategic relationships can backfire.

## 2. THREE MANOEUVRES IN RUSSIA'S GLOBAL CONFRONTATION WITH THE WEST

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine did not diminish Russia's drive for contesting the world order. The Ukrainian resistance and the united Western response have been met in Moscow with continued investments in its challenge to the world order.<sup>29</sup> In the Global South, three manoeuvres have stood out since the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022: strategic communications, sanctions evasion and market substitution, and

<sup>26</sup> Hanna Notte, "[Russia's Invasion of Ukraine. The Iran Nuclear Price Tag](#)," *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, February 2023.

<sup>27</sup> "[Alpha Condé, intermédiaire de Poutine auprès du Somaliland](#)" [Alpha Condé, Putin's intermediary with Somaliland], *Africa Intelligence*, 19 July 2019.

<sup>28</sup> "Après la chute d'Alpha Condé."

<sup>29</sup> Including investing in alternative diplomatic spaces, free from international sanctions. See Notte, "How Ukraine has Changed Russian Diplomacy."

the sheltering of regimes. In service of these goals are Russia's state institutions, diplomacy, and nominally private entities advancing the Kremlin's agenda, such as the *Wagner* PMC.

### *Three manoeuvres stood out since the 24th of February 2022: strategic communications, sanctions evasion and market substitution, and sheltering of regimes*

**Strategic communications.** Outside of the West, Russia is – on the aggregate – perceived positively.<sup>30</sup> Russia's investment in promoting its strategic narratives in the Global South suggests that the Kremlin considers this positive perception to be a foreign policy asset. Russia uses this positive reputation for a variety of purposes, such as trade and investment promotion. In the context of Russia's war on Ukraine and its hybrid war

### *Outside of the West, Russia is – on the aggregate – perceived positively*

on the West, Russian messaging becomes a tool to manipulate public opinion in favour of Russia's aggression. According to researcher Anton Shekhovtsov, Russia has promoted several wartime narratives specifically in the Global South: Russia is a leader in the fight against imperialism and neo-colonialism; the West aims to restore its global domination through the war in Ukraine; and Ukraine is part of Russia's legitimate sphere of interests. Other narratives are deployed for a shorter term, such as the conspiracy theory alleging the existence of "secret US-funded biolabs."<sup>31</sup> There is no consensus on how effective Russian strategic communications are in swaying public opinion outside of Russia. But in some contexts, these communications are in competition with Western messaging on the war.<sup>32</sup>

Russia conveys these wartime narratives through a variety of official and unofficial channels. One of these official channels is '*Rosstrudnichestvo*,' Russia's international

<sup>30</sup> "War in Ukraine widens global divide in public attitudes to US, China and Russia – report," *Bennett Institute for Public Policy*, 20 October 2022.

<sup>31</sup> Anton Shekhovtsov, "Four towers of Kremlin propaganda: Russia, Ukraine, South, West," *Euromaidan Press*, 6 January 2023.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with A1, January 2023.

cooperation agency that has been recently rebranded as a "Russian House." It is under EU sanctions for disseminating propaganda.<sup>33</sup> This agency operates throughout the Global South,

with plans to expand in sub-Saharan Africa in 2023.<sup>34</sup> There are fewer overt channels, albeit well-known to be state-controlled. Due to their size and budget, supposedly independent *RT* (formerly *Russia Today*) and *Sputnik* are the leading venues for Russia's

strategic communications, including in the Global South.<sup>35</sup> *RT* has newscasts in Arabic, French, and Spanish, while *Sputnik* radio broadcasts in Arabic, Portuguese, and Spanish. They both have offices on every continent. Prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, they were generally trusted in Latin America and the Middle East, sometimes even gathering the largest news audiences.<sup>36</sup> The full-scale war led to *RT* and *Sputnik* being sanctioned and closing

their offices in Europe, particularly affecting their French and Spanish operations. Yet, *RT* has opened new outlets since 2022, targeting India (*RT Hindi*) and the Balkans (*RT Balkan*). *RT*

also aims to rebuild its presence in Francophone Africa, with moves made towards opening *RT Africa* reportedly in the works.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to these official and state-controlled channels, the Russian government has been cultivating contacts among local media, 'influencers,' and public figures. Russian diplomatic staff across the Global

<sup>33</sup> Council of the European Union, [Council Implementing Regulation \(EU\) 2022/1270 of 21 July 2022 implementing Regulation \(EU\) No 269/2014 concerning restrictive measures in respect of actions undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine](#), Document 32022R1270 (Brussels: Official Journal of the European Union, 21 July 2022).

<sup>34</sup> Alena Nefedova, "Саванна небесная: Росотрудничество открывает новые центры в Африке [Heavenly Savannah: Rosstrudnichestvo opens new centers in Africa]," *Izvestia*, 7 November 2022.

<sup>35</sup> The lack of transparency in both companies means that we do not know their exact number of employees and precise budget, but the latter is known to be in the hundreds of millions of US dollars.

<sup>36</sup> Argentina, Iraq, Mexico, Venezuela, and Spain stand out as having larger audiences prior to 2022. Donald N. Jensen, "Russia in the Middle East: A New Front in the Information War?" in Theodore Karasik and Stephen Blank, *Russia in the Middle East* (Jamestown Foundation, 2018), 265, 275; "A glimpse into RT's Latin American audience," *DFRLab*, 7 August 2020.

<sup>37</sup> "Le continent africain, nouveau débouché pour la chaîne de propagande russe RT? [The African continent, a new outlet for the Russian propaganda channel RT?]" *RTS*, 26 January 2023.

South actively engages local media through op-eds, interviews, and commentary. Russian diplomacy also courts sympathetic organisations and individuals, such as the so-called 'pan-Africanist' organisations in the Sahel and throughout the continent.<sup>38</sup> Public diplomacy has continued since 2022, frequently featuring symbols of Russian militarism (the 'Z' signs and St. George's ribbons) if not outright Russian propaganda.<sup>39</sup> RT also frequently collaborates with local media outlets.<sup>40</sup> In parallel, Prigozhin's structures also engage similar public figures, benefitting from plausible deniability.<sup>41</sup> There are clandestine operations, too, such as 'troll factories' in Ghana and Mexico, each posting divisive content to try to influence the US elections.<sup>42</sup>

### Sanctions evasion and market substitution.

In response to Russia's annexation of Crimea, invasion of eastern Ukraine, and other malign activities abroad, certain individuals, state bodies, and private companies have been under international sanctions. Similarly, especially since 2022, Russian products have been barred from Western markets to prevent their revenue from fuelling the Kremlin's war machine. Since 2014 and even more so since 2022, Russia has adapted its state budget and overall economy to operate under these conditions. Two closely related elements can be highlighted here: sanctions evasion and market substitution. Market substitution (i.e., replacing one foreign market with another one) is neither illegal nor necessarily malicious. In the context of sanctions and countersanctions, seeking alternative customers and providers – even when not in violation of any restrictions – becomes a strategic move with implications for sanctions' effectiveness.

<sup>38</sup> "Dans les coulisses de la préparation du sommet Russie-Afrique [Behind the scenes of the preparations for the Russia-Africa summit]," *Jeune Afrique*, 14 February 2023.

<sup>39</sup> See: "Lavrov compara conflito na Ucrânia com guerra em Angola [Lavrov compares conflict in Ukraine to war in Angola]," *Deutsche Welle*, 25 January 2023.

<sup>40</sup> For instance, the pro-Russian *Maliactu* in Mali. See: Aude Dassonville, "Russian state channel RT eyes a new audience in Africa," *Le Monde*, 7 April 2022.

<sup>41</sup> Michael Weiss and Pierre Vaux, "The Company You Keep: Yevgeny Prigozhin's Influence Operations in Africa," *Free Russia Foundation* (2020).

<sup>42</sup> Mattathias Schwartz, "How Putin's Russian goon squad used Mexican gig workers to troll an American election," *Business Insider*, 18 February 2023.

