

Hiding Russia's Weakness

Nataliya Bugayova and Kateryna Stepanenko

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The Kremlin is projecting the narrative of a powerful Russia and a powerful Russian President Vladimir Putin to conceal the real weaknesses and limitations of Russia's capabilities and distract from Russia's battlefield failures. Putin has long held that the perception of weakness can be lethal in a system built on the premise of strength — a principle that applies to the stability of his regime as well as to Russia's position in the world. The world should not take the Kremlin's displays at face value, but should look past them to the realities of Russia and this war.

The Kremlin is trying to portray the 80th Anniversary Victory Day parade in Moscow on May 9 as a diplomatic success to present Russia as a superpower and Putin as a respected world leader. The Kremlin boasted that senior leaders and representatives of over 20 foreign countries are attending the parade.[1] The Kremlin media particularly celebrated the attendance of People's Republic of China (PRC) President Xi Jinping, Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, and Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic.[2] Kremlin media framed Fico's and Vucic's parade attendance as an act of Slovak and Serbian resistance against the European Union's (EU) "orders" and "threats." [3] Some Kremlin outlets presented Xi's, Vucic's, and Fico's attendance as direct support for Putin.[4]

The parade was hardly a diplomatic success, however, but was instead an attempt to conceal Russia's international isolation, military failures, and domestic problems. The Kremlin only convinced Russia's known allies to attend the parade, while most world leaders refrained from traveling to Moscow. The Kremlin's emphasis on Xi's attendance shows that Russia remains dependent on its relationship with the PRC and that Putin needs great powers to validate his stature as well as to support his war effort. Three years into its war against Ukraine, the Kremlin is unable to protect a parade in Russia's capital from a risk of drone strikes launched from Ukraine — a country over a thousand miles away from Moscow that Russia thought it could conquer in a matter of days in 2022.[5]

The Kremlin hype of the "Victory Day" parades on May 9 is a part of the Kremlin's long-standing effort to conceal and distract from Putin's and Russia's weaknesses. The Kremlin has been focused on concealing Putin's and Russia's weaknesses since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 by portraying Putin as an effective and caring wartime leader and downplaying Russian failures and Ukraine's successes, while exaggerating Russian successes.

The Kremlin's information efforts have helped preserve the regime and support in Russia for the war effort despite Russia's battlefield failings and the enormous cost Putin has imposed on the Russian people. These efforts are not always effective, however, and sometimes highlight the very weaknesses the Kremlin seeks to conceal.

Portraying Putin as an effective wartime leader

Putin has been an ineffective and cautious war leader, failing to achieve almost any of his stated military objectives three years into Russia's war against Ukraine, despite an estimated 900,000 Russians killed and wounded. [6] His forces have not captured Kyiv, as they set out to do in 2022, nor have they captured all of Kherson, Zaporizhia, or Donetsk oblasts. They have been on the offensive for roughly 18

months but have gained only limited territory — and almost no significant settlements — at a staggering cost in casualties and lost materiel. Putin failed to protect Russia's international borders, enabling Ukrainian forces to launch a months-long incursion into Kursk Oblast and to retain a small foothold in neighboring Belgorod Oblast.[7] Putin himself has publicly appeared on the frontlines in occupied Ukraine and Russia's border areas only three times in these three years.[8] Putin has been consistently risk-averse, including by delaying involuntary reserve mobilization.[9] Putin remains sufficiently afraid to push the limits of Russian society's support for the war that he brought North Korean soldiers to repel Ukraine's incursion into Kursk Oblast instead of declaring a renewed involuntary mobilization.[10] Putin has mismanaged Russia's economy, which is suffering from increased war spending, inflation, labor shortages, and reductions in Russia's sovereign wealth fund.[11]

The Kremlin has been working hard to portray Putin as an effective wartime leader despite these realities through staged events and information campaigns.

