

Putin portrays his expansionist vision as the counterweight to neo-Nazism

by [Tom Rogan](#)

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Russian President Vladimir Putin used Russia's annual Victory Day parade on Thursday to threaten NATO members Estonia and Lithuania.

It is especially significant that Putin chose Victory Day to make his threat. After all, celebrating the World War II [victory](#) over the Nazis, Victory Day is the most important day in the Russian calendar. It unifies Russians in memory of [the sacrifices](#) made across Russia during that brutal war. The Soviet Union [lost more](#) than 26 million people, or more than 13% of their population between 1941 and 1945. Were that same ratio of loss applied to the U.S. today, it would mean 44 million dead Americans.

Victory Day thus has understandable importance to the Russian psyche. But [always a KGB](#) man, Putin knows that what he says on Victory Day will inspire particularly powerful emotional reaction by his citizens. And he didn't pull any punches.



"Today," Putin said, "we see how a number of countries are deliberately distorting war events, and how those who, forgetting honor and human dignity, served the Nazis, are now being glorified, and how shamelessly they lie to their children and betray their ancestors."

Here Putin is referring to the recent electoral success of the far-right National Conservative Party in Estonia (some of whose members have links to neo-Nazis), and Lithuania's continuing [celebration](#) of an anti-Soviet resistance fighter and possible Nazi collaborator, Adolfas Ramanauskas-Vanagas.

But Putin wasn't done. He transitioned from his patriotic ancestry to a call to service. "Our sacred duty is to protect the real heroes," Putin said. "We bow to all veterans from the generation of victors. You live in different countries, but the feat that you accomplished together cannot be divided."

It is near impossible to underestimate the importance of Putin's anti-Nazi rhetoric as a tool for his broader policy. Put simply, Putin cultivates the idea of neo-Nazism's continuing threat as a rationale for his aggressive foreign policy. Leaving no doubt as to his foreign policy import here, Putin added, "Russia is open to cooperation with everyone who is willing to resist terrorism, neo-Nazism, and extremism. Collective resistance to bearers of deadly ideas has become crucial again."

Note the strategic use of language here. Protecting Russia's threatened "ancestry" in "different countries" requires the "sacred duty" of "resistance" to "neo-Nazism." It's a vintage Putinism: mobilizing the nation in a defense of its sacred identity. Now consider that as much as 35% of Estonia's population identifies as ethnic Russian.

It's a smaller share in Lithuania, but that doesn't really matter. What matters is that Putin is giving himself the pretext *to protect* Russians in the NATO Baltic states under the pretext of Russia's unending struggle against Nazism.

A Russian invasion of the Baltics [remains unlikely](#). But Putin's words here may indicate energized Russian intelligence and political activity to disrupt Baltic democracy. NATO remains [very important](#).