Namely, Moscow has invested in several sanctions-busting mechanisms and networks.<sup>43</sup> Moscow has also sought new trading and investment partners to replace the lost markets. None of these schemes have prevented the Russian economy from stagnating since 2014 or from contracting in 2022.<sup>44</sup> But they did hamper the effectiveness of international sanctions, especially in sensitive areas such as dual-use civilian technology and energy.<sup>45</sup> Hence, sanctions evasion and market substitution are treated as connected (even though the former violates international law, and the latter does not). In both cases, countries of the 'Global North' and the 'Global South' are involved. In fact, for the business communities of some countries of the Global South, the war and its fallout have opened new opportunities in Russia.<sup>46</sup>

Due to Russia's state budget dependence on them, petrochemical products are among the key goods involved in sanctions evasion and

*Due to Russia's state budget dependence on them, petrochemical products are among the key goods involved in sanctions evasion and market substitution*

market substitution. Roughly 40% of Russia's exports consist of mineral fuels, with other mined goods and cereals also on the top of the list.<sup>47</sup> In early 2022, roughly four-fifths of Russian crude oil landed in EU or G7 ports. By November 2022, less than a third did. The new port landings were taking place outside of these countries or in undisclosed destinations.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>43</sup> A relevant background case is apartheid-era South Africa and its own sanctions evasion networks. See: Clara Ferreira Marques, "Hints of Russia's Future in South Africa's Sanctions Past," *Bloomberg*, 13 September 2022.

<sup>44</sup> Russia's economy shrank an estimated 2.1% in 2022 after forecasts pointed to a more acute decline that year. "Russia's economy contracted 2.1% in 2022, less than expected," *Nikkei Asia*, 21 February 2023.

<sup>45</sup> The scale to which these imports actually reach weapons systems is unclear. See: Eric Tegler, "Is Russia Really Buying Home Appliances To Harvest Computer Chips For Ukraine-Bound Weapons Systems?," *Forbes*, 20 January 2023.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with A4.

<sup>47</sup> "Russia," The Observatory of Economic Complexity, accessed in March 2023.

<sup>48</sup> Conall Heussaff, Lionel Guetta-Jeanrenaud, Ben McWilliams, and Georg Zachmann, "Russian oil crude tracker," *Bruegel*, 23 February 2023.

Russia responded to the limitations on its energy products by selling its commodities at a discount. Russia's *Urals* crude oil blend only had a few known customers by the end of 2022, principally China, India, and Turkey. In November 2022, it was reported that China and India were buying Russian crude oil as low as 40% less than the international *Brent* benchmark.<sup>49</sup> In addition, Russian oil has allegedly reached numerous countries in the West via secondary exports through countries in the Global South, such as India and Saudi Arabia.<sup>50</sup> While estimates vary, Russia's discount policy has been able to compensate for the loss of profit by maintaining a high sales volume. Finally, European banks and traders have withdrawn from the Russian commodity market, and their place has been taken up by firms from Hong Kong, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).<sup>51</sup>

*Russia has established several networks to import arms and circuits from abroad, some of them running through the Global South countries*

Imports also play a critical role in these schemes. Russia has established several networks to import arms and circuits from abroad, some of them running through the Global South countries. Moscow has sought to redirect trade routes that avoid Europe, regardless of sanctions. A Russia-Iran corridor – with a potential partnership from India – is being built and will facilitate Russian trade, as well as synergy between Russian and Iranian sanction-busting schemes.<sup>52</sup> Beyond physical infrastructure, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Russian Federation (TPPRF) is active in every continent. Its branches have organised events for local firms to navigate the new trade environment created by Russia's war

and sanctions.<sup>53</sup> Despite sanctions, Western circuits continue to be found in Russian arms captured in Ukraine.<sup>54</sup>

*The Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Russian Federation is active in every continent, organising events for local firms to navigate the new trade environment created by Russia's war and sanctions*

Russia is also evading sanctions by relying on cryptocurrencies, diamonds, and gold.<sup>55</sup> These are traded in low-regulatory and favourable environments in China, India, Turkey, and the UAE.<sup>56</sup> With or without the knowledge of these countries' authorities, Russia and Russian companies can hide the origin of their assets. It helps Russia to avoid relying on the US dollar for international transactions. Due to the opacity of these instruments, it is difficult to precisely determine what use Russia gives them. But their importance to Russia is clear. While Russia is one of the world's largest diamond and gold producers, the government is also heavily invested in securing an international presence along the production chain. *Alrosa*, Russia's key diamond producer, is present in Angola, Botswana, and Zimbabwe.<sup>57</sup> The *Wagner* PMC manages several mining operations in Africa, some of them with potential profits of up to one billion US dollars.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Alex Kimani, "China and India Are Buying Russian Crude at a 40% Discount," *OilPrice.com*, 29 November 2022.

<sup>50</sup> Alex Kimani, "The UK Loophole That Keeps Russian Oil Coming In," *OilPrice.com*, 16 January 2023.

<sup>51</sup> Irina Slav, "Russian Oil Sanctions Have Redrawn Global Trade Maps," *OilPrice.com*, 23 February 2023.

<sup>52</sup> Shuntaro Fukutomi, "Russia and Iran eye trade route with India to bypass sanctions," *Nikkei*, 11 January 2023.

<sup>53</sup> Russian Business Council in Dubai (@rbcdubai), "We are delighted to invite you to a joint webinar with Department of Economy and Tourism of Dubai at 11 am on Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> March 2022," Facebook, 28 February 2022.

<sup>54</sup> James Byrne, Dr Jack Watling, Professor Justin Bronk, Gary Somerville, Joe Byrne, Jack Crawford, and Jane Baker, "The Orlan Complex: Tracking the Supply Chains of Russia's Most Successful UAV," *Royal United Service Institute*, 15 December 2022.

<sup>55</sup> "«Москва-сити» — контора депутата Лугового — криптобиржа — банковский счет ["Moscow City" - office of deputy Lugovoi - crypto-exchange - bank account]," *Dossier Tsentr*, 19 December 2022.

<sup>56</sup> Joshua Keating, "Russia's bright, shiny anti-sanctions weapon: Inside the billion-dollar business of 'blood gold'," *GRID News*, 15 July 2022.

<sup>57</sup> Leo Komminoth, "US ban on Russian diamonds boosts African producers," *African Business*, 12 April 2022.

<sup>58</sup> Erin Banco, "U.S. cable: Russian paramilitary group set to get cash infusion from expanded African mine," *POLITICO*, 19 January 2023.



**Sheltering of regimes that violate international norms.** As mentioned above, Russia's foreign policy seeks to revise the international order under the guise of "multipolarity." Part of this policy involves protecting sympathetic regimes that share an anti-democratic outlook and violate international norms. At a minimum, this sheltering comes in the form of Moscow using its permanent seat at the UN Security Council to veto resolutions condemning regimes that violate international law. For example, the North Korean regime does not depend on Russia for its survival. For the first time in 2022, Russia vetoed a UN resolution condemning North Korea's arms programme.<sup>59</sup>

*At a maximum, Russia is the security patron of a handful of regimes and juntas throughout the Global South, all of whom have come to depend on Russian assistance to cling to power*

At a maximum, Russia is the security patron of a handful of regimes and juntas throughout the Global South, all of whom have come to depend on Russian assistance to cling to power. The Maduro and Ortega regimes, the Goitia and Hlaing juntas, and the al-Assad dictatorship are all internationally sanctioned and – to different extents – dependent on Russian security support. In turn, this patronage doubles as power projection, expanding Russia's reach in all continents. By sheltering these regimes, Moscow also encourages emerging

*As the prospects for a quick victory evaporated in March 2022, Russia prioritised its own consumption of war materiel, arms, and manpower needs*

authoritarian regimes to seek patronage from Russia. Russia's advantage as a patron is that it offers comprehensive security resources outside of international norms, without 'strings attached.'<sup>60</sup> These resources vary but typically consist of a combination of informational campaigns, *Wagner* deployments, intelligence

<sup>59</sup> Samantha Beech, "China and Russia veto new UN sanctions on North Korea for first time since 2006," *CNN*, 27 May 2022.

<sup>60</sup> Djibril Fofana and Maggie Janes-Lucas, "Russia's undeclared war on the West in the Sahel," *The Africa Report*, 22 February 2023.

assistance, military cooperation, and assistance in sanctions evasion.

