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“FOR WHITE EUROPE”: RUSSIAN NEO-NAZI GROUP’S EMBRACE OF PUTIN’S WAR ROOTED IN SHARED ILLIBERAL RHETORIC



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“For White Europe”: Russian Neo-Nazi Group’s Embrace of Putin’s War Rooted in Shared Illiberal Rhetoric

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Recent literature concerning Russia's far right and its reactions to the war in Ukraine largely contends that, while [divided](#) on the issue, groups and individuals spanning the right wing of Russia's political spectrum tend to be [in favor of a more pro-imperial position](#). This observation is considered true even of the Russian far right's more marginalized fringes, such as its neo-Nazi component, [the majority of which opposed Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014](#) but are now largely more accepting of the war in 2022.

Contributing to this shift is a [broader reorganization](#) of Russia's neo-Nazi movement centered around the restoration of traditionalist values, one which, as evidenced by multiple speeches made by Russian President Vladimir Putin, more closely aligns with the very same [toxic nationalism Putin has mobilized throughout his presidency](#). Within these converging worldviews, Putin's war is seen as a necessary means to defend Russia against Western liberal values, bring Ukraine ("[Little Russia](#)") back into the fold, and restore Russia to its former glory as a preeminent superpower—to realize a [Russian Reconquista](#). For Russia's neo-Nazi movement, however, the war is viewed as more than simply the defense of Russian imperialism, but a battle for the preservation of the entire white race.

In June of this year, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (Kommunisticheskaya Partiya Rossiyskoy Federatsii, CPRF) highlighted the activities of one such group. In the midst of Russia's so-called "special operation" to "de-Nazify" Ukraine, the CPRF issued an [official communique](#) calling for the designation of Oskolok (the shard)—a domestic, neo-Nazi group which has been "operating legally" in Russia for months—as an extremist organization. Although mired in its own false narratives asserting that there is a Nazi junta in Kyiv—messaging which tracks with the Kremlin's own rhetoric—the CPRF calls into question the paradox which allows the Kremlin to carry out a "special military operation aimed at defeating neo-Nazis who came to power in Ukraine" while domestic groups such as Oskolok carry out political activities on Russian territory at the same time. What the communique fails to recognize, however, is just how aligned groups such as Oskolok are with [the illiberal values](#) that have directly shaped Putin's worldview and influenced the Kremlin's decision-making calculus to engage in an all-out war on Ukrainian statehood and identity.

Through a profile of Oskolok and its activities both on- and offline, this report seeks to highlight these overlaps and why, in some cases, segments of Russia's far right have not only embraced Putin's war, but have committed significant resources to support it.

Ideological Underpinnings

In an early July 2022 [post](#) to the group’s now-restricted VKontakte (VK) page, Oskolok provided its rationale for making Russian folk hero Evpatiy Kolovrat the symbol of its movement, an explanation which provides critical insight into the group’s core ideological leanings. As described in “[The Tale of the Destruction of Ryazan](#),” Kolovrat led a small detachment of Russian knights (*bogatyrs*) in a battle to recapture Ryazan from Mongol ruler Batu Khan. Despite being vastly outnumbered, Kolovrat inflicted a disproportionate amount of damage on Khan’s forces before ultimately being killed, but not before being regaled as a hero by both his countrymen and his enemies. Oskolok, which describes Kolovrat as a symbol of “unbending will” and “spiritual strength,” likens the knight’s 13th-century stand against Khan’s invading forces to the plight of modern-day Russia, besieged on all sides by “national traitors” and foreign enemies, in a fight to preserve Russian tradition, culture, and identity.



