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Escalation of Rhetoric: The European Track of the Kremlin's Domestic Propaganda

How the Kremlin propaganda escalates the narrative of an inevitable war with Europe

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In July, Kremlin officials, propagandists, and pro-war Z-bloggers almost simultaneously intensified their rhetoric on “Western aggression,” ranging from threats of nuclear confrontation to accusations that Europe is preparing for war against Russia.

Yet the more intensively the Kremlin exploits these narratives, the more visible the gap becomes between this rhetoric and the actual mood of Russian society, which is growing less receptive to what is presented as patriotic mobilization.

Key topics:

1. Russian Officials: A Steady Course Toward Escalation

2. A Gap in Perceptions: Domestic Propaganda vs. Public Opinion

3. Z-Community: “Europe Is Being Prepared for War”

Executive Summary

In July, the Kremlin's escalatory rhetoric intensified sharply. Members of the security bloc and the foreign policy establishment (Lavrov, Patrushev, Naryshkin, Ushakov, and the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) via its press service) advanced, almost in unison, a pairing of two narratives: that of "**Western aggression against Russia in the making,**" extending as far as nuclear confrontation, and that of "**Western and Ukrainian responsibility for escalation and for derailing peace.**"

Within these statements, the nuclear factor occupies a special place: accusations that Europeans are driving nuclear escalation are growing louder, while talk of Russia's readiness to use nuclear weapons in the event of "a threat to the state's existence" is becoming more frequent.

Amid mounting domestic problems, the escalation in official rhetoric effectively serves three interconnected purposes: (1) raising the rhetorical stakes toward the West and backing Kremlin demands with threats, against the backdrop of a deteriorating external position for Russia, as Washington itself has begun to acknowledge the effectiveness of Ukrainian strikes on Russian territory; (2) diverting Russian society's attention from mounting domestic problems through a "besieged fortress" logic, redirecting discontent toward Kyiv and the "collective West standing behind Kyiv"; and[3] publicly demonstrating a readiness to continue the Special Military Operation despite public demand to the contrary and a worsening domestic situation.

At the same time, a broad escalation appears to have been postponed at least until the parliamentary elections in mid-September, even as the risks of limited hybrid operations persist: in the run-up to the election, the Kremlin is deliberately avoiding unpopular decisions so as not to complicate what it wants to be a tightly controlled, trouble-free campaign.

This buffer, however, does not hold up against external strikes that damage the government's reputation and popularity, forcing the Kremlin to adapt to new conditions: it has become known

that United Russia's internal KPI targets have been lowered from 55% support and 50% turnout (as of March) to 45% support at the same turnout (as of July)[1]. Given this highly unstable situation inside Russia, forecasting escalation scenarios is all but impossible, since the Kremlin sees no other options for its own survival.

The security bloc and the traditional foreign policy establishment stand at the forefront of these escalatory narratives: on July 22, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov threatened Europe with "unconventional war," having accused Europeans, in a policy article published a few days earlier, of "dreams of expansion" and of seeking nuclear war. Former Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev compared the Baltic states to "mice pulling at the whiskers of a cat with nuclear claws." On July 6, the SVR accused London of organizing a terrorist attack on a museum in Sevastopol, and on July 20 it accused Germany of developing nuclear weapons.

Shortly before that, presidential press secretary Dmitry Peskov had named not only Europe but also Washington among Russia's adversaries, calling the Special Military Operation a "real war," "behind which stand Berlin, Paris, The Hague, Oslo, and, regrettably, the United States," and on July 9 separately stated that "further escalation will only prolong the SMO." The narrative framework for all these statements had already been set a month earlier, on June 23, by Putin himself:

> "The West creates threats, forcing Russia to defend itself, and then accuses Russia of aggression."

Against this backdrop, the threat of hybrid escalation from Russia, according to numerous leaks, is visibly growing: Reuters sources describe "a 'high probability' of escalation in the coming months"[2]; Bloomberg reports[3] a hardening of the Kremlin's position on returning some occupied territories, which it reportedly plans to turn into "buffer zones"; Forbes[4] states that "Russia's drone force is getting ready to pivot for a war with the West," while Polish[5] and Lithuanian[6]

authorities have repeatedly warned of a high risk of hybrid provocations by Moscow.

