

# The Internal Forces Pushing Putin's Escalation in the War with Ukraine

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Articles & Testimony

## The partial mobilization suggests that he is more afraid of regime hardliners than the Russian public.

**R**ussian President Vladimir Putin's decision (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/putin-ukraine-russia-war-mobilization-troops-manpower-rcna48866>) to greatly escalate his war on Ukraine—his announcement Wednesday of a [partial mobilization of reserves \(https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/putin-announces-partial-mobilization-russian-military-ukraine-war-rcna48585\)](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/putin-announces-partial-mobilization-russian-military-ukraine-war-rcna48585), four sham referendums in partly occupied Ukrainian territories and a [veiled nuclear threat \(https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/nuclear-threat-putin-ukraine-war-bluffing-rcna48713\)](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/nuclear-threat-putin-ukraine-war-bluffing-rcna48713)—reflects his desperation to reverse the advances Ukraine has made in recent weeks. That desperation is likely a result of internal pressure.

Until now, Putin has bent over backward to avoid a [formal mobilization \(https://meduza.io/en/news/2022/09/20/russian-duma-introduces-concepts-of-mobilization-and-martial-law-into-criminal-code-as-well-as-articles-on-looting-and-surrender\)](https://meduza.io/en/news/2022/09/20/russian-duma-introduces-concepts-of-mobilization-and-martial-law-into-criminal-code-as-well-as-articles-on-looting-and-surrender) of the armed forces through calling up former military members and recruiting fresh troops (although informally, the military might have begun to do that as early as April or [May \(https://sofrep.com/news/russia-increases-military-recruitment-of-volunteers-amid-heavy-losses/\)](https://sofrep.com/news/russia-increases-military-recruitment-of-volunteers-amid-heavy-losses/)). Putin has almost certainly obfuscated to avoid domestic backlash. Russians often say to themselves at times of hardship, “just so long as there is no war.” The phrase is a reference to the unhealed trauma of World War II. Putin knew a war would be unpopular and had kept all of his previous military interventions limited before the current invasion of Ukraine.

Until now, Putin has tried to maintain the fiction that the scope of the operation and the scale of the losses were minimal. Only days after entering Ukraine in late February, the Kremlin warned of [prison sentences \(https://urldefense.com/v3/https://www.npr.org/2022/03/05/1084729579/russian-law-bans-journalists-from-calling-ukraine-conflict-a-war-or-an-invasion\\_!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!tMwQ0NHmstVjHR1cp-dYjvHhkYcxZvI2gcth-FFmHuBoOG-175X\\_yAP1YniOef4snzMBHh4S2raJYI31zIfrGvano4it\\$\)](https://urldefense.com/v3/https://www.npr.org/2022/03/05/1084729579/russian-law-bans-journalists-from-calling-ukraine-conflict-a-war-or-an-invasion_!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!tMwQ0NHmstVjHR1cp-dYjvHhkYcxZvI2gcth-FFmHuBoOG-175X_yAP1YniOef4snzMBHh4S2raJYI31zIfrGvano4it$) of up to 15 years for calling it a “war” or an “invasion.” As late as Sept. 13, after the recent Ukrainian counteroffensive in which Ukraine took significant territory back from Russia, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov [said \(https://urldefense.com/v3/https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-peskov-mobilization-ukraine-counteroffensive/32031870.html\\_!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!tMwQ0NHmstVjHR1cp-dYjvHhkYcxZvI2gcth-FFmHuBoOG-175X\\_yAP1YniOef4snzMBHh4S2raJYI31zIfrGo0IZaa7\\$\)](https://urldefense.com/v3/https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-peskov-mobilization-ukraine-counteroffensive/32031870.html_!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!tMwQ0NHmstVjHR1cp-dYjvHhkYcxZvI2gcth-FFmHuBoOG-175X_yAP1YniOef4snzMBHh4S2raJYI31zIfrGo0IZaa7$) “at this point” no discussion of mobilization had taken

place.

