



# 24/2

The Russian attack on Ukraine  
a turning point in history



# Foreword

The Russian Federation's attack on Ukraine last year has far-reaching consequences for European security and global stability. This war is not merely Ukraine's struggle. It is also our struggle.

Parallels can be drawn between the significance of the invasion on 24 February 2022 (24/2 for short) and that of other historical watersheds. German chancellor Olaf Scholz rightfully referred to the development as a 'Zeitenwende'.

The outcome of the war in Ukraine is crucial to our future security and welfare. This outcome will depend on Ukraine's and the Russian Federation's willingness to fight and the international community's willingness to offer Ukraine continued support and assistance.

We should consider the possibility that the war will be a protracted affair and that we will have to contend with the consequences of 24/2 for decades. The stakes are high. This publication provides an insight into the significance of the war to the world and to the Netherlands, both now and in the future.

The Netherlands supports Ukraine in various ways. The General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) and the Netherlands Defence Intelligence and Security Service (MIVD) are making a valuable contribution to this support, for example by helping Ukraine to withstand Russian cyber attacks on critical infrastructure and energy supplies. We are proud of this contribution and we are proud of our people, who protect that which we hold dear.

Erik Akerboom (director-general of AIVD) and Major General Jan Swillens (director of MIVD)



# Introduction

The anti-Western aggression displayed by the Russian Federation poses a grave threat to European and global security, the international rule of law and the democratic rule of law in many countries. The capture of Crimea and the military occupation of part of the Donbas region in 2014 were precursors of the Russian Federation's ambitions in relation to Ukraine, and the major military invasion of the country on 24 February 2022 unleashed the largest war seen in Europe since the Second World War.

At present Ukraine is the primary target of Russian aggression. However, this war also has far-reaching consequences for Dutch and European security. Our open and democratic society is experiencing both direct and indirect economic, military, diplomatic and social consequences. Our sense of uncertainty for the future is being fuelled by rising energy costs, higher food prices, the spread of disinformation, espionage and the threat of nuclear war. International relations, particularly between the Russian Federation and the West, have not been this tense since the end of the Cold War. Drastic escalation is not inconceivable, and this is cause for serious concern.

AIVD and MIVD conduct joint investigations into the threat posed by the Russian state. We gather intelligence from sensitive operations using human sources and technology, on the basis of which the threat is identified and defined and action is taken where necessary to counter threats facing the Netherlands and Europe. The details of these analyses are only shared with a select group in order to protect the underlying operations.

This joint publication contributes to the formation of an informed impression of the war in Ukraine and its significance to the Netherlands, one year after the Russian Federation launched its large-scale invasion in 2022. In addition we seek to make our society more resilient by increasing awareness of the threat posed by the Russian state. This publication reflects the essence of our intelligence relating to that threat, in line with the increasing transparency that is appropriate for intelligence and security services in a democratic state under the rule of law, being open where possible and covert where necessary.

First of all we look back at the developments that have taken place since 24 February 2022. We describe the Russian Federation's perception of its role in the world and the actions it takes in pursuit of its goals, focusing thematically on various related elements such as the armed forces, cyber operations, influencing and espionage. In conclusion we highlight the impact on Dutch society from the perspective of the Netherlands intelligence and security services.

## Geopolitical dimension



Under the leadership of President Putin, the Russian Federation presents itself as a self-proclaimed great power that is entitled to shape the world order according to its own perception, primarily in the Russian near abroad but also beyond. Moscow resists a democratic world order in which countries control their own destiny and demands its own sphere of influence in which Russian political, economic, military and cultural interests are paramount. The Russian president is prepared to take major risks in order to command respect. President Putin's regime embarks upon military adventures, organises domestic repression, conducts hacking operations, liquidates enemies, stonewalls international organisations, attempts to sow dissent in the West, blackmails the West by threatening to cut gas supplies, escalates nuclear rhetoric and attempts to expand its influence on the world order.

With its invasion of Ukraine, Moscow is confronting Europe with the first major interstate war on European territory since the Second World War. This invasion demonstrates that President Putin is willing to use violence on a large scale against a sovereign state. This action violates the international rule of law and undermines European security, which is based on the agreement that boundaries can only be changed in mutual consultation between countries and that military aggression targeting neighbours is unacceptable. The large-scale invasion of 2022 is far more expansive than previous Russian military aggression targeting neighbouring countries, such as the actions taken against Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine since 2014.

In the perception of President Putin the war transcends the conflict in Ukraine. Moscow has considered itself to be embroiled in an existential conflict with the West for many years. The stagnation of the Russian military campaign in Ukraine, the West's hardened stance and increased unity, and Sweden's and Finland's desire to join NATO have reinforced Moscow's world view, in which the Russian Federation is surrounded by a hostile West.

Russian decision-making in the run-up to and during the war has been hampered by incorrect intelligence, presumptions, a lack of transparency and an overestimation of its strength. Based on this failed decision-making, the president constantly takes grave risks that endanger regional and global security, and this has culminated in the large-scale invasion of Ukraine. This invasion has demonstrated that the internal checks and balances that appeared to exist to a certain degree within the Russian regime have been severely weakened. Decisions are made exclusively by President Putin and a handful of his confidants, thereby exacerbating the unpredictability of Russian operations.

There is a gaping discrepancy between President Putin's geopolitical intentions and the military reality of the situation in Ukraine. As part of his battle against the West, the Russian president publicly states that his goal is to 'denazify' and 'demilitarise' Ukraine, although the precise definition of this goal is unclear to senior military personnel and policy-makers in Moscow. As a result Moscow no longer has a clear war strategy and the Russian war effort is unfolding on the basis of ad-hoc decisions made by President Putin.