The Kremlin launched an effort to present Putin as an effective wartime leader after Russian military failures in Fall 2022 and amid growing criticism of Putin and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) among pro-war nationalists. Ukraine routed Russian forces out of Kharkiv Oblast in September 2022 and forced Russia to withdraw from west bank Kherson Oblast including Kherson City in November 2022.[12] These defeats caused hysteria in the Russian information space and sparked growing criticism of the Russian leadership.[13] The Kremlin intensified the effort to portray Putin as an involved wartime leader during this critical period. Putin held a senior-level award ceremony to celebrate the Russian occupation of parts of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts in December 2022.[14] The award ceremony followed Zelensky's visit and presentation of awards to Ukrainian troops serving on the Bakhmut front in December 2022.[15] Putin also delivered an address from the headquarters of the Southern Military District (SMD) — in Russia and not near the front lines — a week later in late December 2022 with Russian military personnel in combat uniforms behind him.[16]

The Kremlin's efforts to portray Putin as an effective wartime leader in late 2022 had mixed success. Russian milbloggers criticized Russian officials for failing to visit the frontlines like Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.[17] Putin's decision to award members of his circle who had not been directly involved in fighting also sparked criticism.[18] Russian milbloggers accused the MoD of performative "reporting" instead of addressing systemic issues with the Russian military, with some milbloggers even calling the MoD the "Russian Ministry of Camouflage Selfies." [19]

Putin made his first public visit to frontline areas in Spring 2023 — over a year after Russia launched its full-scale invasion — to improve his appearance as a wartime leader. Putin visited Mariupol in March 2023, and then the Russian Dnestr Group of Forces in Kherson Oblast and the Vostok National Guard headquarters in occupied Luhansk Oblast in April 2023.[20]

Putin had worked to project strength after Wagner Group's financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's failed mutiny in June 2023. The Wagner Group encircled the SMD headquarters in Rostov-on-Don on the way to Moscow as part of Prigozhin's effort to blackmail Putin into making command changes within the Russian military and the MoD.[21] Kremlin sources complained to Russian opposition outlet *Meduza* that Putin did not personally intervene in stopping the mutiny after recording a vague, televised address and instead relied on Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko to negotiate the resolution of a direct threat to Putin's regime.[22] Putin met with the Russian military leadership at the SMD headquarters in Rostov-on-Don in

August 2023.[23] Putin's visit occurred about two months after the failed mutiny, and he sought to portray himself as in full control of his regime and military following the humiliation of the mutiny and the apparent inability or unwillingness of the Russian military to stop it by force.[24] Putin visited the SMD headquarters again in November 2023, likely to portray himself as an involved wartime leader ahead of the presidential elections in March 2024.[25]

Putin has been trying to portray himself as an effective wartime leader amid Ukraine's incursion into Russia in 2024. Putin first distanced himself from Russia's failures in Kursk Oblast in 2024 and then took credit for Russian advances in 2025. Ukrainian forces launched a surprise incursion into Kursk Oblast on August 6, 2024, advanced over 30 kilometers, and seized the town of Sudzha due to Russia's poor fortifications and lack of experienced border forces.[26] Putin at first tried to shift responsibility for failures in responding to the Ukrainian incursion to other Russian officials.[27] Putin held a meeting in August 2024 with Russian government officials about the situation in Belgorod, Bryansk, and Kursk oblasts.[28] Putin chastised Kursk Oblast Acting Governor Alexei Smirnov for speaking about issues that Putin deemed to be solely under the MoD's purview.[29] The Kremlin published footage of the Bryansk, Belgorod, and Kursk oblasts heads' reporting to Putin about regional issues — likely to publicly depict the regional heads as responsible for these issues and in need of Putin's help.[30]

When Russia seized Sudzha in March 2025, by contrast, Putin visited a Russian military command post in Kursk Oblast for the first time since Ukraine's incursion had begun.[31] Putin was likely trying to include himself among the Russian military-political leaders responsible for Russian advances in Kursk Oblast and portray himself as an effective military commander ahead of the US-Russian talks.[32] Putin wore a military uniform during his visit — he had worn a suit during his 2023 visits to the frontline.

The Kremlin also issues periodic instructions to its media to portray Putin as a strong and decisive leader. Russian opposition outlet *Meduza* reported in November 2024 that the Kremlin issued a manual to pro-Kremlin media with instructions to cover Putin's Valdai Discussion Club statements about US-Russia relations by portraying Putin as the "world's greatest leader" whose deep thinking, "breadth of political thought," and role as the "voice of the global majority and new world order" distinguish him from Western political leaders.[33]