FIGURE 1. Screenshot of Oskolok logo taken from the group’s VK page

While Oskolok’s not-so-subtle incarnation of Kolovrat as a symbol of Russian nationalism is at the forefront of the group’s branding and consistently displayed throughout the group’s messaging, not even slightly below the surface is Oskolok’s explicitly white supremacist ideology. It is from this worldview where Oskolok promotes the “great replacement theory” and warns against a “shift in power” from whites to non-whites, which is being facilitated by the [migration policies of European countries](#). Notably, the group’s desire to [incite violence](#) targeting ethnic minorities in Russia is carefully cloaked behind anti-immigration rhetoric, which has increasingly received more [mainstream political support](#). Far less palatable, however, is the group’s use of imagery which displays [David Lane’s](#) “14 Words,” [romanticizes Rhodesia](#), and depicts the “[Day of the Rope](#),” a white

supremacist day of reckoning taken from Pierce’s *The Turner Diaries*, in which non-whites and “race traitors” are executed. In addition to these narratives, Oskolok’s messaging is also decidedly anti-LGTB and anti-Semitic, with the group authoring articles warning against the “[negative nature and consequences of homosexuality](#)” and theorizing about the “[Jewish Question](#).”



FIGURE 2. Examples of custom-created propaganda produced by Oskolok
 Left, “[Day of the Rope](#)” poster; right, [imagery](#) using a variation of David Lane’s “14 Words”

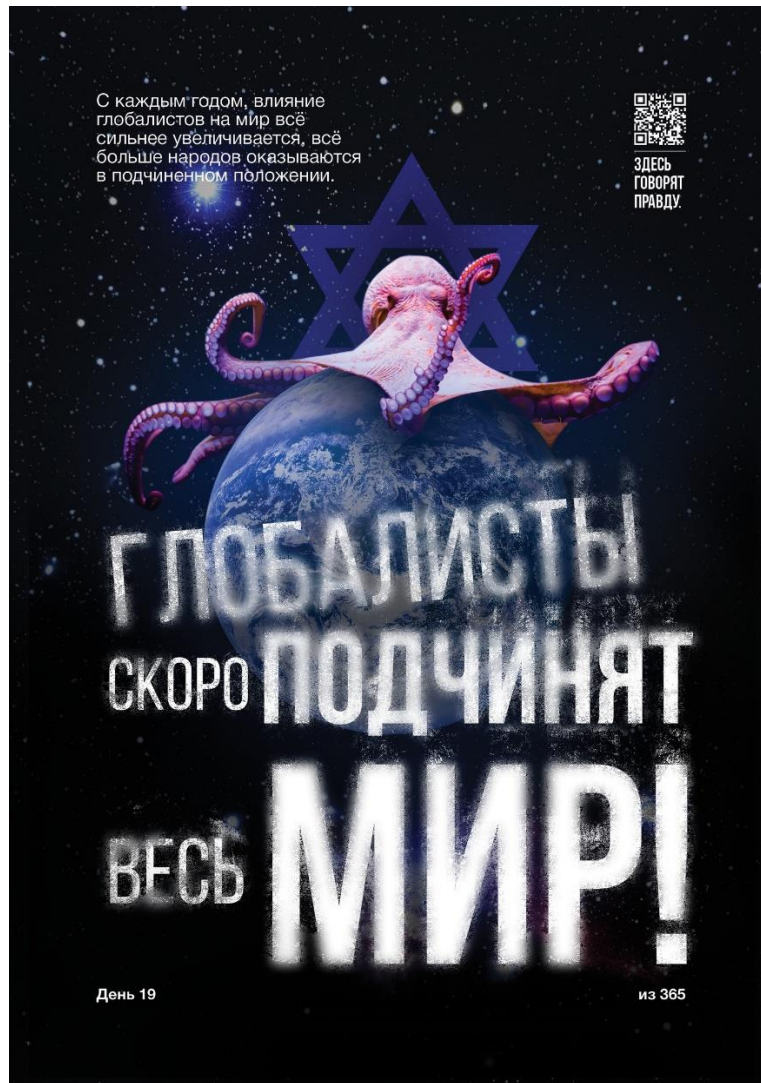


FIGURE 3. Content [promoted](#) by Oskolok

Reconquista, the Ukrainian Question, and Russia’s “Fifth Column”

In an April 9 [post](#) to Oskolok’s Telegram channel, the group sardonically came to the defense of Russian President Vladimir Putin in response to criticisms labeling him as a fascist and nationalist. Included in this post was a sarcastic appeal to the public: “Stop slandering Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin! He is not a nationalist!” Given Oskolok’s repeated criticism of the President and what the group perceives to be his repeated failures to establish a political system that would allow for the group’s definition of Russian nationalism to thrive, this statement (“He is not a nationalist!”) is likely intended as both a backhanded slight against Putin, whom the group has previously referred to as a [centrist](#), and an attempt to position itself as an authority on what does or does not constitute Russian nationalism.