## War weakens Russian regional influence

Moscow is concerned about the state of its relationship with China. During the summit meeting between President Putin and President Xi on the eve of the Winter Olympics in February 2022, both countries publicly described this relationship as unique in world history, forming the foundation for a new world order. In reality the war in Ukraine has further weakened the Russian Federation's position in an unequal relationship with China.

The shifting geopolitical balance in this relationship is not an isolated development. Moscow's influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia is also under pressure. While the Russian regime focuses its attention and capabilities primarily on Ukraine, other neighbouring countries are actively looking elsewhere and are becoming more amenable to forming alternative alliances and partnerships. Larger regional powers have also identified new openings in places where the Russian Federation's leading role was previously undisputed. Although such shifts are gradual and not always durable, geopolitical and regional developments are becoming increasingly unpredictable as a result of the waning Russian influence. Russian aggression in Ukraine is one of the reasons for neighbouring countries to exercise greater caution and detachment in their relationship with the Russian Federation, although Moscow generally lacks the necessary critical reflection to acknowledge its contribution to the resulting regional situation and changing relations.

Even Belarus, a staunch ally of the Russian Federation, appears to be distancing itself from Moscow and has always refused to participate directly in the war. However, Minsk is closely involved in the war, having permitted the Russian Federation to invade Ukraine from Belarusian territory and fire missiles at Ukrainian targets from there. In addition the Belarusian army is assisting with the training of Russian military units for deployment in Ukraine. Belarus and the Russian Federation are also continually attempting to create the impression of an imminent military invasion, forcing Ukraine to remove valuable military capabilities from the front line in the southeastern part of the country to defend its border with Belarus.

Since the summer President Putin has placed a greater emphasis on the purported battle against NATO in Ukraine, partly to boost support for the war among the Russian population. President Putin's highly centralised administration is under growing pressure due to the military setbacks in Ukraine and the increasingly intensive Western sanctions. However, there are currently no signs that the regime is about to collapse. It is difficult to predict how developments would unfold in the event of a collapse and the ensuing consequences.

A military conflict between the Russian Federation and NATO is conceivable in view of the expansion of Russian military capabilities since 2008 and the Russian Federation's sense of an increased threat from the West in the current circumstances. Although it is improbable that President Putin will initiate a military conflict with NATO in the short term, miscommunication and misunderstandings could lead to unintended or undesired escalation. Russian military concepts and doctrines attribute an important role to the utterance of nuclear threats and provide for the actual employment of nuclear weapons in the event of military escalation, and the danger of miscommunication and unintended escalation is consequently cause for concern.

# Military progress of the invasion



Several phases can be distinguished in the military progress of the invasion. The Russian Federation had been building up troops along the Ukrainian border for months prior to the invasion, ramping up military and political pressure on Kyiv and NATO. The first phase of the invasion began on 24 February 2022 with large-scale offensives. Moscow's initial military-operational objective was to capture the whole of eastern and southern Ukraine, including the Ukrainian capital Kyiv and the Black Sea Coast, and to neutralise the Ukrainian armed forces. When it became clear that these initial goals would not be achieved, the Russian Federation revised its objectives. On 31 March 2022 Russian units began to retreat from the vicinity of Kyiv and northeastern Ukraine. In this second phase the Russian armed forces focused on capturing cities such as Mariupol and Izyum in preparation for a large-scale offensive aimed at capturing the entire Donbas region in the summer months. However, this offensive was unsuccessful and the Russian forces temporarily lost the initiative.

The third phase began in July, when the Ukrainian armed forces seized the initiative and launched successful counter-offensives in the Kharkiv and Kherson oblasts. In October the Russian forces responded by intensifying air strikes on critical civilian and military infrastructure, including electricity installations.

The fourth phase occurred between September and November, with the withdrawal of Russian troops from Kherson and the consolidation of the remaining captured territory. During this phase the Russian Federation freed up troops by implementing the partial mobilisation announced in September and by shortening the front lines.

This enabled the creation of conditions during the fifth phase in the winter of 2022/2023 aimed at regaining the initiative. We are now possibly on the threshold of a new phase that will culminate in a Russian spring offensive.

At present Moscow's main military goal appears to be the complete capture and retention of the four illegally annexed oblasts, although even this scaled-back military ambition is proving very difficult to achieve for the Russian armed forces, with large sections of these oblasts remaining under Ukrainian control. The Russian army has established defensive lines hundreds of kilometres long with the aim of defending captured Ukrainian territory. Western military support is vital to Ukraine in order to provide the Ukrainian armed forces with the necessary capabilities to thwart Russian military ambitions and recapture lost territory.

## Russian ground forces

After a year of military setbacks in Ukraine, the Russian Federation has suffered major materiel and personnel losses. The Russian armed forces have had to contend with multiple interrelated structural problems, such as a persistent low morale and logistical shortcomings, which prevented them from mounting large-scale offensive operations before the onset of winter.

Moscow hopes to resolve these issues through the mobilisation announced in September 2022, the employment of mercenaries from the Wagner paramilitary organisation and the import of military materiel from countries such as Belarus, Iran and North Korea. It has already been partially successful in this endeavour.

#### Russian air force

The Russian air force has played a limited role in Ukraine with a limited effect, despite making considerable efforts and causing major damage. The deployment of tactical fighter planes, helicopters and air defence systems to support and protect Russian ground troops on the battlefield has not been decisive, either in an offensive or in a defensive capacity. The Russian Federation has proved unable to achieve air supremacy despite having greater numbers of more advanced aircraft and weapons, particularly in the early stages of the conflict.

As a result Ukraine remains capable of targeting Russian ground troops with air strikes and artillery fire, including rockets.