The Kremlin is likely balancing Putin's domestic image against US President Donald Trump's image in Russia. The Kremlin reportedly ordered Russian media to reduce reporting about Trump and portray Putin as a strong and decisive leader after the February 2025 Trump–Putin phone call.[34] *Meduza* reported in February 2025 that the Kremlin instructed Russian state-run and pro-government media outlets to frame Trump and Putin's February 12 call as Putin's "initiative and victory" and to use Trump's name less frequently.[35] *Meduza* reported that the Kremlin was concerned that the Russian public might see Trump as a more "proactive and decisive" leader than Putin. An unnamed political strategist in the Russian Presidential Administration told *Meduza* that the Kremlin did not want the Russian public to perceive Trump as a "strong leader capable of changing the situation" and Putin as a passive or weak leader in comparison.[36]

Putin has also been trying to present himself as equal to Trump and to present Russia as a global power comparable to the United States and as the heir to the Soviet Union's superpower status.[37]

Portraying Putin as a 'caring' wartime leader

Putin seems unconcerned by the estimated 900,000 Russian servicemen killed and wounded in a war in which Putin has so far failed to accomplish almost a single stated objective. Putin continues to develop new ways to punish anyone who speaks out against his war effort and views such people, including members of women's and veterans' movements, as threats to his regime's stability. Putin is afraid of facing societal backlash as bad as or even worse than that experienced by the Soviet Union following its failed invasion of Afghanistan.[38] The Kremlin adopted censorship laws to silence Russian families' and servicemen's appeals to the Kremlin about casualties, poor treatment of Russian servicemen, and lack of promised social and financial compensations.[39] The Kremlin has been cracking down on women-led local protests in Russia.[40] The Kremlin has been intensifying legal punishments for desertion and voluntary surrender since September 2022.[41] The Kremlin is increasingly developing ways to retain mobilized servicemen on the frontlines to prevent thousands of mistreated, battle-hardened veterans from returning to Russian society.[42] Russian military commanders also frequently mistreat Russian servicemen by subjecting them to grinding assaults, failing to provide supplies, and adopting harsh punishments.[43] Putin has neither condemned such abuses nor made any visible efforts to curtail them.

Yet the Kremlin has been trying hard to portray Putin as a gracious leader who cares about the well-being of Russian military personnel, veterans, and their families.

Putin has staged several meetings with Russian women — claimed wives and relatives of Russian servicemen — since March 2022 to feign his concern for the well-being of Russian forces. Putin used a meeting with female aircraft crew members on March 5, 2022, to respond to the ongoing controversy surrounding Russia's illegal use of conscripts at the time.[44] Putin demonstratively responded to a woman's question about rumors surrounding the need for general mobilization and deployment of conscripts to combat with a reassurance that Russia was not considering martial law and involving conscripts in combat. Russian law forbids conscripts from directly participating in combat operations, and the Kremlin's use of conscripts during the invasion of Afghanistan and the Chechen wars led to the formation of women-led human rights movements in Russia in the late 1980s through the early 2000s. Russian women expressed concerns in March 2022 that Russia was once again using conscripts in combat, and this meeting was likely an attempt to alleviate the backlash.

Putin falsely presented a meeting with 18 hand-picked women holding influential positions in the Russian political sphere as an open discussion with the mothers of mobilized personnel in November 2022 to deflect appeals from actual mothers' and wives' groups.[45] The meeting followed Putin's controversial decision to declare partial mobilization in September 2022, during which the Russian MoD mobilized some ineligible men and failed to properly train these men before committing them to the frontlines. Putin pledged to improve conditions for the mobilized, called on Russians to distrust unfavorable media reports surrounding mobilization, and feigned solidarity with the families of soldiers.

Putin met with Russian women affiliated with the Kremlin's Defenders of the Fatherland State Fund in March 2025 to reassure Russian society that Russia does not send conscripts to combat zones.[46] Putin claimed that he is solving issues with social benefits and veteran status for Russian soldiers and offered social support to families of Russian servicemen declared missing in action. The March 2025 meeting came after the Kremlin once again faced backlash for involving conscripts in defending the Kursk Oblast border.