While Russia’s far right has been divided in terms of its support for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Oskolok is among the many groups that have, despite frequent criticisms of the Russian government, openly embraced Putin’s war and [defended his worldview of Russia’s imperial identity](#). Oskolok’s

vision of its own Russian Reconquista, however, extends beyond viewing Russia simply as a “[beacon of hope for those disappointed with the US-led world order](#),” to one of painting it as a last remaining bastion of white civilization. According to a recent [post](#) made to one of the group’s Telegram channels, the preservation of the entire white race is one of the primary justifications for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. In fact, Oskolok views Russia’s so-called special operation as a precursor to a more significant war between the US and Russia. A war in which Russia—as described by Oskolok as “the last superpower, whose culture is dominated by traditionalism and conservatism”—will fight against the US and its liberal values that are responsible for the destruction of traditional family values and the de-emphasis of national identity. The group further elaborates that Russia is fighting for a prosperous future for white Russian children, and that if it loses it will mean the “collapse of the entire White civilization.” Subsequent posts by the group expound on this notion by depicting the war as a battle of [good versus evil](#), one that will [restore Russia to its former glory](#).

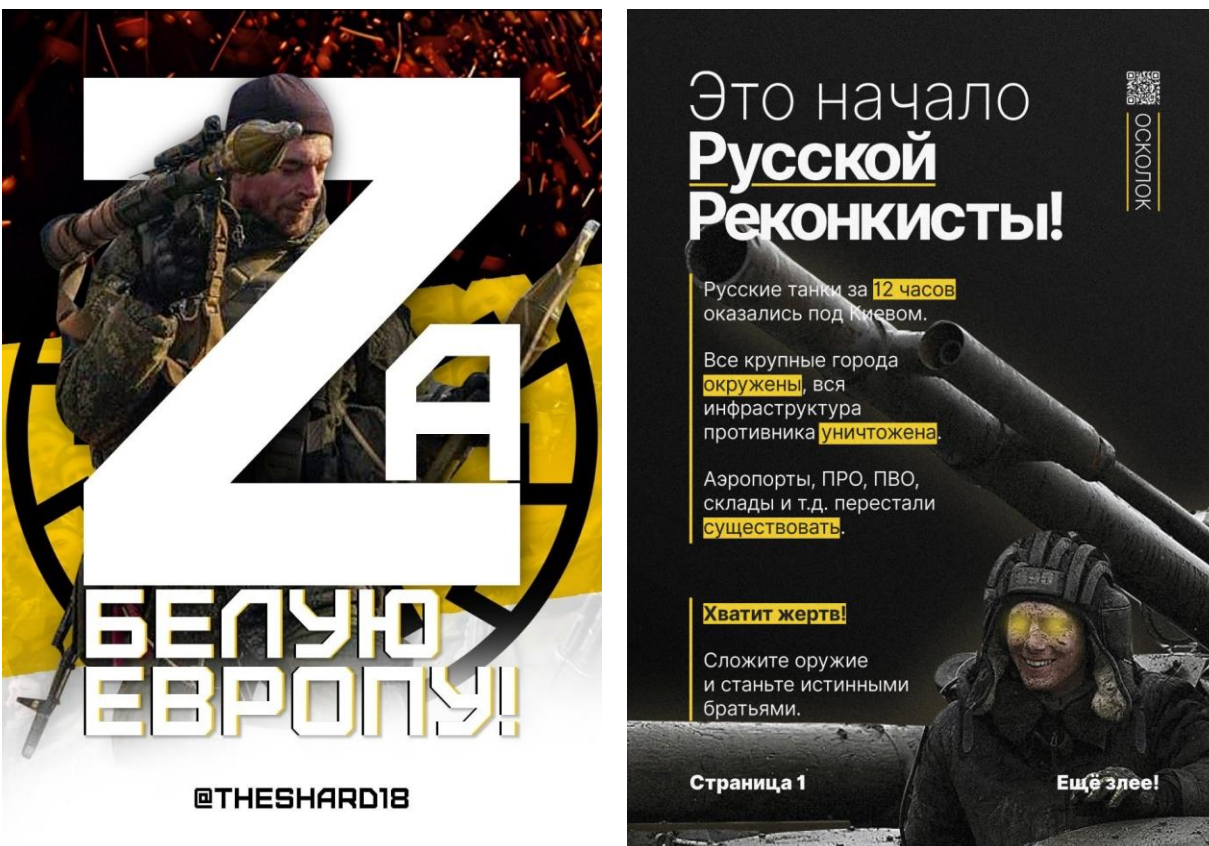


FIGURE 4. *Left*, Screenshot of [image](#) posted by Oskolok using the Z symbol [popularized](#) during Russia’s invasion of Ukraine superimposed over a [sonnenrad](#) (translation: “For White Europe!”); *right*, “Russian Reconquista” [poster](#) created by Oskolok

Yet another critical point of convergence between the worldviews held by Putin and Oskolok is their collective dismissal of any notion of the [legitimacy of Ukrainian statehood and identity](#). In a series of posts made by the group in April, including one titled “About the Ukrainian Problem,” Oskolok essentially echoed remarks made by Putin in his February 21 pre-invasion speech. In these posts, Oskolok speaks to how the culture and history of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus are intertwined, and that they are collectively part of a [triumvirate of “great Russian people.”](#) In this same vein, Oskolok explains that “Ukrainian nationalism” is a false construct built on [Russophobia](#) and influenced by the West. In even more unhinged [posts](#), Oskolok outright calls for the extermination of “so-called

