

Kharkiv Retreat: What Will Military Losses Mean for Russia's Domestic Politics?

By [Tatiana Stanovaya](#)

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Destroyed Russian military vehicle in the city of Izyum, Kharkiv region. **Oksana Ivanets / Armyinform (CC BY 4.0)**

The retreat of the Russian armed forces from Ukraine's Kharkiv region sowed panic, disenchantment, and bewilderment among pro-war activists. Their channels on the Telegram messaging app are brimming with anger at the authorities and questions about how such a setback came about. This is one of the most serious political challenges to the Kremlin since it set about decimating the non-systemic (anti-President Vladimir Putin) opposition.

The Russian authorities have always had a complicated relationship with the pro-war segment of the population. For many years it was marginal: only a small group of fans of the Novorossiia project—a hypothetical confederation of states in southeastern Ukraine stretching from Kharkiv to Odesa — followed the fighting in the Donbas, and they had little

influence over the political agenda. However, the invasion of Ukraine didn't just radicalize the party of war; it also bolstered it with political heavyweights. The conservative anti-Western mainstream — including the party of power, the *siloviki* (members of the security services), and the systemic opposition that doesn't in fact oppose Putin — fully supported the president's decision to invade Ukraine and even tried to get at the helm of the pro-war movement.

For a while, the gap between the pro-war opportunists in government and the traditional anti-Kyiv warmongers had almost closed, which created the perception of broad sociopolitical support for the war. In the face of failures, however, the two groups are again divided: the establishment tries to justify every decision of the Kremlin, while the pro-war activists complain, criticize, and even question the ability of the Russian armed forces to succeed.

Two parallel realms have emerged. In the first, the official one, the realm of “peace,” with its political curators and TV propaganda, everything is going splendidly in Russia, all goals will be achieved on the front lines, and the West is doomed. In the second, the realm of “war,” thousands are dead and wounded, there are victories and defeats, and the struggle is for life or death. There is now a chasm between those who see a holy war with nowhere to retreat lest Moscow fall, and those who only recognize a “special military operation” with unclear objectives and uncertain time frames.

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At first, the difference between these two realms was limited, which allowed the Kremlin to enjoy the fruits of patriotic consolidation: support for almost all institutions of power had surged; the public expressed solidarity with the Kremlin; no one dared to rock the boat; the non-systemic opposition had been crushed; and the systemic opposition joined the military camp. Thanks to all this, regional and local elections held on Sept. 11 went without a hitch.

With time, however, the realms have grown further and further apart. Recent polls showed that Russians have gradually become tired of news about the war and even irritated by those who use the war for political dividends. The Kremlin has realized that it may be dangerous to push the military agenda too far, and is betting instead on making a bigger show of “peaceful life.” Meanwhile, the defeats and challenges on the front lines have been mounting, with fears that Russian troops might not just never make it to Kyiv, but may lose the war outright.

The “peace” and “war” realms might have coexisted for a long time, were it not for the devastating retreat from Kharkiv. The lavish celebrations of Moscow City Day were a stark contrast to the discussions of military failures on social networks. Celebrations in the central Moscow Zaryadye park attended by Putin; an opening ceremony for a giant Ferris wheel at another park, VDNKh; a festive concert; and fireworks all juxtaposed with a stream of panicked, scornful, and desperate messages about bloody losses at the front lines.

In recent months, the “war” realm has been growing and maturing, forging a social base, and winning over hundreds of thousands of Russians. The recent military defeats put this realm front and center, to the Kremlin's great chagrin. The authorities have been scrambling to respond — intermittently making threats, blaming Ukrainian bots for spreading anti-Russian

propaganda, or contending that there is nothing wrong with celebrating Moscow City Day. This lack of a coordinated response is only exacerbating the problem.

At the root of this divide is Putin's peculiar attitude toward Ukraine. In his eyes, Russia was never supposed to defeat the Ukrainian army on the battlefield, or wage a lengthy campaign. Putin's reluctance to mobilize, his readiness to retreat, and his talk that there is no need to rush betray his conviction that Ukraine is historically doomed without full-scale battles: with time, he believes, the country will be exhausted, with the West withdrawing its military help and the elites accepting capitulation. It appears he also miscalculated Ukraine's readiness to counterattack.

Still, it's unlikely that these miscalculations will prove sobering. Betting that Ukraine will capitulate sooner or later implies that, within the historical perspective, it doesn't really matter where the front lines are or where they are moving. Nor does Putin care when referendums on becoming part of Russia will take place and which parts of Ukraine will be annexed by Russia. In his worldview, there is no "Ukraine," there are only "anti-Russian forces" (or even "Nazis") on "Russian land," who are destined to disappear without a full-scale war.

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Based on this logic, as the West collapses, these "anti-Russian forces" will lose access to resources and fizzle out. This is why Russia has not launched major offensives in recent months. Nor will Putin make much of the recent Ukrainian victories, which are unlikely to shake his belief that Ukraine will inevitably "return to the Russian nest."

The problem with this logic is that while many in Russia believe that Ukraine is not a real country, few agree with Putin that Russia can win by just waiting out the war and watching the West collapse. The "peace" realm emerged not because the Russian society and elites are convinced by Putin's approach. On the contrary, it resulted from Putin's attempt to win the war without the direct involvement of the elites and the public.

As the so-called "special military operation" drags on, the Kremlin is trying to push the military agenda to the periphery and cultivate a sense of normalcy. This will only further widen the gap between the "peace" realm and the "war" realm. Military failures will, in turn, galvanize the warmongers, fueling their potential as the opposition.

A pro-war opposition could become one of the most serious challenges to the regime since that of destroying the non-systemic opposition. Certainly, the Kremlin will find it more difficult to repress right-wing protest than it did opposition leader Alexei Navalny and his supporters. Putin does not view the pro-war activists as ideological opponents acting in the interests of external enemies. He considers their protest legitimate and patriotic, which gives the *siloviki*, who are responsible for crushing dissent, less room for maneuver. Moreover, the ideology of the *siloviki* is not so different from that of the right-wing patriots on Telegram.

More frequent military failures and defeats will exacerbate the split between the realms of "peace" and "war" and increase the risks for Putin's political leadership. By trying to be the chosen one for both peace and war, he could end up as no one's choice. For now, as long as the

indignation and panic aren't channeled personally against Putin, the Kremlin is unlikely to embark upon the destruction of the pro-war activists. But make no mistake: this panic will intoxicate the ruling elites and erode their faith in Putin's capacity to control the situation.

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