In the first six months of the conflict, the Russian strategic air force was mainly occupied with disrupting Ukraine's supply of troops, weapons and ammunition to the front. The attacks on railway lines, depots and defence contractors in the Ukrainian hinterland caused considerable civilian casualties and collateral damage, but the military effect was limited.

In October 2022 Moscow adopted a different air strategy, mounting large-scale attacks on the Ukrainian energy infrastructure using cruise missiles and Iranian drones. This strategy is no longer aimed at disrupting Ukrainian military capabilities but is primarily intended to cripple the economy, including the defence industry, and undermine morale among the population, probably in an attempt to exert maximum pressure on Ukraine with the limited remaining supply of long-range missiles.

#### Russian naval forces

The Russian naval forces in the Black Sea play a limited role despite extra reinforcements in the months prior to the war. In the early weeks leading up to and into the conflict, the Russian navy had considerable dominance in the Black Sea and even appeared to be preparing an amphibious landing on Ukraine's south coast. Mainly due to Ukrainian defences and failing Russian logistics, this presumed supremacy diminished quickly and Russian control of the Black Sea has been contested since then. The Russian navy's striking power has been weakened by the loss of the cruiser Moskva, the Russian retreat from Snake Island and Ukrainian attacks on Russian maritime infrastructure, often using unmanned vessels.

Since then the Russian ships and submarines have played a limited role in the conflict and are now focusing on providing logistical support to combat units on land and launching missiles against land targets in Ukraine in a further attempt to undermine the Ukrainian economy and morale.

#### Nuclear, biological and chemical weapons

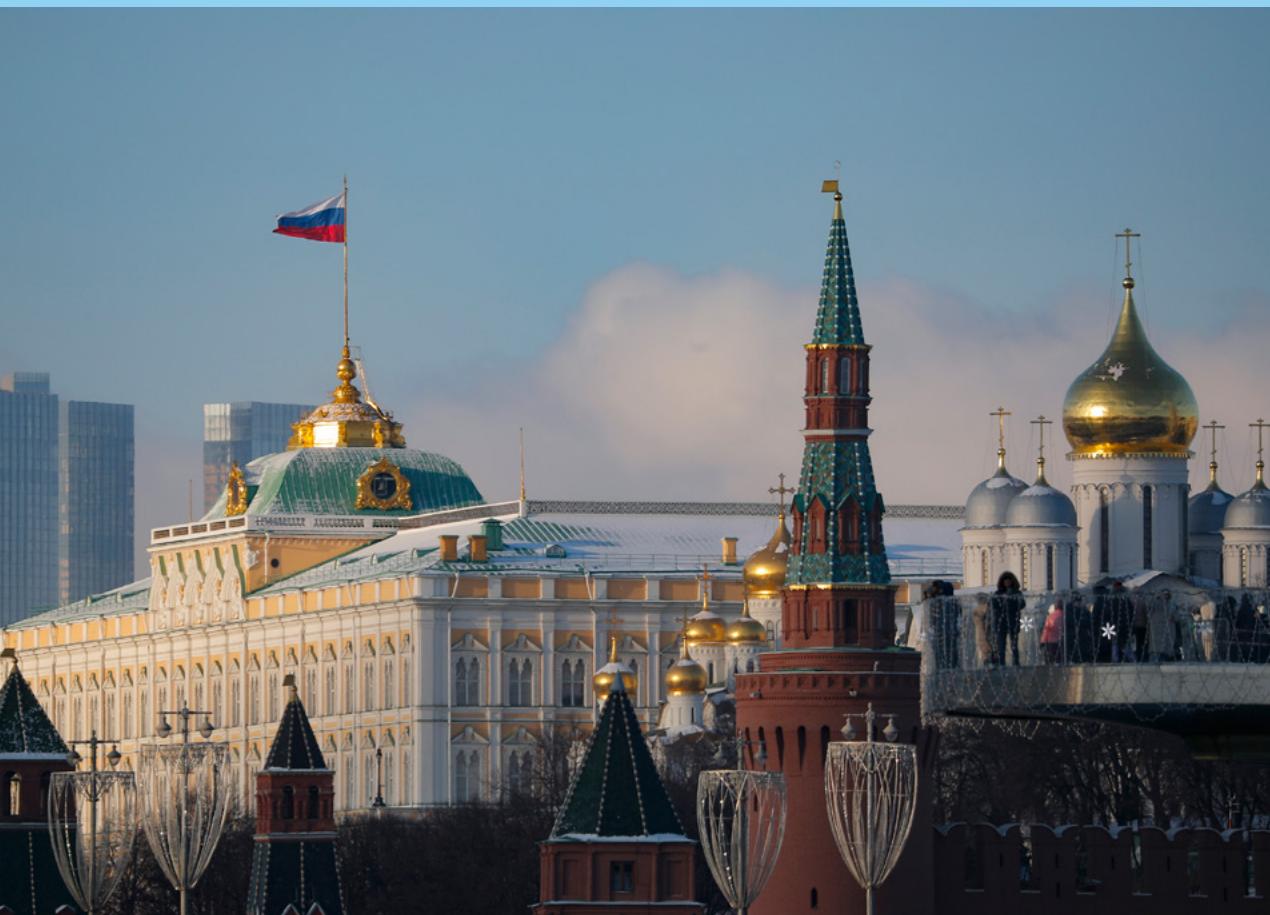
The Russian Federation has by far the largest and most diverse arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons in the world. These capabilities, some of which are highly advanced, include ballistic and cruise missiles that can carry a nuclear payload. The Russian Federation probably has between 1,500 and 2,000 operational nuclear warheads. These weapons are intended to act as a deterrent to potential adversaries, primarily the West. The fact that Moscow repeatedly alludes to the use of nuclear weapons in its rhetoric is concerning. This is probably intended partly to dissuade Western countries from supplying Ukraine with more weapons or interfering directly in the conflict. The actual deployment of nuclear weapons is currently improbable but cannot be ruled out.