Ukrainian statehood” and the resurrection of “[Little Russia](#),” which it believes to be the only solution to “the Ukrainian question.”



FIGURE 5. *Left*, “About the Ukrainian Problem” [poster](#) created by Oskolok; *right*, [poster](#) promoting the narrative that the US is using Ukraine to fight against Russia

Not long after President [Putin invoked fears of Russia’s “fifth column”](#) and warned of the threat posed by individuals he collectively referred to as “national traitors,” Oskolok released its own [list of national traitors](#). Unsurprisingly, individuals on this list align completely with those targeted by the Russian government, such as [Aleksandr Nevzorov](#), a popular Russian TV journalist and outspoken Putin critic who was [recently granted Ukrainian citizenship](#); [Ilya Varlamov](#), a Russian blogger and independent journalist who has spoken out against Russian atrocities in Ukraine; and [Dmitry Bykov](#) and [Alexey Navalny](#), both prominent opposition figures targeted for assassination by Russia’s Federal Security Service (FSB). Again, despite Oskolok’s frequent anti-Putin rhetoric, the “[destruction of liberalism](#)” is an underlying rallying cry that unites Putin and the far right.



FIGURE 6. List of “national traitors” created by Oskolok

Wartime Support

Propaganda

With the stated goal of developing a full-fledged media outlet, Oskolok has been building out a sprawling social media presence, which it leverages for the production, [hosting](#), and distribution of extremist content. Immediately following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the group began leveraging this network, which includes accounts on VK, Telegram, Discord, and YouTube, to galvanize support for Putin’s war. These efforts most frequently revolve around the production of custom-created pro-war propaganda, which the group refers to as “posters of the day.” These posters are subsequently shared by the group and further amplified by its followers. In addition to producing content, Oskolok also provides tutorials showing subscribers how to create their own custom propaganda via the group’s YouTube channel.

