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Victory Day 2026 Amid Mounting Kremlin Failure

How Ukraine’s drone strikes and rising war fatigue turned Victory Day 2026 into a display of Kremlin weakness rather than triumph

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Table of contents

Executive Summary 5

The 9 May Ceasefire: Preserving The Illusion Of Stability 8

War Comes Home: The Drone Campaign As Backdrop 11

From Passive Fatalism To Active Discontent: A Break In Russian Public Sentiment 13

Sources 15

Executive Summary

For the first time since the full-scale war began, Victory Day on 9 May 2026 is turning into an exhibition of failure rather than a propaganda triumph for the Kremlin. Deepening problems at the front, Ukrainian strikes against cities deep in the Russian interior, an economy in pre-crisis condition, and record-low approval ratings for the authorities collectively expose the Kremlin's compound strategic vulnerabilities.

Its assurances that "everything is fully under control" are increasingly at odds with the reality Russians encounter every day – a reality in which Moscow is reduced to effectively pleading for a Victory Day ceasefire from a country it bombs daily.

The Kremlin's chaotic preparations for Victory Day — the regime's central ideological ritual and a core source of narratives used to legitimise its aggression against Ukraine — are revealing in themselves.

In response to the growing effectiveness of Ukrainian drone strikes, the Moscow Red Square military parade, the annual showcase of "Russia's internal stability and military power", has been planned for the first time since 2007 without military vehicles[1]; and another mass propaganda event, the Immortal Regiment march, staged to illustrate "the unity of Russians", has been moved online in Moscow[2].

For the first time in many years, the Kremlin issued no invitations[3] to foreign leaders for the celebrations: only the leaders of Slovakia, Malaysia, and Laos – along with Moscow-dependent Belarus and Russia-occupied Georgian territories, Abkhazia and South Ossetia – announced visits to the Russian capital of their own accord. The leaders of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan confirmed their attendance in Moscow only on the eve of the parade.

According to Russian independent outlets[4], the television broadcast of the planned parade will be subject to a time delay, apparently to prevent footage of any potential strikes from going to air. All press accreditations previously issued to foreign media

journalists have also been revoked[5]. As a countermeasure against drone threats on 9 May, the authorities confirmed[6] a complete shutdown of mobile internet in the capital, extending even to SMS services.

The same objective underlies the Kremlin's unilateral "ceasefire" from 8 to 10 May, backed by threats of a massive missile strike on Kyiv and diplomatic démarches calling for the evacuation of embassy staff from the Ukrainian capital, designed to protect the image of internal stability during the Kremlin's most important propaganda holiday.

When Ukraine mirrored the Kremlin's game by declaring its own ceasefire from 6 May rather than 8 May, Moscow's reaction was conspicuously hysterical: Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova branded the move "bloody PR"[7], while Putin's press secretary Dmitry Peskov made it unmistakably clear that the Kremlin is indifferent to Kyiv's proposals[8].

Ukraine's refusal to recognise Moscow's ceasefire, and the Ukrainian Armed Forces' continued strikes during the night of 7–8 May – the Russian Ministry of Defence reported[9] 1,365 “violations of the ceasefire regime” and the interception of 396 "aerial attack assets" – provoked a furious response from the pro-war Z-community: "You could say there's no ceasefire as such. But we're not advancing"[10]; "Perhaps it would have been better – in honour of the Great Victory – simply to strike the 'decision-making centres' without a ceasefire, without warning, and to strike them relentlessly and mercilessly until victory?"[11].

The Telegram channel Two Majors, which is close to the security bloc, wrote: "Now it's our move. Either we do absolutely nothing again and claim we destroyed 500 foreigners and 100 facilities, or we actually strike every city in Ukraine – and not just for one day"[12]. Foreign Minister Lavrov adopted the same escalatory register on 8 May: "There will be no mercy for the Nazis"[13].

The paradox of 9 May 2026 is plain: the holiday distorted by Kremlin propaganda in its effort to legitimise the current war, is instead a testament to its failure. The actual situation at the front only deepens that impression. In April 2026, Russian forces in Ukraine retreated for the first time in many months[14];

and in March, Ukraine overtook[15] Russia in the number of drone strikes.

Pro-war bloggers are also registering signs that the strategic stalemate is beginning to resolve in Ukraine's favour – the ultra-patriotic Z-writer Zakhar Prilepin states: "If we have no secret plan, then at the current rate of trends we will begin to visibly lose to Ukraine itself. <…> First the villages. Then the cities that have supposedly long been ours. Then the very meaning of the SMO [Special Military Operation, the official Russian term for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine]"[16].

The Z-channel Rybar is equally blunt: "What is happening on the battlefield has turned into hopeless murk. Because this is simply a war over backwater villages that – even the Ukrainians understand this by now – are not of such great significance"[17]. Russian society is registering the same gap between the propaganda image and reality.