In the run-up to the invasion Moscow accused Ukraine, the US and other Western countries of preparing provocations using chemical substances and of maintaining a covert biological weapons programme. It has continued to voice these accusations ever since, using the media, diplomatic channels and international organisations to reinforce this message. Ukraine has also been accused on occasions of seeking to obtain nuclear weapons or mount an attack using a dirty bomb, although such accusations are not substantiated by facts.



Figure 1. Oblasts illegally annexed by Russian Federation and front line as of mid-February 2023

## Malign influence



Ukraine and the West are both being targeted in a Russian information war. However, Moscow's first priority is to create and maintain support for the war in Ukraine among the population of the Russian Federation and the Donbas region. The Kremlin is blocking social media channels in order to obstruct foreign criticism and dominate the public debate on the war in Ukraine.

It is using state media, famous Russians, opinion makers, websites, war veterans, bloggers and refugees from Donbas to reinforce its narrative and to place critics, Ukraine and the West in an unfavourable light. The Russian Federation constantly portrays Ukraine as a country that has no right to exist and needs to be liberated from its allegedly neo-Nazi leaders. The West, and NATO in particular, are depicted as ruthless aggressors that have set their sights on the Russian Federation.

Whereas Moscow focused primarily on its domestic audience and on Ukraine shortly after the start of the invasion, it is now also attempting to covertly influence the West in relation to the invasion, while simultaneously directing attention towards Asia, Africa and Latin America to garner support for its actions. Moscow portrays the war in Ukraine as an act of resistance against an unfair world order dominated by the West and led by the US. It is also attempting to destabilise Western democracies and cooperative frameworks to such an extent that they are no longer perceived as a threat.

The Russian Federation applies a broad range of instruments to communicate its desired narrative to Western audiences, including the following:

- Utilising Russian state media companies such as RT and Sputnik;
- Purchasing and placing articles in Western media;
- Creating videos for social media;
- Setting up Telegram channels;
- Spreading disinformation and propaganda via cyber operations;
- Using memes and pranksters<sup>1</sup>;
- Forging and leaking foreign government documents and publishing fake media websites.

The influence campaigns are conceived and reinforced mainly by figures within the Russian government, with the Kremlin and the intelligence services playing a key role. However, besides the Russian government there are many more parties behind these influence activities, including companies, social organisations and individuals acting alone.

<sup>1</sup> Individuals who imitate others in order to initiate confidential discussions with current and former Western and Ukrainian politicians and subsequently publicise sensitive content from these discussions.

Moscow is spreading its narrative in an attempt to exploit the more favourable views of the Russian Federation that exist within Western societies. Recurring themes within Russian malign influence campaigns targeting the West include Ukrainian corruption, failing Western political systems and media, and the negative economic effects experienced by the West as a result of the sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation.

The influence activities are fleshed out by portraying Ukrainian refugees as criminals, scroungers, prostitutes or anti-Semites. The campaigns further emphasise the economic consequences of Western sanctions for ordinary people, discrimination against Russians abroad, and alleged fake news in Western media pertaining to the conflict in Ukraine. In order to determine the potential success of these campaigns and impressions, Moscow conducts covert population surveys in the West to establish the chance of success in each country for each propaganda theme.

Western countries do not receive equal attention in these influence activities. For example, the Russian radar seems to be focused less sharply on the Netherlands than on other, mainly larger European countries. Germany is one of the more prominent targets, with Moscow making unwavering efforts to influence the German public debate regarding various themes that it considers important. Successful influence campaigns targeting Germany could also be detrimental to the Netherlands in view of the close interconnectedness of German and Dutch security and other interests.

It is difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the Russian influence campaigns and the threat they pose to the West. Furthermore, some influencing attempts fail to reach the intended public due to their inadequate format and execution. Even so, by spreading false information and using false pretexts Russian malign influence operations could undermine trust in the Dutch government, weaken Dutch support for Kyiv and erode social cohesion among the population.

In addition Russian intentions to destabilise and sow dissent should be taken seriously, particularly since the Russian Federation has in the past demonstrated its ability to determine the most opportune moment to strike. Western societies consequently need to remain vigilant with regard to Russian influencing attempts.

## Deception aimed at damaging democracy

Moscow is attempting to control perceptions of the Russian Federation and the West partly by using two pranksters known as Vovan and Lexus. Vovan and Lexus have successfully initiated and recorded confidential conversations with Western politicians several times since 24 February 2022 by pretending to be Ukrainian dignitaries. These actions have enabled the pair to elicit some sensitive statements from politicians on subjects such as Western support for Ukraine. Vovan and Lexus subsequently publish the recorded fragments online or in their own talk show. These revelations are then embellished, mainly by Russian state media, for the benefit of their domestic audience.

The publication of the conversations is intended not only to provide an insight into confidential Western information but also to erode confidence in democracy as a reliable system that has integrity. In this way the pair has publicised confidential statements made by two British ministers, former US president George W. Bush and several mayors of European capitals.



Figure 2. The two pranksters Vladimir Kuznetsov “Vovan” (L) and Alexey Stolyarov “Lexus” (R).

# Espionage



The war in Ukraine has placed the activities of and the threat posed by the Russian intelligence services in the Netherlands and allied countries under heightened scrutiny. Many Western countries decided to expel Russian intelligence officers in response to the invasion of Ukraine. In the first half of 2022, European countries collectively expelled several hundred Russian intelligence officers who had been working at Russian diplomatic missions under diplomatic cover.