The 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine raised questions about Russia's regime sheltering operations. As the prospects for a quick victory evaporated in March 2022, Russia prioritised its own consumption of war materiel, arms, and manpower needs. For example, *Wagner* mercenaries were reportedly relocated from the African theatre to Ukraine in the summer of 2022, with the attention of the PMC's founder, Yevgeny Prigozhin, focused on Ukraine at the time.<sup>61</sup>

Yet, Russia's diplomacy in 2022 and 2023 has evinced Moscow's will to remain the patron of many otherwise isolated regimes. In those two years, Lavrov met with representatives of all the regimes mentioned above, as well as those of Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, the Republic of Congo, Eritrea, eSwatini, Nicaragua, and Sudan, among others.<sup>62</sup> New security pledges were rare in those meetings, but Russia's message of continued support was clear.

### 3. STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS: THE CASE OF TUNISIA

With 11 million inhabitants, Tunisia is a relatively small country in the MENA region. Its security is tied to its larger land neighbours, Algeria and Libya. Tunisia has sought a neutral position in the conflicts involving these countries, such as the Algeria-Morocco conflict over Western Sahara. Tunis has also had to fend off encroachments on its sovereignty. For instance, in 1974, Libya attempted to annex Tunisia, a move that would lead to a soaring relationship. To supplement its security in this precarious situation, Tunis has sought good relations with Europe and

<sup>61</sup> "Special Online Briefing with General Stephen J. Townsend, Commander, U.S. Africa Command (U.S. AFRICOM)," U.S. Department of State, 26 July 2022.

<sup>62</sup> The Kingdom of eSwatini has benefited from Russian arms transfers and security cooperation for the survival of the embattled Mswati monarchy. See: Ivan U. Klyszcz, "Lavrov's Africa Trip Reveals Limits to Russian Soft Power," *The Moscow Times*, 26 January 2023.

the West. The United States stood as a reliable ally to gain leverage in the relationship with France, an otherwise close partner. In turn, by advocating on its behalf, Washington could ensure that Tunisia would not follow Algeria and align itself with the Socialist bloc during the Cold War.<sup>63</sup> Because of this decision – and despite Moscow’s courting – Tunisia’s relations with the USSR were limited to individual episodes of Soviet technical assistance, while the relationship remained superficial.<sup>64</sup> In 1959, Habib Bourguiba, the first president of Tunisia, even proclaimed his country’s intention to join NATO.<sup>65</sup>

Since the 2011 revolution and transition to democracy, the West has deepened its engagements with the country. For instance, Tunis has been identified as a potential cooperation partner for Estonia in MENA.<sup>66</sup> These growing ties have been placed on pause, nonetheless. In 2019, Tunisia witnessed the rise of Kais Saied, a constitutional lawyer who took over the presidential office while riding on a wave of popular discontent propelled by a severe economic crisis. In July 2021, Saied assumed emergency powers and called for a constitutional referendum to replace the 2014 Constitution. Attacks on the media, the judiciary, the parliament, and his critics have accompanied Saied’s consolidation of power.<sup>67</sup> In turn, this authoritarian trend has encouraged Tunis’ major international partners (the EU and the US) to scale down their cooperation; Saied’s supporters have accused the West of “intervening” in the country.<sup>68</sup> Still,

Saied has been focused primarily on domestic affairs, trying not to alienate Tunisia’s long-standing Western partners.<sup>69</sup>

Compared to neighbouring Algeria and Libya, Tunisia is not a priority for Moscow. Tunisia is Russia’s seventh largest trade partner in Africa, yet trade between the two amounts is meagre.<sup>70</sup> Following the Arab Spring, Russia developed an interest in North Africa.<sup>71</sup> In the subsequent decade, several Russo-Tunisian exchanges took place with many new bilateral agreements signed, including an agreement on military cooperation in 2019. The rise of Saied and the COVID-19 pandemic may have hampered this relationship, but exchanges continued. In the months prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian diplomats discussed with their Tunisian counterparts such topics as the resumption of direct flights (shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic), bilateral political dialogue, higher education, and cooperation on space matters.<sup>72</sup> Despite the military cooperation agreement,

*Despite the military cooperation agreement, cooperation on more sensitive domains has been limited, rendering this a superficial bilateral relationship*

cooperation on more sensitive domains has been limited, rendering this a superficial bilateral relationship. Saied has reportedly sought to improve relations with Moscow since taking power.<sup>73</sup> However, the opacity of Saied’s regime and his overall lack of interest in foreign affairs have prevented any policy shifts.

<sup>63</sup> Abdelaziz Chneguir, *La politique extérieure de la Tunisie 1956-1987* (L’Harmattan, 2004), 35, 55.

<sup>64</sup> Chneguir, *La politique extérieure*, 49, 68.

<sup>65</sup> An article in *The New York Times*, 24 March 1956, cited in Lofti Ben Rejeb, “La politique américaine envers la Tunisie: quelle nouvelle approche depuis la révolution?” *Politique américaine* Vol. 2 (2013): 44-45.

<sup>66</sup> Merili Arjakas, Hille Hanso, Kristi Raik, Peeter Raudsik, and Vladimir Sazonov, “Eesti koostöö ELi lõunanaabrusega: [Strateegilised eesmärgid ja fookus](#) [Estonia’s cooperation with the EU’s southern neighborhood: Strategic goals and focus],” *International Centre for Defence and Security*, August 2022.

<sup>67</sup> “[Tunisia security storm Al Jazeera office, expel journalists](#),” *Middle East Monitor*, 26 July 2021.

<sup>68</sup> The EU decided not to observe the November 2022 election – an unprecedented move signalling Brussels’ distancing from Tunis. In May 2022, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) diminished the 2023 aid for Tunisia citing the country’s ‘deviation from democracy’ as the cause. See: “[US to reduce aid to Tunisia as it’s ‘deviating from democracy’](#),” *Middle East Monitor*, 19 May 2022.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas Hill and Sarah Yerkes, “[Tunisian Foreign Policy Under Kais Saied](#),” *Carnegie Endowment*, 11 January 2023.

<sup>70</sup> “[Russia](#),” The Observatory of Economic Complexity.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with B1.

<sup>72</sup> For example, see: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “[О встрече спецпредставителя Президента Российской Федерации по Ближнему Востоку и странам Африки, заместителя Министра иностранных дел России М.Л.Богданова с Послом Туниса в Москве Тареком Бен Салемом](#) [On the meeting of the Special Representative of the President of the Russian Federation for the Middle East and Africa, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia Mikhail Bogdanov with the Ambassador of Tunisia to Moscow Tarek Ben Salem],” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 10 September 2021.

<sup>73</sup> Akram Belkaid, “[Maghreb-Ukraine \(2\). La Tunisie impuissante, les opinions publiques favorables à la Russie](#),” *Orient XXI*, 24 May 2022.

The superficial nature of Russo-Tunisian relations and Tunisia's long-standing partnership with the West shaped some of its reactions to the full-scale war. Tunisia is part of the Ramstein group of supporters for Ukraine's war of self-defence. In fact, it is one of the few non-Western countries to join this group. However, active support for Ukraine required some pressure from the West. According to a report, dependence on Western aid and investment, as well as an already tense relationship with Europe and the US, dissuaded Tunisia from abstaining during the vote on a UN resolution in March.<sup>74</sup> Otherwise, Tunis hinted that its relations with Moscow would remain as they were prior to 2022.<sup>75</sup> Aside from the economic fallout, the topic of the war is not part of Russo-Tunisian dialogue.<sup>76</sup>

A year into the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the core topics of the bilateral relationship were agriculture, energy, and tourism, with prospects for development in those areas.<sup>77</sup> In the meantime, Russia hinted at upgraded ties with Tunisia. In December 2022, a small team of Russian election 'observers' were deployed in Tunisia.<sup>78</sup> These observer missions are sometimes involved in legitimating rigged elections, so their deployment can be considered a form of election interference.<sup>79</sup> The election they observed was heavily criticised as a steppingstone in Saïed's regime consolidation. Otherwise, the dialogue has not reached a higher level. Twice was Lavrov's visit to Tunis announced and retracted. Similarly, a Saïed visit to Moscow was announced in April 2022 but later silently cancelled.<sup>80</sup> Finally,

Tunisia is heavily dependent on grain from both Ukraine and Russia, importing half of its wheat from those two countries. Therefore, its economy suffered greatly due to Russia's aggression.<sup>81</sup>

Despite these superficial ties, Russia is present in Tunisia. Before February 2022, Tunisian public opinion on Russia had not diverged from that in other MENA nations. Since the full-scale invasion, Russia's focus in Tunisia has been on propagating its wartime narratives through a variety of channels.