What changed? Putin was most likely persuaded by the radical elements within his circle that, given the latest military losses, a drastic escalation was the only way to win the war. And for Putin, winning is the only option. Retreat or compromise is something a Western leader would think about; Russian leaders don't take off-ramps.

As such, the escalation is most significantly a signal to the West. Putin is trying to scare the West into the possibility of a larger war and even the use of nuclear weapons to pressure it to limit its crucial support for Ukraine.

These radical Russian elements have long been pushing for more far-reaching action. Chief among them is [Nikolai Patrushev](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/07/13/nikolai-patrushev-russia-security-council-putin/) (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/07/13/nikolai-patrushev-russia-security-council-putin/>), the powerful Security Council secretary and close Putin ally, who represents the so-called siloviki (a circle of ultranationalists associated with the security services).

Russia expert Mark Galeotti has described Patrushev as “[the most dangerous man in Russia](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://www.buzzsprout.com/1026985/4169738_!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!tMwQ0NHmstVjHR1cp-dYjvHhkYcxZvI2gcth-FFmHuBoOG-175X_yAP1YniOef4snzMBHh4S2raJYI31zIfrGt47FN1X$) ([https://urldefense.com/v3/\\_https://www.buzzsprout.com/1026985/4169738\\_!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!tMwQ0NHmstVjHR1cp-dYjvHhkYcxZvI2gcth-FFmHuBoOG-175X\\_yAP1YniOef4snzMBHh4S2raJYI31zIfrGt47FN1X\\$](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://www.buzzsprout.com/1026985/4169738_!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!tMwQ0NHmstVjHR1cp-dYjvHhkYcxZvI2gcth-FFmHuBoOG-175X_yAP1YniOef4snzMBHh4S2raJYI31zIfrGt47FN1X$))” because he has pushed Putin further toward extremist positions. Patrushev's friendship with Putin goes back to Patrushev's career as a KGB officer in Leningrad, and experts say Patrushev has had Putin's ear for years. Indeed, [Galeotti notes](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://www.moscowtimes.ru/2022/05/05/vechnaya-voina-s-zapadom-kak-siloviki-prodvigayut-usilenie-voennoi-agressii-cherez-smi-a20142_!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!tMwQ0NHmstVjHR1cp-dYjvHhkYcxZvI2gcth-FFmHuBoOG-175X_yAP1YniOef4snzMBHh4S2raJYI31zIfrGsIIgp7b$) ([https://urldefense.com/v3/\\_https://www.moscowtimes.ru/2022/05/05/vechnaya-voina-s-zapadom-kak-siloviki-prodvigayut-usilenie-voennoi-agressii-cherez-smi-a20142\\_!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!tMwQ0NHmstVjHR1cp-dYjvHhkYcxZvI2gcth-FFmHuBoOG-175X\\_yAP1YniOef4snzMBHh4S2raJYI31zIfrGsIIgp7b\\$](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://www.moscowtimes.ru/2022/05/05/vechnaya-voina-s-zapadom-kak-siloviki-prodvigayut-usilenie-voennoi-agressii-cherez-smi-a20142_!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!tMwQ0NHmstVjHR1cp-dYjvHhkYcxZvI2gcth-FFmHuBoOG-175X_yAP1YniOef4snzMBHh4S2raJYI31zIfrGsIIgp7b$)), in a [lengthy interview](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://rg.ru/2022/04/26/patrushev-zapad-sozdal-imperiu-lzhi-predpolagaiushchuiu-unichtozhenie-rossii.html_!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!tMwQ0NHmstVjHR1cp-dYjvHhkYcxZvI2gcth-FFmHuBoOG-175X_yAP1YniOef4snzMBHh4S2raJYI31zIfrGlr1_1Rd$) ([https://urldefense.com/v3/\\_https://rg.ru/2022/04/26/patrushev-zapad-sozdal-imperiu-lzhi-predpolagaiushchuiu-unichtozhenie-rossii.html\\_!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!tMwQ0NHmstVjHR1cp-dYjvHhkYcxZvI2gcth-FFmHuBoOG-175X\\_yAP1YniOef4snzMBHh4S2raJYI31zIfrGlr1\\_1Rd\\$](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://rg.ru/2022/04/26/patrushev-zapad-sozdal-imperiu-lzhi-predpolagaiushchuiu-unichtozhenie-rossii.html_!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!tMwQ0NHmstVjHR1cp-dYjvHhkYcxZvI2gcth-FFmHuBoOG-175X_yAP1YniOef4snzMBHh4S2raJYI31zIfrGlr1_1Rd$)) to the Russian government outlet Rossiyskaya Gazeta in May, Patrushev ultimately calls for Russia to begin a full-scale war. That requires complete mobilization—as well as total state control of the Russian economy.

