



Putin's Victory Day Speech Forgoes an Opportunity to Escalate Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

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May 9, 2022

Key Takeaways:

- **Russian President Vladimir Putin used his May 9 speech to praise ongoing Russian efforts in Ukraine and reinforce existing Kremlin framing rather than announcing a change. He did not announce an escalation or declare victory in the Russian war in Ukraine.**
- **Putin likely calculated that he could not ask the Russian population for a greater commitment to the war effort and implicitly reassured the Russian people that he would not ask for a greater societal commitment in his speech.**
- **Putin may be recognizing the growing risks he faces at home and in Ukraine and may be adjusting his objectives, and his desired end state in Ukraine, accordingly.**
- **The Kremlin has already scaled down its objectives in Ukraine (from its initial objective of capturing Kyiv and full regime change) and will likely do so again—or be forced to do so by Ukrainian battlefield successes.**
- **Regardless of any change—or lack thereof—in the Kremlin's objectives, Putin's speech indicates that the Kremlin has likely decided to maintain its current level of resourcing in the war.**
- **The Kremlin attempted to demonstrate the alleged popularity of its occupation of eastern Ukraine through forced Victory Day celebrations in occupied Ukrainian territories.**

Russian President Vladimir Putin used his May 9 speech to praise ongoing Russian efforts in Ukraine and reinforce existing Kremlin framing rather than announce a change. He did not announce an escalation or declare victory in the Russian war in Ukraine.¹ May 9, Victory Day, is Russia's most important patriotic holiday and commemorates the Soviet victory in the Second World War, known in Russia as the Great Patriotic War. Putin's much-anticipated speech was a ready-made opportunity for him to alter the Kremlin's current framing of the war in Ukraine or announce a policy change. Putin had three general options for his Victory Day address: declare some sort of Russian victory, make a policy change to ramp up the war effort in some way (such as by calling for a larger-scale mobilization or formally declaring war on Ukraine), or what he chose—to pursue a steady state narrative and reinforce the Kremlin's existing framing (and resourcing) of the war.

Many Western officials and analysts speculated that Putin would formally declare war on Ukraine to enable a larger-scale mobilization.² Instead, the Kremlin's framing of Victory Day celebrations reiterated existing

Kremlin justifications for the war and drew on purported historical parallels between the Second World War and the Kremlin's framing of its invasion of Ukraine. Putin reinforced each of the Kremlin's core (and patently false) narratives attempting to justify its unprovoked invasion of Ukraine: that Ukraine is a Nazi state; that the United States and NATO refused to acknowledge Russia's security concerns and provoked the war; and that the Ukrainian government was preparing an imminent attack and genocide against Russian speakers in eastern Ukraine. He did not introduce any new justifications for the conflict, nor did he ask for a greater commitment from the Russian military or population.

Putin bizarrely framed Nazi Germany and modern-day Ukraine as equal Nazi threats to Russia's security. He relied heavily on present-tense language as he congratulated servicemembers who fought in World War 2 and who "these days ... are fighting for our people in Donbas. For the security of our Motherland—Russia." Putin celebrated the participation of "fighters of different nationalities" and "the great, indestructible strength of our united multinational people," recognizing the Russian proxy fighters from the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics and implicitly recognizing fighters from other Russian proxy separatist regions like South Ossetia.

Putin implicitly reassured the Russian population that he would not ask them for a greater commitment to the war effort. Putin likely calculates that he cannot ask the Russian people to mobilize without triggering a destabilizing backlash against his regime. Putin could have used Victory Day as a rallying cry to declare a larger mobilization. However, backlash from large-scale mobilization could destabilize Putin's regime, whereas current levels of commitment appear to be acceptable to the Russian population—or at least generating controllable levels of discontent. Public opinion polling from Russia's independent Levada Center in mid-April indicated that 80% of Russians supported Russia's military activities in Ukraine, but only 50% strongly supported the war, and 31% of all Russians felt "anxiety, fear, and horror" relating to the invasion.³ Western sanctions will likely increasingly impact Russian citizens in the coming months, limiting the enthusiasm of the general population to make greater sacrifices for the war effort. Putin likely also faces internal discontent from Russian elites and security forces, and the war has degraded the military that would defend his regime from large-scale domestic unrest.⁴ Putin likely factored these calculations into his decision to pursue a steady-state approach to the war, rather than an escalatory mobilization.

