

## Introduction

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Europe and Russia have long measured themselves against one another, both as strategic challenges and cultural mirrors. For centuries – from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, across the yawning steppes of Ukraine – every crisis, clash, and flashpoint reflects this dynamic: a Europe and a Russia at once at odds and deeply entwined, an alterity without which the civilisational self could not arise. Russia had its Slavophiles and Westernisers, both wrestling with what its relationship with Europe should be. Today, the neo-Slavophiles, revisionists, and imperialists have come to dominate, shaping the situation as it stands in 2026. This coincides with a moment in post-Cold War history when both the European security architecture and the international system are more unstable than at any point in the past three decades.

Russia's sustained pressure on, and attempts to dismantle, the post-Cold War security architecture in Europe have come to fruition. The war against Ukraine – as acknowledged by Russia – is far more than a regional conflict: it is a war against NATO, against Europe, against the West and what it represents. The rules of the so-called rules-based world order are not treated as universal norms but as peculiarities of a Europe and a West that Russia regards as in decline. Through coercion and threats of violence, Russia insists that its borders and spheres of influence remain negotiable by force, rather than subject to any rules it considers external and illegitimate. Understanding and analysing contemporary European security requires internalising this axiom: Russia can and will reject these ideational constraints. A unified, coherent deterrent posture and sober strategic foresight remain the continent's primary guarantees of peace and prosperity. Failure to maintain either carries a tragic human cost, as demonstrated by five years of full-scale war in Ukraine.

Therefore, the *Conference on Russia Papers 2026* poses the following questions: What threat does Russia pose to Europe? How can Europe respond? What are Russia's ambitions, and how is it seeking to realise them? What second-order effects arise from Russia's aggressive actions? This

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volume engages with these questions through three analytical lenses, framing a paradigm of contemporary European security.

The first of these focuses on the European locus of the threat emanating from Russia, as well as the potential structuration of European autonomy and agency. It examines the challenge posed by Russia's attempts to export its governance model, how Russia has historically undermined European strategic agency, and what the EU can do to reinforce it. It considers how Europe might pursue strategic autonomy, France's efforts to position itself within these dynamics, and how Ukraine might collaborate with European countries for the repatriation of its citizens. Together, these discussions underscore that Russia remains inimical to Europe and that the continent must act, though the precise measures required remain subject to debate.

The second thematic section examines the Russian worldview, its idealised vision of the international system, and the specific actions and countermeasures undertaken by the Federation. It considers Russian conceptions of multipolarity, the influence of Russian strategic culture on its willingness to escalate and negotiate, its use of lawfare as a form of deterrence, varied deployments of hybrid and informational warfare, and its readiness to engage in open combat. Together, these analyses provide both an explanatory framework for, and a hypothetical toolkit of, Russian actions in the coming years.

The final section examines the specificities and secondary effects on European security arising from the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It addresses Russian perspectives on deterrence, maritime strategy, the lessons the war in Ukraine offers to non-state actors, and Russia's use of para-statal military forces as instruments of pressure on Europe. Together, these discussions demonstrate that Russia's *modus operandi* and strategies will produce long-reaching consequences, extending beyond Europe and beyond the immediate dynamics between Europe and Russia.

This work would not have been possible without the dedication of each contributing author and the entire editorial team. The arguments and perspectives presented in these chapters are solely those of the authors and do not represent the position of the Baltic Defence College. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the perspectives and discussions in this volume provoke critical reflection, inspire creative solutions, and encourage sober consideration of the future – an imperative for Europe, the Transatlantic Alliance, and beyond.