The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Z-symbols, Fewer Tanks and No Guests: Russia Prepares to Mark Victory Day as Ukraine War Rages

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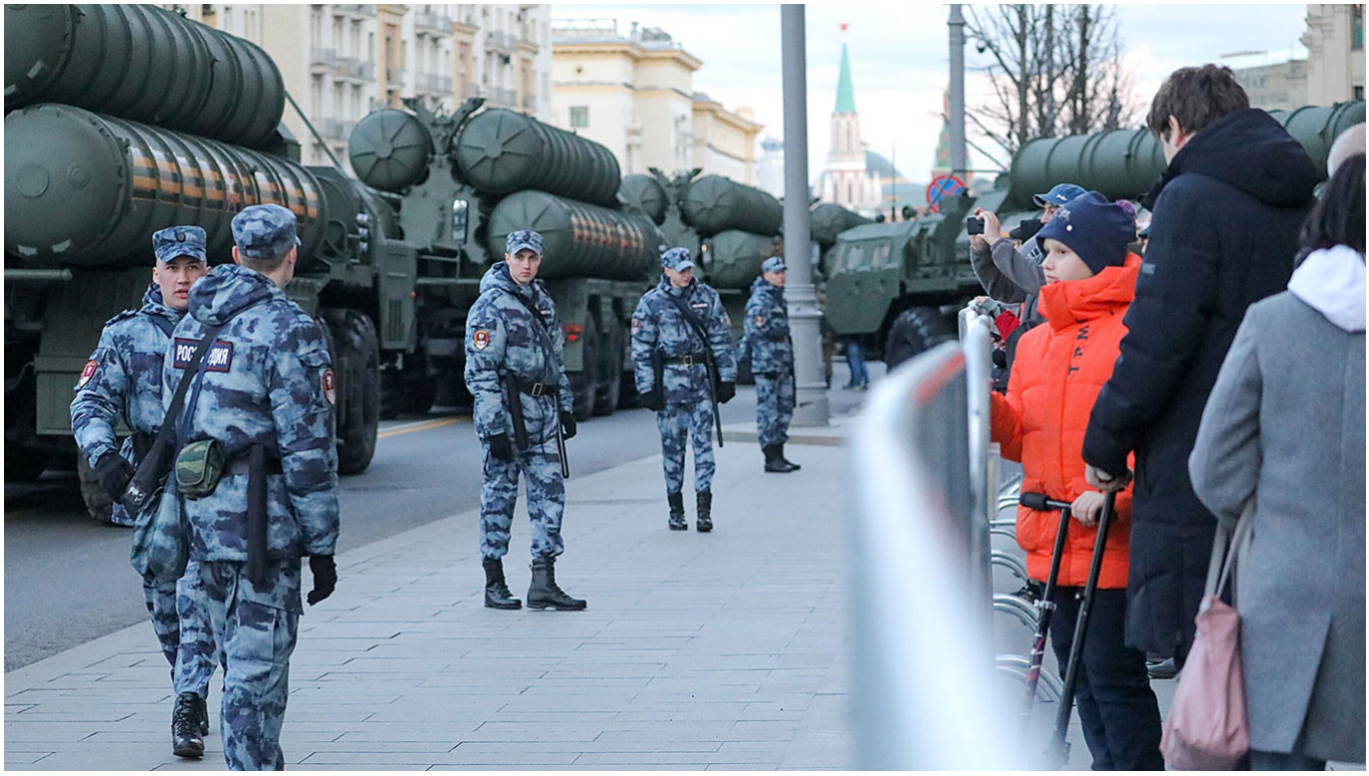
May 07, 2022



Victory Parade rehearsal in Moscow **Sophia Sandurskaya / Moskva News Agency**

Russia will mark Monday the Soviet Union's victory over Nazism amid expectations that ongoing fighting in Ukraine will cast a long shadow over the popular event.

In particular, the set piece military parade on Moscow's Red Square will see significantly fewer soldiers and equipment compared to last year, which experts have linked to significant losses sustained by Russia in its ongoing war in neighboring Ukraine.

