

# The Makeevka missile attack and the political crisis in Russia

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In an effort to deflect blame for the deaths of likely hundreds of Russian soldiers in a Ukrainian missile strike in the Donbas on New Year's Day, the Kremlin is insisting that the reason Ukraine was able to hit the barracks where troops were located was because the men were using their cell phones in contravention of military policy. Speaking in a video statement on last Wednesday, Lieutenant General Sergei Serdyukov declared this to be the "main reason" that at least 89 soldiers were killed in a single strike, a military humiliation for Russia and a disaster for the men and their families.

The Kremlin's tally of the dead, which included one regiment's deputy commander, is widely believed to be a significant undercount, as about 600 men were stationed in the now-leveled former school building. Because soldiers were being quartered on top of an ammunition depot that was located in the structure's basement, the scale of the destruction was particularly massive.

The wife of one serviceman who survived the blast told the press that her husband awoke surrounded by "meat, meat and blood." Already the Ministry of Defense has had to revise upward its death count, which, initially placed at just 63, was denounced by soldiers' relatives as false.

Despite growing demands, the Kremlin has yet to release a list of the dead. Kiev claims it killed 400 Russian troops and wounded 300. The majority of these were reportedly recent conscripts, but there may have also been special forces among them. The city of Samara, from which many of the draftees came, announced that its hospitals alone are treating 60-70 wounded.

Wives of some soldiers told the press in Samara that they were never contacted by officials about the fate of their spouses, but rather had to track them down themselves. Others are still waiting for information.

According to one pro-Kremlin journalist, Anastasia Kashevarova, survivors will be either sent back into battle or "somewhere else out of sight." Others, she said, are being dispatched to the state prosecutor's office, which is investigating the event. "Please don't even write his name," one woman told the press, referring to her husband. "I'm afraid," she said, explaining that he survived and walked "half-naked" to a hospital in Rostov. Those who lived through the

attack "are being written off as unnecessary witnesses," stated one relative.

For its part, Washington responded with unrestrained glee to the news that the Ukraine's US-supplied HIMARS missile killed hundreds of Russian servicemen in one fell swoop. Speaking last Thursday, retired admiral John Kirby, who is the coordinator for strategic communications at the National Security Council, declared that he would not "wring his hands" over the Russian toll and added that Washington would continue supplying Ukraine with the "kinds of systems and assistance they need to defend themselves," including more HIMARS.

The Putin government is attempting to cover up its debacle and manage the fallout by on the one hand declaring the dead and wounded soldiers the responsible party, and on the other, declaring them heroes. The day following the ministry of defense's claim that soldiers gave away their coordinates to the enemy by making phone calls, the Russian president announced special state recognition for the attack's survivors.

It is clear, however, that the ability of Ukraine to inflict such a high one-time casualty count on Russia with the aid of a US-supplied HIMARS missile is in no small part a failure of Russian military planning, one of many in the last 11 months. According to one news report, to the extent that troops' cell phone usage may have played a part in giving away the barrack's coordinates to the Ukrainian military, it was because soldiers were gathered together to watch President Putin's New Year speech.

The toll in Makeevka is intensifying the political crisis facing the Kremlin. The deaths of so many conscripted men, called up by Putin in a "partial mobilization" last year, can only deepen fears within the broader population about the costs of war and the dead end to which the Russian government has brought it.

Aware of the extreme unpopularity of the conscription, the Kremlin has been at pains to insist that it does not intend to extend the draft, although it may very well do so. Even under conditions in which all criticism of the "special military operation" is banned and violations carry large fines and prison sentences, there are regular news reports and social media accounts of desertions, draft dodging, and protests over the poorly equipped condition of troops at the front. At the same

time, inflation, wage arrears and the spread of part-time employment are hammering real incomes.

According to the Levada Center, a Russian polling agency critical of the Kremlin, as of December 2022, 41.2 percent of those surveyed indicated they definitely supported the war, down about 7 points from February 2022. The number of those who “mostly” support it, rose about 10 points during that same period. Over the last 11 months, about 20 percent of respondents have consistently indicated that they do not agree with the Kremlin’s actions in Ukraine to one or another degree.