Putin routinely uses staged interactions with Russian servicemen and veterans to legitimize his rule. Putin spoke in December 2023 with Russian military personnel who complained that their military

commanders refused to give them leave. Putin responded by addressing the Russian military command, “Let them rest! The commander has already decided. That’s me.” Putin seemingly spontaneously granted Russian personnel leave to portray himself as an involved wartime leader who responds to his troops’ requests.[47] Putin used an interaction with the then-commander of the Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) “Sparta” Battalion, Artyom Zhoga, in December 2023 to announce his 2024 presidential bid.[48] Zhoga approached Putin following a military award ceremony and claimed that the “people of Donbas” want him to run in the elections. Zhoga has since become the Presidential Representative to the Ural Federal Okrug and a member of the Russian Security Council.[49]

Downplaying Russian Failures and Ukraine’s Successes, while Inflating Russian Successes

Russian military gains have been mediocre compared to the Kremlin’s stated war aims. Russia had not seized any large cities in Ukraine since Summer 2022 and remains unable to make dramatic advances on the battlefield.[50] The Russian gains came at the cost of massive personnel losses.[51] Russia only gained 1,627 square kilometers in Ukraine and Russia’s Kursk Oblast between January and April 2025 at a reported cost of 160,600 casualties.[52] Russian forces occupy around 20 percent of Ukraine. At the current monthly rate of advance in Ukraine, it would take Russian forces over 152 years to capture the remaining 80 percent of Ukraine, if Russia can sustain massive personnel losses indefinitely. Russian victory is thus hardly inevitable.

Ukraine has achieved many successes against a larger and wealthier adversary. Ukraine denied Russia its objective of seizing Kyiv. Ukrainian counteroffensives liberated a significant portion of Kharkiv Oblast and Kherson City in November 2022. Ukraine has driven Russia’s Black Sea Fleet out of the western Black Sea and the occupied ports in Crimea.[53] Ukraine destroyed expensive and hard-to-replace Russian weapon systems with Western weapons and Ukraine’s own low- and medium-cost unmanned systems.[54] Ukraine holds targets deep in the Russian rear at risk through its long-range attack capability. Ukraine stood up large-scale domestic development and production of drones within just three years.[55] Ukraine pioneered the establishment of an Unmanned Systems Forces (USF) command to adapt to the realities of modern warfare, and Russia is trying to catch up to Ukraine’s successful integration of drones into its force structure and on the battlefield.[56]

The Kremlin has focused on downplaying Russian failures and Ukraine’s success, while exaggerating Russian gains to obfuscate these realities. Four examples of many include:

Kherson

Ukraine liberated Kherson City in November 2022. The Kremlin tried to preemptively frame Ukraine’s 2022 counteroffensive in Kherson Oblast as a failure and then downplayed the Russian withdrawal when Ukraine succeeded. The Russian MoD began conducting a narrative campaign to present Ukraine’s counteroffensive as a failure almost as soon as it was announced on August 29.[57] Several Russian milbloggers—even those who have been critical of the Kremlin—promoted this message.[58] Putin likely ordered some of his propagandists to suppress any critiques of the Russian withdrawal from Kherson City. Many Russian state TV news programs omitted or downplayed the withdrawal.[59] The Kremlin staged a televised meeting with then-Commander of the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine, Army General Sergey Surovikin, and former Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu to conceal Putin’s failure in Kherson City.[60] Shoigu ordered the withdrawal of Russian troops across the Dnipro River during the meeting after Surovikin recommended the withdrawal, allowing the Kremlin to blame the withdrawal on Shoigu and Surovikin.[61]

Russia's withdrawal from Kherson City caused an outcry from Russian pro-war nationalists despite the Kremlin's efforts to downplay the setback. The pro-war Russian ideologist Alexander Dugin criticized Putin for failing to uphold Russian ideology by surrendering Kherson City. Dugin said this Russian ideology defines Russia's responsibility to defend "Russian cities" such as Kherson, Belgorod, Kursk, Donetsk, and Simferopol. Dugin noted that an autocrat has a responsibility to save his nation all by himself or face the fate of "king of the rains," a reference to Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, in which a king was killed because he was unable to deliver rain amid a drought. Dugin noted that the autocrat cannot repair this deviation from ideology merely with public appearances.[62]

Crimea

Russian media downplayed Ukraine's attacks on the Kerch Strait Bridge in 2022.[63] *Meduza* reported that the Russian Presidential Administration distributed a guide to Russian mass media on the appropriate way to downplay the damage to the bridge.[64] The Kremlin intensified its efforts to downplay Ukrainian strikes after Ukrainian forces launched successful strikes against the Chonhar Bridge between occupied Crimea and occupied Kherson Oblast in late July and early August 2023.[65] The Ukrainian strike against the bridge on July 29, 2023, outraged the Russian information space. Prominent Russian milbloggers, however, did not comment on subsequent strikes against the bridge on August 7, 2023.[66] Crimean occupation officials began proposing strict regulations and penalties on individuals who publish content revealing the locations and operations of Russian military assets, likely to conceal the impact of Ukrainian strikes.[67]

