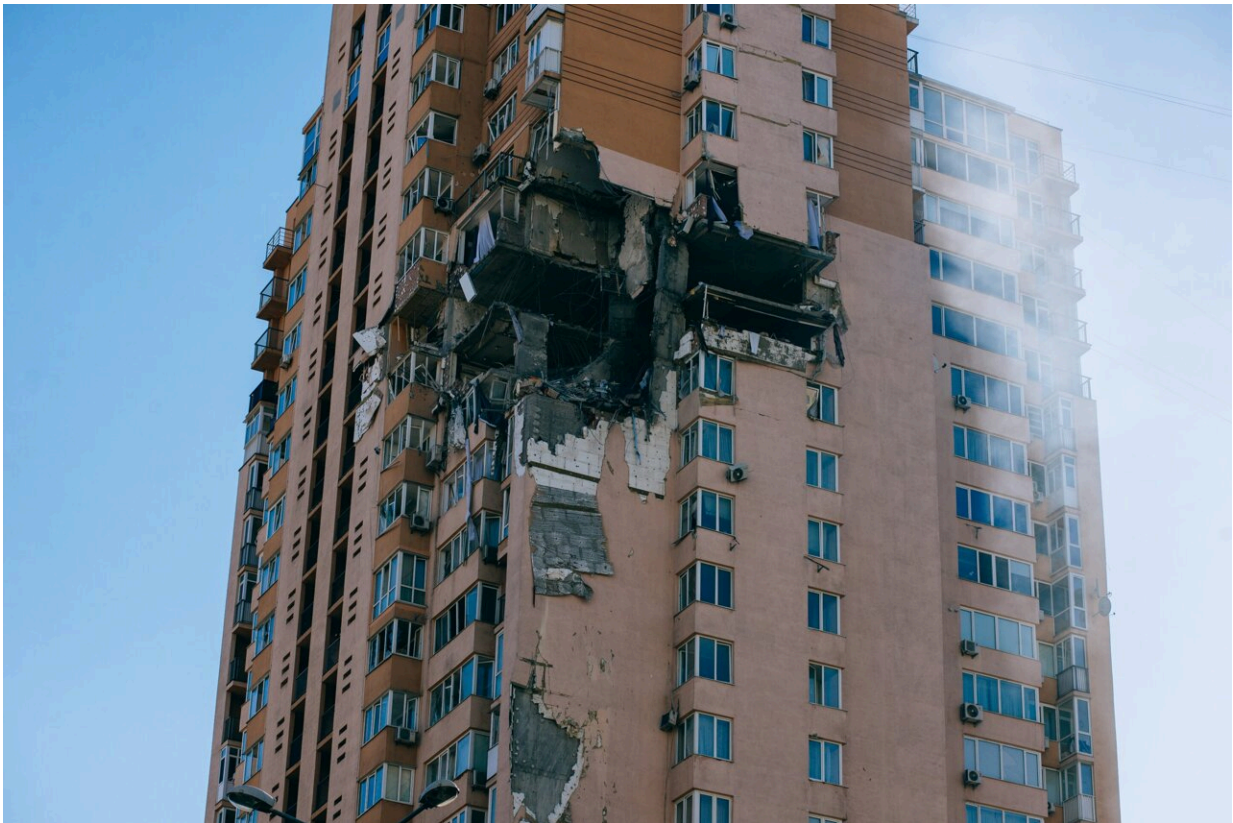


Ukraine war: The psychological and political impact of the drone attacks in Russia

June 7 2023, by Ben Soodavar



Kyiv, Ukraine. Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Every military action communicates something. The recent drone strikes in Moscow during which three residential and high-rise buildings were targeted certainly did so.

This unprecedented attack arguably communicated to Muscovites that Vladimir Putin's "special military operation" is nothing but a euphemism for a war that has now reached the Russian capital.

It also communicated to the Kremlin that Russian soil is not immune from the sort of military strikes it has inflicted upon Kyiv.

Many commentators have argued that these attacks are a "boost to morale" for Ukrainians and undermine Putin's hyperbolic narrative on the war's success, and I agree. The Kremlin has downplayed the threat and reassured the public that its air defenses can mitigate any future attack.

But what exactly is the psychological impact of these strikes on ordinary Russians themselves? And what sort of response could this enable?

