

## **The Russian Radical Right and the War in Ukraine: A Zealous Avant Garde, Dissident Voices, and Their Audience**

[Marlene Laruelle](#)

Ph.D., Research Professor, Director of the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies ([IERES](#)), co-Director of [PONARS Eurasia](#), and Director of the [Illiberalism Studies Program](#) at The George Washington University.

June 15, 2022

With the term “Russian Radical Right,” I refer to all those who position themselves to the right of the current regime and have complained about its lack of resolve on matters of national identity or conservative values. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has been met with exaltation by a large part of the Russian Radical Right, which has long been calling for such an action. Yet this is not the only perspective on the war to be found on the Radical Right: even as many figures position themselves as the foremost advocates of the war, others are being more cautious and critical of the Kremlin’s management of the “special operation,” and a few isolated individuals have even refused to embrace the conflict. The war also seems to have opened new avenues for the Russian Radical Right to be heard by public opinion, as their websites and social media platforms have seen greater engagement, but this may be a short-term effect of the catharsis created by the first months of the war.

### **The Avant Garde: Zealous Demonstrations of Loyalty**

The main nationalist or radical right-wing figures have been [celebrating](#) Russia’s engagement in war. Among them are the fascist geopolitician Alexander Dugin; the Stalinist publicist Yegor Kholmogorov; the aging editor Alexander Prokhanov, a key figure of the 1990s “red-brown” coalition; and the writer Zakhar Prilepin, who has been leading (or at least claims to have been leading) one of the volunteer battalions of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic.

All have embraced the “special operation” as the long-awaited moment of Russia’s revenge on the West and on Ukraine. Equally, each has included some personal elements in his narrative. Dugin, always a fervent supporter of eschatological thinking, has been venerating the [final war](#) (*Endkrieg*) between Western and Russian civilizations and the victory of the “solar” Putin, ready to take on his world mission, over the “lunar” Putin, who was too submissive to the West. Kholmogorov and Prokhanov have been explaining why Ukraine does not exist as a nation and is part of Russian civilization, employing different historical arguments that refer to the imperial period or the Soviet decades. Prilepin, for his part, has sought to glorify the war in itself and the idea of regeneration through violence.

### **The Critical Followers: Iconic Warlord Igor Strelkov**

Igor Strelkov (Girkin), the most famous warlord of the 2014 Donbas secessionism, is emblematic of a second trend: fervent support of the war in parallel with criticism of the way Russia is fighting on the ground.

Strelkov has never hidden his support for monarchism and his nostalgia for the former tsarist empire. In the late perestroika period, he became a member of the military history club *Markovtsy*, which specializes in reenactments of the operations of White General Sergey Markov (1878–1918) and the First Infantry Division of the White Volunteer Army. Since his return from Donbas in the summer of 2014, Strelkov has found himself in semi-legal opposition to the regime. Although he tried to [capitalize](#) on his war prestige, he failed to build a new institutional or party niche for himself and has remained a quite solitary figure.

With Russia's new invasion of Ukraine, Strelkov hoped that the Kremlin would complete what he sees as the job left unfinished since 2014: conquering the whole of Ukraine. On his Telegram channel, he dreams of a radical political solution that would see Ukraine divided into two entities— Novorossiia (the eastern and southern territories of Ukraine) and Malorossiia (the rest of Ukraine)—both of which would then be incorporated into Russia. As a less compelling solution, he proposed the establishment of a friendly regime in Kyiv that would bring Ukraine into a Union with Russia akin to the one that already exists between Russia and Belarus.

But as a military expert and an experienced soldier (he has fought in all the secessionist conflicts in the post-Soviet space over the last thirty years), Strelkov rapidly became critical of the Russian army's strategic mistakes, and particularly of Minister of Defense Sergey Shoigu. He has therefore found himself in the paradoxical position of being among the unabashed partisans of destroying Ukraine while at the same time questioning the abilities of the Russian leadership, for which he has drawn criticism from official figures.

### **The Refusers: The Rare Nationalist Figures Criticizing the War**

While extreme support for the war has been the dominant tone, some dissonant voices have nevertheless been heard. Among these is that of Natalia Poklonskaya, the muse of Russian monarchism and nostalgia for the last tsar, Nicholas II. Originally from Ukraine, she became the face of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 when she resigned from her position as Procurator of Crimea under Ukrainian legislation to become the Procurator of a Russia-annexed Crimea. As a Duma MP between 2016 and 2021, she was known for her monarchist statements, making her a rare female hero to nationalist-minded groups. Since early 2022 she served as deputy head of Rossotrudnichestvo, the state agency for international humanitarian cooperation and compatriots, but was dismissed in June after her critical comments on the war.

In a long YouTube [interview](#) with the journalist Katerina Gordeeva on March 31, Poklonskaya expressed her disagreement with the war, stating—courageously in the current Russian context—that “Ukrainians are another nation.” She explained that already during Maidan, she realized that Ukrainians had gone a different way from Russia and wanted their own state. Identifying herself

as Ukrainian by origin and Russian by citizenship, she sees the war as a terrible drama that is destroying the future of the relationship between the two countries.

