

Ukraine Rebel Leader Vows to Stay in Moscow to Protect Putin

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Former pro-Russian separatist commander Igor Strelkov speaking at a news conference in Donetsk in July.

Igor Strelkov, the former commander of pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine, said Thursday he was relocating to Moscow to protect President Vladimir Putin from enemies and traitors.

"The West and the 'fifth column' are making no secret of their plans to overthrow Putin. Their path is that of dragging out the war [in Ukraine] as long as possible," Strelkov was cited by LifeNews as saying at a news conference.

Strelkov, a 43-year-old Muscovite also known by the surname Girkin, said he had no plans to return to eastern Ukraine and would instead stay in Moscow — the new battle front, according to him.

"I support Putin and am against the 'fifth column.' Russian people need to completely reject any opposition activity," Strelkov was cited as saying in the report.

The term "fifth column" has been used frequently in Russia during the Ukraine crisis to describe Western leaders and the new authorities in Kiev, who separatists like Strelkov have refused to recognize as legitimate.

Strelkov was thrust into the spotlight as a rebel leader in mid-May, quickly taking control over many of the fighters in eastern Ukraine and declaring himself defense minister of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic.

Strelkov is a retired colonel in Russia's Federal Security Service, a successor agency to the KGB. He also fought in the Bosnian war and served as a war correspondent in Chechnya.

He stepped down from his duties as military commander in Donetsk in mid-August.

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