*Due to an association of Western support for Ukraine with the US' interventionist policy in the Middle East, Tunisian media and public opinion have generally been unfavourable to Ukraine*

Due to an association of Western support for Ukraine with the US' interventionist policy in the Middle East, Tunisian media and public opinion have generally been unfavourable to Ukraine. People in Tunisia tend to agree with the accusation that the West applies double standards towards Middle Eastern refugees while favouring Ukrainians. In turn, some of Russia's conspiracy-laden war propaganda occasionally finds its way into Tunisian media.<sup>82</sup> A poll conducted in 2023 suggested that public opinion in Tunisia remained Russia-leaning.<sup>83</sup>

The channels used to propagate Russia's wartime narratives include means usually associated with public diplomacy: cooperation with diaspora organisations (the so-called "compatriot" organisations), cooperation and engagement with local media, and cooperation with businesses interested in Russia. In other contexts, Russia utilises the networks built by their local embassies to facilitate the type of business exchanges that result in sanctions evasion. This has been especially prevalent in Turkey and the UAE, with some failed attempts in Egypt. Tunisia's business engagements with Russia – while growing – do not have the scale

<sup>74</sup> According to an anonymous source cited by *Orient XXI*, Tunisia's diplomacy would have preferred to abstain or be absent from the vote to extract concessions from the West. See: Belkaid, "Maghreb-Ukraine (2)."

<sup>75</sup> "Jerandi reçoit l'ambassadeur de Russie en Tunisie [Jerandi receives Russian Ambassador to Tunisia]," *La Presse*, 5 March 2022.

<sup>76</sup> Interview with B1.

<sup>77</sup> Interview with B1.

<sup>78</sup> Benoît Delmas, "La Tunisie s'affranchit du club des démocraties [Tunisia frees itself from the club of democracies]" *Le Point*, 18 December 2022.

<sup>79</sup> Anton Shekhovtsov, "Fake election observation as Russia's tool of election interference: The Case of AFRIC," *European Platform for Democratic Elections*, 10 April 2020.

<sup>80</sup> "Diplomate tunisien : "Une visite prévue du Président Kaïs Saïed en Russie" [Tunisian diplomat: "A planned visit by President Kaïs Saïed to Russia]," *Andalou Agency*, 29 April 2022.

<sup>81</sup> "War in Ukraine: A food crisis in the MENA region?," *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, 10 March 2022.

<sup>82</sup> Belkaid, "Maghreb-Ukraine (2). La Tunisie..."

<sup>83</sup> "Au Moyen-Orient, l'image de la Russie est écornée mais la neutralité domine [In the Middle East, Russia's image is damaged but neutrality dominates]" *Courrier Internationale*, 24 February 2023.

or depth needed to be involved in Russia's sanctions evasion schemes.<sup>84</sup> There is also a "Russian House" branch active in Tunisia. Some of these are normal activities that any embassy is expected to carry out, but in the context of a multi-year war, they are turned into tools of strategic communication.

### *Tunisia's business engagements with Russia do not have the scale or depth needed to be involved in Russia's sanctions evasion schemes*

The Russian embassy in Tunis has been actively engaging the local media and promoting Russia's wartime narratives. For instance, an April interview with the Russian ambassador Alexander Zolotov reproduced Russia's propaganda about Ukraine, the invasion, and the role of international sanctions. With tourism being a strategic sector for the local economy, the Russian ambassador blamed the West for the diminished inflow of Russian tourists to Tunisia.<sup>85</sup> In a May interview, the ambassador put the blame on the West for the mounting troubles of the Tunisian economy and the access to grains in particular.<sup>86</sup>

Beyond the direct media engagements, there are several organisations in Tunisia that cooperate with the Russian embassy in public diplomacy. Chief among them is the Council of Russian Compatriot Organisations in Tunisia (KSORST). Created in 2019, this organisation regrouped several Russian cultural associations. On their website, KSORST lists the ombudsman of the Russian Federation, 'Russky Mir' (Russian world), and 'Rossotrudnichestvo' as partner organisations.<sup>87</sup> The broader sphere of 'culture' has remained a priority for Russia in Tunisia. One of the few publicised meetings between the Russian ambassador and the Tunisian

government took place in February 2023, when he met with the Minister of Culture of the country. The purpose of that meeting was to expand on the bilateral cultural exchange agenda. Present in the meeting was the head of the Tunisian branch of the "Russia House."<sup>88</sup>

KSORST plays a role in coordinating Moscow's core foreign policy goals with on-the-ground public messaging. On 18 March 2022, KSORST, the Russian embassy, and the "Russia House" staff, among other groups, held a rally to express support for

Russia's aggression in Ukraine. The rally featured the militaristic "Z" symbol.<sup>89</sup> Many public events involving these organisations frequently display St. George's ribbons, another symbol of Russian militarism. There is a degree of coordination between KSORST and the general "compatriot" structures of Russia's foreign policy. For instance, in 2023, the commemoration day of the Battle of Stalingrad was organised based on materials that were obtained from the Moscow city government and the Commission for the Preservation of Historical Memory under the World Coordinating Council of Russian Compatriots. The materials – made available online – omit the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in their version of the events leading up to the Battle of Stalingrad.<sup>90</sup> These contacts play a role in Russia's strategic communication and thus are monitored by Russia's foreign policy elite. One revealing example is that a member of the team of KSORST travelled to Russia in November 2022 to join an event that featured the head of Russia's foreign intelligence services, Sergey Naryshkin, as a speaker.<sup>91</sup>

The picture painted above suggests that Russia's lack of attention to Tunisia is relative. On the ground, diplomats and state-aligned

<sup>84</sup> Interview with C1.

<sup>85</sup> "Alexandre Zolotov, Ambassadeur de la Fédération de Russie en Tunisie: Notre volonté de continuer à contribuer à la sécurité alimentaire et énergétique de la Tunisie est immuable" [Alexandre Zolotov, Ambassador of the Russian Federation to Tunisia: Our desire to continue contributing to Tunisia's food and energy security is unchanging], *Leaders*, 6 April 2022.

<sup>86</sup> "Alexandre Zolotov, ambassadeur de la Russie en Tunisie: "Il n'y a aucun élément de discorde avec la Tunisie" [Alexander Zolotov, Russian Ambassador to Tunisia: "There is no element of discord with Tunisia"], *Realites*, 15 May 2022.

<sup>87</sup> Conseil Des Organisations Des Compatriotes Russes De Tunisie, "Главная" [Main page], KSORST, accessed in March 2023.

<sup>88</sup> "La ministre des affaires culturelles s'entretient avec l'ambassadeur de Russie en Tunisie" [The Minister of Cultural Affairs meets with the Russian Ambassador to Tunisia], *African Manager*, 2 February 2023.

<sup>89</sup> "Акция солидарности под лозунгами «За мир!», «За Россию!» [Action of solidarity under the slogans "For peace!", "For Russia!"], KSORST, 21 March 2022.

<sup>90</sup> "Международный исторический квиз «Великий Сталинград: наша история, наша память» [International historical quiz "Great Stalingrad: our history, our memory"], KSORST, 2 February 2023.

<sup>91</sup> "В Музее Победы пройдет Всероссийский форум «За Победу» [The Victory Museum will host the All-Russian Forum "For Victory"], *Gazeta Kultura*, 22 November 2022.

organisations actively promote Moscow's strategic narratives and do so in coordination with Moscow. In the context of Tunisia's ambiguous views of Ukraine and Russia, Moscow's strategic communications position Russia to benefit were a break between Tunis and the West to widen. In turn, Saied's authoritarian rule deals a blow to the consolidation of an emergent democratic regime, which is a goal on its own for Russia's revisionist foreign policy agenda.