Another figure famous on Russian talk shows for his vocal support of a more assertive regime is the film producer Karen Shakhnazarov, now director of the state agency Mosfilm. In an appearance on the most famous Russian talk show, Sunday Evening with Vladimir Soloviev, however, he dared to [describe](#) the “special operation” as a mistake and called for it to be stopped as soon as possible. He also stated that Moscow should recognize Ukraine as an independent nation and should limit itself to protecting the Donbas region.

Some of these anti-war positions have implicit or explicit Slavophile or pan-Slavist tones: it is, the argument goes, precisely because of Russia’s close historical and cultural proximity with Ukraine that Russia should respect Ukrainians’ will to be their own nation. This provides a nuanced dissociation between a pan-Slavism respectful of other Slavic nations’ identity and what we could call Putin’s “East-Slavic supremacism,” arguing of Ukraine’s non-existence as a nation.

### **What Audience for the Russian Radical Right?**

The war atmosphere has boosted the audience of Russian Radical Right platforms. As we can see from Table 1, all websites, television channels, and Telegram channels saw rapid growth in viewers/subscribers/readers between February and March 2022, followed by a slower increase in April.

The most impressive growth has come on Strelkov’s Telegram channel, which has increased its audience by more than 300 percent (and now stands, in mid-May, at 362,000 followers), not so much because of its ideological content as because it is one of the most informed insider channels on the failures and successes of the Russian army on the Ukrainian battlefield.

Other platforms have been growing more modestly during the war, expanding their audiences by between 20 and 40 percent. These include Dugin’s channel; Prokhanov’s newspaper *Zavtra*, the readership of which has grown only very marginally; as well as the Russian Popular Line ([ruskline.ru](http://ruskline.ru)), the monarchism movement celebrating the last Romanovs and the Black Hundreds. Their lack of success compared to others highlights how little relevance they have in today’s political context.

For their part, Konstantin Malofeev’s media projects—such as Tsargrad and Katekhon—have achieved much higher growth (more than 100 percent), meaning that the narrative they have crafted seems better able to meet the audience’s needs. The same is true of Yegor Kholmogorov’s platforms.

I added to the list of Russian Right platforms the channel Zvezda, controlled by the Russian Ministry of Defense, as well as Spas, founded by the Russian Orthodox Church. As Table 1 shows, they have both benefitted significantly—and even more than other platforms—from the

confrontational context. This seems to confirm that state-related media structures have been the main beneficiaries of the war.

**Table 1. Increase in audience size of Russian Right platforms**

Telegram Channels	Subscribers February 2022	Subscribers March 2022	Subscribers April 2022	Percentage Increase
Gazeta_Zavtra	5,378	5,996	6,492	20%
Tsargradtv	31,215	55,522	74,429	138%
DuginChannel	3,925	5,297	5,679	44%
StrelkovII	76,673	203,027	316,943	313%
holmogortalks	13,190	25,351	28,709	117%
RUkatehon	2,298	5,944	6,588	186%
ruskline_ru	1,038	1,372	1,446	39%
Spastv	5,015	32,587	35,468	607%
tv_zvezda	3,157	7,212	8,431	167%

Webpages	Visits February 2022	Visits March 2022	Visits April 2022	Percentage Increase
tsargrad.tv	41,151,625	68,649,559	63,230,253	53%
katehon.com	163,729	271,876	No data	66% for March
ruskline.ru	436,560	703,281	531,071	21%
tvzvezda.ru	6,004,945	14,581,107	10,608,084	142% for March
spastv.ru	304,929	442,308	No data	45%

Source: Author's compilation from the Integrum database

## Conclusion

While a large part of the Russian population seems to support the “special operation” passively, seeking to protect its private life from any state encroachment and trying to avoid looking too closely at what is happening in Ukraine, a minority has been mobilized by the conflict. This minority has found comfort in reading media that make even more radical statements than the ones available on state channels, which already engage in extensive propaganda. It would be fascinating to see whether the readership of the Russian Right as it appears from the numbers in Figure 1 overlaps with the general audience of state media (people may simultaneously watch state channels and look for more nationalist/conservative narratives on other platforms)—and if so, to what extent—or whether they constitute a specific audience niche that distrusts state media (we could see such a gap, for instance, with regard to pandemic, lockdown, and vaccination strategies, as right-wing websites expressed criticism of state policies).

It also remains to be seen if this wave of interest in more radical narratives is here to stay or was the one-time product of the shock of the beginning of the war and will not result in more long-term support. It seems indeed that the Russian public opinion is [getting tired](#) of the war. In any case, the Russian Right has been capitalizing on the post-February 24 atmosphere and now finds itself in a new favorable environment for promoting its radical worldviews.

Given that Moscow has decided to pursue more modest goals of conquest following its early epic defeats, one may wonder when the Kremlin will no longer feel at ease in its partnership with a Russian Right too radical in its statements and now disappointed by the reality of a long, boring war of attrition. A similar situation occurred in 2014, when Moscow decided to scale down the Radical Right's enthusiasm for Donbas and prevent many of its leading figures from being given the floor on television so as not to stir up too much passion, and in 2017, when the film *Matilda* generated violence by Orthodox fundamentalists. The war is obviously on a different scale, but the Kremlin's pattern of keeping public passions under control may remain in place. The answer is likely to be found by looking at the position, within Putin's inner circle, of the political patrons and financial backers of the Radical Right.