In parallel, a hybrid war by Russia and Belarus against Latvia is intensifying ahead of parliamentary elections: on July 17, Latvian border guards recorded 111 attempted illegal border crossings from Belarus, while in neighboring Lithuania, whose border with Belarus is nearly four times longer, only two such attempts were registered on that same day[7]. Most of those detained, according to Prime Minister Andris Kulbergs,

> "were young men with criminal records"[8].

Yet propagandistic and hybrid escalation is resonating increasingly poorly with public sentiment, even though the theme of "Europe preparing for war with Russia" remains the second most prominent topic in domestic propaganda after the SMO. According to June data[9] from the independent Levada Center, 64% of Russians favor moving to peace talks (up 4 p.p. over the month), while the share of those who do not support the actions of Russian forces has reached a record 24% since 2022.

The growth of the "pro-peace" group is driven above all by fatigue: as early as a March poll[10] on the motives of those favoring negotiations, fatigue and a desire for peace together accounted for 50% of responses, up 21 p.p. over the year.

Despite the summer vacations of leading propagandists Vladimir Solovyov and Dmitry Kiselyov, the most aggressive escalation propaganda continues to run on national television, which remains a source of information for 56% of Russians[11]. On July 19, for example, Channel One framed the summit of the "Coalition of the Willing" simultaneously as a sign of European disunity and of Europe's desire for "more blood," stating that

> "the instigator of the project, Macron, plainly dreams that Europe will continue down the path of confrontation, and calls on everyone else to wake up. [...] Europeans are preparing their own citizens for protracted confrontation with Russia."

That same day, special correspondent Mikhail Antonov of the channel Russia 1, reporting directly from Berlin, stated that "Europeans still believe Russia will not retaliate against them. This belief is ineradicable in them. It makes them insolent," claiming that von der Leyen is turning Europe into "an industrial base for war with Russia," and that Merz is prepared to "do absolutely anything with regard to Russia."

Yet the potential to whip up a new wave of war hysteria in society, this time over Europe, has clearly been largely exhausted: willingness to use nuclear weapons is above average among television viewers (34% versus 29% nationwide[12]), but the nationwide figure itself remains below 2024 levels (34–39%), and the share of those who believe the war could escalate into a conflict with NATO has been declining for a second consecutive year, though it remains high (54% in May[13]).

The Z-community actively reproduces the same narrative, acting as an amplifier for the pro-war audience. The Telegram channel Two Majors, linked to the security bloc, writes daily about "the rehearsal of NATO offensive scenarios" and escalation in the Baltic region, where "Euro-NATO will escalate the situation to the maximum, provoking Russia into retaliatory action," emphasizing the deployment of "Estonia's most combat-capable unit right at Russia's borders."

At the same time, Svarshchiki, also linked to the security bloc, claims that

> "Trump proposed to Erdogan [...] that he consider invoking Article 5 in the event of a direct clash between Russia and NATO in the form of an attack and the seizure of Crimea by the Turkish army. While all forces are diverted to the west, there could be a surprise from Turkey's direction."

Continuing this narrative, the largest Z-blogger, Yuri Podolyaka, states outright that "Europe is preparing for war... with Russia," for the "intimidation" of which, according to the Z-resource Operation Z: War Correspondents of Russian Spring, the Coalition of the Willing will hold military exercises near Ukraine's borders.

Boris Rozhin, author of Colonelcassad, and war correspondent Yevgeny Poddubny, one of the leaders of the United Russia party list for the upcoming elections, speak of a deliberate NATO policy of ratcheting up escalation:

> "Everything happening around NATO is a search for formats that would let the alliance continue its confrontation with Russia while remaining safe for itself. Amid the recognition, masked by unrelenting bravado, of a growing level of risk," for which NATO is preparing for "a new stage of militarization."

Z-analyst Yuri Kotyonok, for his part, observes with regard to Europe that

> "the enemy has felt that it holds the initiative and will try to turn it into a strategic and operational turning point. [...] And they have gathered to try to inflict a strategic defeat on the Russians. Put crudely, they have tasted blood."

The Z-channel Fighterbomber pushes the logic of escalation to its ultimate conclusion:

> "Nuclear strikes really would speed up the end of the war. The khokhols [a derogatory Russian slur for Ukrainians] are already egging us on to just fucking nuke them. So as not to suffer, I suppose."

Resources tied to Vladimir Solovyov, meanwhile, state that

> "Moscow, the Kremlin, and Putin are ready to radically raise the bar of escalation, because patience is running out."