The expansion of Ukrainian strikes to cities deep in the Russian interior, the disasters and tragedies resulting from strikes on oil-and-gas infrastructure, and the authorities' inaction have acted as catalysts for yet another wave of public discontent – one that can no longer be sustained under the logic of war without either a major escalation or a negotiated settlement.

Approval ratings for state institutions have returned to pre-war lows; 53[18]–62%[19] of Russians, according to independent polling agencies, favour peace negotiations; and the Kremlin's propaganda machine can no longer operate preventively but is now forced to respond reactively to each new wave of criticism.

The Kremlin, which has narratively instrumentalised Victory Day as the central proof of the historical rightness of its course, approaches 9 May with neither military victories to display nor broad public support. The holding of its symbolic events is itself called into question by the threat of Ukrainian strikes. The spectacle of a Kremlin plainly unable to guarantee the safety of the public, the military parade, or visiting foreign leaders – while begging for a ceasefire from a country it bombs every day – is particularly telling in the fifth year of a war which it still insists on calling a "military operation", unwilling to acknowledge the increasingly obvious signs of its own failures.

The 9 May Ceasefire: Preserving The Illusion Of Stability

Victory Day on 9 May is the Kremlin's central propaganda ideologeme – the foundation from which it constructs the key narratives legitimising its confrontational foreign policy, including aggression against Ukraine. The symbolic events organised by the authorities – chief among them military parades in major cities and above all the parade on Moscow's Red Square – are so central to the propaganda function of demonstrating "Russia's internal stability and military power" that cancelling them is deeply undesirable for the Kremlin even in the face of serious security risks – an unambiguous signal to society that the situation is critically out of control.

The Kremlin's attempts to cement the ideological link between victory in the Second World War and the current aggression against Ukraine – in which Russian soldiers supposedly continue "the work of their grandfathers and great-grandfathers" – have thus backfired: the significance of Victory Day to Russians has fallen by ten percentage points since 2021 (from 69 to 59%, Kremlin-controlled VTsIOM[20]); the share of those who regard it as a "people's holiday" has declined by six percentage points (from 56 to 50%, Kremlin-controlled FOM[21]); and the events surrounding the Victory Parade are becoming, in the eyes of Russian citizens, an unmistakable illustration of the current situation at the front in Ukraine – where signs of the Kremlin's failure, rather than its victory, are growing ever more apparent. According to ISW[22], Russian forces recorded their first retreat in April 2026, their first in many months (–116.01 sq km); and in March, Ukraine overtook[23] Russia in the number of drone strikes, despite an increase in strikes from both sides.

The escalation of Ukrainian drone strikes over recent months has generated serious Kremlin anxiety about the holiday events and the Red Square parade. Periodic internet shutdowns

have resumed in Moscow[24], and the authorities have confirmed[25] their plans for a full mobile internet shutdown on 9 May, including SMS services.

The first parade rehearsal took place considerably later than in previous years – during the night of 4-5 May (2024-25: 23 April; 2022-23: 25 April) – and, according to[26] VChK-OGPU, a Telegram channel close to the security services, the rehearsal was conducted "under conditions of heightened secrecy".

On 29 April, the Kremlin announced[27] plans to hold the Moscow parade without military vehicles, citing "operational conditions" – for the first time since 2007[28]. In other cities, according to Russian independent outlets[29], parades have either already been cancelled (26 cities) or are likely to proceed in a scaled-back format.

The Kremlin has also decided to cancel[30] the in-person Immortal Regiment march in Moscow – another symbolically important event traditionally exploited by propaganda to demonstrate "the unity of the people in support of the authorities' course and of great Russia", despite its original commemorative purpose.

All of these measures are aimed primarily not at protecting people's safety, but at preserving the propaganda image of "stability" and of the Kremlin's control over the current situation. The same objective is served by the Kremlin's unilateral ceasefire declaration[31] from 8 to 10 May and its accompanying hysterical intimidation campaign: repeated threats of a massive missile strike on central Kyiv in the event of any ceasefire violation, diplomatic démarches[32] warning that embassy and international organisation staff must be evacuated from the Ukrainian capital, and the active amplification of these threats by propagandists.

Ukraine's attempt to mirror the Kremlin's game provoked a furious response from the Russian authorities and their propaganda apparatus: Volodymyr Zelensky's declaration of a ceasefire from 6 rather than 8 May was branded[33] by Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova as "bloody PR" and "some kind of ceasefire designed to overshadow Russia's own ceasefire announcement and the genuinely grave situation of the Ukrainian

Armed Forces at the front"[34]. These talking points were enthusiastically taken up by the Z-community of pro-war bloggers, who markedly escalated their rhetoric and called[35,36,37] for strikes "on decision-making centres", while criticising the Kremlin for not having done so sooner.

The Kremlin's declared "ceasefire" – which it cannot compel the other party to observe even with its most strident threats – only exposes the fragility of the entire propaganda architecture underpinning Victory Day 2026. The holiday that is meant to serve as a demonstration of victory and triumph has become not even a demonstration of their absence, but an exhibition of defeat. Russian society sees this too: confronted daily with the rising cost of the Kremlin's war, it no longer believes in a victorious outcome.