On 29 March 2022 the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared 17 employees of Russian diplomatic missions in the Netherlands *persona non gratae* (PNG)<sup>2</sup>. They left our country in early April together with their families. The employees had been stationed in the Netherlands under diplomatic cover but in reality worked as intelligence officers of the foreign intelligence service *Sluzhba Vneshney Razvedki* (SVR) and the military intelligence service *Glavnuy Razvedyvatelnoye Upravlenie* (GRU). They operated from the Russian Embassy and the Russian Consulate in The Hague and the Trade Representation of the Russian Federation in Amsterdam. Never before did the Netherlands expel this many Russian intelligence officers at the same time for espionage.

The expulsion of these intelligence officers from the Netherlands significantly reduced the capabilities of the Russian intelligence services to carry out intelligence operations in the Netherlands. With this measure, the Dutch government limited the long-standing presence of Russian intelligence officers at Russian diplomatic missions in the Netherlands. AIVD and MIVD are working with other ministries to prevent the Russian services from restoring their capabilities at the diplomatic missions in the Netherlands.

## Russian espionage threat persists

The expulsion of the Russian intelligence officers has not eliminated the threat of Russian espionage and other intelligence activities to the national security of the Netherlands. Moscow's interest in political, economic and military intelligence relating to the West has only increased since the invasion of Ukraine and the Western sanctions against the Russian Federation. Moscow remains intent on gathering intelligence on the Netherlands' foreign policy regarding the EU and NATO in order to identify and exploit possible rifts in Western unity. The Russian Federation will also focus more on obtaining intelligence on advanced technology, which has become inaccessible through other channels due to the sanctions. In the Netherlands, the Russian services furthermore concentrate on international organisations such as the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and the International Criminal Court, partly for the purpose of gathering intelligence on investigations into the Russian Federation.

<sup>2</sup> When a diplomat is declared persona non grata by a host nation, this individual must leave the country in the short term. Since diplomats enjoy absolute immunity, such a decision is generally the highest possible sanction that can be imposed on diplomats displaying undesirable conduct.

The Dutch policy relating to the Russian Federation and Dutch support to Ukraine are matters of interest to the Russian intelligence services. The Russian services therefore highly probably aim to gather intelligence on the Dutch military contributions to NATO activities on NATO's eastern flank, the supplies of military materiel to Ukraine and the training of Ukrainian military personnel.

#### Non-diplomatic intelligence activities

The Russian Federation also deploys intelligence officers without a diplomatic cover to conduct intelligence operations in the Netherlands. In April 2022 the GRU attempted to infiltrate the International Criminal Court in The Hague by planting a GRU intelligence officer with a fake Brazilian identity as an intern at the organisation. During his internship the GRU officer could have collected intelligence on investigations into possible Russian war crimes in Ukraine. He could also have influenced these investigations. This officer was declared an undesired alien upon arrival at Schiphol Airport and sent back to Brazil.

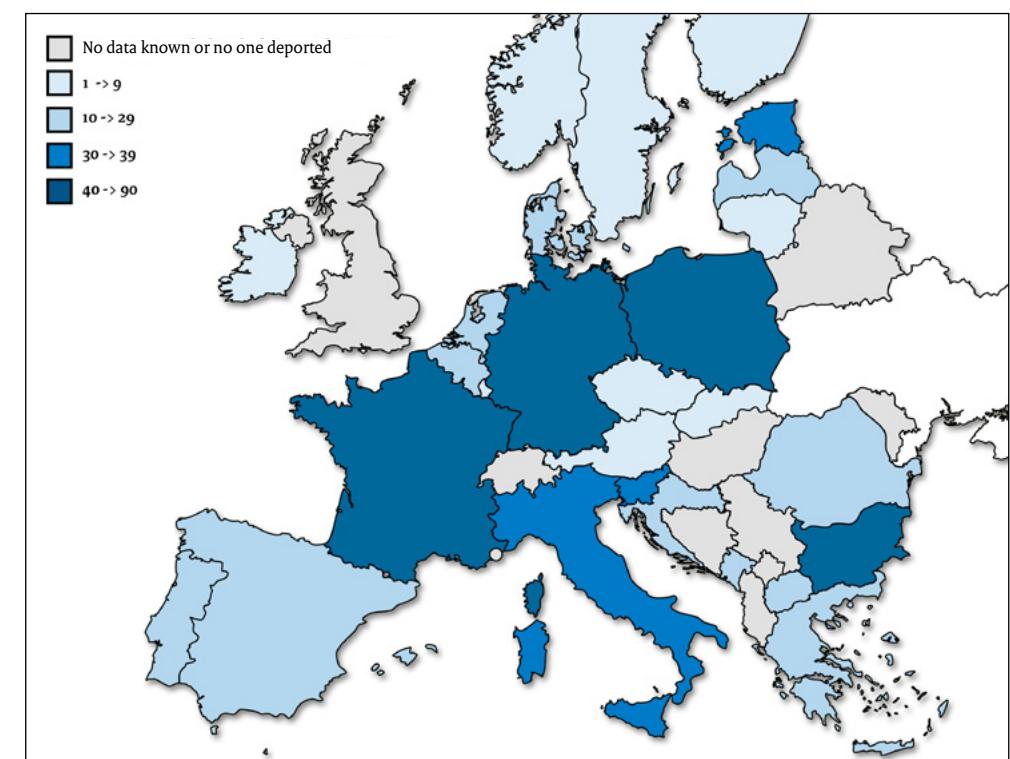
Russian intelligence services are also involved in circumventing Western sanctions by using front companies. Russian production chains are strongly dependent on Western technology and goods. Partly due to Western sanctions, Russian manufactures are having trouble obtaining Western components and materials. The Russian intelligence services are consequently being deployed to covertly acquire Western sanctioned goods and transport them to the Russian Federation.