This past month, other ultranationalist voices have joined in renewed calls for mobilization as well. One prime example is Igor Girkin (aka Strelkov), a former Russian intelligence officer who played a key role in annexing Crimea from Ukraine and the subsequent fighting in Ukraine's Donbas region in the east in 2014. Girkin has consistently criticized the Russian Defense Ministry's handling of the war since the start of the invasion. “If our Kremlin elders do not change their tactics, we will be seeing catastrophic defeats,” [he said earlier this month](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/08/we-have-already-lost-far-right-russian-bloggers-slam-kremlin-over-army-response_!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!tMwQ0NHmstVjHR1cp-dYjvHhkYcxZvI2gcth-FFmHuBoOG-175X_yAP1YniOef4snzMBHh4S2raJYI31zIfrGt0M6s8I$) ([https://urldefense.com/v3/\\_https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/08/we-have-already-lost-far-right-russian-bloggers-slam-kremlin-over-army-response\\_!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!tMwQ0NHmstVjHR1cp-dYjvHhkYcxZvI2gcth-FFmHuBoOG-175X\\_yAP1YniOef4snzMBHh4S2raJYI31zIfrGt0M6s8I\\$](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/08/we-have-already-lost-far-right-russian-bloggers-slam-kremlin-over-army-response_!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!tMwQ0NHmstVjHR1cp-dYjvHhkYcxZvI2gcth-FFmHuBoOG-175X_yAP1YniOef4snzMBHh4S2raJYI31zIfrGt0M6s8I$)).

More explicitly, Chechnya strongman and [close Putin ally Ramzan Kadyrov](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/18/the-real-role-of-pro-russian-chechens-in-ukraine) (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/18/the-real-role-of-pro-russian-chechens-in-ukraine>), whose troops have been fighting in Ukraine, said in a [Telegram post](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/11/kadyrov-criticises-russias-stunning-setback-in-ukraine_!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!tMwQ0NHmstVjHR1cp-dYjvHhkYcxZvI2gcth-FFmHuBoOG-175X_yAP1YniOef4snzMBHh4S2raJYI31zIfrGrXtfawD$) ([https://urldefense.com/v3/\\_https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/11/kadyrov-criticises-russias-stunning-setback-in-ukraine\\_!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!tMwQ0NHmstVjHR1cp-dYjvHhkYcxZvI2gcth-FFmHuBoOG-175X\\_yAP1YniOef4snzMBHh4S2raJYI31zIfrGrXtfawD\\$](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/11/kadyrov-criticises-russias-stunning-setback-in-ukraine_!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!tMwQ0NHmstVjHR1cp-dYjvHhkYcxZvI2gcth-FFmHuBoOG-175X_yAP1YniOef4snzMBHh4S2raJYI31zIfrGrXtfawD$)) on Sept. 10: “If today or tomorrow changes are not made in the conduct of the special military operation, I will be forced to go to the country's leadership to explain to them the situation on the ground.” Days later, he [called for mobilization](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-chechnya-fall-mobilization-troops-russia-setback/32035516.html_!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!tMwQ0NHmstVjHR1cp-dYjvHhkYcxZvI2gcth-FFmHuBoOG-175X_yAP1YniOef4snzMBHh4S2raJYI31zIfrGv_imxSi$) ([https://urldefense.com/v3/\\_https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-chechnya-fall-mobilization-troops-russia-setback/32035516.html\\_!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!tMwQ0NHmstVjHR1cp-dYjvHhkYcxZvI2gcth-FFmHuBoOG-175X\\_yAP1YniOef4snzMBHh4S2raJYI31zIfrGv\\_imxSi\\$](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-chechnya-fall-mobilization-troops-russia-setback/32035516.html_!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!tMwQ0NHmstVjHR1cp-dYjvHhkYcxZvI2gcth-FFmHuBoOG-175X_yAP1YniOef4snzMBHh4S2raJYI31zIfrGv_imxSi$)).