*In the context of Tunisia's ambiguous views of Ukraine and Russia, Moscow's strategic communications position Russia to benefit were a break between Tunis and the West to widen*

## 4. SANCTIONS EVASION AND MARKET SUBSTITUTION: THE CASE OF INDIA

Since the end of the Cold War, India has emerged as a pivotal actor in Asia and a growing partner of the West. New Delhi has developed close relations with France, Israel, and the US that were absent in previous decades. India is one of the largest non-EU and non-G7 commercial partners of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. However, India's partnership with the West has its limits. On the one hand, New Delhi is seen in the West as a key partner in balancing a rising China. In 1962, India and China fought a short war over the disputed Aksai Chin region (which saw an escalation in 2020). Together with Australia, Japan, and the US, India is part of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue group (Quad). India has also been an active member of the Commonwealth of Nations since gaining independence. On the other hand, animosity with China and partnership with the West are not a given. China and India are part of the BRICS country grouping and used to be active in the trilateral Russia-India-China (RIC) format. India is also a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), a security exchange forum that includes China and Russia. Good relations with the West are relatively recent, while

divergence on core normative issues remains.<sup>92</sup> Today, India positions itself as a rising power of the Global South that, nonetheless, maintains proximity to the Global North through its enduring links with the West.

Since gaining independence in 1947, India has regarded Moscow as a potential partner to balance against China, Pakistan, and the US. During the Cold War, this led to a close partnership with the Soviet Union, which was a source of military cooperation and developmental assistance. The high point in Cold War-era relations came during the 1971 war when Soviet submarines deterred the US from intervening in that conflict. The episode sealed Moscow as India's dependable partner, and the Soviet Indian Amity Treaty was signed shortly thereafter.<sup>93</sup> The Soviet collapse made Russia's leadership regard the relationship with India as a Cold War legacy and a hindrance when engaging the rest of South Asia.<sup>94</sup> Closer ties resumed especially after the 1994 Moscow Declaration on the Protection of the Interests of Pluralistic States, in which both countries endorsed each other's respective policies in Chechnya and Kashmir.<sup>95</sup> By the middle of the decade, Russian policymakers would regard India – together with China – as a necessary partner to balance the leading powers of Eurasia against the West. This strategic notion would dominate the thinking behind Moscow's India policy for years to come.<sup>96</sup>

Since the rapprochement of the mid-1990s, trade and investment grew, the cooperation agenda expanded, and the modes of engagement gained multilateral and regional dimensions (the SCO, BRICS, and RIC). Military cooperation has been particularly important. India is the only large country in the world that depends on the international market to equip its armed forces, with Russia being the largest supplier for decades, engaging in transfers,

<sup>92</sup> Nuclear proliferation and new understandings of sovereignty (i.e., responsibility to protect) are two issues that stand out.

<sup>93</sup> Nandan Unnikrishnan, "[1971: When Delhi and Moscow came together](#)," *Observer Research Foundation*, 16 August 2021.

<sup>94</sup> Jyotsna Bakshi, *Russia and India: from ideology to geopolitics, 1947-1998* (Dev Publication, 1999), 214-215.

<sup>95</sup> Bakshi, *Russia and India*, 239-240.

<sup>96</sup> This notion is sometimes called the Primakov Doctrine, named after Russia's second Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov.

co-production, and co-development of defence systems. The relationship gained more scope after Narendra Modi had been elected prime minister in 2014. He cultivated a close relationship with Putin and came to regard him as a dependable counterpart. For Moscow, India has gone from an aid beneficiary to a full-fledged partner. In turn, New Delhi appreciates that Russia – an established great power and member of the nuclear club – recognises India as a rising power.<sup>97</sup> In addition, since the new standoff with China began in 2020 at the Himalayas, New Delhi wishes to keep Moscow neutral or on its side in case of an escalation there.<sup>98</sup>

Prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Lavrov had reassured his Indian counterparts that no ‘re-invasion’ would take place. Thus, India’s leadership was taken by surprise on 24 February.<sup>99</sup> What followed was India scrambling to evacuate nearly thirty thousand of its citizens – mostly students – from Ukraine, many of whom were trapped close to the area of active hostilities. Despite this setback, India did not demote its strategic relationship with Russia. Although some Indian policy experts argued that India should diminish its relations with Moscow, there was consensus among the leadership that there should be no pivot away from their traditional partner. Particularly important was the rapport between Modi and Putin. Despite the ‘reprimand’ at the SCO summit in September (when Modi told Putin

*Modi ultimately believes in Putin’s rationality, including with regards to the war*

during a panel that “now is not the time for war”)<sup>100</sup> and his stated desire for the war to end, the prime minister ultimately believes in Putin’s rationality, including with regards to the war.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>97</sup> Interview with A2.

<sup>98</sup> Interview with A2 and A4. See also Menon & Rumer, “Russia and India”.

<sup>99</sup> Indian intelligence services do not count with a ‘Eastern Europe’ department but according to a source, they were not taken by surprise by the full-scale war. Interview with A5.

<sup>100</sup> Rishabh Pratap, Larry Register, and Heather Chen, “[Indian leader Narendra Modi tells Putin: Now is not the time for war](#),” *CNN*, 17 September 2022.

<sup>101</sup> Interview with A4.

India has preserved its strategic partnership with Russia. India’s investment in good relations with Russia and the West raised the possibility of New Delhi becoming a credible mediator in the war.<sup>102</sup> Yet, its policymakers have stressed that the goal in maintaining their country’s strategic partnership with Russia is to maximise India’s autonomy on the international scene. In

*Policymakers have stressed that the goal in maintaining their country’s strategic partnership with Russia is to maximise India’s autonomy on the international scene*

addition, there is little confidence that India – despite its close relations with Russia – could change Moscow’s views.<sup>103</sup> Hence, there has been little willingness in New Delhi to alter the course of its relationship with Russia according to all relevant sources interviewed for this report. Several reasons stand out, and many of them are connected to Russia’s move of sanctions evasion and market substitution. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine brought attention to India’s disposition to expand its trade with Russia, but Russia’s initiative should not be overlooked either.

The commodities discount that Russia introduced after February 2022 has been received by many countries as the opportunity to expand or protect their market share. India’s approach was partly informed by these calculations.<sup>104</sup> By the end of 2022, Russia had gone from having a negligible presence in the Indian oil market to becoming the country’s third largest supplier.<sup>105</sup> As a result, the Indian government saved several billion US dollars (compared to the average crude oil barrel purchased in the same period a year prior).<sup>106</sup> The decision to buy Russian oil has been criticised by Ukraine as an act that enables Russia’s war efforts.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>102</sup> “[German Chancellor Olaf Scholz arrives in India, may ask PM Modi to mediate on Russia-Ukraine war](#),” *Livemint*, 25 February 2023.

<sup>103</sup> Interview with A4.

<sup>104</sup> Interview with A1.

<sup>105</sup> “[Discounts make Russia third-largest oil supplier to India](#),” *Al Jazeera*, 17 January 2023.

<sup>106</sup> Niharika Sharma, “[How much money did India save in a year by buying Russian fuel?](#),” *Quartz*, 24 February 2023.

<sup>107</sup> Kallol Bhattacharjee, “[India is buying Ukrainian blood by purchasing Russian crude oil: Ukraine Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba](#),” *The Hindu*, 17 August 2022.