The Kremlin also attempted to demonstrate the alleged popularity of its occupation of eastern Ukraine through contrived Victory Day celebrations in occupied Ukrainian territories. Russian forces and occupation officials likely compelled Ukrainian civilians to participate in Victory Day events across occupied Ukraine in parallel with over 15,000 Victory Day events across the Russian Federation.⁵ Events in occupied territories included commemorative ceremonies, broadcasts of Putin's parade and speech in Moscow, and Immortals Regiment marches commemorating veterans of the Second World War.⁶ Occupation authorities in Kherson claimed that they prevented multiple "provocations" and established checkpoints around the city to prevent Ukrainian counter-demonstrations.⁷ The Ukrainian Armed Forces General Staff reported that Russian forces seized the personal identification documents of civilians in occupied Zaporizhia and promised to return the documents only if those civilians attended the demonstrations.⁸ Ukrainian media reported that Russian forces brought people from Crimea and Luhansk to participate in a Victory Day event in Melitopol, and the Ukrainian mayor of Melitopol denied that any Melitopol residents participated in the event.⁹

Putin may be recognizing the growing risks he faces at home and in Ukraine and may be adjusting his objectives, and his desired end state in Ukraine, accordingly. Putin may still announce a full or partial mobilization in the future and has not given up his ability to do so. May 9 would have been an opportune time to announce a new policy or declare victory in Ukraine, but the Kremlin was certainly not bound to this

date. Putin may also pursue a more covert mobilization, such as forcing conscripts into contract soldier positions or forcing public servants into conscription, to avoid the likely backlash to a larger-scale mobilization effort.

The Kremlin has already scaled down its objectives in Ukraine (from its initial objective of capturing Kyiv and full regime change) and will likely do so again—or be forced to do so by Ukrainian battlefield successes. Putin will likely seek the complete occupation and securitization of Ukraine’s Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and large swathes of southern Ukraine, including Mariupol, Zaporizhia, and Kherson, which Russia may then annex. The Kremlin will likely announce sham referendums calling for the independence or ascension to Russia of Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories in the coming weeks. The fact that the Kremlin has not yet done so suggests that it may still hope to gain additional territory in Ukraine, or that it has not yet achieved sufficient securitization of occupied areas.

Regardless of any change—or lack thereof—in the Kremlin's objectives, Putin’s speech indicates that the Kremlin has likely decided to maintain its current level of resourcing in the war. That level of investment is unlikely to be sufficient to achieve the Kremlin’s objectives for the current, second phase of the war (capturing the entirety of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts and holding its occupied territory in southern Ukraine). However, it is unclear if the Kremlin understands that reality, and the war remains likely to protract.

¹ <http://kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/68366>

² <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/putin-planned-russias-victory-day-rcna27462>

³ <https://www.npr.org/2022/04/18/1093282038/russia-war-public-opinion-polling>; <https://www.levada.ru/en/2022/04/11/the-conflict-with-ukraine/>

⁴ <https://www.ft.com/content/7a63fc25-2e34-4030-b957-81a1500b7012>; <https://www.vox.com/22961563/putin-russia-ukraine-coup-revolution-invasion>; <https://www.cnn.com/2022/04/29/europe/russian-oligarchs-suicides-intl/index.html>

⁵ <https://tass dot ru/obschestvo/14584655>;

⁶ <https://tass dot ru/obschestvo/14582197>; https://riafan dot ru/23189040-zhiteli_osvobodzhennogo_energodara_smotryat_translyatsiyu_parada_pobedi_v_moskve;

⁷ <https://tass dot ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/14582825>; https://www.cnn.com/europe/live-news/russia-ukraine-war-news-05-07-22/h_b8cec20608d2cf2b72ab6f785882341e

⁸ <https://www.unian dot net/war/voyna-v-ukraine-2022-okkupanty-otbirayut-dokumenty-u-ukraincev-novosti-vtorzheniya-rossii-na-ukrainu-11818641.html>

⁹ <https://hromadske dot ua/posts/mer-melitopolya-zayaviv-sho-zhiteli-ne-svyatkuyut-9-travnnya-z-okupantami-propagandistski-zmi-povidomlyayut-pro-urochistosti>; <https://www dot unian.net/war/9-maya-rf-svezla-v-melitopol-tsyachi-lyudey-iz-kryma-i-luganska-foto-novosti-vtorzheniya-rossii-na-ukrainu-11819592.html>