As Alexey Kovalev, investigative editor at Meduza [has written](https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/09/12/russia-ukraine-war-defeat-opposition-putin-stab-in-the-back-conspiracy-theory-far-right/) (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/09/12/russia-ukraine-war-defeat-opposition-putin-stab-in-the-back-conspiracy-theory-far-right/>) for Foreign Policy, a protest movement of hardliners calling for escalation has largely gone unchecked in its criticism of how Russia's leadership has handled the war, although it still has mostly avoided criticizing Putin directly. Unlike other Russians, these hardliners have routinely referred to the conflict as a war.

Against this backdrop, the [Kremlin warned critics](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/kremlin-warning-to-critics-of-russian-armys-losses-in-ukraine-22qm0s56z_!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!tMwQ0NHmstVjHR1cp-) ([https://urldefense.com/v3/\\_https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/kremlin-warning-to-critics-of-russian-armys-losses-in-ukraine-22qm0s56z\\_!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!tMwQ0NHmstVjHR1cp-](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/kremlin-warning-to-critics-of-russian-armys-losses-in-ukraine-22qm0s56z_!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!tMwQ0NHmstVjHR1cp-)

[dYjvHhkYcxZvI2gcth-FFmHuBoOG-175X\\_yAP1YniOef4snzMBHh4S2raJYI31zIfrGn4uUNsj\\$](#)) in recent days to be “very careful.” For the first time, that caution appears to be directed toward hardliners rather than liberal anti-war critics.

Putin’s resort to partial mobilization suggests that he’s more afraid of regime hardliners than his own public. The growing criticism means the more extreme elements of his supporters could turn against him and threaten his hold on power in a way the public could not because the hardliners have ties to the security services and are more likely to use violence to achieve their aims.

In late 1999, Putin wrote a [long essay](#)

<https://urldefense.com/v3/https://pages.uoregon.edu/kimball/Putin.htm> [:!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!tMwQ0NHmstVjHR1cp-dYjvHhkYcxZvI2gcth-FFmHuBoOG-175X\\_yAP1YniOef4snzMBHh4S2raJYI31zIfrGvK794HB\\$](https://pages.uoregon.edu/kimball/Putin.htm)) titled “Russia at the Turn of the Millennium” in which he lamented Russia’s loss of international standing and expressed the fear of Russia losing its unity. Indeed, this fear has consistently stood in the backdrop—and often the forefront—of his thinking over the years. Ironically, Putin’s decisions may ultimately bring about the very thing he sought to prevent.

The West, for its part, needs to remember that this is not the first time Putin has issued nuclear threats, and while it would be irresponsible to dismiss it, giving in to blackmail carries its own repercussions. Right now, the Russian military is in no condition to fight NATO, and it is unclear to what extent the partial mobilization will [solve Russia’s military problems](#) <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/putin-ukraine-russia-war-mobilization-troops-manpower-rcna48866>). Moreover, the finger on the nuclear button is still that of Vladimir Putin rather than Patrushev or other hardliners.

At the same time, the Ukrainians, the most likely victims of any tactical Russian nuclear strike, remain committed to fighting despite the risk. It is now more important than ever to provide them with the support they need. The fight is not only about Ukraine alone: For Putin and the hardliners alike, it’s about the West.

In their view, the West aims to weaken—if not destroy—Russia, while the Ukrainian government is a puppet of the United States. They’re waging this war to preserve Russia’s right to an imperial sphere of influence, its ability to behave outside internationally accepted norms, and its alternative to the rules-based global order in which small states have as much sovereignty as large states and there is a limit to what a government can do to its citizens. The future of the liberal world order is at stake.

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