

How the War in Ukraine Became a Magnet for Russia's Career Politicians

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State Duma deputy Vitaly Milonov. vk.com/milonov

For those in Russia's ruling elite set on reaching the top, the war in Ukraine is an unexpected new career elevator. Ever sensitive to the whims of President Vladimir Putin, the presidential administration is increasingly keen to reward veterans of the conflict.

It is not, however, actual combat veterans who are favored, but officials and politicians who have visited the front line for photo opportunities and made use of them to demonstrate their radicalism. Such displays are well received in the Kremlin, regardless of the consequences for the quality of government or relations among the elites, many of whom wish things could just go back to how they were before the invasion of Ukraine.

The elites have been dressing for the part since the very beginning of the war, when First Deputy Chief of Staff Sergei Kiriyenko and the United Russia ruling party general secretary Andrei Turchak started the trend, sporting khakis in newly occupied areas of Ukraine.

Appearances at the front by careerist politicians, among them State Duma deputies [Vitaly Milonov](#), [Sergei Sokol](#), and [Dmitry Khubezov](#), grew more frequent in the summer. There is now even [a special reserve unit](#) made up of lawmakers called Cascade.

Others have gotten in on the action, too. Alexander Sapozhnikov [quit his post](#) as mayor of the city of Chita to volunteer for the war. Primorye Governor Oleg Kozhemyako eagerly [visited](#) the trenches. Dmitry Rogozin, ex-head of the state space corporation Roscosmos, also donned a uniform and headed off to the front.

Whether any of them have taken part in actual combat is unclear. But they have fully embraced the label of combatant, a bet that appears to have paid off. These days, Putin speaks constantly of the valor of those fighting the war, and even delivered his New Year's address against a backdrop of men and women in uniform.

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Amid such scenes, the radicalization and militarization of Russia's ruling elite continue in full force. Kursk Governor Roman Starovoit [talks openly](#) of receiving training from Wagner, the notorious mercenary outfit; Turchak casually [alludes](#) to the sledgehammer with which the defector Yevgeny Nuzhin was executed last November; and Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief of the RT propaganda machine, heaps praise on Wagner and its founder Yevgeny Prigozhin. In this way, players within the system signal to Putin that they are not just in favor of the war; they are true radicals.

This outpouring of zeal is no accident. Putin [expects](#) that "soldiers will delight us again and again with the results of their work," and for its part, the presidential administration is prepared to do everything it can to present him with people who will fill him with pride. In this year's regional elections, for example, it will [promote](#) the candidacies of war veterans and [encourage](#) governors to visit the front. Those who heed its advice will receive special attention, as have the Cascade group of lawmakers, who, unusually for rank-and-file parliamentarians, have secured meetings with both Kiriyenko and Turchak.

Still, the Kremlin has faced obstacles in getting in-system politicians in line, including some of its own making. In recent years, it had taken to admitting independents to various legislative bodies, in an effort to avoid provoking the ire of voters hostile to the increasingly unpopular United Russia. It extended its patronage to regional elites, guaranteeing them representation in the legislative branch and asking relatively little in return: namely, a promise to back the Kremlin's governors and not to go into opposition. Today, the stakes involved in remaining loyal are much greater and the cost too high for some.

Take Maxim Vasilyev, the Kursk lawmaker who went to Mexico for the New Year holiday and was criticized for doing so by Turchak. Vasilyev hails from a family of major landowners and developers and was elected to the regional legislature as an independent representing a single-member constituency. He responded sharply to Turchak, and that, it would seem, was the end of the story. There are unlikely to be any consequences for the lawmaker, as stripping Vasilyev of his seat would prove difficult and the Kursk elites would not take kindly to sanctions against one of their own.

Then there is the Vologda lawmaker Denis Dolzhenko, who rang in the new year in Dubai. Turchak [demanded](#) his expulsion from United Russia, only to find that he was an independent representing a single-member constituency.

Such public dressings-down, especially at the hands of less authoritative figures, only add to the tensions within the elite. Yet this has not served to moderate the Kremlin's demands. If a year ago it was considered disloyal to protest the invasion, and later to stay silent on the conflict, what arouses suspicion today is insufficient zeal for the war.

The presidential administration is unlikely to make managers and lawmakers of actual soldiers and officers, save for a few token cases. The most cunning careerists, therefore, will appropriate the label of "veteran," earning it through visits to the front lasting only long enough for a photo op. Where before careerists completed training programs for governors and competed in the Leaders of Russia contest, the career pipeline now runs through Ukraine.

Meanwhile, politicians in no hurry to undergo radicalization will find themselves increasingly sidelined. This will first play out at the regional level, but it cannot be ruled out that veterans will also fill open seats in the State Duma and the Federation Council, their elevation owing not to their fitness for office but to the preferences of Putin.

So begins the division of Russia's low- and mid-ranking elites into "veterans," to whom many doors will be open and jobs guaranteed, and everyone else. The former will rise at the expense of "civilians," and many will attain power solely on the basis of their wartime service—which may exist in photos only.

The system's façade of political and managerial competence will irreversibly give way to a mismatched patchwork quilt, sewn in line with the fickle tastes of the president. Side by side with the "veterans" will be the young technocrats and what remains of the alumni of the All-Russia People's Front coalition. It will amount to an exercise in negative selection from which only those willing to do anything to draw the leadership's attention will emerge, while the system continues to deteriorate.

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