The US has signalled acquiescence to New Delhi's policy of purchasing Russian crude "as long as [India does not] use [Western insurances, financing, and maritime services] and they find other services."<sup>108</sup> In March 2023, it was reported that the Indian government will ensure that there would be no breaches on Russia oil sanctions.<sup>109</sup>

*By the end of 2022, Russia had gone from having a negligible presence in the Indian oil market to becoming the country's third largest supplier*

Russia has also reached out to India for imports. On 11 May 2022, it was reported that Russian importers had sought contacts with their potential Indian counterparts.<sup>110</sup> On 29 November 2022, *Reuters* revealed that Russia had handed to the Indian government a list of 500 goods that Moscow would like to import from India (e.g., finished consumer goods, intermediate goods, and raw materials).<sup>111</sup> India's energy purchases widened India's trade deficit in Russia's favour to the tune of billions.<sup>112</sup> Yet, entering the Russian market has not been straightforward. Under exploration since March 2022, the Rupee-Rouble trade mechanism has only been officially operating since February 2023. Meanwhile, Indian banks and financial institutions are cautious about using this mechanism because of potential secondary sanctions.<sup>113</sup>

Russia is actively involved in facilitating these exchanges also at the business-to-business level. For example, Sergey Cheremin, the head of external relations for the Moscow

city government, leads the Business Council for Cooperation with India, an organisation that lists the Russian embassy in New Delhi as a partner and that has connections to the TPPRF.<sup>114</sup> The Business Council organises trade fairs and events directed at the Indian and Russian business communities and explains how to overcome trade barriers.<sup>115</sup> These events do not necessarily feature the largest Indian companies. In fact, small and medium-sized businesses are of particular interest to Russian importers as they may be less exposed to the West and thus less concerned about secondary sanctions. After an initial worry, Indian businesses renewed trade with Russian counterparts.<sup>116</sup>

Whereas energy has been the key factor in the bilateral relationship since 2022, arms trade continues to play a role. India sees itself as bound to Russia for arms, and many speak of 'path dependency'.<sup>117</sup> While there is goodwill from Indian buyers towards Russian arms

*While there is goodwill from Indian buyers towards Russian arms suppliers, the long-term trend has been of gradual substitution of Russian imports with Indian-made systems*

suppliers, the long-term trend has been of gradual substitution of Russian imports with Indian-made systems.<sup>118</sup> According to estimates by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Russia remains India's largest foreign arms supplier, but transfers dropped by 19% in 2018-22 against 2012-17.<sup>119</sup> The "Make in India" policy has pushed the relationship from one of provider-customer to one of co-production and gradual substitution. The full-scale war did not start this dynamic but accelerated it.<sup>120</sup> Moreover, Western firms have

<sup>108</sup> Mimansa Verma, "[Yellen is happy for India to buy as much Russian oil as it wants, but there's a caveat](#)," *Quartz*, 14 November 2022.

<sup>109</sup> Ruchi Bhatia and Adrija Chatterjee, "[India to Ensure No Breach on Russia Oil Purchase Sanctions](#)," *Bloomberg*, 12 March 2023.

<sup>110</sup> "[Russian importers seek deals with India's smaller firms to sidestep sanctions](#)," *The Economic Times*, 11 May 2022.

<sup>111</sup> Mimansa Verma, "[Russian industries, hit by sanctions, are now shopping in India](#)," *Quartz*, 1 December 2022.

<sup>112</sup> An estimate puts the figure at 30 billion US dollars. See: Shreya Nandi, "[1 year of Ukraine war: Cheaper crude from Russia pushes India's import bill](#)," *Business Standard*, 23 February 2023.

<sup>113</sup> "[Need to invest something new, says Russian envoy on rupee-rouble mechanism bump](#)," *Hindustan Times*, 6 February 2023.

<sup>114</sup> The Vice President of the Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry is a board member of the Business Council for Cooperation with India.

<sup>115</sup> "[About](#)," Business Council for Cooperation with India, accessed in March 2023.

<sup>116</sup> "Russian importers seek deals with India."

<sup>117</sup> Spenser A. Warren, Sumit Ganguly, "India–Russia Relations after Ukraine," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 62 no. 5-6 (October 2022): 811–837.

<sup>118</sup> Interview with A3.

<sup>119</sup> Pieter D. Wezeman, Justine Gadon, and Siemon T. Wezeman, "[Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2022](#)," *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, March 2023.

<sup>120</sup> Warren et al., "India–Russia Relations," 818–819.

been targeting the Indian market to replace Russian suppliers.<sup>121</sup>

India's strategic choice of an 'uncommitted' policy vis-à-vis Russia's aggression opened an opportunity for Moscow to make its 'move' for evading sanctions and substituting markets through India. The outcome is that Russia undermines the enforcement of international norms. For India, Russia's business offer is a double-edged sword. Due to the volume of trade, the short-term economic gains have been large for the Indian government. But the reputational costs of dealing with Russia have already resulted in a wedge between India and the West. India – despite its close engagements with Russia – does not believe that it can change Russia's mind on the war.

## 5. REGIME SHELTERING: THE CASE OF MYANMAR

In the East Asian context, Myanmar is a relatively small country (with the lowest population density in the region), as well as a relatively underdeveloped one. Its security needs, however, are big as it holds within its borders the world's longest civil war. De facto, the country is divided between the territory held by the central government – usually led by the military (the Tatmadaw) and representing the Bamar ethnic majority – and the territory held by the different ethnic militias. Since Myanmar's independence in 1948, the central government has collaborated with some of these militias, but the insurgency has often pitted them one against the other. The central government – especially during the period of Tatmadaw rule from 1962-2011 – has been suspicious of any international contacts, lest they reach out to the insurgency.

Throughout the Cold War, Myanmar's authoritarian rulers opted for isolation, building no significant relations with either the Soviet Union or the United States. Only the economic rise of China would create a partnership with Beijing, albeit one with many limitations. A short-lived transition to democracy that began in 2011 saw a marked improvement in relations with the West:

<sup>121</sup> Graham Lanktree, "UK arms firms spy chance to wean India off Russia," *POLITICO*, 13 February 2023.

sanctions were lifted, and the cooperation agenda widened. In Europe, diplomatic relations were established for the first time with Estonia, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxemburg, Malta, and the Holy See. In 2013, Estonia activated its parliamentary diplomacy with the prospect of widening bilateral cooperation on public services.<sup>122</sup> Yet, the army remained a powerful actor in Myanmar's politics, with a quarter of all seats in the parliament reserved exclusively for the army's appointees, a feature codified in the army-drafted 2008 Constitution.<sup>123</sup>

Despite some hopeful prospects, Western-alignment and civilian rule proved to be short-lived. The Rohingya genocide of 2017 soured relations between Myanmar's civilian authorities and their Western counterparts.<sup>124</sup> The 2021 Tatmadaw coup d'état ended both the rapprochement with the West and the decade of civilian rule. The coup followed allegations of irregularities during the 2020 election: the Tatmadaw claimed the election was fraudulent despite the international observers stressing its rigour.<sup>125</sup> Since then, multiple foreign governments and international organisations have called to end the flows of funds and arms to the military and reintroduced sanctions. The Tatmadaw has been at war with certain ethnic militias and an anti-putsch urban resistance in the Bamar-majority region of the country since 2021.

Russia-Myanmar relations have changed along with the evolution of the ruling power of the country. Today, this bilateral relationship stands out because – although long-lasting – it does not build on a close Cold War partnership (to the same extent that the one with India does). Today, the relationship implies close contact in sensitive sectors (unlike in Tunisia). In fact,

<sup>122</sup> "Mihkelson: Eestil on hea võimalus pakkuda Myanmarile siinseid lahendusi [Mihkelson: Estonia has a good opportunity to offer solutions here to Myanmar]," Riigikogu, 16 November 2013.

<sup>123</sup> "Why does military still keep 25% of the seats Myanmar parliament?," *BBC*, 1 February 2016.

<sup>124</sup> For example: "Estonian MEP: EU must put pressure on Myanmar to end atrocities against Rohingyas," *Baltic Times*, 19 September 2019.

<sup>125</sup> The elections were internationally considered to have been fair. The real causes of the coup are not known exactly. Some known factors at play include institutional fallout, cultural elements, and personal conflict among leading elites. See: Michał Lubina, "Myanmar one year after the coup. Interview with Professor Michał Lubina," *Security and Defence Quarterly*, Vol. 38, no. 2 (2022): 86–93.



few students from Myanmar go to Russia, and there are no known Bamar-language Russia-controlled media.<sup>126</sup> Generally, expertise on Myanmar is poor in Russia.<sup>127</sup> Yet, seeking to hedge against Chinese domination, the Tatmadaw placed many of its ambitions on cooperation with post-Soviet Russia. Thus, the military made Moscow its second-largest arms supplier since the early 2000s, as well as a destination for military officers to receive further training.