Inasmuch as there is popular support for the Russian government’s invasion of Ukraine, it stems from the mistaken belief within the population that the Putin administration is waging some sort of genuine fight against American and European imperialism. The ferocity of the anti-Russian policies of Washington and its NATO allies—which Putin returns to over and over in his speeches and statements—is real, and it is hardly lost on a population that saw 30 million and more die in the Nazis’ attempt to wipe the Soviet Union off the map.

The Kremlin works to exploit the latent, unclarified anti-imperialist sentiment stemming from the tragedy and heroism of the Soviet victory in World War II to win backing for its own agenda, which has nothing to do with defending the workers of that country and everything to do with defending Russian capitalists’ right to feed off “their own” population. Under Stalin and after, the Russian ruling elite has always falsely portrayed the battle against fascism as a Russian national struggle, as a struggle for “national defense.”

The problem, however, that the Putin government faces, is that the Soviet masses, including its Russian portion, did not fight fascism to defend capitalism or the “Russian nation.” They fought fascism to defend their socialist revolution, or what remained of it, despite the crimes of Stalin. Today’s ruling elite has long since liquidated everything that the struggle for socialism in the USSR accomplished, and therefore it grasps ever-more desperately at Russian nationalism to stay afloat.

As it was dissolving the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s, one of the central claims that the Communist Party bureaucracy made was that imperialism was a myth and the people of the Soviet sphere had nothing to fear from their newfound capitalist friends. Having worked to suppress working class revolution around the world for decades, the Stalinists insisted, as Mikhail Gorbachev said repeatedly, that the end of the Cold War would usher in a new era of peace. In their quest to enrich themselves by restoring the market and integrating the USSR into the global capitalist system, the elite savaged the Soviet working class and all of the economic and social resources it had built up over more than 80 years of struggle and sacrifice.

The heirs of this disaster, of which President Putin is a representative, now find themselves in a blind alley,

discovering after years of reaching out to their “western partners” that imperialism is, indeed, not a myth, and Russia is on the losing end of its brutal logic. With the invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin thought that it could force some sort of settlement with the US and NATO that would allow the Russian state to survive. Instead, the war has escalated, and whatever the twists and turns of the coming period, there is no way out. The national road has led only to a dead end.

The New Year’s Day military debacle, as well as all the previous ones over the course of the last 11 months, threatens to blow apart the Russian national myth and with it the tenuous support that the Putin government has. The frustrated and angry response of the country’s right-wing nationalists to the Makeevka death toll is revealing in this regard.

Igor Strelkov, a former member of the Russian security services and leading pro-Russian militant in the Donbas, denounced defense officials for the evident stupidity of stationing such a large number of troops in a single location.

“This could happen again AT ANY MOMENT,” he warned on Telegram on Monday. “This is not the only such (extremely dense) deployment of personnel and equipment in the HIMARS missile strike zone,” Strelkov wrote, referring to the rocket launchers supplied to Ukraine by Washington.

“Makeevka is criminal negligence,” wrote Pavel Gubarev, who fought with pro-Russian forces in the Donbas starting in 2014, on the same social media platform. “These are the mistakes of spring-summer 2022,” he said, adding that Russian troops around the occupied zone are increasingly vulnerable to HIMARS attacks and other strikes behind their lines.

Also writing on Telegram, journalist and Moscow Duma deputy Andrey Medvedev opined, “It was clear to everyone in advance that on New Year’s Eve, the AFU and the SBU would try to strike where we would have vulnerabilities. Why was the enemy given the opportunity to hurt us? Why was the decision made to deploy personnel in this manner? By whom was it decided?”

“Every soldier and officer is important. The life of every soldier is a great value. With the approach ‘women will give birth to new ones’ not only will we not win, our prospects will be gloomy,” he added.

He accused the military brass of “direct aid to the enemy.” Others have declared that a repeat of the Makeevka events due to a failure to intelligently deploy troops can only be regarded as “treasonous.”



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