"This is one of the few times when Russia is conducting a conventional war at its borders at the same time as having the parade," Aglaya Snetkov, an expert in Russian foreign policy at University College London told The Moscow Times.

"The reduction of the parade shows that the Russian government is both aware of the losses

[in Ukraine] and is trying to manage how to deal with them."

Russia's annual May 9 celebrations, also known as Victory Day, mark the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany in 1945 and have been increasingly used by President Vladimir Putin as a means to promote patriotic unity and showcase the country's military might.

Given the absence of significant military gains in Ukraine, the Kremlin is expected to reorient this year's event to justify the invasion of Ukraine.

Among other pro-war additions, a group of fighter jets is expected to fly over central Moscow in the shape of a "Z", a popular symbol of support for Russian troops in Ukraine.

While the number of planes expected to take part in the Moscow flypast is slightly higher than last year, the numbers of infantry and equipment are lower.

Compared to about 191 military vehicles and about 12,000 military personnel in 2021, this year there will be only 129 military vehicles and 10,000 personnel, according to information published Friday by Russia's Defense Ministry.

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"Speeches will focus on drawing parallels between the Soviet Union's war against Nazi Germany and how Russia is 'alone' in their fight against contemporary Nazism in Ukraine," said Allyson Edwards, an expert on Russian militarism at Britain's University of Warwick.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly spoken out against Western countries that seem not to appreciate the Soviet contribution to the defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II. About 27 million Soviet citizens were killed in four years of conflict.

At the same time as showcasing Russia's role in the defeat of Nazism, celebrations this year have been designed to bolster recruitment into the Armed Forces by motivating Russians to "continue the deeds and victories of their ancestors," according to Edwards.

Western officials and observers have warned that the Kremlin may even be planning to announce a mobilization of reservists or civilians on May 9 in order to boost the country's flagging military campaign in Ukraine that is reportedly hampered by problems that include a lack of infantry.

This has been denied by top Russian officials.

Either way, many Russians – particularly those who fled the country at the beginning of the invasion because of political persecution or conscription – will be watching events on May 9 closely for a sign of how the war will unfold in the coming months.

Unlike previous years, Victory Day events will be held in the absence of foreign leaders.

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said last month that no foreign leaders were invited to the Victory Day parade this year because it was not a round-number anniversary – unlike in 2005, or 2010. "It's our own holiday, a sacred holiday for Russia and all Russians," he said.

But Putin was accompanied at the parade on Red Square in 2017 by Moldovan President Igor Dodon and by Kazakhstan head of state Nursultan Nazarbayev the year before.

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One Victory Day event that will be scrutinized for signs of the extent of popular support for the fighting in Ukraine will be the so-called "Immortal Regiment" marches, traditionally attended by hundreds of thousands of Russians, including Putin himself.

Edwards said there will likely be a record turnout at Immortal Regiment rallies given that the event has been held online during the coronavirus pandemic.

"Russia often positions itself as a marshal, keeper, preserver of memory, so it will pitch the Immortal Regiment as a struggle to preserve the memory of the Great Patriotic War against those it believes are diminishing it or wiping it out," she said.

Russia may even attempt to stage Victory Day parades, or Immortal Regiment events, in captured Ukrainian city of Mariupol, according to Ukrainian officials.

There are also fears in Ukraine that the May 9 celebrations in Russia could be used as an excuse for an intensification of attacks on Ukrainian military positions.

The southern port city of Odesa and surrounding region announced last week that it was imposing a strict curfew for May 9.

Putin and other Russian officials have repeatedly accused Ukraine of being a "Nazi state", and the Russian army operating in Ukraine often uses World War II flags and other symbols.

"Everyone is expecting something to happen [on 9 May], both the enemies of Putin and his supporters," political expert Abbas Gallyamov told the BBC on Saturday. "These expectations created a vacuum that needs to be filled. If it's not, Putin will lose politically."

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