Russian Officials: A Steady Course Toward Escalation

Russian officials continue their escalatory rhetoric, combining two narratives at once: that "the West is the source of the threat and is preparing for aggression against Russia," pointing to the possibility of a direct, nuclear clash between Russia and NATO, and that "Europe and Kyiv are driving escalation and derailing peace," effectively absolving Russia of responsibility for the war's continuation.

On July 22, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov threatened[14] Europe with "unconventional war":

> "We are not going to attack anyone, but if they once again gather all of Europe under familiar banners and try to attack us, this will already be an unconventional war. The war will be different."

Earlier, on July 18, he had published a policy article titled "Ukraine, Europe, and Global Security,"[15] originally intended for Politico Europe, in which he accused Europe of "dreams of expansion," militarization, and a drive toward nuclear war:

> "A direct clash between NATO and Russia could quickly escalate into an exchange of nuclear strikes with catastrophic consequences. [...] Europe is undergoing a serious buildup of military capabilities, including in the nuclear sphere. [...] Political and military figures in Europe attribute to Russia aggressive plans that, they claim, are not limited to Ukraine. The president of Russia has repeatedly stated that this is nonsense, a provocation, and disinformation aimed at extracting budget funds for the fight against Russia."

The escalatory rhetoric was voiced still more prominently on July 15 by Nikolai Patrushev, a figure close to Putin, former

secretary of Russia's Security Council and now head of the Maritime Board:

> "when I watch the Baltic mice pulling at the whiskers of a cat with nuclear claws, I get the impression that certain European countries simply cannot help themselves, and this will lead Europe to catastrophe"[16].

The Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) leveled similar accusations, claiming that European countries were engaged in provocations: on July 6, the SVR called the strike on the Sevastopol Museum of Defense "a meticulously planned provocation by London and its intelligence services"[17], prompting SVR Director Sergei Naryshkin to threaten retaliation on July 8, stating that "the Kyiv regime and its British masters will answer for this"[18].

On July 20, the SVR leveled an accusation against Germany over the development of nuclear weapons, reinforcing the Kremlin's increasingly prominent narrative of preparations for nuclear aggression against Russia:

> "Berlin is capable of producing the necessary fissile material on its own within one to three months and of building a functioning nuclear explosive device within a year. [...] The intent of the current German authorities to gain direct access to nuclear weapons is already causing extreme concern in Europe as well, given the revanchist sentiment in Berlin"[19].

Earlier, presidential press secretary Dmitry Peskov had clearly articulated the escalatory course, accusing Europe, and unexpectedly the United States, of prolonging the war: on July 5, he called the SMO "a real war, because behind Kyiv stand Berlin, Paris, The Hague, Oslo, and, regrettably, Washington"[20], and then on July 9 stated[21] that "further escalation will prolong the SMO," suggesting that "Russia will have to create a large buffer zone in Ukraine in the event of escalation."

The narrative that Europe and Ukraine are derailing peace was echoed by presidential foreign policy aide Yuri Ushakov immediately after the Putin-Trump phone call, though unlike Peskov, he did not mention Washington:

> "Kyiv and its European sponsors are counting on protracting and even escalating the conflict, and on terrorism against the civilian population. At the same time, the European 'party of war' proceeds from a false perception of the overall situation and of the state of affairs along the line of contact"[22].

Earlier still, Federal Security Service (FSB) Director Alexander Bortnikov had also voiced the narrative that "Volodymyr Zelensky is a terrorist," adding that "there is no one else there to talk to at this stage, for now. He makes decisions accordingly, and we take that into account"[23].

All of these statements are consistent with the overarching narrative framework that Vladimir Putin himself set on June 23, in a valedictory address to graduates of military academies:

> "whereas NATO countries previously limited themselves to supporting the Kyiv regime, [...] they are now openly saying in the West that they are preparing for war with us and are increasing their military, offensive budgets. To justify such spending and the radical militarization of their states, the leaders of NATO and EU countries, as before, are using false claims of an alleged Russian military threat.
> The scheme of the so-called pseudo-democratic West's actions is very simple: first they create threats to our country, force us to take the actions necessary for self-defense and self-protection, and then immediately accuse us of every mortal sin in order to justify the continuation of their own aggressive policy, their own aggressive actions toward Russia"[24].