The reaction from Moscow residents has been tainted by profound shock and fear. One woman who witnessed the attack [said](#) that the whole ordeal was "scary. You sit at home and this thing flies at your window. Of course it's dangerous." A [security guard](#) who was also present, [expressed that](#) "no one understood what was happening."

The war in Ukraine has felt like a distant issue for most Russians, until now. Muscovites now demonstrate a palpable fear of being injured or killed by one of those drones. Even though no civilian was killed or severely injured in this latest attack, the specter of the war coming home can make the imagination run wild.

Since the invasion in February 2022, Russians (except for soldiers and their families) have yet to experience any sense of the trauma that Ukrainians have recently experienced. Westerners may hope that drone attacks will prompt the Russian public to put greater pressure on the Kremlin to bring the war to an end.

But director of the Moscow-based polling company the Levada Center, Denis Volkov, [argues that](#) "single events do not have big impacts" on support for the Russian president.

Rallying the Russian people?

Conversely, these attacks could provide the Kremlin with the necessary rhetorical ammunition to bolster domestic support for their shameful foreign policy. They could exploit the psychological fragility, caused by the drone attacks, to turn the shock and anxiety of Russians into outright anger against Ukraine.

Those ideologically supportive of Putin are likely to have their views reaffirmed, while people who have thus far been politically indifferent or apathetic could all of a sudden become more receptive to the Kremlin's narrative. Periods of emotional instability and anxiety can produce all sorts of behavioral changes—not least the search for violent retribution.

The attack on the dam in Nova Khakovka in southern Ukraine during the [early hours on Tuesday](#) could well be evidence of this psychological shift to further punish Ukraine.

My own [research](#) on the psychology of war has shown that people are more likely to support a war when the dangers they themselves face are properly explained. It helps when the conflict is framed as a "clash of civilisations." This has been the case with the war in Ukraine—the Kremlin's propaganda has deliberately tied Ukraine to the terms fascism and Nazism.

Putin has argued that Russia's actions in Ukraine are necessary to free people from the yoke of western neo-imperialism. Now there is evidence of the Kremlin framing this latest development in terms of "terrorism."

In response to the attack in Moscow, [Putin stated](#):

"The Kiev regime has chosen a different path—attempts to intimidate Russian citizens with strikes at residential buildings. This is an obvious terrorist approach ... Of course, Ukrainian citizens cannot speak out because of the total terror against civilians."

He framed the strikes as an attack on innocent Russian "citizens." His choice to represent the drone strikes with the terms "intimidate" and "terrorist," served to inscribe the Ukrainian regime as evil—a regime which had resorted to a path commonly associated with non-state actors.

He not only represented Moscow's residents as victims of Ukrainian terrorism, but spoke of how the Ukrainian government had terrorized its own people—further evidence of his [savior complex](#).

His statement introduced the concept of terrorism as an additional frame to devalue the legitimacy of Ukraine's political leadership. The use of the term and its labeling can have a dehumanizing effect on the subject with which it is proscribed to.

This sort of discourse encourages public discussion around a "war on terror" narrative. This can enable a whole set of actions which would otherwise be harder to legitimize—including punitive attacks on key Ukrainian infrastructure and further mobilization of Russian forces.

The Motherland needs you

Russia has suffered terrible losses in Ukraine, with the UK Ministry of Defence estimating that up to [60,000 of its soldiers have died](#). The consequences of ordering up another round of mobilization could be severe for Putin.

To avoid a mass exodus of fighting-age men and circumvent domestic unrest, he has relied on mercenaries such as the Wagner Group. Just after the incident in Moscow, deputy state дума chairman, Petr Tolstoy [wrote on his Telegram page](#): "We need the mobilization of all forces and means."

Ordinary Russian men have no ambition of being used as cannon-fodder for a war which has no benefit to their lives. But answering the call to protect Russia from Ukrainian terrorists and assert control over national security, could persuade more to join up.

This would depend on how many more attacks occur inside Russia—and how effectively the Kremlin's propaganda can exploit the emotions of a fearful and anxious public.

Given the strength of the Russian narrative surrounding the country's massive sacrifice of lives in the fight against the Nazis in the second world war, giving one's life for the motherland has a [special meaning in Russian society](#). Given the right conditions, it is very possible for Putin to exploit this to continue his military crusade in Ukraine.

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