

Russia: Igor Girkin/Strelkov: when the radical becomes too radical

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The recent arrest of Igor Girkin, more popularly known as Strelkov, by the Russian authorities is emblematic of the uncertainty now facing the country. Previously viewed as a useful asset by the Kremlin, the ultranationalist now appears to be a threat to Putin's increasingly troubled rule.

On July 21st 2023, Russian authorities arrested one of the country's most notorious public figures. Igor Girkin, also known as Strelkov, is a Russian-born former FSB officer, an internationally wanted terrorist, and an ultranationalist responsible for a myriad of crimes. These include the downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17, which killed 298 civilians, and fermenting separatism and conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Girkin/Strelkov is, according to [reports](#), being charged with incitement of terrorism. In what seems like a case of comical irony, the terrorist is being charged with terrorism by the power he once served. The case is just more proof of the Kremlin's logical dissonance.

In late 2022, Anna Arutuyan published her well-researched book *Hybrid Warriors: Proxies, Freelancers and Moscow's Struggle for Ukraine*. This takes a deep dive into the actions of separatists in Ukraine, Russia's role in the war in Donbas, and finally the actions and personalities of those Russians that have done the Kremlin's bidding in Ukraine. Arutuyan's book is likely the most in-depth attempt at investigating and defining the role of Girkin/Strelkov in the Donbas War. Unapologetically albeit soberly, Arutuyan illustrates his successes and failures. While he provoked strife and violent conflict for the Kremlin, he also forced Moscow's hand beyond what it was prepared to do at the time.

One of Arutuyan's main arguments is that in the first days and weeks of the separatist movement, grassroots structures appeared that gave the impression of the Kremlin's involvement. Girkin/Strelkov's actions - leading an armed insurrection into Sloviansk and later forming the internationally condemned Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) - were unwelcomed by the Kremlin, which was in the process of dealing with its own illegal annexation of Crimea and the subsequent international repercussions. It did not take long, however, for the Kremlin to see the ultimate benefits of Girkin/Strelkov's actions. The authorities got on board with what amounted to eight years of bloody, hybrid warfare designed to destabilise Ukraine as much as possible.

In the end, however, Girkin/Strelkov went too far even for the Kremlin. Arutuyan argues that from the very beginning, Girkin/Strelkov was a thorn in Moscow's side. Responsible for downing Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 with Russian-supplied weapons, he single-handedly embroiled the Kremlin in an international crisis for which it was not prepared. Nevertheless, he successfully fermented dissent in Eastern Ukraine and helped lay the political path for Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24th 2022. Last year's escalation was subsequently expedient and palatable for the Russian domestic audience as it followed a similar pattern of hybrid warfare and online propaganda. This made him a useful tool for the Kremlin. His ultranationalist narratives fed into a more general concept that the Kremlin had been actively promoting for years. Even then, however,

Girkin/Strelkov strayed from the path of acceptability.

As Arutuyan writes, “Strelkov, having returned from Donbas in 2014 and since then launched a campaign criticizing the Kremlin and Putin personally, had more to fear from his own government than he did from the West.” This is despite being wanted in The Hague for the events surrounding the shootdown of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17. Since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, in which Girkin/Strelkov played no small part, he has been increasingly critical of Putin, the Kremlin and the Ministry of Defence. Again and again, Girkin/Strelkov has accused the Russian authorities of huge failures in its war in Ukraine. This has been done online through his “Club of Angry Patriots” media channels, where he regularly criticises the military and government for not doing enough against what he sees as potential threats to Russian civilisation. Girkin/Strelkov’s “club” has even gone so far as to [claim](#) that it will be entering politics to save Russia from the status quo under Putin. Even though some level of pro-invasion critique (as opposed to anti-invasion critique, which the authorities have punished harshly) has been tolerated, the arrest of Girkin/Strelkov is a testament to the Kremlin’s thinning patience with any form of dissent.

In the end, Girkin/Strelkov is one of the main actors that threatened Ukraine’s fragile, pre-2014 harmony. At the time, as Anna Arutuyan aptly points out, the Kremlin tolerated him and his actions because the Russian authorities were able to recognise the myriad kickbacks he had generated, despite causing a number of international crises. However, now that he has been threatening Russia’s fragile harmony, in an era of unprecedented instability, mutiny, drone attacks on the Kremlin, etc., Putin and the Kremlin are now not taking any chances. For a country recognised internationally as a state sponsor of terrorism, it is deeply ironic – though logical – that the state is now prosecuting its most notorious terrorist for inciting terrorism.

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