These generally concern dual-use goods, which are manufactured in the civilian domain but can be used for military purposes. The Russian services use various shadow constructions, including front companies located outside of the Russian Federation, to conceal traceability to the Russian Federation. As a consequence the Russian Federation may be able to circumvent Western sanctions and trade restrictions and procure the required technology and materials.

#### Sabotage threat against the Netherlands

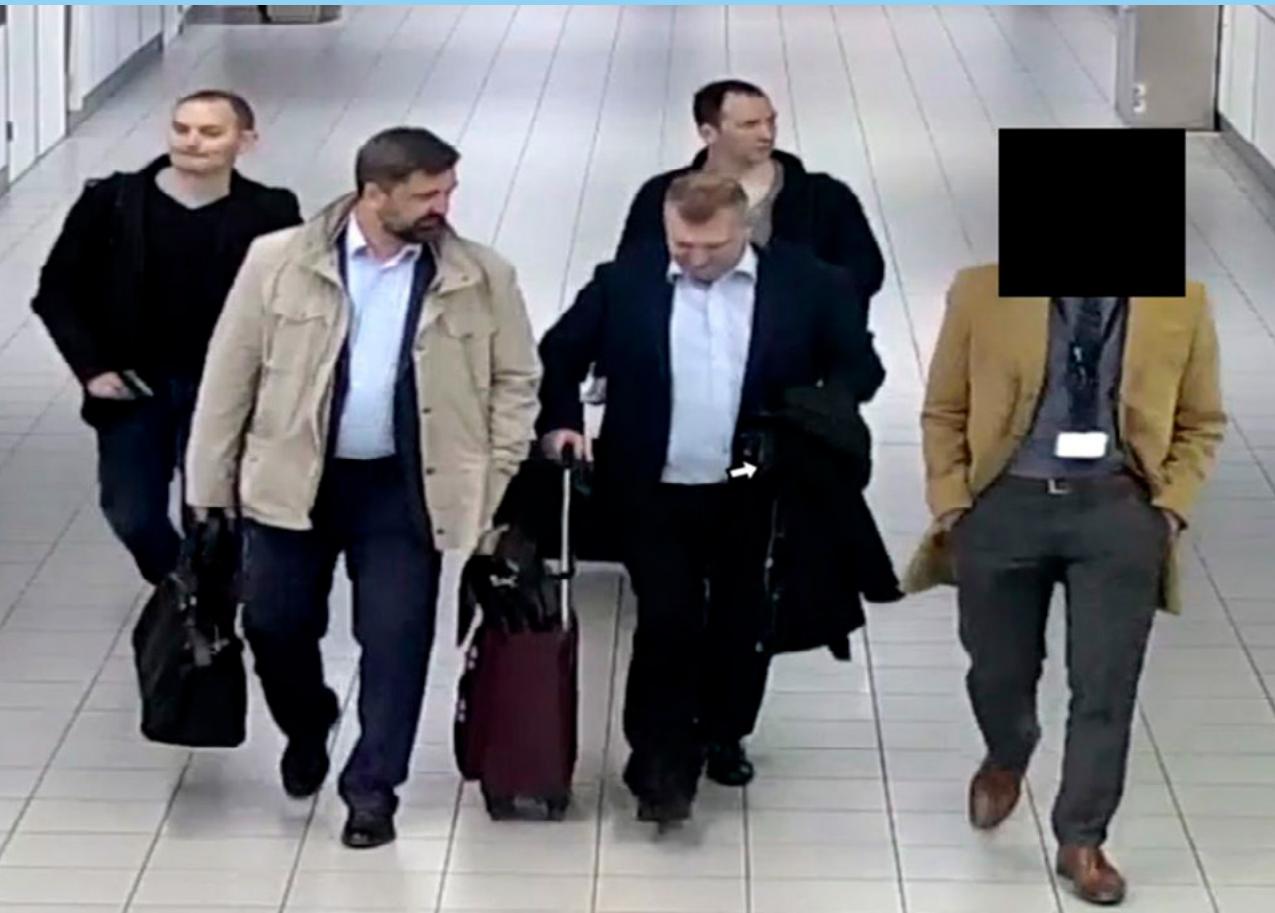
The Dutch critical maritime infrastructure in the North Sea, which includes internet cables, gas pipes and windmill parks, could be vulnerable to sabotage. The Russian Federation is covertly mapping out this infrastructure and is undertaking activities that indicate espionage and preparatory actions for disruption and sabotage.

A physical threat of this nature could also target other vital sectors, such as water and electricity facilities, as long as such attacks can be mounted covertly. It may be useful for the Russian Federation to prepare physical disruption and sabotage. MIVD and AIVD provide information to organisations that are responsible for organising and implementing security measures aimed at increasing the resilience of Dutch vital processes.



Afbeelding 3: Number of deported Russian embassy employees, including intelligence officers, in 2022. Larger countries generally had more Russian employees at the embassies to begin with. The United Kingdom carried out large-scale deportations in 2018 in the wake of the Skripal poisonings.

# Russian cyber operations



Before and during the war, Russian intelligence and security services carried out large-scale digital espionage, sabotage and influence operations against Ukraine and NATO allies. The tempo of Russian cyber operations is high and many of their attempts have not yet been made public. So far, the Ukrainian and Western digital defences have managed to limit the impact of these persistent attempted attacks. Over the course of the war it has also become clear that the Russian Federation struggles to synchronise cyber operations with other military operations, such as air strikes.

