



The Tsar's Fears: Why Putin's Vulnerability Can Become a Danger for Europe

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The reduced Victory Day parade showed a Russia less secure, more isolated, and more exposed to Ukrainian attacks. But **this very fragility makes the Kremlin more unpredictable**: a Putin under pressure might choose escalation to avoid appearing weak.

For years, the Victory Day parade on Red Square has been one of the main symbolic tools of Putin's power. Tanks, missiles, strategic launchers, and uniformed units served to project the image of an invincible Russia, heir to the Red Army and a great power capable of challenging the West.

This year, however, the power's scenography showed something else: **not the strength of the Tsar, but his fears.**

The parade was reduced, Moscow fortified by exceptional security measures, mobile communications limited. Russian authorities implied that the main goal was to protect Vladimir

Putin. It's a heavy political signal: **the leader who promises security to Russians appeared himself in need of protection.**

The war, which the Kremlin imagined distant and controllable, has entered the Russian strategic space. **Ukrainian drones, long-range attacks, and raids against sensitive targets have undermined the official narrative.** Russia is still advancing in the Donbass, but it fails to achieve the decisive victory promised.

Hence the risk: a vulnerable Russia is not necessarily less dangerous. It can become more prone to risk-taking.

Weakness as a Factor of Escalation

Putin built his power on three pillars: internal stability, Russia's return to the rank of a great power, and the belief that the West is weak and divided. The war in Ukraine has put them all under pressure.

On the internal front, Russian society shows signs of fatigue. After years of an economy sustained by the war effort, high deficits, rising war costs, restrictions, and the militarization of daily life are emerging.

On the military front, Moscow has not turned numerical superiority into a quick victory. After more than four years of war, Russia is still engaged in fully conquering the Donbass, indicated by the Kremlin as a central objective.

On the political front, the elites are waiting for a way out. But Putin does not offer an exit strategy: he offers continuity, mobilization, and future victory. This fuels anxiety within the system.

For an authoritarian leader, appearing weak can be more dangerous than appearing aggressive. If Putin felt trapped, he might choose a new escalation: broader mobilization, economic requisitions, more intense attacks against Ukraine, or provocations towards NATO.

The Reduced Parade and the Kremlin's Message

Victory Day was supposed to show strength and control. Instead, it communicated vulnerability. The absence of traditional large displays of armored vehicles, extraordinary security measures,

and the climate of nervousness suggested that the Kremlin fears not only Ukraine but also the psychological effect of the war on Moscow.

Cancelling the parade would have been impossible: it would have meant admitting that Ukraine can influence the main Russian patriotic rite. But holding it in a reduced form produced an ambiguous result: Russia celebrated the 1945 victory by showing the difficulties of the present.

Putin once again tried to link the current war to the Soviet fight against Nazism. It is the central narrative of the Kremlin: Moscow would not be conducting a war of aggression, but a new “great patriotic war” against a hostile West.

The presence of military personnel engaged in Ukraine and North Korean contingents confirmed the transformation of the parade: no longer just a historical celebration, but a representation of the ongoing war. Russia wants to appear as the center of an anti-Western front, but also shows increasing dependence on partners like North Korea, Iran, and Belarus.

The Danger for NATO

Putin's vulnerability does not only concern Ukraine. It directly concerns Europe.

According to several former Western commanders, Russia might be tempted to test NATO, especially in the Baltic countries. Not necessarily with a full invasion, but **with a limited action**, hybrid or conventional, calibrated to test the Alliance's response.

The logic would be simple: **if Moscow demonstrated that NATO hesitates in the face of a limited attack against Latvia, Estonia, or Lithuania, the entire structure of Western deterrence would be weakened.** Article 5 would formally remain in force, but would appear politically less credible.

This is where the Tsar's fears become dangerous. A Putin convinced he cannot retreat without losing prestige might seek an escape forward, betting on Western slowness, divisions, and fears.

Germany and Poland in the Crosshairs

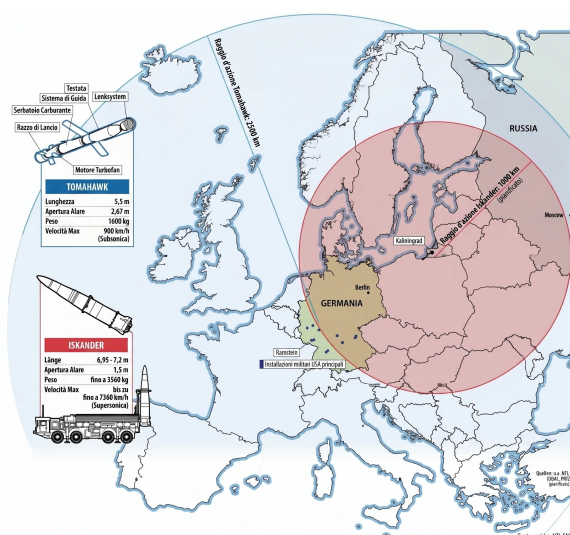
In case of a crisis in the Baltic, **Germany would immediately become a strategic target.** Through German territory pass NATO's main logistical lines: ports, railways, highways, airbases,

depots, and command structures.