*Seeking to hedge against Chinese domination, the Tatmadaw placed many of its ambitions on cooperation with post-Soviet Russia*

Despite good relations with the civilian government, Russia welcomed the suspension of democracy in Myanmar. Good military-to-military relations – even after the 2017 genocide – meant that Moscow was well-positioned to engage the rising junta. Moreover, the fall of another emerging democratic regime (like in Tunisia) advances Russia's confrontation with the liberal international order. Consequently, the bilateral agenda expanded in 2021 to include further arms deliveries, cooperation in culture, education, tourism, and investment in energy and healthcare.<sup>128</sup> Still, Moscow regarded the junta as a low-priority client: high-level meetings had remained asymmetrical until mid-2022.<sup>129</sup> However, Moscow's approach is not without risks. Russia took a gamble when it offered support for the junta in 2021. On the one hand, if the junta manages to consolidate power, Moscow will benefit from a close partner in Southeast Asia and ASEAN and a relatively large arms market. On the other hand, if the junta is ousted, Russia will be seen as a facilitator of an illegitimate government and lose its clout in the country.<sup>130</sup>

<sup>126</sup> In 2014 there was an agreement signed between Yangon University and the "Russky Mir" foundation. There is no "Russkiy Dom" in Myanmar.

<sup>127</sup> The expertise may have also declined recently due to the loss of human capital following the flight of hundreds of thousands of Russians in 2022. Interview with Michał Lubina, 22 February 2023.

<sup>128</sup> "A Timeline of Russia's Relations With Myanmar Junta Since the Coup," *The Irrawaddy*, 15 February 2023.

<sup>129</sup> Interview with Michał Lubina.

<sup>130</sup> Ivan U. Klyszcz, "Russia's Myanmar Gambit," *Riddle*, 6 May 2021.

Since 2022 and despite the mounting costs of the war, Russia has remained committed to sheltering the junta. This enduring commitment meant that the relationship changed little in the past year. Under the junta, Myanmar was the only country in Asia expressing unqualified support for Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.<sup>131</sup> This response came out of loyalty to their Russian patron and deference to Moscow's lead on the matter. Generally, the junta cares little about the outside world and lacks the necessary external intelligence apparatus.<sup>132</sup> Yet, the war did bring some change to the relationship: increasingly isolated, Russia revised its engagements with the junta and assigned them some additional value. Symbolic of this was Putin meeting coup leader Gen Hlaing for the first time only on 7 September 2022.<sup>133</sup> Since 24 February 2022, the bilateral agenda expanded the array of cooperation items to include the joint development of financial instruments for sanctions evasion, rouble-kyat payments, and nuclear energy.<sup>134</sup>

*Since 24 February 2022, the bilateral agenda expanded to include the joint development of financial instruments for sanctions evasion, rouble-kyat payments, and nuclear energy*

Despite the costs of the full-scale war, Russia continues to shelter the junta in a variety of ways. Diplomatically, support has been limited to Russia blocking UN resolutions that condemn the junta. At the UN, Russia is also seen as an obstacle to deciding who will represent Myanmar at the General Assembly.<sup>135</sup> Yet, the substance of Russia's support remains in the military sphere. Due to the opacity of both regimes, it is difficult to have a reliable picture of arms sales and transfers between the two

<sup>131</sup> Myanmar's UN representative was appointed by the civilian government.

<sup>132</sup> Interview with Michał Lubina. See: Andrew Selth, *Secrets and Power in Myanmar: Intelligence and the Fall of General Khin Nyunt* (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019).

<sup>133</sup> In April 2022, Tatarstan's president Rustam Minnikhanov visited the country. Tatarstan usually serves as a conduit for Russian investment under the guise of sub-national international initiative or 'paradiplomacy'.

<sup>134</sup> "A Timeline of Russia's Relations with the Myanmar Junta"

<sup>135</sup> Thompson Chau and Dominic Oo, "The worry is Russia': UN delays Myanmar representation decision," *Al Jazeera*, 5 December 2022.

in the last few years. Generally, the Tatmadaw are interested in procuring Russian weapons to help them wage the decades-long civil war and, since the coup, quelling the anti-putsch urban resistance; Russian arms have been widely deployed in both military campaigns, even in 2022.<sup>136</sup> For instance, it has been reported that in 2022 Russia delivered the Su-30 jets that Myanmar had bought in 2018.<sup>137</sup> Since the putsch, the Tatmadaw have sought Russia to expand their role and provide direct “anti-terrorism” support. In particular, the junta is interested in Russia’s know-how in crushing the urban resistance in the Bamar heartland.<sup>138</sup> On 30 November, the Russian armed forces travelled to Naypyidaw to attend the Russia-Myanmar “Anti-Terrorism Committee,” chaired by the junta’s top officials. While the agenda of the meeting was not publicised, “anti-terrorism” was frequently invoked by Russia and the junta to refer to anti-insurgency, such as in Chechnya or Syria.<sup>139</sup>

*The military is the driving force behind proliferation, while the involvement of North Korea and Russia raise the question of whether the programme is meant to serve as a bargaining chip*

Aside from arms and know-how, nuclear energy is part of Russia’s offer to the junta. Over the last two decades, the Tatmadaw has sought to gain nuclear capabilities by procuring a nuclear power plant from Russia. Despite a stated peaceful use, the military is the driving force behind the proliferation. Moreover, the involvement of North Korea and Russia raises the question of whether the programme is meant to serve as a bargaining chip in regional and international negotiations.<sup>140</sup> After two decades of failed plans, in 2022, new agreements were signed between Russia and the Tatmadaw. On 6 February 2023, Russia’s state-owned nuclear

company Rosatom, signed a nuclear energy cooperation agreement with Naypyidaw, which the opposition called a step forward towards the acquisition of nuclear weapons.<sup>141</sup>

Finally, Russia has assisted the junta in its communications. While Russian media is relatively uninterested in Myanmar, they have propagated some of the junta’s messaging. For instance, Russia’s diplomacy and media channels hinted at the anti-putsch resistance being foreign-backed.<sup>142</sup> They also referred to the international media coverage of the genocide and the coup d’état as an information campaign against the country.<sup>143</sup> Finally, some Russian academics at state institutions echoed the junta by putting into question the legitimacy of the results of the 2020 elections.<sup>144</sup>

In exchange for its sheltering efforts, Russia receives a few assets from the junta. The Tatmadaw have advocated for Russia in ASEAN and used its veto power to prevent Ukraine’s President Zelenskyy from delivering a video statement ahead of the annual summit in 2022.<sup>145</sup> Furthermore, the Tatmadaw’s continued arms procurement potential became more valuable to Moscow as other Southeast Asian markets disinvested from Russia.<sup>146</sup> Finally, engagement with the junta adds to Russia’s claims that it is not isolated despite the Western sanctions. If the junta manages to cling to power, Russia will benefit from being its most significant foreign patron.

In the context of the Rohingya genocide and the putsch, Russia’s support undermines regional security and international norms. Russia’s dissemination of nuclear technology has also raised concerns given the past allegations of

<sup>136</sup> Alena Zhabina, “Will Russian aid for Myanmar give Moscow an Asian foothold?,” *Deutsche Welle*, 8 February 2023.

<sup>137</sup> “Myanmar Takes Delivery of Russian Sukhoi Su-30 Jets: Monitor,” *The Defense Post*, 4 November 2022.

<sup>138</sup> Interview with Michał Lubina.

<sup>139</sup> “Top Russian General Meets with Myanmar Junta Chief,” *The Irrawaddy*, 1 December 2022.

<sup>140</sup> Andrew Selth, “Burma’s nuclear program: domestic dream or regional nightmare?,” *AQ: Journal of Contemporary Analysis* (2004): 14-40; “Myanmar Junta’s Nuclear Ambition Timeline,” *The Irrawaddy*, 6 October 2022.

<sup>141</sup> “Myanmar junta opens ‘nuclear information center’ in Yangon with Russia’s Rosatom,” *Radio Free Asia*, 8 February 2023.

<sup>142</sup> “Domestic situation in Myanmar should be settled without external meddling, Putin says,” *TASS*, 1 December 2021.

<sup>143</sup> Petr Akopov, “Почему Россия не осуждает взявших власть генералов [Why Russia does not condemn the generals who took power],” *RIA Novosti*, 2 February 2021.