War Comes Home: The Drone Campaign As Backdrop

The expansion of Ukrainian UAV strikes against Russian regions, growing in scale and intensity, has amplified an already record level of public discontent. Daily raids, failures of Russia's air-defence system resulting in civilian casualties, and the catastrophic consequences of the strikes themselves have broken sharply into everyday life not only of residents in the border regions accustomed to wartime conditions, but also of those in Central Russia and the deep interior.

Strikes on Cheboksary, Moscow, Chelyabinsk, Yekaterinburg, and other cities; attacks on Russian oil-and-gas infrastructure; and the ensuing local environmental disasters – such as the oil spills, large-scale fires, and hydrocarbon smog in Tuapse and Perm at the turn of April and May – are demonstrating to citizens the stark divergence between everyday reality and the Kremlin's propaganda claims that "the situation is fully under control". The effect is visible in a sharp rise in public attention to "strikes on Russian territory": from 6% on 17-19 April[38] to 15% on 24-26 April[39] (FOM).

Accumulated discontent is surfacing not only on social media as unmistakably critical organic content directed at the authorities, but is in some cases producing collective self-organisation. One recent example is the broad independent volunteer campaign in Tuapse to address the consequences of an oil spill resulting from drone strikes on the local oil refinery and marine oil-loading terminal.

The campaign arose primarily from a visible distrust of the Russian authorities' claims that the situation was "routine", set against the real picture circulating on social media – and it reached such a scale of public engagement that the Kremlin

attempted a narrative takeover, infiltrating propagandists into the volunteer movement.

Sergei Karnaukhov, a member of the network run by leading Russian propagandist Vladimir Solovyov, was dispatched[40] to the disaster zone in Tuapse: "The SolovyovLive team is helping to address the consequences in Tuapse – not just in words, but in deeds"[41].

The scale of the campaign clearly illustrated Russians' understanding that the Kremlin routinely lies about most uncomfortable matters – downplaying or ignoring the scale of the consequences, thereby refusing to accept public accountability. When forced to acknowledge problems, the Kremlin deflects responsibility onto regional authorities in order to prevent discontent from consolidating at the national level.

From Passive Fatalism To Active Discontent: A Break In Russian Public Sentiment

Record war fatigue in Russian society from the unpopular war in Ukraine (53[42]-62%[43] of Russians who favour peace negotiations, according to independent agencies) is converting from passive fatalism into active discontent, consolidating against a backdrop of deteriorating social and economic conditions, an increasingly repressive domestic policy course, and growing state intrusion into citizens' private lives.

Data from all Russian polling services – both Kremlin-affiliated and independent – point to the same conclusion: the wartime rally-around-the-flag effect that emerged immediately after the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has been exhausted. Approval ratings for state institutions[44,45] (the president, the government, the parliament), the personal ratings of leading Russian politicians[46,47], including Vladimir Putin, and assessments of the authorities' economic, domestic, and foreign policy course[48,49] – all of these indicators have fallen in unison to their lowest levels of the entire war period, returning to the pre-war lows of a period marked by a serious crisis of public trust in the Kremlin.

The clearest illustration of the shift in Russian public sentiment has been the emergence of organic discontent campaigns on social media, whose reach has steadily widened since the start of 2026.

Five waves stand out in particular: (1) tax increases and cuts to benefits for small and medium-sized businesses (January-February); (2) a sharp rise in food and utility prices (February); (3) internet blockages, restrictions, and shutdowns (February-present); (4) livestock culls in Siberia (March); (5) the consequences of strikes on oil-and-gas industry facilities (April-present).

The defining characteristic of these online protest campaigns is that responsibility for the accumulating problems and the

deteriorating situation is attributed directly to the authorities. The Kremlin attempts to counter this with the narrative that "Putin is simply not being informed about the problems", seeking to deflect public criticism away from the president.

The propaganda system itself, however, is experiencing serious failures. The vast majority of domestic decisions that attract public criticism are rolled out without competent political messaging, and the narratives intended to legitimise them are deployed far later than the situation demands.

It is evident that the Kremlin – owing to growing internal tensions within the system and its broader degradation – is currently not capable of acting preventively to prepare public opinion for unpopular decisions; it is forced to respond reactively.

The resulting communications vacuum is filled by critical content and messaging, which in the most striking cases leads to protest self-organisation – as occurred during the March "Scarlet Swan" campaign, an attempt to organise mass protests against internet blockages across many cities, suppressed by the authorities by force.

Against this backdrop, the events surrounding Victory Day 2026 amount not merely to a propaganda failure, but to indicators of a systemic governance crisis for the Kremlin – one that takes on particular significance in the context of the State Duma elections in autumn 2026, the first since the start of the full-scale invasion, which will take place amid consolidating public discontent. Although part of the public criticism is artificially generated by the elites themselves, discontent is already spilling beyond their control.

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