To support the Baltic countries, the United States and European allies would have to move men, equipment, and ammunition through Germany and Poland. Moscow knows this. Therefore, it would likely try to slow down or disrupt these flows with missiles, drones, sabotage, cyberattacks, and hybrid operations.

The Iskanders deployed in Kaliningrad and other areas near the eastern flank represent a concrete threat. Depending on the configuration, they can hit targets in Poland, the Baltic countries, and potentially in eastern Germany.

Russia has already shown its method in Ukraine: attacks against energy infrastructures, ports, cities, railway networks, depots, and civilian populations. The purpose is not only military but political: to generate fear and pressure on public opinion.



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The American Factor

Adding to the instability is American uncertainty. **Donald Trump's threat** to withdraw at least 5,000 U.S. soldiers from Germany, along with doubts about the arrival of promised missile capabilities, sends a dangerous message to Moscow: **the West might be less cohesive than it appears.**

Germany hosts essential American infrastructures, starting with Ramstein. It is not just an airbase, but a central node of the U.S. military presence in Europe, connected to healthcare facilities, NATO commands, logistical networks, and links to the Middle East, Africa, and the

eastern flank.

Relocating this system elsewhere would be extremely difficult. Poland is closer to the Russian threat and therefore more vulnerable; more distant countries would be less useful operationally.

Western Germany remains, for geography and infrastructure, the ideal point.

But perception counts as much as reality. **If Putin were convinced that Washington is no longer fully committed to European defense, he might consider a risky action more convenient. Deterrence fails when the adversary doubts the will to react.**

The European Response

The lesson is clear: **Europe cannot base its security solely on the hope that Washington remains available**, nor on the belief that Putin will stop because he is weakened. His very weakness can push him to more aggressive moves.

This is why European long-range capabilities become central: cruise missiles, precision systems, layered air defense, drones, electronic warfare, protection of critical infrastructures, and logistical resilience. Without the ability to strike command centers, depots, and rear areas, NATO risks being dragged into the war Russia prefers: slow, exhausting, and politically corrosive.

The [European ELSA program](#), discussions on Taurus, the potential acquisition or deployment of Tomahawks, and cooperation with Ukraine on drones and missiles at sustainable costs should be read in this context. **They are not offensive tools in a political sense; they are deterrence tools.**

Deterrence works when the adversary knows that Europe is capable of reacting, willing to do so, and can impose costs greater than any benefit.

Putin's Fears Do Not Guarantee Peace

The temptation in Europe is to interpret the signs of Russian difficulties as the beginning of an irreversible decline. It is a mistake. Putin has already overcome serious crises: the failure of the assault on Kyiv, the retreat from Kharkiv, the abandonment of Kherson, the attacks on the Crimean bridge, the drones on the Kremlin, Prigozhin's revolt.

This does not mean that Putin is invulnerable. **It means that his vulnerability can produce two opposite outcomes: caution or radicalization.** No one can know where he places the limit beyond which he will decide to intensify.

Russia could increasingly transform into a permanently militarized state, similar in strategic posture to Iran or North Korea: isolated, armed, repressive, willing to sacrifice economic development and internal well-being to sustain the confrontation with the West.

For Europe, it would not be a temporary crisis, but a new strategic condition.

Conclusion: Stop the War Before It Starts

The reduced Victory Day parade should not reassure. It should alarm. It showed that Putin fears vulnerability, the image of weakness, and the return of war to the symbolic heart of Russian power. **But a frightened autocrat, armed and without a political way out, can become more dangerous, not less.**

For this reason, Europe must accelerate. Air defense, long-range missiles, protection of logistical networks, ammunition, military mobility, command and control, cyber defense, and industrial capacity are no longer future planning topics. They are immediate conditions of European security.

Peace will not be preserved by ignoring the Tsar's fears, nor by hoping that his vulnerability makes him more reasonable. It will be preserved only by making it clear that any aggression against NATO would fail and have an unsustainable price.

Putin's weakness can be a crack in the Russian system. But if the West misinterprets it, it can also become the trigger for the next European war.