<sup>144</sup> Ksenya Yefremova, “Военный переворот в Мьянме: причины и последствия [Military coup in Myanmar: causes and consequences],” *Russian International Affairs Council*, 1 February 2021.

<sup>145</sup> “Myanmar Junta in Spotlight After Zelensky Barred from ASEAN Summit,” *The Irrawaddy*, 11 November 2022.

<sup>146</sup> Myriam Boulianne, “In Southeast Asia, buying Russian weapons has become ‘a risky bet,’” *Le Monde*, 30 June 2022.

the military harbouring an interest in nuclear arms.<sup>147</sup> The Tatmadaw's fight for power has proceeded with no regard for human rights. Russia's contempt for human rights was also undeniable in its Myanmar engagements. In a telling quote by a Russian diplomat at the UN, this was put in evidence: "Attempts to *focus solely on the human rights aspect* of recent events in [Myanmar], including the declaration of a state of emergency [imposed by the junta], are unreasonable and politically motivated."<sup>148</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The evidence presented by this report suggests that relations between Russia and the Global South changed in 2022 and became more high-stakes for the latter. The countries of the Global South responded to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine by prioritising their economic and security needs, while avoiding alienating their Western partners. The cases of India, Myanmar, and Tunisia show how different countries seek to maximise their security according to their needs by adjusting their response to the war. A determinant factor in their response is their relationship with Russia, the West, and Ukraine.

**Russia's strategic partners** avoided distancing themselves from Moscow by not complying fully with international sanctions, moderating their criticism of the war, or abstaining at the UNSC votes. They have also sought not to alienate the West by not offering loans to Moscow nor providing Russia with military support (with Iran and North Korea being two exceptions). Russia's strategic partners might also hesitate about their ability to change Russia's behaviour in the war, despite their mutual investment. The case of India suggests that Russia's strategic partners can only look after their own interests while moderating the reputational damage caused by continued relations with Russia. Whereas they might not be making common cause with Russia, Moscow capitalises on their balancing act.

**Russia's client states** might look at the full-scale invasion of Ukraine as an opportunity

to adjust their relationship with Moscow, but in no case has there been a breakdown. In most cases, either Russia is too involved to let them go, or they count on Russian support for their domestic or international security needs. Moreover, a genuine endorsement of Moscow's vision of the war cannot be dismissed. As explored in Myanmar's case, the junta benefits from Moscow's support while Moscow harbours long-term hopes for the junta's success. Namely, Russia might wish Myanmar would become a larger arms export market. In addition, the failure of Myanmar's nascent democracy is a goal on its own in Russia's revisionist ambitions.

**Russia's superficial partners** might condemn Russia's war but count on future opportunities to engage the country in some areas. Tunisia's case shows that a close old partner of the West, even a member of the Ramstein group, can keep the door open to cooperation with Russia. While Moscow might struggle to turn this opportunity into a true leverage vis-à-vis the West, it helps Russia to avoid full isolation.

As this report demonstrates, the fact that Moscow no longer is a superpower status does not impede it from pursuing its interests abroad and bringing its war with Ukraine and its confrontation with the West to the entire globe. Its diplomacy, public outreach, and economic relations must be all understood in the context of Russia's aggression against Ukraine and its challenge to the world order. This report highlights three manoeuvres that Moscow carries out in the Global South: strategic communications, sanctions evasion and market substitution, and regime sheltering.

Russia's diplomacy, state agencies (e.g., the "Russia House"), international media, and "compatriot" organisations abroad all promote its strategic narratives about the war, Ukraine, and Russia itself. These narratives may vary and be deployed inconsistently, but their aim is to move public opinion in favour of Russia's goals. The case of Tunisia shows how they operate in the open even in a state that formally supports Ukraine. Swaying public opinion by these means allows Moscow to accomplish geostrategic goals on the cheap. While their effectiveness is hard to gauge, these narratives are in competition with Western messaging.

<sup>147</sup> Andrew Selth, "Burma's Nuclear Program."

<sup>148</sup> "Russia opposes attempts to politicize human rights issues - mission to UN," TASS, 27 February 2021.

Since 2014, Russia has been actively creating channels to evade sanctions and maintain its international trade. In 2022, Moscow invested considerable resources and attention to this goal, mobilising its business community and diplomacy, as well as exploring new vessels such as cryptocurrencies. Crude oil has stood out because of the large sums of money involved (as the case of India illustrates). But other commodities and goods such as cryptocurrencies, gold, and diamonds should also be monitored. Searching for new markets does not go against international law, but it is part of Russia's goal of undermining international sanctions.

Russia's close partnerships with the regimes marginalised by the international community are important. Russia contributes to their viability and survival, which ensures their continued *modus operandi*. As the case of Myanmar shows, this support has multiple aspects. Albeit concentrated in the defence and security space, other areas such as sanctions evasion, energy, or even nuclear dissemination are involved. In addition, the survival of these isolated regimes contributes to Russia's broader revisionist agenda against democratic governance. Russia's support is motivated not only by geostrategic reasons but also by undermining international norms.

Countering Russia's manoeuvres in the Global South will help put pressure on Moscow and its aggressive foreign policy. Ultimately, Russia's aggression against Ukraine, confrontation with the West, and foreign policy in the Global South are all connected by Moscow's aggressiveness on the international scene. To respond, this report recommends the following:

- **Have the right expectations.** A comprehensive global consensus on the war is probably out of reach. The countries of the Global South engage Russia for a variety of reasons, including some sensitive areas of national security. These countries have been reticent to abandon Moscow in response to the war, and they likely cannot be persuaded to change their position through messaging or, worse, lecturing. Skilful and future-oriented diplomacy is needed.
- **Amplify Ukraine's message.** There is only so much messaging can accomplish

on its own, but countering Russia's strategic communications will strengthen international norms and public support for them. Currently, perceptions of the war stem from a lack of knowledge about Ukraine – a vacuum that Russia actively seeks to fill with its wartime propaganda. Ukrainian diplomacy is working to address this gap, but coordinating messaging and public diplomacy with Western partners can multiply the reach of Kyiv's message.

- **Lend diplomatic networks to Ukraine.** No talks or negotiations about Ukraine should be made without Ukraine on the table, and this includes the Global South. Many Western countries have robust diplomatic networks among politicians and elites in certain parts of the Global South. Where possible and relevant, Western diplomacy in the Global South must be proactive in including its Ukrainian counterparts when engaging decision-makers, especially in topics such as grains, fertilisers, reconstruction investment in Ukraine, and sanctions compliance.
- **The Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) should not forget about Russia.** This effort was conceived as an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), but the PGII should also contemplate those niches on which Russia has concentrated in the Global South. Grains and fertilisers can be added as priorities for investment promotion. A viable offer to these countries in grains and fertilisers will diminish the attractiveness of Russia, especially for those superficial partners who are ambivalent towards maintaining relations with Moscow or not. This recommendation also applies to the EU's Global Gateway and the United Kingdom's British Investment Partnerships.
- **Enforce sanctions but do not force countries to choose sides.** The countries of the Global South want to avoid a new Cold War. The current moment presents challenges for their development and security. In many cases, they cannot afford to lose Moscow as a partner, at least in some areas. Pressuring them into abandoning Moscow can backfire, especially when nothing else has been

offered as an alternative (see the previous recommendation). At the same time, however, it must be made clear that facilitating Russia's sanctions evasion, or any other element of Russia's war effort, is inadmissible. The same applies to the arrest warrants (at the time of writing) issued by the International Criminal Court for Putin and the presidential commissioner for children's rights, Maria Lvova-Belova.

- **Do not abandon democracy promotion, rethink it.** The misuse of this policy in previous decades to justify military interventions has given democracy

promotion a negative reputation. However, the cause is valuable on its own and it is intertwined with broader security concerns. Russia – together with China – is pursuing an international revisionist agenda, one that targets democracy as the paramount legitimate form of government. Disabling Moscow's ability to shelter autocratic regimes – through sanctions and traditional diplomacy – will undermine the Kremlin's revisionist agenda. Similarly, helping emerging democracies to consolidate will make it harder for Moscow to advance its goal of making autocracy a legitimate form of government.

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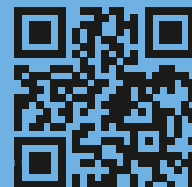
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