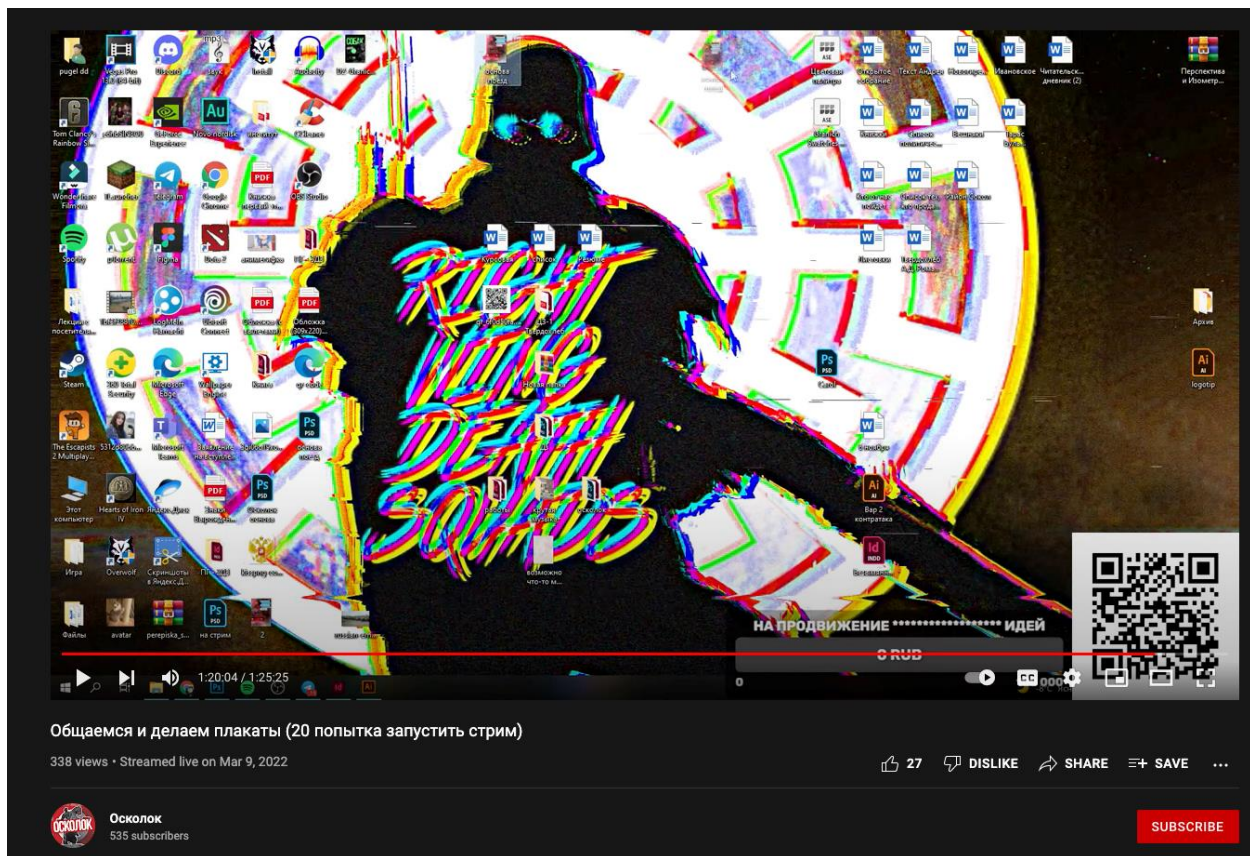


FIGURE 7. Screenshot of an Oskolok YouTube [video](#) showing subscribers how to make propaganda posters. Note desktop background depicting neo-Nazi imagery (use of sonnenrad and “Right Wing Death Squads”)

Targeted Harassment and Material Support

Combining the group’s penchant for content generation and its promoted narratives echoing Putin’s warnings about a Russian “fifth column,” Oskolok organizes online harassment campaigns targeting a number of individuals the group has branded as “liberal traitors”—Russian politician and deputy of the Moscow City Duma, [Darya Besedina](#); Tajik-born Russian singer-songwriter [Manizha](#), who represented Russia at Eurovision in 2021; Russian pop musician and songwriter [Leonid Agutin](#); and Belarusian rapper [Max Korzh](#).

Within these campaigns, Oskolok accuses named individuals of openly supporting Ukraine either by participating in events, such as the “[U for Ukraine](#)” benefit concert, or by promoting what the group broadly characterizes as anti-war, anti-Russian views. In response to these perceived offenses, Oskolok directs its supporters to lodge complaints against these individuals with the Ministry of Internal Affairs under a section of the Russian criminal code which was [recently expanded to include provisions making “public actions aimed at discrediting” the Russian Armed forces illegal](#). While this activity could generally be referred to as a variation of “[brigading](#),” a term used to refer to “coordinated abusive engagement behavior online,” the implications of reporting individuals to the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs arguably have more inherent real-world consequences than what are typically characterized as spillover effects of conventional brigading.