A Gap in Perceptions: Domestic Propaganda vs. Public Opinion

The theme of Europe preparing for war against Russia consistently remains the second most prominent topic in Russian domestic propaganda, ranking right after the SMO narratives of "the steady advance of Russian forces in Ukraine" and "Kyiv's terrorism against civilians." **By combining these two themes**, the Kremlin is deliberately trying to whip up war hysteria in a society that is increasingly in favor of ending the war.

According to June data from the independent Levada Center[25], **64% of citizens favor moving to peace talks** (up 4 p.p. over the month), while 24% of Russians do not support the actions of Russian forces, a record figure since 2022. Public fatigue is the key factor: as early as a March poll[26] on the motives of those favoring negotiations, responses citing fatigue, the protracted nature of the war, and a desire for peace together accounted for 50%, up 21 p.p. over the year.

Nevertheless, the pervasiveness of the escalatory rhetoric in Russian propaganda is having an effect[27]: the share of those who justify the use of nuclear weapons rose by 5 p.p. over the year, from 24% in June 2025 to 29% in June 2026. Even so, these figures remain relatively low: in 2024, this share fluctuated between 34% and 39%.

Another sign that the Kremlin's capacity to whip up war hysteria over Europe's supposed preparations for aggression against Russia has been exhausted is the slow decline in the share of those who believe the war in Ukraine could escalate into a clash with NATO, despite the intensified propaganda campaign: although the figure remains fairly high, at 54% in May 2026, it has fallen steadily over the past two years, from 58% in June 2024[28].

The most aggressive escalation propaganda airs on national television, which is a source of information for 56% of Russians[29]. The effect of this TV propaganda is also borne out by polling data: among television viewers, the desire to move to negotiations is noticeably lower than the national average, 49% versus 64%, as is the share of those who do not support the actions of Russian forces, 17% versus 24%, while willingness to use nuclear weapons is higher, 34% versus 29%[30].

Prominent examples of this propaganda are the weekly Sunday news wrap-up broadcasts, which present the Kremlin's fullest narratives, adapted to current events. In these broadcasts, the propaganda works its way systematically through every country in Europe, presenting each as intent on war with Russia.

On July 19, for instance, the **national broadcaster Channel One** aired a segment titled "French Lessons: Bastille Day as a Mirror of European Disunity," which simultaneously promoted the narratives of "deepening contradictions within the EU" and of "Europe's desire for more blood":

> "Behind the pompous facade, it is increasingly hard to conceal the emptiness and uselessness of the bloc [the Coalition of the Willing], whose intentions are plainly not peaceful. [...]
> If the European Union itself lacks the reach, and there is disarray within it, it is hardly conceivable that the participants in its surrogate, the 'Coalition of the Willing,' will act in concert.
> Still, the instigator of the project, Macron, plainly dreams that Europe will continue down the path of confrontation, and calls on everyone else to wake up. [...]
> Europeans are preparing their own citizens for protracted confrontation with Russia. Helsinki's system of anti-nuclear bunkers could easily once again become a strategic asset, should the coalition of warmongers want still more blood"[31].

That same day, on another major channel, **Russia 1**, a segment aired featuring Kremlin propagandist Mikhail Antonov, Vesti's

special correspondent in Germany, broadcasting the same narratives directly from Berlin:

> "Europeans still believe Russia will not retaliate against them. This belief is ineradicable in them. It makes them insolent. [...] Von der Leyen is now openly talking about turning Europe into a technological and industrial base for war with Russia. It has long since been the wallet. [...]
> Merz is confident that he can do absolutely anything with regard to Russia, especially if he buys Tomahawks from Trump and shelters behind the French nuclear umbrella. [...]
> Strategic awakening, advanced deterrence: Europe is trying to fill these verbal formulas with substance. Some of it works, but often it simply masks reality. [...]
> The correct sequence of actions would look like this: a strategic wake-up at the Hôtel des Invalides, followed by morning exercises, breakfast, and then medication"[32].

At the same time, the Kremlin's leading propagandists, Vladimir Solovyov and Dmitry Kiselyov, have somewhat reduced their intensity with the start of the summer vacation period: Solovyov, who normally broadcasts daily, has limited himself to only the Sunday edition of his TV show, while Kiselyov is being temporarily replaced by fellow propagandist Yevgeny Popov, host of the show "60 Minutes" and, concurrently, a State Duma deputy.

