

Why Putin's retreat from Kherson could be his most humiliating defeat yet

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Life, as the saying goes, is coming at Vladimir Putin fast. Having gleefully announced the [annexation](#) of four regions of Ukraine barely more than a month ago—even as his army retreated within them—the

Kremlin now says it's withdrawing from the [only regional capital city](#) it had captured since invading in February 2022.

The grim announcement that Russia was abandoning Kherson was made by Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, accompanied by Sergei Surovikin, Russia's latest commander of the war in Ukraine.

President Putin was absent from the proceedings, as is his habit when there's bad news to report. Even so, putting his top military leaders in front of the cameras was a significant move. It thrust them into the spotlight, making it clear who would be held responsible for further failures. But it was also potentially a rare moment of relative honesty with the Russian populace, marking the first time in the war that an official announcement about a military defeat had been [televised](#).

It's true that Ukrainian authorities remain [skeptical](#) about the withdrawal announcement, sensing a trap. They have claimed Russian units are [integrating into the civilian population](#) and will try to take Ukrainian forces by surprise, turning Kherson into an urban warfare bloodbath on a scale similar to the destruction of Mariupol witnessed earlier in the war.

That certainly remains a possibility, so any analysis of implications should be based on the caveat that this could well be a Russian ruse.

That said, a retreat from Kherson (which Russian forces captured in March 2022), has been [on the cards](#) for some time. Moscow has been quietly [emptying](#) the city of its best forces over the past few weeks, replacing elite [airborne troops](#) with newly mobilized conscripts.

As [Surovikin](#) himself admitted, the city was becoming impossible to hold in the face of relentless Ukrainian artillery and missile strikes. Withdrawing to the West Bank of the Dnipro River as winter approached was essentially the [only viable option](#), making the waterway

itself a natural line of defense that Ukrainian forces would have to cross to recapture any more territory.

3 reasons Kherson loss will likely prove decisive

But there are three reasons why Russia's loss of Kherson—if Moscow's claims are accurate—will likely prove decisive for the future of the war, and potentially Putin's own fortunes.

1. The Kremlin's war aims now look impossible

Kherson is [strategically significant](#). A major port, it's a waypoint from Russian-held parts of the Donbas regions of Luhansk and Donetsk, through the Crimean peninsula, and Ukrainian-held coastal Black Sea towns like Odesa.

After failing to capture Kyiv and bring about forced regime change, Moscow's objectives shifted to linking up the Donbas with a so-called "[Crimean corridor](#)", effectively shutting Ukraine out of the Black Sea, and turning it into a landlocked rump state.

But the loss of Kherson means Russian forces no longer have a foothold west of the Dnipro River to conduct offensive operations. They are also well held in the north of Ukraine around [Kharkiv](#), and continue to fall back to hastily-constructed [defensive lines](#) near Mariupol and Khakovka.

As natural defensive barriers, rivers work both ways: abandoning territory across the Dnipro slows down the Ukrainian advance. But equally it makes it impossible for Russian forces to make any headway along the Black Sea coast, unless the tide of the war turns drastically in Russia's favor—which is a very unlikely prospect.

2. Crimea is now at risk

If Kyiv's forces recapture Kherson city, the roads to Crimea will become vulnerable to Ukrainian long-range artillery and drone strikes. Previously seen as a safe haven—not just for Russian military personnel but also tourists—the ability of Ukrainian forces to attack Crimea proper will be even more significant than the powerful but highly symbolic strike on the [Kerch Bridge](#) in October, or Crimea's Saky airbase in August.

Controlling Kherson also frees up Ukrainian forces to redeploy around [Zaporizhzhia towards Melitopol](#), which would threaten Crimea from the east.

Even more importantly, Ukrainian control of the Dnipro around Kherson reverses one of Putin's few victories in Ukraine: ensuring [fresh water](#) for the residents of Crimea. Ukraine had retaliated against Russia's seizure of the region in 2014 by building a dam to barricade the North Crimean Canal, which supplied Crimea with around [85% of its water](#).

Russian forces [destroyed](#) the dam two days after its invasion on February 24. But Ukraine now has the option to threaten the water supply to Crimea once more, and in the longer term, to control it. That's both significant now, and a powerful card at the negotiating table in any future attempt to settle the conflict.

3. Defeat in Kherson is personally humiliating for Putin

The loss of Kherson would be yet another a sign of deepening weakness around Vladimir Putin, underscored by an unbroken string of military defeats. For Russia, controlling the Kherson region is [fundamental](#) to protect Crimea, and to serve as a staging-post for Russian offensive

operations, however much that prospect has dwindled.

Defeat there makes a mockery of claims of strength from Russian state media: there's no hiding the fact that [withdrawing](#) to "better defensive positions" is nonetheless another retreat.

On the domestic front, seeking to limit the fallout by setting up the military for scapegoating as Putin's defeats continue to mount up becomes not just increasingly indefensible, but also politically perilous. The inherent vulnerability of autocrats like Putin is they can only blame the most heavily-armed portion of society for so long. Without careful management, or at least some tale of success to counterbalance the failures, it's dangerous to make enemies of those with the most effective means to challenge a leader.

Changing the narrative from failure to success is therefore what the Kremlin is likely to try next. So in the short-term, we are likely to see Putin seek to leaven the defeat in Kherson with his usual depressingly predictable response: violence.

This means more indiscriminate strikes against Ukrainian population centers, against power and water as well as other civilian infrastructure.

One of the great outrages of Russia's conduct throughout this war is that the Kremlin views every setback as needing to be redeemed with the blood and suffering of Ukrainian non-combatants.

But like Putin's petulant attacks on Kyiv after the partial destruction of the [Kerch Bridge](#) demonstrated, this is likely to only further strengthen the resolve of Ukraine's people and leadership to end this war on their terms.

For those of us removed from the conflict in the West, we should feel

duty-bound to help them bring that about.

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