The overwhelming majority of the Russian cyber operations is aimed at espionage for the purpose of securing military, diplomatic and economic information from both Ukraine and NATO allies. For instance, the Russian Federation attempts to penetrate Ukrainian military networks and systems in order to obtain tactical intelligence, including the locations of military materiel and military personnel. But as their target selection is very broad, Ukrainian organisations that are not directly involved in the war or in political decision-making also fall victim to such attacks.

Russian intelligence also focuses on the military support provided to Ukraine by NATO allies. The Dutch armed forces, ministries and embassies have also been targeted in cyber espionage attempts in the past year, albeit unsuccessfully.

## Cyber sabotage

The Russian cyber sabotage campaign against Ukraine is the most extensive and intensive operation of its kind ever carried out. Moscow regularly tries to digitally sabotage Ukraine's critical infrastructure, launching persistent attacks using wiper malware<sup>3</sup>. Ukraine and Western defenders must remain vigilant in the face of the constant and extreme pressure exerted by the Russian Federation.

So far there has been no large-scale disruption and the consequences of cyber sabotage are negligible compared to the impact of physical military operations. The Russian Federation is unable to realise the full potential of cyber operations, probably because it struggles to synchronise these operations with other military operations, such as air strikes. Moreover, most Russian digital attack attempts are either identified in time or remedied swiftly thanks to the advanced Ukrainian monitoring, detection and response measures. Ukraine receives significant support from Western intelligence services and companies in this area.

However, this does not guarantee that Ukraine's digital defence will be successful. Its success can probably only be maintained for as long as Western support matches the cyber operations of the Russian intelligence services in terms of intensity and adaptiveness.

<sup>3</sup> Malware that deletes information

### **Digital influencing**

Information confrontation, including influencing through deception, disinformation and cyber operations, plays a central role in the Russian modus operandi. It is carried out to a large degree using digital capabilities and is partly intended to cause psychological damage. For example, on several occasions the Russian intelligence services managed to temporarily assume control of Ukrainian media channels and broadcast Russian messages, after which they digitally sabotaged the systems of these media outlets. Ukraine's power supply has also been targeted in cyber sabotage operations, which were probably primarily intended to undermine Ukrainian morale.

In order to conceal their involvement in the covert dissemination of disinformation and propaganda via digital channels, the Russian intelligence services apply numerous techniques which they also use in cyber operations. Cyber operations and malign influence operations are often even conducted by the same units within the information operations troops (VIO) of the Russian military intelligence service GRU.

# Impact of the war on Dutch society



## Russian energy politics

Moscow is attempting to disrupt the European energy market by limiting its gas supply to Europe, which has led to shortages and higher gas prices on the European market. Moscow is using energy supply as a means to achieve its political goals. Since the start of the war in Ukraine, Moscow has put its political interests above the economic interest of its gas exports. Gazprom, the Russian state company responsible for exporting Russian gas to Europe, blames the sanctions and the loss of the Nord Stream pipeline for the decreased supplies. However, it is improbable that such practical issues alone are the root causes of the reduced supply.

In fact, Moscow is pursuing a deliberate strategy of exploiting Europe's gas dependence to maximise pressure. This strategy is aimed at eventually forcing Europe to abandon its support to Ukraine and lift the sanctions against the Russian Federation. Moscow is aware that its position as an energy superpower will become more vulnerable in the long term. By cutting off the energy supply, it hopes to bring Europe to its knees before the EU is able to permanently discard the Russian Federation as an energy supplier. In part due to this move, the Russian strategy was instrumental in hiking up energy bills and inflation in the Netherlands in 2022.

## Effects of conflict create fertile breeding-ground for anti-establishment extremism

The spread of anti-establishment extremism has posed a threat to national security for some time.<sup>4</sup> This type of extremism manifests as a narrative focused on an 'evil elite' that allegedly controls all influential institutions and uses this power to repress 'the common people'. This elite is believed to invent crises aimed at legitimising its repressive policies and actions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the nitrogen crisis, but also the conflict in Ukraine. Many Dutch nationals are currently facing the effects of inflation caused by rising gas prices. Anti-establishment extremists believe that this situation was engineered by the evil elite to repress the population, and deny that it was caused by the conflict. Like the COVID-19 pandemic, the conflict in Ukraine has therefore probably contributed to the spread of anti-establishment extremism in the Netherlands.

An interesting fact in this respect is that the extremist anti-establishment movement is largely pro-Russian and portrays President Putin as the 'saviour' in the fight against the evil elite in the West. Although this pro-Russian stance has not necessarily helped to spread the narrative among the overwhelmingly pro-Ukrainian or neutral Dutch population, the pro-Russian attitude of the extremists probably renders them more susceptible to Russian malign influence activities.

<sup>4</sup> Anti-establishment extremism is a phenomenon in which ideologically motivated individuals and groups specifically target democratic institutions and processes and are willing to engage in violent and non-violent activities aimed at undermining the democratic rule of law. Examples of non-violent activity include systematic attempts to incite hatred, spread fear, deliberately disseminate disinformation, demonise and intimidate targets, renounce legislation and regulations, and create a parallel society that rejects the authority of the Dutch government and judicial system.

#### **No indications of Dutch extremist groups travelling to Ukraine**

AIVD has no indications that substantial groups of Dutch proponents of extremist ideology have travelled to Ukraine to assist the Russians or Ukrainians in fighting the war. While Dutch left-wing and right-wing extremists have some sympathy for specific fighters or armed groups, the conflict in Ukraine hardly plays a role in their propaganda. Noteworthy, however, is the fact that pro-Putin sentiment within the right-wing extremist movement has turned, since the invasion is entirely at odds with right-wing views on sovereignty.

