

Reading the Tea Leaves of Russia's Pro-War 'Z-Universe'

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A poster in Moscow with the "Z" symbol. **Kirill Zykov / Moskva News Agency**

One of the by-products of the Ukraine war has been the emergence of the online "Z-Universe," an enormous network of websites and social media accounts named after a popular pro-war symbol. It is most active on Telegram, which, unlike Twitter and Facebook, is not banned in Russia. All its participants spread pro-Kremlin and anti-Ukrainian propaganda, publishing information that may or may not be true, but which legitimizes the war and the killing of Ukrainians.

The Z-Universe seems chaotic, but it is actually very complex — and hierarchical. At the top are politicians and Kremlin officials, such as former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. On the next level are governors and warlords, such as the head of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic, Denis Pushilin, or the head of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov. Below them are the heads of the state media outlets and talk-show hosts. Even lower still is the layer of "analysts" and war correspondents. At the very bottom is an army of trolls. Their Telegram

channels have tens of thousands of subscribers, but most of them are bots.

In the first days of September, during the Ukrainian counteroffensive in the Kharkiv region, the Z-Universe went into a state of shock. Not so long ago, in the virtual world, the Russian army was the "second best army in the world" and could take any European capital if it tried hard enough. But, suddenly, the Russian army couldn't even hold some mid-sized Ukrainian towns.

The first reaction was denial. On Sept. 9, when the Russian army was fleeing the town of Izyum, war correspondent Alexander Kots was still doing what he had been doing throughout the war: providing disinformation. He happily [published](#) videos of paratroopers landing from helicopters and promised everyone that Izyum would never fall. Three days later, Kots was writing from another location dozens of kilometers from Izyum.

"Balakleya, Kupyansk, and Izyum have surrendered. We are withdrawing from most of the Kharkiv region. This is a military disaster," wrote the [Zastavny Telegram channel](#). "I cannot explain what is happening now on the Izyum front. But there is only one option: tomorrow all those responsible for the failure of the front will be arrested for high treason," wrote Telegram [channel](#) Zhivov.

The blast on the Crimean Bridge further lowered the morale of the Z-Universe: "It is no longer clear who is leading the special operation: is it still Russia or is it already Ukraine?" [wrote](#) one channel.

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After that, it was time for a reckoning. Kadyrov accused the commander of the Russian Armed Forces in eastern Ukraine, Alexander Lapin, of incompetence and the chief of the General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, of nepotism. Kadyrov [wrote](#): "Lapin is useless.... If it were up to me, I would demote Lapin to private, strip him of his medals and send him to the front to wash away his shame with a machine gun."

Yevgeny Prigozhin, owner of mercenary group Wagner, [echoed](#) Kadyrov: "All these bastards ought to be sent to the front barefoot with just a submachine gun."

Such trenchant public criticism of government officials is highly unusual in today's Russia. However, it's worth remembering that none of these people are expressing their personal opinions. They all have a patron at the top of the Kremlin hierarchy. The patron of both Kadyrov and Prigozhin is widely considered to be the head of the Russian National Guard, Viktor Zolotov.

Zolotov has apparently decided to use the army's failures to weaken the position of Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, who had been pegged to be Putin's successor before the war.

Unexpectedly, it appears some Kremlin officials also joined the attack on Shoigu. The rumor is that anonymous Telegram channel Nezygar expresses the views of the presidential administration. "The direct clients and mediators of the process who are in Washington and London have managed to drag Russia into a full-scale direct military conflict with Ukraine

and an indirect one with the NATO bloc," Nezygar [wrote](#) recently.

All these maneuvers were successful. General Lapin remained in his post, but General Sergei Surovikin was appointed over his head to command all the military operations in Ukraine. Kadyrov was promoted to colonel general, equal in rank to Lapin.

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Enter Igor Strelkov, a retired FSB colonel and *l'enfant terrible* of the Z-Universe. In 2014, Strelkov led rebel gunmen to seize power in Donetsk, then became the defense minister of the Donetsk People's Republic, fought without much success and was replaced by regular Russian army officers.

Since then, Strelkov has constantly criticized Russia's military commanders. From the first day of the war, he has been calling for a general mobilization, "information mobilization" — that is, patriotic hysteria — and subserving the economy to the needs of the military. He has called the Russian military command "idiots" and dubbed Shoigu a "Cardboard Marshal." It's believed Strelkov is a spokesman for the FSB leadership and nationalist army officers.

None of the siloviki — the Defense Ministry, the FSB, the Russian National Guard — have their eye on the Kremlin throne for themselves. They are competing for influence over Putin. However, as journalist Yulia Latynina has [pointed out](#), "the battle being fought is for Shoigu's position, not for Putin's throne. But whoever becomes Shoigu's successor will also become Putin's successor."

Of course, it is difficult to fully understand what is going on in and around the Kremlin, even by analyzing the signals from the Z-Universe. What is clear, however, is that military failures have fueled a power struggle.

All this points to what historian Timothy Snyder [considers](#) the most likely end to the war. Though events are unlikely to lead to civil war and armed clashes inside Russia, the logic of a serious power struggle will force major players to pull as many combat-ready units out of Ukraine as possible and bring them closer to home.

In Kadyrov's case, this is Chechnya; while the other clans will need to bring their armies closer to Moscow. After that, the war will end on its own.

As Snyder points out: "This, of course, would be a very good thing, for Ukraine and for the world."

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