Z-Community: "Europe Is Being Prepared for War"

The narrative that Europe is being prepared for war with Russia is actively promoted by bloggers in the pro-war Z-segment; every leading author has weighed in on the "inevitability" of war.

The Telegram channel Two Majors, close to the security bloc, writes almost daily about the growing threat: "the rehearsal of NATO and Ukrainian offensive scenarios in the Black Sea region"[33], "the first rehearsal of a scenario for joint action by Euro-NATO military contingents in preparation for an offensive operation against Russia"[34], "in the Baltic region, the Euro-NATO countries will escalate the situation to the maximum, provoking Russia into retaliatory action"[35], and "the deployment of Estonia's most combat-capable unit right at Russia's border points to the creation of conditions for receiving the main forces from the western part of NATO, in case the alliance carries out an offensive operation against Russia"[36].

The same narrative is actively promoted by Yuri Podolyaka, the largest Z-blogger (2.7 million subscribers): "Europe is preparing for war... with Russia!!!"[37].

Another large channel, Operation Z: War Correspondents of Russian Spring (1.5 million subscribers), meanwhile claims that the Coalition of the Willing's exercises near Ukraine's borders will be held "to intimidate Russia"[38].

The Z-channel Svarshchiki, close to the security bloc, for its part warns of a threat that Turkey will seize Crimea as part of NATO's preparations for aggression:

> "Trump offered Erdogan weapons on a priority basis, including F-35s, and suggested he consider invoking Article 5 in the event of a direct clash between Russia and NATO in the form of an attack and the seizure of Crimea by the Turkish army. While all forces are diverted to the west, there could be a surprise from Turkey's direction"[39].

In parallel, Boris Rozhin, author of the Z-blog Colonelcassad (750,000 subscribers), speaks of a deliberate NATO tactic of ratcheting up escalation:

> "Everything happening around NATO is a search for formats that let the alliance continue its confrontation with Russia while remaining safe. Amid the recognition, masked by unrelenting bravado, of a rising level of risk"[40], adding that "Europe is being prepared for war. The summit is already demonstrating NATO's shift toward a systemic expansion of Europe's defense-industrial base. The infrastructure being built is designed to sustain support for Ukraine over the long term and to prepare the alliance for a possible large-scale conflict"[41].

Yevgeny Poddubny (575,000 subscribers), a war correspondent for VGTRK and, concurrently, one of the top five candidates on the United Russia party list for the State Duma elections, likewise states that NATO is ready for "a new stage of militarization":

> "calls for such large-scale militarization are coming from an alliance that, as Rutte would have it, presents itself as 'defensive.' In reality, the entirety of NATO's 'defensiveness' amounts to an arms race with a predetermined script"[42].

The Z-channel Fighterbomber (500,000 subscribers), for its part, calls for a nuclear strike on Ukraine to end the war, stating that "beauty bloggers very often write that China is the only reason we haven't yet nuked the hell out of Ukraine. There's logic to that"[43], and suggesting that Ukrainians themselves are supposedly calling for a nuclear strike:

> "Nuclear strikes really would speed up the end of the war. The khokhols are already egging us on to just fucking nuke them. So as not to suffer, I suppose"[44].

Z-analyst Yuri Kotyonok (300,000 subscribers) argues that Europe is not ready to make peace with Russia, asserting that it holds the strategic initiative and poses a notable threat to Belarus:

> "Europe is not ready to negotiate with Russia. The enemy has felt that it holds the initiative and will try to turn it into a strategic and operational turning point. [...] And they have gathered to try to inflict a strategic defeat on the Russians. Put crudely, they have tasted blood.
> At the same time, at least for the current year, 2026, Europe will not enter directly into war with Russia. It prefers to fight by proxy. [...] The khokhols are the ones fighting for Europe directly, which suits Europe just fine. It is so convenient, after all, to annihilate Slavs while periodically tossing Kyiv weapons and money. [...]
> But Belarus is precisely next in line, so that a buffer zone made up of Finland, Belarus, and Ukraine can finally be built around Russia, sealing off Russians' 'window to Europe' for good"[45].

Vladimir Solovyov, a leading Russian propagandist, for his part published claims on his Telegram channel (1.1 million subscribers) that "the world is heading down the path of apocalyptic escalation"[46], and that "Moscow, the Kremlin, and Putin are ready to radically raise the bar of escalation, because patience is running out"[47].

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