#### **Al-Qaeda and ISIS will probably attempt to exploit the effects of the conflict**

While the Dutch jihadist movement has largely ignored the conflict in Ukraine, its effects provide opportunities for global jihadism. First, jihadist organisations are enjoying somewhat more freedom of movement in Syria due to the decline in Russian activity in the region. By the same token, the fact that the conflict has naturally led to a shift of focus among armed forces and intelligence and security services worldwide will possibly ease international pressure on jihadists. Second, some of the proponents of jihadism established in Ukraine have fled to Europe to escape wartime violence. Finally, jihadists currently tend to believe that it is easier to obtain automatic firearms and other weapons in Ukraine, which could potentially be used to carry out terrorist attacks. The services deem it probable that al-Qaeda and ISIS will attempt to exploit these opportunities. The extent to which they will succeed in this endeavour is currently being investigated with a view to preventing such exploitation. These are nonetheless concerning developments, given that in the past few months AIVD has observed a slightly heightened threat of ISIS attacks targeting Europe.

# Outlook

The above sections describe the evolution of the threat posed by the Russian Federation in the past year, based on intelligence. Although it is impossible to predict how this threat will develop in the future, conceivable scenarios can be created on the basis of this intelligence. In this context, it is important to note that any further developments will depend strongly on factors that are not the subject of investigation by AIVD or MIVD, such as the level of Western military support provided to Ukraine and NATO's deterrence policy. This outlook is therefore limited to the factors within our area of investigation and for which we can provide a reasoned assessment.

## War in Ukraine: a war of attrition

The outlook in the short term focuses primarily on the conflict in Ukraine itself. The main development drivers are the relative balance of power between the Ukrainian and Russian armed forces, the West's willingness to support Ukraine and the amount of support it provides, the Russians' readiness to escalate the situation, and Kyiv's and Moscow's desire to arrive at a political solution. The development of these factors does not paint a rosy picture for the near future.

The war in Ukraine has become a war of attrition whose end is nowhere in sight. In the short term the Russian armed forces will attempt to regain the initiative through partial mobilisation and by re-equipping units. However, it is probable that both the Russian Federation and Ukraine will be incapable of achieving all of their military objectives in the short term.

At present, nobody holding a position of influence in Moscow appears to be seriously arguing in favour of a peaceful diplomatic process. According to Russian thinking, every Western victory in Ukraine automatically means a defeat for the Russian Federation and is therefore difficult to tolerate. In Moscow's view, continuing along the path it has entered – the military defeat of Ukraine – is probably the only conceivable option, despite the knowledge that this goal is nowhere in sight. Moscow will therefore probably espouse nationalist, anti-Western and pro-war rhetoric in an attempt to garner support for the war among the Russian population, to further transform the economy into a war-based economy, and to continue to cultivate military cooperation with countries such as Iran and Belarus.

## Geopolitical confrontation with the West

The further course of the war in Ukraine will directly impact the relationship and differences between the Russian Federation and the West in the long term. The main factors of influence in this respect are the Russian Federation's stance and willingness to escalate and the West's level of cohesion and unity.

The most probable scenario in the long term is one of continued confrontation between the Russian Federation and the West (NATO and the EU). While it is improbable that this confrontation would escalate to an armed conflict, such a situation is conceivable, and concerning too given the Russian Federation's position as a nuclear-armed great power. An alternative scenario is conceivable if the West were to lose its unified stance vis-à-vis the Russian Federation, and in such a case Moscow would probably conclude that it pays to use military aggression. Further regional instability would probably ensue in Europe, directly impacting security in the Netherlands.

The threat posed by the Russian Federation and the activities it carries out do not only affect the military security of NATO and the EU. The geopolitical confrontation also has a decisive effect on the Russian threat posed to Dutch, European and NATO security interests below the threshold of armed conflict in the civilian domain. Our democratic rule of law, economic security, critical infrastructure and knowledge security will probably remain under threat from the Russian Federation, and protecting them requires vigilance and resilience.

## Conclusion

In the Russian perspective the war in Ukraine constitutes more than a regional conflict. The Kremlin and a substantial section of the Russian population view the war as an element of the fight against the West, in which both the future of the Russian state and the survival of Russian culture are at risk.

Regardless of the outcome of the war in Ukraine, the Russian Federation will probably continue to pose a threat to the Netherlands in the long term. Even when this direct conflict has ended, the Russian Federation – resentful, distrustful, frustrated and perceiving itself as surrounded by hostile states – will probably believe that it remains embroiled in a permanent battle with the West. Given its deep-seated belief that it is a country under threat, its fighting power and its nuclear arsenal, the Russian Federation will remain a major factor of influence for security in Europe in the long term.

## Photo captions by section

- **Geopolitical dimension**

*Russian President Putin meets with his defence minister Sergei Shoigu and commander Valery Gerasimov, 27 February 2022*

- **Military progress of the invasion**

*Ukrainian tank in Kyiv, 16 March 2022*

- **Malign influence**

*The Kremlin in Moscow, Russian Federation*

- **Espionage**

*Russian embassy, The Hague*

- **Russian cyber operations**

*Four Russian intelligence officers working for the Russian secret service travelled to the Netherlands on diplomatic passports on 10 April 2018. On 13 April they attempted to hack into the WiFi network of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in The Hague. MIVD successfully thwarted the hacking operation, and the men were subsequently deported.*

This brochure was published by:

The Netherlands Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations  
The General Intelligence and Security Service

and

The Netherlands Ministry of Defence  
The Netherlands Defence Intelligence and Security Service