Vowing that they are “just getting started,” Oskolok thanked its supporters for generating a “[tremendous amount of noise](#)” surrounding their campaigns against both Manizha, whose appearance at the then-upcoming [Stereoleto Festival in Saint Petersburg was canceled](#), and Korzh, who announced the [postponement of his stadium tour in Russia](#). And while it is difficult to assess what impact the group’s campaign may or may not have had, there is evidence to suggest, based on the [promotion of the group’s efforts by Russian state-controlled media](#), that Oskolok’s campaigns gained at least some traction. Further, the group’s reach during these campaigns was expanded exponentially by the Russian-language Telegram channel “Cyber Front Z,” a pro-Russian “[people’s movement](#)” with alleged [ties](#) to Russia’s notorious “troll factory”—the Internet Research Agency. Cyber Front Z has been promoting both [content](#) and campaigns originating from Oskolok since at least April 2022, and it leverages its 100,000 or more followers to distribute pro-war propaganda across both Russian- and English-language groups and to the [social networks of popular TV channels](#). In addition to Cyber Front Z, campaigns and content originating from Oskolok have also been amplified by multiple other [pro-Russian Telegram channels](#) within Russia’s [propaganda](#) and disinformation ecosystem, as well as multiple [Russian nationalist accounts](#).



FIGURE 8. Posters created by Oskolok during campaigns targeting Darya Besedina, Max Korzh, and Manizha

On June 26, Oskolok signaled that the group’s endorsement of Putin’s war extends beyond purely ideological support when it [announced](#) that it had raised over 60,000 rubles (worth approximately US \$1,000) to purchase an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) to send to soldiers fighting on the front line. As with Oskolok’s targeted harassment campaigns, the group’s fundraising efforts were supported by multiple pro-Russian Telegram channels, including [Cyber Front Z](#). In addition to their own fundraising, which the group likely accomplishes by leveraging pre-existing [infrastructure](#) set up to finance the production and distribution of extremist content, Oskolok has also [directed its subscribers to contribute](#) to a number of other sources that are actively engaged in providing “humanitarian aid” or material support to specific Russian military units, such as the 100th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade of the People’s Militia of the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic.

Conclusion

Despite [recent half measures](#) taken by Russia's Prosecutor General's Office to mitigate the group's online reach, Oskolok continues to carry out its political activities unabated, standing up new accounts and outlining [future plans to expand its audience](#). And while it is potentially easy to dismiss Oskolok as a purely online movement, the group has larger aspirations, as evidenced by its [hosting of in-person lectures](#) and the group's promotion of more mainstream Russian nationalist figures and political organizations, such as [Mikhail Butrimov](#) and the [Youth Wing of the Party of Russia's Rebirth](#) (Partiia vozrozhdeniia Rossii)—a party with a stated intent of restoring Russia's great-power status and a history of nationalist political alliances.

Even with overall numbers of active members affiliated with nationalist groups in Russia [being reportedly low](#), due at least in part if not entirely to the Kremlin's stifling of opposition movements, Oskolok and other [like-minded organizations](#) have become some of the most ardent on- and offline supporters of Putin's so-called special operation. Despite suppressing certain movements domestically, the Putin regime has historically [maintained extensive ties with far-right groups](#) and has leveraged these groups to achieve its political goals at home and abroad. In some cases, as is with Task Force "[Rusich](#)"—a neo-Nazi paramilitary unit which [has been fighting for Russia on the frontlines](#)—Russia's far right has been an integral part of the Kremlin's overall hybrid warfare strategy. It is no surprise then to see Cyber Front Z, the alleged front group with ties to Russia's [Internet Research Agency](#), leveraging content and [promoting](#) campaigns originating from Oskolok to prop up Russia's invasion of Ukraine, because it fits the Kremlin's modus operandi.