Kursk

Putin has chosen to downplay Ukraine's incursion in Kursk rather than seeking to use it to mobilize more support for the war. The Kremlin launched a messaging campaign aimed at downplaying the Ukrainian incursion into Kursk Oblast and justifying the prioritization of offensives in eastern Ukraine at the time.[68] The Kremlin did not sufficiently prepare to defend the Russian border with Ukraine before the incursion.[69] The Kremlin could have more effectively addressed the risk of incursion and incursion itself by declaring war, martial law, or mobilization, which would have let the Russian MoD generate manpower and resources to repel the incursion.[70] The Kremlin refrained from doing so in favor of downplaying the incursion — making a choice yet again in favor of preserving the perception of strength rather than addressing Russia's vulnerabilities in the real world.

The Kremlin has simultaneously been trying to present even the smallest gains as grandiose and final Russian victory as inevitable. Putin made a unique televised appearance in January 2023 proclaiming the Russian military's and the Russian MoD's success in seizing the small town of Soledar (northeast of Bakhmut) in Donetsk Oblast.[71] Putin's televised appearance followed shortly after Putin acknowledged in December 2022 that Russia's war in Ukraine was taking longer than he expected, and after the Wagner Group failed to rapidly advance to and seize Bakhmut as expected and, indeed, promised.[72] The Kremlin tried to portray its advances in Donetsk Oblast in September 2024 as dramatic, even as Russian offensive operations in Donetsk Oblast did not portend or cause the collapse of the frontline throughout Ukraine.[73] The Kremlin continues to exaggerate Russia's military strength and tactical battlefield victories to sustain support for its war in Ukraine.[74] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov, for example, falsely claimed in April 2025 that the situation on the ground in Ukraine is different from what it was in March 2022 and that it is "impossible" not to recognize this situation "de facto or de jure." Peskov attempted to create the false impression that Russia is in a stronger position in Spring 2025 than it was in March 2022, even though Russia's battlefield situation has deteriorated

since the initial days of the invasion. Such exaggerations allow the Kremlin to justify the continuation of the war, garner support from the Russian society, and reject ceasefires and territorial concessions.

The Kremlin has been promoting self-censorship among milbloggers who have undermined Kremlin efforts to portray the war in Ukraine as a decisive Russian victory. Russian milbloggers have candidly reported on Russian forces' poor performance in Ukraine and have discussed how the Kremlin has attempted to censor their coverage in Ukraine. The Kremlin has also integrated select milbloggers into its information campaigns to regain a dominant narrative within the information space.[75]

Russian efforts to cover up its weakness have mixed success and often backfire. Russian state media was unprepared to cover the rout of Russian forces from Kharkiv Oblast in Fall 2022. The Russian MoD's inability to admit Russian failures in Kharkiv Oblast and effectively set information conditions led to a crisis in the Russian information space. Kremlin-sponsored TV propagandists offered a wide range of confused explanations for Ukrainian successes, ranging from justifications that Russian forces were fighting against the entire Western Bloc to downplaying the importance of Russian ground lines of communication in Kupyansk, which the counteroffensive liberated.[76] The Kremlin's propagandists were disorganized in their narratives, with some confirming the liberation of certain towns and others refuting such reports.

Conclusion

The Kremlin relies on numerous information efforts to conceal Putin's and Russia's weaknesses. These efforts include but are not limited to grandiose military parades, demonstrative war zone visits, meetings with veterans and their families, and misrepresentation of Russia's battlefield realities. These efforts allow the Kremlin to justify its war efforts in Ukraine, legitimize its rule, and manipulate the Western perception of Russia's capabilities. The abundance and the Kremlin's prioritization of these information efforts, however, reveal that the Kremlin is plagued with military, domestic, and diplomatic weaknesses that it desperately tries to misrepresent and conceal. Western leaders and observers of this war should focus on the realities of the situation on the battlefield and the very real constraints on Russia's capacity to continue to wage war at the current intensity and not be deceived by the Kremlin's efforts to conceal its challenges and flaws.

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